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Nepal: A Chorus of Women's Voices Makes a Difference - Influencing Local Government Spending

How do women influence local government spending so that it is more responsive to their needs and priorities? This remains a challenge in Nepal, as women lack social, political and economic power to influence decision making for the benefit of women, as well as men.



Women from Terai, Nepal.
Photo: ADB

Nepal had made some gradual progress in women's participation in local government, initially through the Local Self Governance Act 1999, that provided for 20% women's representation in ward level committees and in village development councils. This policy helped bring women into local level decision-making. However, owing to the past conflict and political transition there has been an absence of local government in the past 14 years, with civil servants administering local bodies. In this structure, women's participation was negligible. The government-initiated Local Governance and Community Development Program¹ and policy, has, since 2010, helped create new inclusive structures, with its 33% required female representation in ward citizen forums and community awareness centers, which participate in planning processes. The Local Governance and Community Development Program helped fill the gap in people's participation in local planning processes, in the absence of elected local bodies.

Growing evidence in other countries indicates that at the local government level, women's participation and leadership has gradually transformed social norms and led to greater investment in public services by local government. In India for example, one-third of seats on *gram panchayat* (village councils) are reserved for women. This has led to more investments in drinking water infrastructure, and better availability of public goods.² Leadership by women, on behalf of women, can be an effective catalyst in propelling the gender equality agenda.

Gender designs to support women's influence in local governance

The gender equality and social inclusion plan of the ADB-supported *Nepal Governance Support Program (Subprogram I)* was designed to respond to the gap in women's influence in the area of community and local governance. It attempted to enhance the meaningful participation of women and disadvantaged groups in decision making, increase their access to state and non-state resources and opportunities, and increase their engagement in leading and managing community-based

organizations.

A core objective of the gender equality and social inclusion plan was to strengthen the capability of local government to provide effective and inclusive services and improve accountability through community mobilization. Essentially, the Nepal Governance Support Program provided support to the local governance and community development program, with ADB as the largest provider of funds.

The program included the development and implementation of a gender and social inclusion policy throughout local governance decision making processes. There were special measures such as training and advocacy and targets to increase the number of women in planning processes at community and local government level to at least 33%. The gender targets covered all levels of decision-making, from the lowest to the highest levels (in ascending order): user groups, ward citizen forums, village development committees, municipal committees and district development committees.

The targets were set to ensure the greater voice, participation and influence of women and disadvantaged groups over resource allocation at local council levels, including in the user groups and ward citizen forums which prepare, submit and implement projects. Social mobilizers were to be trained to be instrumental in changing social norms and attitudes about women and other disadvantaged groups, 33% of whom were to be women. Most critically, there was to be 35% targeted spending for development - 10% for women; 10% for children; 15% for disadvantaged groups; and women were to be involved in determining how local development funds were spent to benefit them and their priorities.

The mainstreaming of gender and social inclusion in governance and community development

An important achievement of the program was the formation and adoption of the gender and social inclusion policy by the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development and subsidiary bodies. It placed gender and social inclusion issues firmly on the local governance agenda, even if it was not entirely accepted across all the local governance structures. Most local government staff members are now aware of the requirement for women and disadvantaged groups representatives in all planning committees and their required inputs on project funding decisions. Over 70% of local staff members in all 75 project districts participated in gender and social inclusion awareness raising so that the gender and social inclusion policy and its integration into local government processes was widely disseminated. Overall, how race, ethnicity, gender and socio-economic class intersect, converge and conflict are now better understood.

Influencing public resource allocation – climbing the empowerment ladder

Gender inclusive and prioritized allocation of resources was a critical component of the program. Although the gender equality and social inclusion plan was not designed to have a direct impact on livelihood opportunities, it was designed to influence control over public resources, and provide access to resources and opportunities, hence the gender targets for participation in all decision making processes.

The program resulted in the increased access of women and disadvantaged groups from 38% in 2010, to 46% of state resources in 2011. The mandatory allocation of 35% of the capital budget to fund projects prioritized by women and disadvantaged groups was a significant achievement resulting in the increase of targeted funds from 25% in 2010, to 35% in 2012.

More than 55,000 community infrastructures were built between 2009 and 2013, benefiting 3 million households, in 75 project districts. In some instances, funds were also used for hiring birth attendants in rural villages, and for establishing birthing centers.

Gender responsive budgeting and planning was also put into operation in 38% of district development committees by the end of the project. This was achieved through the integration of gender and social inclusion responsive indicators into local budgets.

In the social mobilization review conducted by the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development in 2013, 74% of those interviewed at local level said that they knew about the development budget, and that social mobilization had contributed to community engagement in all program processes.

As stated by Suman Subba, Senior Social Development Officer at ADB's Nepal Resident Mission,

The achievements show that women and disadvantaged groups have reached a level of access which places them firmly on the lower steps of the empowerment ladder. They are now progressing towards the further steps of control and ownership. But, there is still a long way to go.

Increased participation of women in local governance - quantity and quality both matter

At the beginning of the program, women's participation in planning processes of local bodies was very low to almost non-existent. The gender and social inclusion targets made a real difference in getting women's voices heard, as a chorus, in the allocation of the 35% of local development funds to meet their specific priorities.

Social mobilizers, 49% of whom were women, were responsible for mobilizing women, sensitizing women and men, and setting up gender inclusive bodies. In line with the gender equality and social inclusion plan, the formation of ward citizen forums was initiated in almost all districts resulting in 44% female membership, a total of 346,489 women, amounting in all to an increase of almost 100% female participation.

As indicated by an executive secretary of a program municipality – the presence of the women on the committee, even if their contribution was passive, was a salutary reminder to the male members that allocations had to be made for women's prioritized projects. This point was also reiterated by some male members of the ward citizen forum. A male municipal committee member also said that *"The presence of women in these decision-making groups obligated other members to take account of women's views on funding priorities."*

In another village development committee, the women said that they sat quietly at meetings and did not volunteer their views, "but this did not mean that we did not comprehend what was going on at the meetings." Their presence generated a discussion on the 35% targeted spending for women, children and disadvantaged groups.

Overall, reaching the numerical targets for women's participation in decision-making groups has been successful, and has directly and indirectly influenced the allocation of resources to meet women's needs.

To meet the challenge of increasing the quality of women's influence in decision making in local governance processes, specialized capacity building, mentoring and confidence building is needed. This will help women assert their rights and persuade men to work in partnership with women.

¹Government Support Program (Subprogram 1) contributed to the government sponsored Nepal Local Governance and Community Development Program, and the policy framework and actions drew entirely from the Local Governance And Community Development Program

²J. Klugman et al. 2014. Voice and Agency: Empowering Women and Girls for Shared Prosperity. Washington, DC: World Bank

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