

## RESEARCH and EVALUATION (PEER REVIEWED)

**Community governance and service delivery in Nepal: an assessment of influencing factors**

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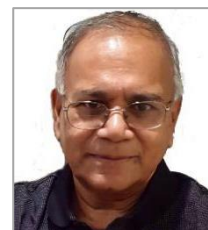
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**Abstract**

*This paper analyses factors influencing effective service delivery at the grassroots level in Nepal, through a qualitative field study which includes in-depth interviews with 110 community-based organisations (CBOs) and five focus group discussions. The findings indicate that a wide range of governance arrangements have been deployed in the effort to achieve effective service delivery. However, many CBOs lack a solid governance system for their development undertakings, leading to poor performance and lack of accountability. A number of factors are identified as causing this weak practical application of community governance, notably institutional mechanisms, socio-economic structures, power politics and interests, capacity limitations and resource constraints.*

**Keywords:** Community governance, local democracy, community-based organisations, service delivery, Nepal

**Introduction**

The third wave of democracy that began in the 1970s produced some defining moments for many. Probcreate organised electoral arrangements and elected executives to manage state affairs, democratisation next sought to create structures for the practice of democracy at all levels. Gradually, citizens conscious of community values and aspirations were stimulated to engage in democratic activities, and demand both a stake in decision-making and a fair share of resources (Freund and Jaud

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2013; Whitehead 2002; Khanal 2006). The state and market were no longer seen as the only or best agents for dealing with inequality and poverty at the grassroots. As no single actor or institution was capable of solving multifarious social and economic problems independently, the idea that germinated in development discourse was the need for collaboration, cooperation and social inclusion in any development initiatives (Newman 2001). This belief was enshrined in the participatory governance paradigm in the 1970s, which advanced the norms of efficiency, effectiveness and sustainability in development and emboldened communities to build partnerships, support the democratic process, and establish structures for 'bottom-up' policy formulation (Ross and Osborne 1999). This sort of 'communitarian movement' emphasised pluralism in local power distribution arrangements and associated nexus between government, civil society and the market (McCluskey et al. 2009).

Extensive evidence from Asian, African and Latin American countries suggests that community institutions are essential for empowering people and helping them exercise their democratic rights. In these regions of the global south, community-based institutions strive to educate and empower broader segments of the community, introducing democratic principles and strengthening the capabilities of poor and vulnerable groups (Johnson 2001). This work brings many benefits: enforcing social accountability, raising public voices against inefficiency and ineffectiveness, generating more inclusive decision-making, boosting members' bargaining power, increasing economic security, building partnerships, promoting community empowerment and serving as a channel for organised community development (Arrossi et al. 1994).

In the late 1970s, the concept of 'new governance' emerged. This focused on the integration of the public and private spheres beyond 'government' (O'Toole and Burdess 2004), to achieve 'governing through communities' – an approach which encouraged government, business groups, community institutions and individual citizens to work together and share power, knowledge, skills and resources to reach collaborative consensus-based decisions (Stoker 2007; Marsden and Murdoch 1998). The two most important goals of this new form of governance were: first, to define 'community governance' in such a way as to ensure people's robust participation in multiple roles, linking desired outcomes to resources and accountable organisations, and using collaboration as an instrument in development (Epstein et al. 2006); and second, to drive institutional effectiveness at the grassroots through mechanisms such as neighbourhood management initiatives, partnerships, and community empowerment strategies (Connelly 2011). The theory is that these mechanisms help community-based organisations (CBOs) in developing a corporate identity and an organisational and managerial ethos that support responsibility and accountability in the delivery of services at the grassroots. This in turn ensures vigorous community participation in multiple roles, the formation and operation of collaborative networks, the tracking of community decision-making, and the contribution of citizens towards obtaining desired outcomes (Gaynor 2011).

The impetus for this new pattern of ‘grassroots’ governance has been the fragmented nature of the state apparatus, flawed market structures and operations, and the urban focus and elite bias of civil society. All these impediments must be addressed in order to meet the needs of ordinary people. Nevertheless, community-level governance is a daunting challenge. Existing power-holders, whether members of the public, government officials or development partners, have been reluctant to incorporate norms of governance in community affairs policies, acts, regulations and guidelines, and this has been a deterrent (Bhattachan 2002). In Nepal, patrimonial social structures, a flawed political system, bureaucratic disloyalty, a complex administrative apparatus, and exclusionary factors prevent ordinary people from gaining equal access to public services.

It should be acknowledged, however, that some improvements to community governance were noticeable after the 1990s, in areas such as service distribution, local resource management, economic/social empowerment, social capital building, social/public accountability, anti-discrimination programmes and development management. This study looks at the extent to which the situation may have improved – or not – in the following 25 years. It attempts to establish specific community governance factors that influence effective service delivery at the local level in Nepal, based on recent field study research.

The paper is structured as follows. In the next section, a literature review and some conceptual issues are highlighted. Then the methodology of the study is described. The field data is then analysed and findings presented in a third section, followed by a discussion of key factors identified (institutional mechanisms, socio-economic structures, power politics and interests, and capacity and resources constraints).

### **Factors influencing community governance: literature review and conceptual perspectives**

In developing societies, communities are predominantly informally organised, relatively lacking in technical, human and resource capacity, economically vulnerable and elite-captured (Kamruzzaman 2018, Ch. 1). Accessing services and resources can be difficult and there exists a high degree of social exclusion. Community governance in such societies is influenced by factors such as institutional crisis, poor governmental performance, power arrogation and unaccountable leadership, lack of transparency, absence of interest representation in decision-making structures, and most notably rampant corruption (Ojha et al. 2009). A number of researchers have identified what they see as the key factors. Commins (2007) lists factors including social, political and economic exclusion; economic differentiation; information asymmetry; and socio-economic disparity. Twenty years before, Escobar (1988) had identified a different, but overlapping, list of six factors: changing roles and relationships between citizens and the state (central/local government); political, economic and social manipulation of the empowerment agenda; difficulties for communities in accessing local services; weak technical and financial capacity within community organisations; lack of awareness of those in governance roles; and the dominance of traditional power structures. Clarke and Stewart (1998), meanwhile, identified serious

structural problems with the concept of 'new governance', such as the fragmentation of local governments and local service delivery systems, ineffective empowerment mechanisms, problems with resource mobilisation, and ineffectual leadership.

Many authors (including Acharya 2016 and Bowles and Gintis 2002) point out that numerous developing countries face an accentuated crisis of governance due to market failures, institutional hierarchies, and a democratic deficit. In the 1970s, neo-liberalism (privatisation, denationalisation and deregulation) sought to improve community governance and service delivery in developing countries. However, many of the strategies adopted were too narrowly focused, while others were too general to be linked to community concerns with governance. Some authors consider only institutional factors to be relevant, such as the enabling environment (legal provisions, decentralised policies and strategies, good governance), organisational commitment (devolution, partnership development, coordinated working), conflicts of interests between partners, and policy bias (Ostrom et al. 1993; Zafarullah and Huque 2001); but others identify wider social factors such as exclusion, feudal legacy, exploitation, social discrimination, modernisation, globalisation, westernisation, and marketisation or competition (Illing and Gibson 2007; Roodt 1996). Many also emphasise political factors, such as power structures, political and social elitism, patron–client relationships, political processes, and neo-colonial policies (Lewis and Kanji 2009; Malla 2001). Yet other explanations include factors related to poverty and deprivation, vulnerability, seasonality, and powerlessness and humiliation (Chambers 1995; Hulme and Shepherd 2003); or to lack of skills and knowledge to capitalise on local resources (Oliver 1997); or to unequal resource distribution (Marwell and Ames 1979); and financial crises (Mahanty et al. 2009). More recently, community governance has been influenced by technological innovation and developments in information and communication technology (Acharya 2016; Waema and Adera 2011).

It is clear that a multitude of factors influence the efficiency of organisational activities. However, one underlying constant is that trust between all actors is essential to achieve community uplift (Dewett and Jones 2001). This is too often absent. Banner (2002) describes the disenchantment of many grassroots actors who view community governance as upwardly, rather than downwardly, accountable and thus susceptible to uncertainties. In such conditions, ordinary people are very vulnerable as they are forced to rely on external actors, who are by nature more bureaucratic and typically prefer a hierarchical structure that may threaten the community governance system. On the other hand, if used sensitively, central and local government commitment, engagement of the private sector, and community cooperation can help achieve effectiveness (Cheshire 2000). Weber et al. (2001) suggest that major shifts in community governance are outcomes of a combination of three elements – policy discourse, policy actors, and policy instruments – all of which are influenced by events and institutional performance.

Some authors suggest that information and technological development have often skewed priorities and agendas away from community-centred issues and towards national, regional and global imperatives (Pillora and McKinlay 2011). In such cases, community governance will hardly be able to compete with the public sector and market forces. Additionally, issues such as stakeholder competition, empowerment, citizen engagement, civic leadership, ownership, public responsibility and legitimisation, community control of and access to resources, and state funding mechanisms, will deeply affect whether community governance is effective or not (Gaventa 2004). Such factors often create hierarchical structures and empower nominated leaders rather than ordinary citizens (Banner 2002). In such conditions, community governance may not be seen as legitimate, and may be unable to make institutional shifts (single to multiple) or system transformation (top-down versus bottom-up) (Ståhlberg 1997).

Still more issues affect community governance: institutional vacuums, patrimonial power structures, political and social patronage, fragmented political cultures, disenchanting bureaucracies, lack of information, poor economic performance, political and bureaucratic capture of power and resources, centralised delivery systems, lack of transparency, lack of autonomy, insensitive development that weakens community cohesion, structural social exclusion, lack of organisational resources and knowledge, and limited physical and human capacities (Dahal 2010; Ross and Osborne 1999; Bardhan and Mookherjee 2005; Grindle 2007). On a more positive note, O'Toole (2006) argues that community governance is the form of governance closest to the people: it enables and empowers them to participate directly in decision-making, facilitates quick responses to people's needs and priorities, and promotes genuine ownership by local people.

It seems clear, therefore, that the effectiveness of community governance depends on the efficient functioning of a wide range of variables such as inclusive participation, the empowerment agenda, transparency and accountability, an enabling environment, local democratic practice, service delivery and integrity mechanisms, social capital, institution-building, community mobilisation, planning, implementing and monitoring, institutional arrangements (both formal and informal) and coordination, linkages and partnerships between development agencies (Nsubuga and Olum 2009). These formal variables of community governance have to be seen from trust-based relationships and reciprocity, and volunteerism perspectives, as well. These variables enhance or limit the effectiveness of organisations' decisions or actions. At the community level, their degree of impact may be determined by the actions' relevance, accuracy, credibility, quality and integrity, timeliness and punctuality, coherence, accessibility and cost-efficiency.

In Nepal, the concept of community governance is associated with the notion of *dharma* (religion), which determines institutional duties, power practices and the governing system (Dahal 2004). These traditional governing practices have contributed to preserving social harmony by shaping social dynamics, social power relations and grassroots self-governance systems (Wong and Shik 2011).

However, self-governance in the past was not encouraged (Bhattachan 2002). The reluctance of the public, inter-governmental, non-governmental and donor sectors to incorporate community governance into their policies, statutes, regulations and guidelines weakened such 'people-led' governance (Dahal 2004). Subsequently, conventional institutional arrangements, centralised decision-making, lack of coordination and collaboration among development actors, misappropriation of resources, and capture of opportunities by dominant groups at the local level created institutional disaster (Khanal 2006). It is these kinds of practices that are the major causes of failures of community governance and declines in service effectiveness.

### **Key factors influencing community governance in Nepal**

We will now look briefly at the literature on four key factors influencing community governance in Nepal: institutional mechanisms, socio-economic structures, power politics and interests, and capacity limitations and resource constraints.

**Institutional mechanisms:** In 1977, a concerted initiative towards decentralisation in Nepal was initiated with the implementation of the Integrated Rural Development Program (IRDP), which focused on the concept of partnerships between central government and community groups in delivering local-level services (Rondinelli 1983). Communities were directed to build new informal institutions as service facilitators. However, this initiative not only neglected the indigenous community-based systems but also permitted rural power elites to avoid engaging in community participation. They captured all possible alternatives, dominated the service system, and destroyed public motivation for institutional development. Subsequent research has found that the arrangements for delivering agricultural extension, education and health services at that time were determined by political elites, without reference to the needs of local people or statutory requirements. Edmunds and Wollenberg (2001) reported that local elites are socially embedded in Nepal and have substantial influence over local institutions and communities – both in project selection and implementation and in harnessing resources. This study found that most of the resourceful CBOs, and a number of other groups, had been captured by these elites. In these groups, there is no scope for different voices, downward accountability is missing, and the pro-poor approach has been largely rejected. Gauli and Hauser (2009) cite, for example, how Nepal's Community Forestry Programme has been widely criticised for being dominated by elites and for providing much larger benefits to the better-off than to the poor.

Institutional failure within community groups can be caused by many factors: lack of an appropriate and legitimised institutional structure; reduced efficiency; absence of vision, mission and guiding principles; lack of an enabling environment; centralised decision-making systems; and reluctance to strengthen community institutions (Lee and McBride 2007). At best, these gaps reinforce upward accountability and weaken governance; at worst, such exploitation has led to the demise of many CBOs and paralysed others. In the study areas, close relations between service providers (state and non-state)

and local elites led to the capture of services by the latter, and made access for ordinary people difficult. Nor was service delivery the only issue; the formation and maintenance of voluntary community organisations became harder, and the quality of service was badly compromised.

After 1990, the newly-formed democratic government reformed many policies within the framework of neo-liberalism – through decentralisation, denationalisation or privatisation, and deregulation. Local governments were designated as ‘development coordinators’ at the intermediate and grassroots levels. However, governance was poor as job descriptions for key personnel were unstructured and undefined, and policy guidelines for local government operations were weak. Such guidelines were not only politically biased, but also led to local governments becoming regulated institutions of central government (Dahal 2010). Lack of capacity of local leaders, coupled with the capture of institutional power by vested interests, made the bureaucratised local bodies sluggish and inefficient and inhibited downward accountability. These entities began controlling and regulating people’s institutions – the CBOs – rather than facilitating and coordinating them. Similarly, due to pressure from political leaders and local elites, only a small number of CBOs were accepted as local government partners. Nor – if the findings of this study are a guide – did these handpicked CBOs always work to meet people’s expectations.

**Socio-economic structures:** Since restoration of democracy in 1990, the Nepalese government has focused on social mobilisation programmes to create awareness, enhance community capacity and increase community participation in decision-making. The aim of these efforts is to create a sustainable framework at community level within which to tackle poverty. Factors such as social attitudes, the feudal legacy, ethnicity, family status, economic standing, awareness levels, locality, and community values play a key role in determining whether community governance will be effective. In the geographical area studied by this research project, the community social structure has three main dimensions. First, there is the Hindu caste system which governs people’s attitudes, culture and social stratification. Secondly, societies are ruled by a patrimonial system, which is an offshoot of legacy, culture and traditional practices. Thirdly, social position is determined by economic status, which creates a materialistic basis for socio-economic life. These three factors all contribute to stratifying communities and draining people’s confidence, as well as affecting relationships and obstructing the introduction of new social practices. It may be argued that the transformational processes such as community-owned ideas, economic betterment enterprises, capacity empowerment, and teaching skills and knowledge for social change, have systematically collapsed and further destabilised marginalised communities (Uphoff 1993). Many studies indicate that marginalised communities are typically highly illiterate, unaware of their rights and responsibilities, excluded from political, social and economic opportunities, and oppressed by various kinds of discrimination (Bennett 2005; Bernt and Colini 2013; Dean and Platt 2016; Silver 2007; de Haan 2011).

**Power politics and interests:** In almost all CBOs, executive leaders or influential general members are either politically connected, or their actions are intricately associated with individual political interests or hidden political agendas (Acharya 2016; Yates 2012; Bhattacharya and Basnyat 2005). These leaders become, therefore, not agents of social change but rather politically motivated actors who adopt strategies of patronage, exclusion and championing pet projects. Consequently, many CBOs do not share any common interest with the people: they adopt neither a common vision nor an inclusive agenda, and they pay little or no attention to policies, guidelines and legalities. Hierarchical attitudes to power work against empowerment agendas, and also erode social cohesiveness. Upreti and Müller-Böker (2010) link these practices to Nepal's feudal legacy, suggesting that this legacy has undermined the interests of weaker segments of society in local democracy, governance and programme implementation.

**Capacity limitations and resource constraints:** In the past, the government in its eighth Five Year Plan (1992–1997) had officially adopted a 'participatory' approach and sought people's participation in service delivery (Pandit et al. 2007). Still in force, this approach places CBOs centre stage as the 'best' instrument for delivery of services at the community level. However, many CBOs, particularly in remote areas, are inefficient due to a lack of skills, and to exclusion (Uphoff 2004). Malla (2001) argues that a paternalistic attitude has on the one hand created a patronising relationship in decision-making, and on the other has led to manipulation of information and communication techniques, which rob disadvantaged people of their access to opportunities and services. If CBOs can achieve a social 'licence to operate', it is much easier for them to become established and hence to receive resources and partner with development agencies. This type of legitimisation also fosters social accountability, institutional capability and access to resources (Opere 2007). Nonetheless, although this approach promotes a degree of self-reliance within local communities and their institutions, the imperfect market network, elite and middle-men influences, and technical and financial constraints still remain obstacles.

## Methodology

This research purposively chose as its study focus the village development committees – ie the lowest unit of local government – in the villages of Pawannagar, Shantinagar, Shreegaun, Hekuli and Goltakuri in Dang district, Nepal. All five are remote settlements known for endemic poverty and enduring marginalisation from service delivery structures. Our fieldwork identified that over 60% of the population in the five villages live in households classified as ultra-poor or poor. Only 33.5% of households can access safe drinking water, and only 43.6% can access sanitation. Within the villages, 59.4% of residents are literate. The involvement of local government bodies, sectoral line agencies, donors and NGOs in these localities has a long history.



Three broad categories of CBOs were chosen for analysis. These included community forestry user groups (CFUGs), community development organisation groups (CDOGs) and women's development groups (WDGs). The CFUGs were directly involved in natural resource management activities as per government regulations. CDOGs, supported by local government and development partners, conducted social, economic and infrastructural development activities, while WDGs attempted to ensure women's participation and gender inclusion in local development activities at the grassroots level. As people's representatives and facilitators of local services, these bodies have been actively involved at the community level since 1990, when enabling legislation was passed. In the selection of respondents, a sampling method was used. The randomly selected sample size of 110 from a total CBO population of 152 was determined using the Yamane (1967) method<sup>1</sup> to ensure sample representation at a 0.05 margin of error.

A qualitative method involving in-depth interviews and focus group discussions (FGDs) was adopted to generate the primary data. Interviews were held with 110 groups out of 152 groups during the period of scheduled group meetings. The respondents were two people from each of the 110 CBO groups, namely the chairperson and the secretary. These interviews were designed to gather the opinions and attitudes of participants on the relationship between the community, the CBO, and state and non-state partners in community governance and service delivery. Semi-structured questionnaires were used for the interviews, with questions addressing the main research issues: participation, community empowerment and mobilisation, local democracy, social capital and governance.

Likewise, five FGD sessions were organised with the remaining 42 groups. The participants included chairpersons, secretaries and treasurers (for the important function they are entrusted with) from each group, and discussion focused on management, public access to services and the peacebuilding process in the aftermath of the communist uprising and takeover. Each FGD lasted approximately 90 minutes. Proceedings were recorded electronically and later transcribed. From the FGDs, governance patterns and the nature of public access to services were discerned. Research ethics standards, as set out in the Guidelines for Human Research<sup>2</sup> at the University of New England, Australia, were applied in collecting the primary data, including the organisational survey and the FGDs.

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<sup>1</sup>Yamane sampling method  $n = \frac{N}{1 + N(e)^2}$  hence  $\frac{n = 152}{1 + 152(0.05)^2}$  Therefore the sample size = 110

<sup>2</sup> Human Research Ethics, University of New England [www.une.edu.au/research/ethics-and-grants/human-research-ethics](http://www.une.edu.au/research/ethics-and-grants/human-research-ethics)

## **Findings: the extent to which key enabling factors for community governance were present in the five villages**

Six factors extrapolated from the conceptual discussion above that enable sound community governance are discussed below. These are: inclusive participation, community empowerment, community mobilisation, strengthening local democracy, social capital development, and transparency and accountability. We discuss each in turn, and then move to the broader cross-cutting discussion.

### ***Inclusive participation***

Participating in this research project gave people real opportunities to express what makes a difference in the issues affecting them, and what influences community decisions and actions. Analysis of participants' responses showed that meaningful community participation was thought to be achieved through the sharing of power and resources, deliberate efforts by social groups to control their own destinies, and the opening up of opportunities at the grassroots. This was believed to have led to the development of broader networks of communities working together on 'governing' activities, and also to improvements in efficiency and accountability. In community service delivery, it was viewed to be very beneficial to have equal participation from women and disadvantaged communities in all types of decision-making: planning and selecting projects, allocating resources, and sharing out benefits. The shared benefits that respondents described were of several kinds: economic (forest resources, savings/credit schemes, government/non-government grants); social (equal distribution of opportunities, power and authority); democratic (access to the leadership selection process); and informational inclusivity in generating knowledge resources, influence in decision-making, training, interaction, and capacity-building).

In addition, it was reported that inclusion increased if members from lower caste groups, women and ethnic minorities were placed in executive positions to influence decision-making relevant to group activities. These practices demonstrate that meaningful participation was achieved by mobilising local people's economic resources (for example via a compulsory savings policy, or the formation of a resource mobilisation group), the harnessing of natural resources (forest management, sustainable use of forest resources, small-scale water mills, irrigation canals), and consensus-based management through local awareness-raising and information-sharing. It was found that the following three conditions contributed to making a real difference in inclusive participation: transparent democratic practices with clear accountability; appropriate facilitation to support groups and members; and positive action by rural elites, who were normally in leadership positions.

By contrast, the following conditions were observed to have some negative effect: unresponsive key actors, a 'non-listening' culture, weak community relationships, wayward leadership by elites, strong political influence, lack of devolved power, and lack of appreciation of local communities.

The following opinion of a participant encapsulates this finding:

*Not only government policies, rules, and regulations, but also the internal mechanisms of CBOs and their service systems are not all effective. The selection of leadership, and other decision-making processes such as the formulation of plans and projects and mobilisation of resources are power-structured, which does not encourage people's participation and their access to the service system.*

The research found that many of the CBOs were incapable of configuring structures, organising leadership, and designing linkages and guidelines that promote the required meaningful participation. A number of reasons for this were identified: poorly organised group meetings without prior or adequate notice, a lack of agenda and structured discussion, absence of ground rules or regulations, and general organisation members' ignorance of their roles and responsibilities. These created three types of issues in decision-making. The first was low attendance at meetings, especially among weaker and more vulnerable segments of the population, which in turn created an environment of domination by the rural elites. Secondly, there were no guarantees that the elite group would listen to the voices of poorer community members. The third issue was manipulation of records (falsification, inaccuracy or exaggeration). These issues led to CBOs becoming ineffective in delivering services.

### **Community empowerment**

Community empowerment concerns how members of a group are able to act collectively in ways that enhance their influence on, or control over, decisions that affect their interests. It is a multi-dimensional concept, in which actions reflect local values and belief systems, and help people or groups to gain power and control over their own lives. This study found that CBOs were quite successful in being heard and creating an enabling environment for people's participation in the decision-making process. There were a number of specific contributing factors. First, where local government bodies deliberately allied themselves with communities, and provided institutional facilitation, this contributed to empowering the communities. In such situations, local communities typically received regular annual funding from the local government for social empowerment issues. Second, strategic alliances between the local government bodies, NGOs and communities were found to enhance local capacity. For example, NGOs and donors used technical support packages to foster social mobilisation, awareness-raising, advocacy, lobbying, planning and monitoring activities, and skill-based income-generating activities. Third, communities under CBO leadership appreciated the CBO's role in making community initiatives happen; CBOs were seen as exerting pressure on development agencies for downward accountability, and as being a major stakeholder in their communities. Respondents cited many instances which demonstrated how CBOs helped communities to set up and embed participatory planning and budgeting, tracking of public expenditure, citizen monitoring of projects, and citizens' charters. These initiatives decreased political influence in decision-making through people's inputs and increased service co-production and management, as well as improving service delivery. Equally, if CBOs were able to

boost economic empowerment this ensured community access to economic benefits including jobs, financial services, property and other productive assets, skills development and market information.

Most of the CBO groups studied were found to be relatively well organised. They had an annual programme of work, horizontal and vertical linkages and networking systems, an institutional vision and guidelines (including for monitoring and supervision), and a citizens' charter. They also publicised their programmes, resources, and decisions, held regular group meetings, ensured effective resource allocation and project implementation, and regularly audited and evaluated their activities. Finally, many communities were skilled at settling conflicts and disputes over resource allocation and mobilisation, and had developed negotiation and mediating skills; these skills enhanced citizens' power with political parties and local government. Nevertheless, CBOs were hampered by official systems which did not support them. Legal acts, regulations, policies and the ways these were enforced or implemented were not always inclusive in practice. These often failed to fully transfer power to the local level and also entrenched the centre's political interests in the name of decentralisation. Respondents stated that the complexities of these legal procedures actually strengthened the centralisation process and increased the influence of political and local elites within communities, rather than promoting community autonomy.

These realities led to three types of crisis of governance at the community level. First, many CBOs chose not to adopt governance indicators in their development initiatives as these would be nullified by influential political actors. Secondly, some CBOs became bogged down in delivering services. Thirdly, such problems created major obstacles to the CBOs carrying out their work. As one participant put it:

*Our past was very difficult; we did not have education, health, communication, and transportation facilities. Our generation has been living without hopes and aspiration of better livelihood. The lack of effective policies and their poor implementation by the government and their extended arms (state and non-state partners) are the causes of our insecure life.*

Historically, CBOs have not been always in a position to influence decision-making, and their contribution has rarely been formally acknowledged. For this and other reasons, local communities and their institutions were frequently powerless. This led many research participants to confirm that the present system provided benefits only to the rich and to elites, political leaders and service agencies; putting them in a controlling position and marginalising the community and its institutions.

### **Community mobilisation**

This study found that CBOs did enable communities in the study area to serve as liaison agencies between their neighbourhoods and their local public institutions. They also encouraged 'watchdog' or accountability activities, such as public hearings. Examples of CBO community activities included: effective management of local forests, rural-based micro-finance, increased enrolment of primary- and secondary-level students, improved public access to primary healthcare, and improvements in the supply of agricultural and drinking water.

A wide range of other empowering activities were cited. These related to service planning and delivery (prioritisation, monitoring and oversight); coordination and networking with service providers; combating harmful traditional beliefs (campaigns against the dowry system, untouchability, illiteracy, witchery, child marriage, domestic violence, and caste- and gender-based discrimination); increasing representation and participation among women and marginal community groups; boosting local democracy, for example by increasing the 'voice' of diverse groups; and involvement in choosing the leaders and management committees for local schools. Some of the inclusive activities specifically encouraged women, *tharus* minority ethnic groups, the marginalised *dalits* and other marginalised people to participate in group activities.

These achievements indicate that CBOs make a substantial contribution to community mobilisation. They have been playing a decisive role in enhancing sustainability, improving efficiency and effectiveness, empowering poor people, and strengthening inclusive governance. Their assistance in mobilising economic resources such as savings, government and non-government funding and community-owned assets (forests, land, quarry stone, sand and water) has not only enabled effective service delivery but also contributed to these services' long-term sustainability. For example, over time rural communities with CBOs have been able to collect a significant amount of money to invest in rural cooperatives that provide soft loans to other villagers. These processes not only promote indigenous skills, but also help communities reduce their dependency on external agencies.

However, many obstacles to robust community empowerment remain. Barriers identified by respondents included: poor awareness of governance systems and absence of best practice, poor social accountability, poorly managed public hearings, flawed social audits and citizen report cards, and elite-based power structures within the community. Further empirical findings from the study were apathy on the part of local people; frustration and dissatisfaction within communities; structural problems for CBOs, such as upward accountability; and dependence on government and donor agencies – which could be in conflict with community-owned indigenous practices, cooperation, collaboration and communitarian values. Some respondents felt that CBOs were themselves highly power-structured: more concerned with accessing resources and demonstrating upward accountability to their funding agencies than with ensuring inclusive leadership. For this reason, it was felt that they are, in general, highly influenced by political agendas and less focused on volunteerism and social movements against injustice. On the other hand, some respondents did feel CBOs were conscious of people's aspirations and, by their nature, less political. However, this politically-neutral stance was seen as leading to a lack of resources, meaning not only that CBOs were unable to meet public needs and demands, but also faced declining membership and increasing dysfunctionality. One participant's view is pertinent:

*We intend to utilise the CFUG's resources for community development, so that we can meet our basic needs and demands. [But] whenever a meeting is conducted, the chair and secretary show the demand lists such as granting resources for the salary of school*

*teachers, funding support to the local political parties, and presenting forest products to the district-level bureaucrats. If we opposed their agendas, they would create administrative and legal complexities and put us in a trap.*

This shows people may be denied service opportunities, unless they go along with CBO activities which may not have been democratically decided. Such a forced approach inevitably provides only short-term results, leaving implemented projects/programmes either unsustainable or lacking public ownership. Similarly, there was a lack of joined-up thinking between different types of empowerment activities (economic, social and political). This type of flawed intervention favoured upward accountability and a supply-driven service system, increased outsiders' influence, minimised the role of local people, and misused resources.

### **Strengthening local democracy**

Democracy is a value-laden concept, but is generally agreed to concern the rights of people to participate in decision-making processes. If fully implemented, it is a system where participation and representation of all sections of the population at all levels of decision-making is guaranteed. It promotes local diversity, creates a level playing field for political parties, and weakens vested interests. At the community level, democracy can contribute to developing community dialogue, maintaining a community calendar, communicating about policies and programmes, providing practical information on service delivery, capturing feedback and citizen input, organising local and neighbourhood associations, and organising campaigns and citizen initiatives.

This study found a clear value for local democracy at the community level. First, it was seen to weaken hierarchical power structures. Second, it supported the establishment of a power structure that put the community at the centre. Third, it helped increase the effectiveness of governance and hence accessible, equitable, and quality-driven services, as well as accountability, political skills and service integrity. Positive outcomes of this kind not only inspired community members to organise themselves, but also encouraged them to raise awareness in the community on issues such as social justice, civil rights, equal opportunity, fairness, and participation in educational, economic and institutional activities. However, the study found great variation in the degree to which local democracy was adopted by CBOs. Some appeared to practise democracy only if convenient to them. The main reasons for this were felt to be the feudal legacy in the CBO system, low levels of user awareness and access to democratic opportunities, bureaucratic and political reluctance to devolve power and authority, complex legal practices and policies, and political bias. Communities felt that CBOs were highly politicised, elite-captured and, to some extent, derived their legitimacy from delegated authority rather than from their actual communities. In these groups, manipulation and influence were common phenomena that harmed communities economically and socially.

The following observation is typical, showing how local people may be oppressed by the misuse of a majority-based democratic system:

*As original dwellers, we constituted the CFUG, formulated guidelines, demarcated fire lines, replanted and rehabilitated the barren land. However, we have become a minority now. After the migration from hill districts during the period of conflict, migrant numbers are higher than us. Now, they hold key positions on committees due to the majority-based democratic system and have formulated policies, rules and regulations according to their advantage. This has violated the CFUG's norms and rules.*

Some of the reasons given as to why CBOs did not promote wider access were low educational status and awareness, patriarchal social structures, and family pressure. Many CBO members claimed they were denied access to leaders and opportunities to put their arguments. If they disagreed with the leadership, they would be discriminated against when it came to resource utilisation and allocation. This study also found evidence that most CBOs were being used as political vehicles for boosting leadership status, and as bargaining instruments. Generally, leaders reserved many opportunities for their own followers.

### **Social capital development**

Social capital is a valuable output of trust and relationships. At the community level, social capital may be defined as association, trust and reciprocity between individuals and within communities that boosts community confidence, heightens community participation, enhances well-being, reduces malpractice, and promotes economic prosperity. Uphoff (1993, p. 619) states that “CBOs are closer to the people, drive people’s knowledge, assess the local situation, and create an environment to mould responsible people to work for their communities”. This study’s findings support this view, showing social capital resulting in positive relations within communities and functioning groups, and encouraging network-building within the community that counters elite capture and breaks down rigid power structures. In this sense, greater transparency, more accountability and equal opportunities for participation in CBO activities create an environment of trust at the community level. This inspires people to provide voluntary services (physical or cash contributions) for community activities. For example, we find that that increasing public access to primary health services, improving school enrolment, and facilitating communication between people and their local government and sectoral agencies, generates strong cooperation between communities and CBOs.

More specifically, successful CBOs aimed at promoting strong capacity, a positive working culture and clear rules and regulations (*bidhan* and *karya nirdesika*), which fostered inclusive participation and responsible use and management of local resources. For example, the implementation of a pro-poor policy in service provision encouraged deprived *dalit* and *tharu* people to participate. Resourceful CBOs supported marginal communities to become involved in infrastructure development projects that affected them, such as drinking water schemes and culvert and road construction. They also provided scholarships to schoolchildren from marginal communities and encouraged people to organise themselves into groups. The formation of paralegal committees enabled many women’s issues to be

settled at the village level. They also encouraged equal sharing of benefits, democratic decision-making and leader selection, and transparency. CBOs which acted this way, and honestly addressed issues, attracted strong social support. Thus it can be seen that creating social capital required investment and use of embedded resources in social relations.

A significant problem found by the present survey was that some groups are not formally constituted in law. As a result, government and non-government partners refuse to build formal partnerships with them. The evidence suggests that these CBOs had weak links with external organisations and were influenced by the traditional cultural practices of their communities and the patronage-based practices of the government. This culture led agencies to play the role of giver, and the people that of receiver.

On this issue, a participant expressed his dissatisfaction thus:

*In our experience, the present legitimisation process is nothing more than politics of decentralisation. This has influenced the local community to split and collapse social harmony in the community. Some groups (CFUGs legitimised by the prevailing law) have been enjoying local forest resources and others such as CDOGs, WDGs, and farmer and livestock groups, are lagging behind. This has created inter-group conflict in the community.*

Overall, many CBO groups found it hard to build social capital. Poorly planned services, lack of information on how benefits are shared out, non-users' participation in project user committees, and a general lack of transparency have led to public dissatisfaction with CBO activities. This has directly affected their ability to create social capital.

### **Transparency and accountability**

Transparency may be defined as openness and an ongoing communication process to achieve public accountability in a timely and reliable way. This study found that transparency at the local level could be enhanced through the use of scorecards for public services and by supporting local independent media (radio, local newspapers), social audits and public hearings. These measures promoted steady improvements in accountability, both in the short and the long term. Within the study area, some CBO groups had established a social intelligence system for improving transparency and accountability, by monitoring community actions. Its work included accurate identification of the status and progress of activities, as well as any omissions and delays. Support for this system was growing, due to its interactive nature. Many people in the community put their trust in such organised community-based 'watchdog' groups because they felt they was more reliable and trustworthy, and were community-owned.

This respondent reported that community engagement had brought many improvements in the governance process, notably by monitoring group integrity, which reduced corruption and increased service effectiveness. The role of '*nagarik sarokar samiti*' (citizen concerned groups) was seen as successful in improving community-managed schools, drinking water schemes, and watershed conservation practices. Frequent monitoring, feedback, and solution-seeking enhanced CBO



performance making services more effective. Nevertheless, many CBOs were not sharing information or communicating with their members. The practice of regular assemblies was poorly implemented. Equally, there was a huge reluctance among CBOs to implement public and social audit programmes for their activities. All these findings indicate poor community governance. The following observation of a participant is pertinent:

*Almost all CBOs' leadership is highly influenced by nepotism, cronyism and favouritism. Their activities, resources, and benefits are mostly linked with the government, NGOs and donor agencies. In many activities, such as project selection, funding, and implementation, the community people are provided with no information. But when they need to show public involvement, they demand our participation. Because of the lack of downward accountability, we aren't ready to contribute.*

This finding suggests that CBO power tends to be concentrated in a few individuals, leading to weak community governance. People's main concerns were about participating in local-level decision-making, so they could formulate priority projects in areas such as roads, education, health services and access to drinking water and sanitation, agricultural extension, vocational skills training, and employment opportunities. However, their capacity to do so was limited by their lack of education, poverty, low political and social standing, geographical isolation and poor information.

### **Discussion: key factors influencing community governance and service delivery**

The findings outlined above indicate that service delivery and governance at the community level in Nepal is fairly weak and many CBOs are unaccountable and not always responsive to community needs. The problem is not so much a lack of political and bureaucratic initiatives; but rather the influence of excessive regulation, a lack of professionalism, the ineffective application of the rule of law, corruption, and the dominance of rural elites. These issues have deterred communities from actively engaging in governance matters, and despite considerable – albeit sporadic – efforts, many CBOs remain non-compliant with many of the norms and essentials of community governance.

We now discuss these issues with a focus on four themes: institutional mechanisms, socio-economic structures, power politics and interests, and capacity and resource constraints.

#### ***Institutional mechanisms***

Many respondents expressed the view that service delivery had become politicised after democratisation, and CBO groups had become political vehicles. The accountability of some CBOs is inclined towards the elites, political leaders, bureaucrats and resourceful NGOs – making them not only citizen-unfriendly, lethargic and unaccountable to their communities, but also unethical, inefficient, and manipulative of resources and services. There appears to be an institutional crisis at community level. Contact between community actors has been very limited. Some groups are affiliated to a particular development agency, which may be regarded as highly valuable by the leadership, but ordinary members of the group are denied opportunities. The actions of such 'special' agencies have dissuaded

communities from expanding their relationships with others for support. Indeed, competition and conflict between development agencies has implications for coordination and linkages at the grassroots. Likewise, there appear to be conflicts of interest between ordinary members and the leadership of CBOs which impair institutional efficiency at the community level. According to this study's findings, the conflicts arise over resource mobilisation and management, skills and knowledge development, leadership contests, and project selection and implementation. Many distortions and institutional deficiencies have emerged at the community level which, counter-productively, have actually increased the long-term dependency of communities on external agencies, and have threatened the sustainability of service delivery.

### ***Socio-economic structures***

Within this study, some participants complained that existing social and economic practices offered disproportionate opportunities to the rich and better-off sections of the population. The research found three distinct drivers of poor community governance in Nepal: patron–client relationships, structural legacies, and social and economic exclusion. CBOs' activities are decided by a social elite, the local power structure, resource politics and donors' wishes. These have not only created ambiguities but have also encouraged the elites to adversely affect service delivery managed by CBOs. Participants pointed out that group leadership is always in the hands of local elites, such as *zamindars* (landlords), who are oblivious to people's problems, careless about informing them of decisions they make, and discriminatory in distributing benefits.

Although the Nepalese Constitution mandates democracy for all citizens, in practice this right has remained largely confined to males and the so-called 'higher' castes in society. Many participants in the present study stated that democratic practice at the community level was not inclusive, citing several reasons. Firstly, some respondents felt local people themselves were not ready to participate, due to a lack of awareness or inadequate orientation. A second reason given was that political parties and development partners conspired to unfairly devalue less powerful groups within the community, especially women. Thirdly, it was noted that the way policy is formulated and reformulated in discussion with central authorities is very technocratic, mechanistic and over-formalised.

Fourthly, some respondents felt CBO groups lacked the necessary capabilities. If reforms were introduced, they invariably functioned in a 'trickle-down' manner, leading to a situation which created winners and losers at the community level. Women participants argued, for example, that there was hardly any space to discuss or prioritise social and financial activities, and also that discriminatory practices blocked their daughters from attending boarding schools. These grievances have fractured social cohesion. On a similar note, many participants declared that only people who already have voice, power and wealth can articulate the issues and convince development partners to serve their interests.

This consequently excludes many communities, organisations and individuals from the community-building system and overall governance process.

### ***Power politics and interests***

Participants did not have unreasonable expectations: they expressed modest hopes and simple dreams for a comfortable life. However, one-size-fits-all NGO and donor rules and ‘top-down’ governmental regulations have created undue hurdles for communities seeking to move from a community-owned indigenous system to a framework that supports modernisation and a market economy. This study’s findings suggest, for example, that many preconditions set by development agencies are pointless and have resulted in the formation of parallel institutions that squeeze out community institutions in planning and implementation. This situation has hindered community members in organising themselves and actively identifying problems, planning and making decisions, and taking action to meet their objectives – with or without government or NGO support. Some participants, however, believed that service delivery is primarily the responsibility of the government, which should deliver services to the communities. Government organisations, however, maintain that some powers, functions and resources have been devolved to CBOs, but because the latter are not sufficiently motivated or interested, they do not carry out their roles effectively. To this, CBOs reply that whatever power has been devolved has been captured by local elites. For example, the low level of cooperation between CBOs and development agencies has been a key deterrent to establishing strategic alliances for undertaking service delivery.

In Nepal, there has been a serious absence of robust localised political authority in local government for several decades. This vacuum has led to a misuse and misallocation of development resources that has adversely affected community governance, democratic practice and leadership capability at the grassroots. To fill decision-making and implementation gaps at local level, CBOs are in theory regarded as the best institutional instrument. Yet, capacity and resource constraints, along with conflict between sectoral interests, have impaired their operational efficiency. As a stop-gap arrangement, the central government established an ‘all-party’ political mechanism to fill the vacuum and carry on service delivery and development projects in local authority areas but corruption and cronyism have not diminished. However, this mechanism serves a limited purpose as it remains unaccountable, has encouraged unprecedented corruption and indiscretion among local personnel, and has promoted favouritism and exclusion at the community level. The continued absence of elected leadership in local areas has endangered community governance in all its aspects.

### ***Capacity and resource constraints***

In the study area, many communities face difficulties in accessing education, healthcare, safe drinking water and other essential services. To address this, service organisations attempt to enhance the managerial and organisational capacities of local institutions. This study found that CBOs could not

maintain their integrity and efficiency in service delivery. For example, the annual volume of governmental grants for local development has been increasing, but capacity constraints and the power games of political parties have prevented local bodies from meeting community needs and efficiently managing resources. Nor are the communities themselves always able to identify their problems, absorb, manage and utilise their budgets, and achieve positive results. For example, there is ample evidence that the annual budget in most local government units is regularly frozen due to lack of CBO capacity to use funds properly or in a timely way.

The skills of CBOs in facilitating, interacting or communicating with their community and other actors have also been very weak. Several implications for the community are noticeable. First, there is increasing inequality in sharing benefits, which occurs because setting up CBO groups tends to take a very long time – years in some cases. In some cases, founder members receive more opportunities, leaving little for new members. Secondly, Nepal's Local Self-Governance Act (LSGA) 1999 mandates 33% women and 10% *dalit* and ethnic minority participation in decision-making. The annual budgets of local bodies and sectoral line agencies also provide for a 10% resource allocation each specifically for women and ethnic groups. However, these groups have struggled to claim their shares, owing to capacity limitation and lack of understanding of how to draw up and submit proposals. These resources tend to end up in the pockets of the elites. Thirdly, resources to implement rural infrastructure projects remain underutilised, due to lack of vision or confidence of the leadership. The outcome has been the capture of both the decision-making process and project management by local elites, ostensibly on behalf of local communities. Fourthly, most CBO leadership positions have been occupied by schoolteachers, ex-local government personnel, unemployed educated youth and rich landowners, who have not hesitated to grab the benefits meant for the poor or those who do not realise what they are entitled to. Among the CBOs studied, most also faced a scarcity of resources, which made them more dependent on either government organisations or non-state agencies, particularly donors and NGOs. These organisations and their officials generally take a paternalistic attitude, which disparages democracy and participation to a great extent. This study found evidence of their rejection of participatory decision-making and imposition of their preferences in service delivery management.

Community service delivery has typically been undertaken either by central governments, community organisations or private enterprises. However, this is insufficient, ineffective, and sporadic, because of the top-down approach of the central government and private sector organisations. However, multi-actor collaborations have to some extent offset CBOs' lack of incentives, inadequate funds, and absence of technical expertise, and partnerships between resource agencies and CBOs have in many cases brought about positive change and helped resolve many uncertainties.

## Conclusions

Community governance in Nepal has not only been involved in maintaining democratic practice and public access to the service delivery system, but also in empowering communities to ensure sustainable service delivery. Although many groups at the community level have been engaged in multi-layered matters, the trend shows that many micro and macro level factors are facilitating their passage from specific to polycentric issues. This study found some negative intercorrelations between the six variables indicating structural problems faced by CBOs; these variables were upward accountability, inordinate dependency on others (notably local elites, government and donor agencies), institutional crisis, socio-economic hierarchical rigidity in communities, resource misuse, and service delivery manipulation. These problems were found to hamper the effectiveness of community governance in many ways although there have been many efforts to allay them. In many instances, a lack of awareness and inadequate orientation discourage communities from participating in community affairs. Development partners often act unfairly where community matters are concerned and policy formulation and refinement is overly technocratic, mechanistic and formalised. Moreover, CBOs often have limited capability and political motivations often mean that leaders prioritise individual interests or hidden agendas over wider community needs.

As long ago as 1990, the Nepalese government transformed local government institutions into development coordination mechanisms at the intermediate and grassroots level. However, the evidence from the present study indicates that CBOs are directly influenced by many external factors such as institutional policies, socio-economic structures, power politics and interests, and capacity and resource constraints that dent social capital building. These pressures complicate their decision-making and have the potential to make them less capable and more disorganised – with a knock-on negative effect for service delivery.

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