

GOVERNANCE LAB

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From Commitments to Change: What Local Governments Must Do to Make Inclusive Governance a Reality

Nepal's local governments are doing many of the right things. The harder task is making sure those efforts consistently translate into influence, access and better services for women and marginalized communities.

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An encouraging story is emerging from Nepal's local governments. Across municipalities, there is growing recognition that women and marginalized communities must have a meaningful place in planning, budgeting, decision making and public service delivery. Municipalities are conducting consultations, introducing targeted programmes, adopting gender responsive budgeting approaches and creating mechanisms intended to bring excluded communities into local governance.

But there is another story that is harder to see in policy documents. A woman may be invited to a consultation without having much influence over the final decision. A municipality may allocate a budget for gender equality while citizens remain unclear about what has been allocated, who it is intended to benefit and what it is expected to achieve. More importantly, an allocation does not necessarily mean that the money will be spent. Competing priorities, implementation constraints or changing needs during a fiscal year may result in resources being redirected or allocated funds remaining unused. A budget line can therefore exist on paper without producing meaningful change in people's lives.

The same gap can appear in policies and services. A policy may exist while implementation remains uneven across municipal sections and wards. A person with a disability may technically have access to a public service but still face practical barriers in reaching it, understanding the process or obtaining the support they need. These are not necessarily failures of intent. They point to an implementation challenge.

Governance Lab's recent public hearing on inclusive governance, organized in Bhumikasthan Municipality with support from UN Women under the Strengthening Gender Responsive and Inclusive Governance programme, brought many of these questions directly into the conversation between citizens and local government. The discussion covered women's participation in decision making, gender responsive planning and budgeting, access to public services, participation of Dalits and persons with disabilities, implementation of gender equality and social inclusion policies, institutional gaps, transparency and collaboration with women's rights organizations and civil society. These discussions were also informed by the experience of ten governance fellows placed across ten local government units in Lumbini Province. Through their engagement with municipal processes, women's rights organizations, civil society, and citizens, the fellows provided additional insights into how policies and commitments are being translated into practice, where gaps remain, and what could strengthen citizen engagement and more inclusive local governance.

What emerged was neither a picture of a government doing nothing nor one in which existing measures are sufficient. It was a picture of progress alongside unfinished institutional strengthening.

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The municipality described efforts to increase women's participation in planning, budgeting and decision making, alongside economic empowerment initiatives. It also reported efforts to make public services more accessible, including taking services to the homes of persons with disabilities and supporting Dalit and marginalized communities to access municipal services.

These are important steps. But the municipality also acknowledged that institutional and implementation gaps remain. Stronger coordination between municipal sections is needed. Capacity and awareness need to be strengthened. Monitoring requires greater attention. Existing gender equality and social inclusion policies need stronger implementation and coordination. This is where the conversation about inclusive governance needs to move next.

Women's participation in local government is an important achievement, but representation should not be confused with influence. The question for local governments should increasingly be whether women are able to shape decisions, whether their priorities are reflected in plans and budgets, and whether they can hold institutions accountable for commitments made in their name.

The same applies to marginalized communities. Dalits, persons with disabilities and other excluded groups may be formally included in consultations and committees, but meaningful inclusion requires more than presence. It requires

the ability to raise concerns, influence priorities and see those concerns reflected in decisions and services. Local governments therefore need to examine participation not only by asking who attended a meeting, but by asking what happened because they participated.

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Gender responsive planning and budgeting also needs to become more meaningful at the community level. Local governments are already engaging communities in identifying priorities and working to integrate gender responsive approaches into planning and budgeting. But the effectiveness of these efforts depends on what happens between identifying a priority and delivering a result.

Citizens need to be able to follow that journey. They should be able to understand what was prioritized, what was budgeted, what was spent and what was achieved. This requires stronger monitoring, accessible information and regular citizen feedback.

Gender responsive budgeting should therefore not remain primarily a technical exercise within government. It should become something communities can understand, question and monitor. This would create a stronger connection between citizen participation and public spending, while also making it easier to identify when commitments have not translated into implementation.

The same principle applies to public services. The municipality's efforts to provide services to persons with disabilities and facilitate access for Dalit and marginalized communities demonstrate the importance of looking beyond formal availability. A policy is not inclusive simply because it exists. A service is not accessible simply because it is officially available. Local governments need to ask whether people can actually reach the service, understand the process, obtain the information they need and receive the service without unnecessary barriers. These challenges point to a broader institutional priority: making existing mechanisms work effectively.

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Municipal officials should know which section is responsible for responding to a concern raised by citizens. It should know what action was promised, who is responsible for delivering it and whether that action was completed. Citizens should be able to access the same information.

Women's rights organizations, civil society organizations and community groups can play an important role in making this possible. Their role should extend beyond mobilizing people to attend consultations or public hearings. They can help communities understand municipal plans and budgets, document concerns, support marginalized citizens to engage with government, follow up on commitments and provide feedback when services are not reaching intended communities.

The relationship between municipalities, WROs, CSOs and community organizations should therefore be treated as part of the local accountability system rather than as an occasional partnership.

One immediate step is to ensure that municipalities conduct public hearings on a regular basis and that every public hearing leads to a follow up process. Municipalities should not have to wait for another project, consultation or hearing to revisit commitments already made. There should be a clear mechanism for tracking what citizens raised, what the government agreed to do, who is responsible and what progress has been made.

This does not necessarily require creating new structures. Existing municipal mechanisms can be used if responsibilities are clearly assigned and information is regularly updated and shared with citizens. The important thing is that commitments do not disappear once the hearing ends.

Regular public hearings can become one part of a wider accountability cycle. The public hearing notes and commitments can be uploaded into a municipal database or a dashboard that is available online and accessible to all citizens. Citizen concerns can inform planning. Budget implementation can be discussed with communities. Service users can provide feedback. Municipal sections can report progress. WROs and CSOs can support community monitoring. Commitments can then be reviewed publicly.

Nepal's local governments have already demonstrated a willingness to promote women's participation, support marginalized communities, improve access to services and integrate gender and social inclusion into local planning. The next step is to make these efforts more systematic, coordinated and measurable.

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Inclusive governance becomes real not when a mechanism exists, but when people can see its effect in decisions, budgets, services and institutions. The measure of progress is therefore not only what municipalities commit to do, but what changes because they did it.