

LALITPUR, NEPAL, July 19 – Governance Lab convened its policy dialogue on the topic "Unlocking Nepal's Tourism Sector: Bridging the Data Gap for National Policy," bringing together senior policymakers, industry leaders, and academics to discuss the governance and data gaps standing between Nepal's tourism ambitions and their implementation. The discussions emphasized how closing these gaps is an opportunity shared by everyone in the sector.

Nepal's tourism sector welcomed more than 1.15 million international visitors in 2025 and remains one of the country's largest economic engines, generating significant foreign exchange earnings and government revenue, including over NPR 1 billion in mountaineering royalties alone. The current government has signaled clear near-term priorities for the sector: Tourism Policy 2025 (2082) emphasizes destination diversification, quality and year-round tourism, and stronger private-sector partnerships, while the 16th National Plan sets an ambitious arrivals growth target for the coming years – a volume-and-value ambition also reflected in the Nepal Tourism Board's forthcoming Five-Year Action Plan (2026–2030).

These priorities are largely promotional and market-facing in orientation. What remains comparatively underdeveloped is a parallel governance and institutional agenda – how permitting, revenue-sharing, data systems, and inter-agency coordination should evolve to support this growth sustainably, particularly at the federal-local interface. Understanding the importance of this gap, Governance Lab conducted this event to build shared understanding on where evidence gaps remain and what role each stakeholder is prepared to contribute going forward.

Opening the event, **Dr. Nisha Onta**, Founder and Executive Director of Governance Lab, welcomed the audience and framed the discussion around Governance Lab's research. She explained that Governance Lab's focus on tourism grew out of nearly four years of conversations with entrepreneurs, researchers, and academics, many of whom pointed to tourism as the sector where this work should begin. Despite the government's visible focus on promoting tourism, the country continues to fall behind, pointing to a governance gap rather than a promotional one.

Aanandita Shrestha, Program and Research Officer at Governance Lab, presented the research findings, drawn from fieldwork conducted in the Khumbu region between January 2026 and March 2026. The research surfaced seven areas of opportunity for stronger, more coordinated tourism governance, spanning permit coordination, revenue alignment with local government, conservation and customary governance coordination, worker welfare frameworks, enforcement capacity, real-time data systems, and inter-agency coordination and proposed three priority reforms: a single digital permit portal, a strengthened and technically resourced Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation (MoCTCA), and an open, real-time tourism data platform.

Pratisha Joshi, Program and Partnership Coordinator at Governance Lab, introduced the panel discussion. With panelists from different sectors like the local government, academia and the private sector, she said the conversation would bring our different views on the data and evidence gap. She built the discussion around three themes; Data and evidence gaps, fair sharing of tourism resources, and what's being done versus what still needs to change.

The panel discussion, moderated by Joshi, featured Chairperson Mingma Chhiri Sherpa of Khumbu Pasang Lhamu Rural Municipality, Dr. Smrittee Kala Panta, Assistant Professor at Kathmandu University School of Management, and Mr. Raj Gyawali, Founder and Director of socialtours.

(The panelists point of views in different themes and questions are synthesized in a single paragraph)

Chairperson Mingma Chhiri Sherpa shared the real gap between how policies are made and how they actually play out on the ground. Even though Nepal has moved to federalism, he said, the mindset is still centralised and closing that gap means policymakers need to talk directly to the regions their decisions affect. He pointed to Khumbu's new grey card system, built to track not just how many tourists come but how much locals actually benefit and whether the area can handle the load. The municipality has also introduced its own tourism fee, using rights guaranteed by the constitution, as part of a push toward more sustainable tourism while it keeps pressing the federal government for a fairer share of the revenue Khumbu brings in. He also talked about the Nawa system, Sherpa customary system that predates Sagarmatha National Park itself, and stressed that it has quietly supported conservation in the region for decades without formal recognition from the state.

Dr. Smrittee Kala Panta said the real problem is data quality, whether Nepal is even tracking the same things year after year and whether it's making proper use of the technology already available to close the gap. She pointed to the national tourism budget shrinking from about NPR 13 billion to NPR 7.34 billion in three years, even as tourism is talked about as the backbone of the economy, and used Bardiya National Park's numbers from FY 2081 – 26,131 visitors, NPR 4.52 crore in revenue, against a park budget of just NPR 2.33 crore to show why Nepal needs to look harder at where tourism benefits actually go. She showed concerns against copy-pasting the same policy everywhere, since what works in Khumbu won't necessarily work in Bardiya. She also noted that 60% of Nepal's population is working-age, yet unemployment sits near 20%, a sign, she said, that universities need to prepare students better, and that researchers should pool their limited resources instead of working in silos.

Mr. Raj Gyawali said federalism has brought real gains through local control, but coordination across the ministries involved in tourism is almost nonexistent. He also pointed out that Nepal already collects huge amounts of data through visas, passports, and more, but hasn't pulled it together into anything useful. He pointed to Norway and New Zealand, where shared market data lets businesses compete on quality instead of guesswork. He also revived a 2014 proposal to turn Nepal's tourism ministry into a technical body free of political transfers, something he suggested the cabinet could do tomorrow. Looking back at how the sector grew, he said plainly: "the private sector carries the responsibility of creating the image of tourism." He suggested the government stop acting as a gatekeeper and instead become an enabler, treating tourism as one connected ecosystem instead of managing it top-down.

The open Q&A, drew questions from the floor, including from Lisa Choegyal, Dambar Raj Bhatta, Lal Bahdur Pun, Shradha Shakya, Paul Rogers and Pravesh Siwakoti. Questions circled around whether a one door permit policy could actually work, concerns about climate change in the Himalayan region and the Nawa System. After the Q&A, the panelists shared their commitments going forward.

Closing the panel discussion, Joshi invited each panelist to share their commitment going forward. **Chairperson Mingma Chhiri Sherpa** noted that Khumbu Pasang Lhamu Rural Municipality has been working on its own initiative, having already finalized a tourism strategy and action plan for the region, with the focus now on implementation in coordination with the private sector and other stakeholders. **Mr. Raj Gyawali** reaffirmed the private sector's willingness to work with the government and committed to continuing to fund tourism research, stressing that transparency within the private sector itself will be key to moving the sector forward. **Dr. Smrittee Kala Panta** committed Kathmandu University to strengthening its role in the sector, citing a new master's program launching in 2027 with a focus on research and professional leadership, and new partnerships with think tanks to build a shared platform for the sector's stakeholders.

Following the panel, **Hon. Prof. Dr. Sudan Jha**, Member of the National Planning Commission, said the government has been working with renewed speed and integrity in recent months, while cautioning that Nepal's national plans have too often lacked originality and depth. He called for greater investment in Nepal's own data and technology — including a sovereign AI to break down the silos fragmenting tourism data across agencies, citing Kerala's use of technology and branding to grow its tourism sector over the past five years. He argued that policy should be built to solve real problems and guide outcome-based, evidence-driven tourism, and suggested Nepal reconsider its practice of selling tourism at the lowest possible price, unlike Kerala, which raised prices and grew regardless. He closed by stressing that responsible AI use is a matter of ethics, not just capability.

Closing the event, **Hon. MP Anushka Shrestha**, Member of Parliament, House of Representatives of Nepal, thanked the presenters from Governance Lab and said, "the time we are here is hope and optimism." She noted that the tourism bill has now reached her committee for clause-by-clause discussion, and stressed that the parent Act must set a strong foundation, since lawmakers are preparing for outcomes they cannot yet fully foresee. She observed that much of the work behind lawmaking is unglamorous and slow, but building stronger legislative memory matters more than quick, actionable outcomes – and noted that some of the research presented at the dialogue already aligns with what her committee has planned. She closed by reaffirming Parliament's commitment to accessibility and to active engagement with stakeholders going forward.