

# **Vitalizing Local Government Performance in Nepal: Citizen Participation, Socioeconomic Development, and Social Mobilization**

**GANESH PRASAD PANDEYA**

National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS)

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## **HIGHLIGHTS**

- The performance of local government (LG) across the developing world has been critiqued by scholars and practitioners for institutional shortcomings to deliver quality goods and services.
- This study contributes to bridging this gap by taking Nepal as a case. The findings lend stronger support to a hypothesis regarding the argument that LG performance depends substantially on the circumstances, especially the degree of citizen participation, level of socioeconomic development, and achieved state of social mobilization.
- Citizen participation often enhances LG performance, but depending on the contexts, in contrary, it may sometimes lead to negative outcomes as well.
- The state of socioeconomic development and social mobilization has a significant effect on the level of LG institutions reform focusing citizen participation alone—that is implementing an institutional framework of systematic style of citizen participation—

is not sufficient to realize the goal of improved LG performance through participatory approaches.

- Educating and mobilizing citizens, particularly women and disadvantaged groups, raising income level, and optimizing geographical scale of LG coverage are all essential to enhance the planning and accountability aspects of LG performance.

## **ABSTRACT**

### **Problem**

Scholars and practitioners have critiqued institutional shortcomings of public institutions or local governments as the reason of failure to deliver quality goods and services. To address these challenges, from the past 40 years, governments around the world including Nepal have undertaken reform programs emphasizing the importance of participatory approaches of local government (LG). However, literature suggests that the outcomes of participatory approaches of improving LG performance have not been invariably the same. There is still a large gap in understanding specifically about the effects of these factors on improving LG performance.

### **Purpose**

The broader objective of this study is to examine how and why citizen participation, socioeconomic development, and social mobilization can contribute to vitalize LG performance in Nepal. The specific objectives are set as (a) to assess how citizen participation affects the performance of LG in relation to local planning and accountability practices, and (b) to explain the effects of socioeconomic development and government program of social mobilization on LG performance.

## **Methods**

This study is designed primarily based on mixed-methods of research analysis. I use qualitative methods to better capture the views of multiple stakeholders on the role of citizen participation in enhancing LG performance, focusing especially on its local planning and accountability aspects. For this purpose, primary data were collected through semi-structured interviews, questionnaire surveys, focus discussions, participant observations, in-depth case studies and document analysis. Then, to explain the effects of socioeconomic development and social mobilization on the level of LG performance, I developed a logistic model of quantitative analysis by collecting secondary data from various sources.

## **Results**

The findings from both qualitative and quantitative methods lend stronger support to a hypothesis regarding the argument that LG performance depends substantially on the circumstances of the degree of citizen participation, level of socioeconomic development, and achieved state of social mobilization. The qualitative analyses showed that citizen participation in LG decision-making promises to bring often positive but modest changes in enhancing LG performance, particularly making considerable improvement in local planning and accountability practices. However, citizen participation may sometimes lead to perceived negative outcomes, such as exclusion, tokenistic participation, discrimination, clientelism, and capture. The quantitative analyses using the logit estimator lend support to the view that the state of socioeconomic development and social mobilization have significant effects on the level of LG performance. Specifically, female literacy is likely to have a strong, significant, and positive effect on LG performance, and geographical area of LG also has a significant positive effect while population does not have a significant effect on LG performance. In contrast, the estimation results suggest strongly that poverty has a significant negative effect on LG performance. Most importantly, achieved state of government program of social

mobilization, particularly for disadvantaged citizens, has a significant, though modest, positive effects on the level of LG performance.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Along with ongoing debates in the literature of public administration over ways to vitalize LG performance, the findings of this study lead to conclude that coordinated improvement in all three circumstances—citizen participation, socioeconomic development, and social mobilization—is essential to building citizens' capacity and agency to influence the process of LG decision-making that improves the performance of LG. This finding contributes an important addition to the literature that reforming LG institutions to make citizen participation more inclusive and democratic alone is not sufficient to improve the performance of LG. In addition to reforming LG institutions, a better understanding of the role of socioeconomic development and social mobilization in the particular context could be a primary base to know the types of participation outcomes and the levels of LG performance.

In the context of Nepal, which has diverse socioeconomic and cultural settings, the findings offer new directions that designing better institutions for citizen participation to make it more inclusive and effective is not sufficient, although essential, for vitalizing LG performance. Improving socioeconomic conditions, like educating and mobilizing citizens, particularly the disadvantaged ones, raising the level of income, and optimizing geographical scale of LG coverage appear all to be important factors to vitalize LG performance through participatory approaches. These coordinated improvements are vital for enhancing citizens' capacity and motivation to fight for their rights vis-à-vis governing actors. The findings of this study complement the established theories of public administration and political science and sharpen the perspectives on government-citizen relations to improve public performance. I hope that a theoretically-informed model developed in this study will help scholars and practitioners to improve LG performance in Nepal and in similar contexts beyond Nepal.