

FURTHER DISSECTING THE OUTCOMES OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION ON LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACCOUNTABILITY IN NEPAL

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ABSTRACT

Despite expanding research into participatory local governance across developed democracies, comparatively little is explored about what the outcomes of citizen participation are in underdeveloped democracies. This study aims to fill the gap in empirical literature by assessing the effects of citizen participation on local government accountability in Nepal. Based on qualitative analysis using multiple sets of data from extensive fieldworks and surveys, this study concludes that citizen participation often strengthens local government accountability, especially with regards to enhancing transparency, strengthening monitoring systems, improving responsiveness, and controlling corruption risks. However, it may also lead to no effects or negative effects, such as tokenistic participation and new forms of corruption. Participation is most likely to show positive effects when there are responsive and capable LG officials, empowered and mobilized citizens, and active and capable civic organizations that can effectively influence decision-makers.

Keywords - Citizen Participation, Transparency, Responsiveness, Accountability, Nepal.

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Ganesh Prasad Pandeya collected the data, designed the research framework, and performed the data analysis. He also drafted the manuscript. Masahiro Horie and Clay Wescott gave suggestions on methodology and developing questionnaire. All of them read and approved the final manuscript.

The authors would like to extend their sincere thanks to Yoichi Okita, Tatsuo Oyama, Ikuo Shimomura, Katerina Petchko, Shree Krishna Shrestha, Sushil Kanel, Chakrapani Acharya, Khem Raj Nepal, Adam Wescott and two anonymous reviewers who provided valuable support and comments on this paper. The first author also gratefully acknowledges the academic support by GRIPS, Japan as a visiting scholar and the funding support by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS).

INTRODUCTION

Research on participatory local governance in developing countries has highlighted the importance of local government (LG) accountability as a driver of effective service delivery and local good governance (e.g., Blair, 2000; Fox, 2007; Putnam, 1993; Schedler, 1999). But LGs in these countries face more a lack of responsiveness, transparency, and accountability to the needs and demands of citizens than ever before (Box, 1998; Narayan, Chambers, Shah, & Petesch, 2000; United Nations [UN], 2008; World Bank, 2003). To overcome these problems, citizen participation, particularly at the local level, is required to strengthen LG accountability and responsiveness towards citizens and their institutions (Blair, 2000; Box, 1998; Crook & Manor, 1995; Devas & Grant, 2003; Fox 2007; Putnam, 1993, 1995; UN, 2008), popularly known as ‘social accountability’ (Bevir, 2007; Brinkerhoff & Wetterberg, 2015; Devas & Grant, 2003). Specifically, Ackerman (2004) claimed that “opening up of the core activities of the state to societal participation is one of the most effective ways to improve accountability and governance” (p. 448). Participation grants citizens easy access to, and a voice in, LG decision-making, enabling them to hold LG officials accountable (Arnstein, 1969; Bevir, 2007).

Despite expanding research into participatory local governance across developed countries, comparatively little of the outcomes of citizen participation in underdeveloped democracies have been explored. In addition, there exists a large gap between theories and practices of the impact of participation on LG accountability (Gaventa & Barrett, 2010; Rocha Menocal & Sharma, 2008). Practitioners and academicians continue to debate how and under what conditions citizen participation leads to positive impacts on LG accountability (Gaventa & Barrett, 2010; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Nabatchi, 2012; Rocha Menocal & Sharma, 2008). For instance, a recent study conducted based on exploratory interviews with 35 LG stakeholders and focused group discussions (FGDs) in two Village Development Committees (VDC) in Nepal, Pandeya (2015) found that “citizen participation was often associated with largely positive but sometimes negative outcomes” (p.92) depending on the nature of influence of contextual factors. This finding needs to be further tested with more intensive fieldworks, as it is not verified empirically.

This study engages an important and underdeveloped field of research—the outcomes of citizen participation in underdeveloped democracies. Its objective is to examine how citizen participation affects LG accountability in Nepal, as well as to strengthen the foundations of Pandeya’s (2015) previous findings with further evidence. This study attempts to answer three research questions: (a) How does citizen participation contribute towards strengthening LG accountability? (b) What are the outcomes of citizen participation in relation to strengthening LG accountability? (c) And, what are the key factors that influence the process of strengthening LG accountability through participatory approach? The findings of this study would contribute to practitioners in government, non-profit, and development oriented organizations towards better understanding about democratization and improved governance.

CITIZEN PARTICIPATION AND ACCOUNTABILITY: A THEORETICAL DEBATE

Studies so far have explained ‘accountability’ as a fuzzy concept, making it difficult to define and understand the term clearly (Bevir, 2007; Blair, 2000). Generally, accountability refers to an obligation of public authorities to provide information about and/or justification for their actions or inactions and to apply sanctions for noncompliance (Brinkerhoff & Wetterberg, 2015). Particularly, accountability is “the process of holding actors responsible for their actions” (Fox, 2007, p. 28), through ensuring answerability—providing information and justification about one’s action—and enforceability—the possibility of “asking what has been done” with giving reasons or justifications as well as “rewarding good and punishing bad behaviour” (Schedler, 1999, p. 15). Available literature suggests three types of accountability: public officials’ horizontal accountability to elected representatives; upward accountability to the higher authorities; and downward or social accountability to citizens, civil society, stakeholders, interest groups, and the like (Bevir, 2007; Brinkerhoff & Wetterberg, 2015; Devas & Grant, 2003). This last category—seen as an antidote to state-centred accountability (Brinkerhoff & Wetterberg, 2015)—may have a direct relationship with citizen participation and participation outcomes (Lu & Xue, 2011). It tends to ensure “tight linkage between citizen action and day-to-day implementation” (Box, 1998; p.74) through citizens’ involvement in policy process, such as policy discussions and decision-making, as well as making LGs open, accessible, and welcoming to all interested citizens.

A large body of empirical literature on deliberative democracy, participatory governance, and development theory suggests both positive and negative outcomes of citizen participation¹ for improving accountability of public official², and the conditions that participation works as a means of strengthening accountability (Gaventa & Barret, 2010; Fox, 2007; Speer, 2012). Some scholars claim that citizen participation enhances responsiveness and accountability of public officials, and leads to a high credibility and legitimacy in government and citizenship (e.g., Kweit & Kweit, 1981; Speer, 2012). It promotes social accountability and helps to bridge the accountability gap—the difference between what citizens want and what governments are doing (Box, 1998; Fox, 2007; Putnam 1995; World Bank, 2003). This can be achieved by making both the values of citizens and what governments are doing to promote those values more transparent (Kaufmann & Bellver, 2005).

Many contemporary scholars are in consensus that participation matters for promoting LG accountability (e.g., Blair, 2000; Box, 1998; Fox, 2007). Blair’s (2000) qualitative and comparative analysis of six Asian and African countries found that citizen participation shows significant potential for promoting democratic local governance, including the promotion of LG accountability, as citizens can exercise control over public officials through increased representation and empowerment, particularly of women and minorities. The author concluded the viability of democratic local governance “depends in the final analysis on participation and accountability—bringing as many citizens as possible into the political arena and assuring that local governors are responsible to the governed for their actions”, as well as the roles played by political parties and civil society organizations (CSOs) (p. 35).

Wang and Wart (2007), in their quantitative study of U.S. cities, claimed that citizen participation “can develop a better sense of trust” toward citizens and also contributes to “improvement in service competence and changes in administrative ethical behavior” (p. 276). They argued that participation is linked with high-quality services that the public want, improvement in accountability and transparency practices, and successful consensus-building in administrative decision-making. However, these achievements are largely dependent on managerial competency and ethics, as well as technical and resource capability of LG institutions.

But there are also a number of studies arguing that participation brings both positive and negative effects. Reviewing 100 case studies of citizen participation in developed and developing countries including Nepal, Gaventa and Barrett (2010) identified a total of 828 outcomes, of which 75 percent are positive and 25 percent negative. In their words, participation played an effective role worldwide in promoting inclusive and accountable states through better access to state services and resources; however, participation may lead “to a sense of disempowerment and a reduced sense of agency, or to new knowledge dependencies ... [; that can be] perceived meaningless, tokenistic, or manipulated ... [; and] can contribute to new skills and alliances which are used for corrupt and non-positive ends, or are captured by elites, or raise new issues of accountability and representation.” (p. 57). They further claim that social mobilization, citizen empowerment, types of central monitoring system, roles played by CSOs, social and political dynamics of power relations, and the capacity of government institutions can all affect the link between participation and its outcomes.

Consistent with these findings, in their empirical study of Kenya and Uganda, Devas and Grant (2003) concluded that although participation tends to widen the role of citizens in LG decisions and then increases LG accountability, it sometimes does not go much beyond rhetoric—e.g., tokenistic participation. They said that success is often associated with local circumstances at a particular point in time including committed and effective local leadership, external pressures from CSOs, media, and central monitoring system, and increased availability of information, all of which can help to ensure wider public interest when there is conflict with the interest of local elites. Brinkerhoff and Wetterberg (2015) examined the four participatory projects of Indonesia, the Philippines, Guinea, and Rwanda and concluded the similar findings that both supply-side and demand-side factors of participatory local governance are critical for improving responsiveness and service delivery performance of LGs. Blair (2011) further argues that state funding and active state support through the mechanisms to be used in citizen participation process are essential to hold public officials responsible for their actions.

Although this review on the theoretical debate of participation outcomes does not necessarily cover the full body of citizen participation literature, it provides some important insights to understand the outcomes of citizen participation and the conditions for making it successful. Many scholars agree that no single study is sufficient to explain a clear link between citizen participation and its outcomes (e.g., Arnstein, 1969; Blair, 2000; Fox, 2007; McGee & Gaventa, 2011). In fact, there is a scarcity of systematic studies that conclude precisely how citizen participation can contribute to strengthening state responsiveness and accountability (Mansuri & Rao, 2011) and specifically what factors,

to what extent, and which agents are most critical in particular context (Rocha Menocal & Sharma, 2008). In practice, it is a challenge to have a clear understanding of the relationship between participation and accountability due to the existence of the dynamic and multiplier effects of participation—both positive and negative (Wang & Wart, 2007).

Based on the insight of previous studies, it would be logical to conclude that the relationship between citizen participation and accountability is not as simple as popularly believed. While participation can promote accountability, transparency, responsiveness, and the legitimacy of LG, it can also lead to negative outcomes, often benefiting the elites rather than the poor. Productive engagement largely depends on the structures, processes, commitments, and responsiveness of LG (supply-side factor). Specifically, the nature and values of local political and bureaucratic leaders, power distribution among actors and external pressures, including the role of central monitoring systems, are critical to strengthen LG accountability. Similarly, the capacity of citizens, CSOs, and media (demand-side factors) are equally important to create countervailing forces to ensuring citizens' voices in LG decisions and to challenge the practice of local captures and clientelism.

PARTICIPATION CONTEXT AND PROVISIONS

The Government of Nepal (GON) emphasizes citizen participation in local governance and development process, including administrative decision-making. In addition, citizens' rights to participation are guaranteed by the constitutions, statutes, and policy directives. The Interim Constitution of Nepal (2007) states that LGs shall be based on the principle of decentralization and devolution of authority “in order to promote the participation of people, to the maximum extent possible, in the system of governance of the country... even from the local level” for improved service delivery and institutional development of democracy (GON, 2007, p. 100). Similarly, the Local Self-Governance Act (LSGA) of 1999 provides a basic institutional design, organizational structures, and their powers and authorities of each tier of LG³. This Act has created considerably wider spaces and opportunities for promoting citizen participation as it articulates various participatory values, such as local autonomy, fiscal decentralization, democratic accountability, local control, and participatory planning and budgeting systems in all the cycles of local planning and in many aspects of local governance and administrative process.

The subsequent policies, guidelines, and directives have further re-emphasized and greatly internalized these participatory values as an important dimension of local governance and development. Consequently, gender and minority interests are protected through reserved seats in various mechanisms of LGs for their effective and inclusive participation. For instance, the Local Bodies Resource Mobilization and Management Guideline of 2012 not only provides participation space in all the governance and development processes of LGs, but also guarantees for the allocation of at least 15 percent of development budget to disadvantaged groups (DAGs), 10 percent to women, and 10 percent to children. It also underscores the need for greater dissemination of LG deci-

sions, income, and expenditure, ensuring the opportunity for informed participation. In addition, social mobilization programs implemented since 1995 have now been extended to all LG units. This program aims to organize and empower the poor and vulnerable, partnering with CSOs for their effective and critical participation⁴. To ensure the participation of all segments of community in all the process of local governance and development, the GON has created various mechanisms including the following:

- a. A 14 step of participatory planning: This process allows local stakeholders including women, young children, minorities, suppressed class, social workers, and local politicians to participate in prioritizing, decision-making, executing, and monitoring of local planning and budgeting process.
- b. Project level monitoring and facilitation committee: This committee is composed of five members (including two women) to monitor the progress of each project implemented either by the beneficiaries or by the contractors, and this committee's recommendation is required prior to the final payment and settlement of any project.
- c. Public audit: This is a mechanism of social accountability in which many stakeholders, including ordinary people, gather at project site to carry out the technical and financial audit of each project and to make recommendations to LGs for final payment.
- d. Ward Citizen Forum (WCF): This forum, an important mechanism of social mobilization, is composed of about 25 poor and well-off people to discuss community governance and development issues on regular basis, and to identify solutions at the local level.
- e. Community Awareness Centre (CAC): This center, composed of about 30 poor, vulnerable and DAGs, aims to raise awareness of citizenship and self-development at the community level by applying the REFLECT—Regenerated Freirean Literacy through Empowering Community Technique—approach (Freire, 1972).
- f. Minimum Conditions and Performance Measures (MCPM): This is a central monitoring system that evaluates the performance level of each LG, via a team of independent experts, to gauge the overall performance and governance. The result of this assessment is used for financial and non-financial reward and punishment to LGs.
- g. Local Governance and Accountability Facility (LGAF): This program provides grants to CSOs to oversee the performance of LGs through such tools as public expenditure tracking, community engagement survey, public hearing, and compliance monitoring.

These mechanisms have opened up new opportunities for informed, inclusive, and critical participation of citizens, particularly for women, marginalized, and DAGs, in local governance and the development process. It is believed that these mechanisms have both widened and deepened participatory practices at the local level by creating more participatory institutions, granting citizens more spaces and voices.

Ironically, despite this policy framework, there has been an absence of political representatives in LGs since July 2002. Their responsibilities were entrusted to the chief executive officers (CEO) appointed by the central government due to mainly political

transition for state restructuring. To fill the void, the GON had decided to involve the representatives of all political parties as consultative apparatus, but this decision was withdrawn in 2012 due to the perceived embezzlement of the representatives in LG resources. Nevertheless, ignoring their official status, political parties still effectively represent and influence LG decision-making (Independent Commission for Aid Impact [ICAI], 2014; Kelly, 2011). In sum, Nepal's policy frameworks and programs have greatly emphasized citizen participation as an important aspect for promoting the systems of participatory local governance and social accountability of LGs.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

This study aims to build on Pandeya's (2015) robust initial findings on the outcomes of citizen participation on LG accountability. To expand upon the original, this study used multiple methods of data collection so that the weakness of one method could best be compensated by the strength of another method, and the data could be triangulated accordingly (Creswell, 2014). Primary data was collected through field surveys carried out between 2011 and 2015. This prolonged engagement and persistent observation in the process of data collection gave researchers the time to do justice to their subject matter.

The first author conducted semi-structured interviews with 52 people (including the initial 35), selected through snowball sampling techniques, at the length of about 40 to 90 minutes. The voices of interviewees were tape-recorded and were transcribed immediately after each session. We focused mainly on seeking answers to the research questions mentioned earlier. Probing questions were asked as required. Using data saturation and redundancy techniques, we stopped the interview when it was felt that more interviews would not reveal any additional properties or new information about the research questions understudied (Creswell, 2014).

After carefully analyzing and interpreting patterns in citizen participation outcomes on LG accountability based on the data from semi-structured interviews and Pandeya's (2015) initial findings, a set of 17 open-ended questionnaires was developed (Appendix 1). We also purposefully selected 150 people for questionnaire surveys, and received complete response from 88 people. The respondents for both interviews and surveys represented the Tarai, hills, and mountain regions as well as sociocultural diversity in the country. They consisted of LG officials working at central and local levels, experts engaged in research and academic activities, donor agencies involved in LG reform, and CSO activists directly engaged in local governance. All had at least five year experiences in local governance and development (Table 1).

Table 1: Summary of Respondents

Respondents	Semi-structured in- terviews	Questionnaire sur- veys	Total
Middle-and-high ranking officers, expert staff at MOFALD	11	17	28
Officials working at DDCs and VDCs or with LGs	16	32	48
Ex-ministers and high ranking politicians	6	-	6
Participation experts, e.g., researchers and professors	5	7	12
Officials from development partners	7	7	14
CSO activists and workers	7	25	32
Total	52	88	140

Source: Own research

To better explore the full picture of participation events and their outcomes, we purposefully selected Godamchaur and Irkhu VDCs of Lalitpur and Sindhupalchok districts. These VDCs have about 25 years of participatory planning, considerable variation in contextual variables, easy access to travel, and existing ties of the first author with the VDC staff and community people. In addition, Godamchaur represents some features of semi-urban-rural areas, and has a higher literacy rate for both men and women than the national average or Irkhu. Representing rural areas, Irkhu represents the community of socio-cultural diversity with a larger percentage of indigenous people (Table 2). In these VDCs, respondents were selected consulting with VDC staff and some NGO leaders, giving high consideration to reflecting the socio-economic diversity of the concerned VDCs.

Table 2: Key Demographic Features of Godamchaur and Irkhu Village Development Committees

VDC	Number of total population	Total number of households	Literacy rate		Social characteristics		
			Male	Female	Brahmin and Chhetris	Indigenous people	Dalits
Godamchaur	4914	1094	93	70	3301 (67%)	1134 (61%)	383 (8%)
Irkhu	3443	751	61.1	47.99	898 (26.08%)	2330 (67%)	215 (6.24%)
National average	5611.92	1118.2	75.1	57.4	31.25%	27.28%	12.62%

Source: CBS 2012

In both VDCs, FGDs were held with local stakeholders (requiring at least two years of participation experience) including VDC secretaries and staff, social mobilizers and activists, politicians, teachers, and representatives from CSOs, women, indigenous peo-

ple, Dalit, and young people. Among them, 22 people were interviewed as key informants. The first author also observed six meetings organized by the WCF, CAC, and IPC in the same VDCs. Documents including official records, meeting minutes, memos, progress reports, and audit reports, collected from Godamchaur and Irkhu VDCs and the Ministry of Federal Affairs and Local Development (MOFALD), were studied and analyzed. In addition, to understand the views at district level, FGDs with key stakeholders were held in Lalitpur, Kabhre, Sindhupalchok, Nuwakot, and Dhading DDCs. After obtaining the preliminary findings of this study, confirmatory discussions were undertaken in 2014 and 2015 in Godamchaur and Irkhu VDCs as well as Chaughada VDC of Nuwakot district to probe further details, explore the changes in participation practices and determine the outcome.

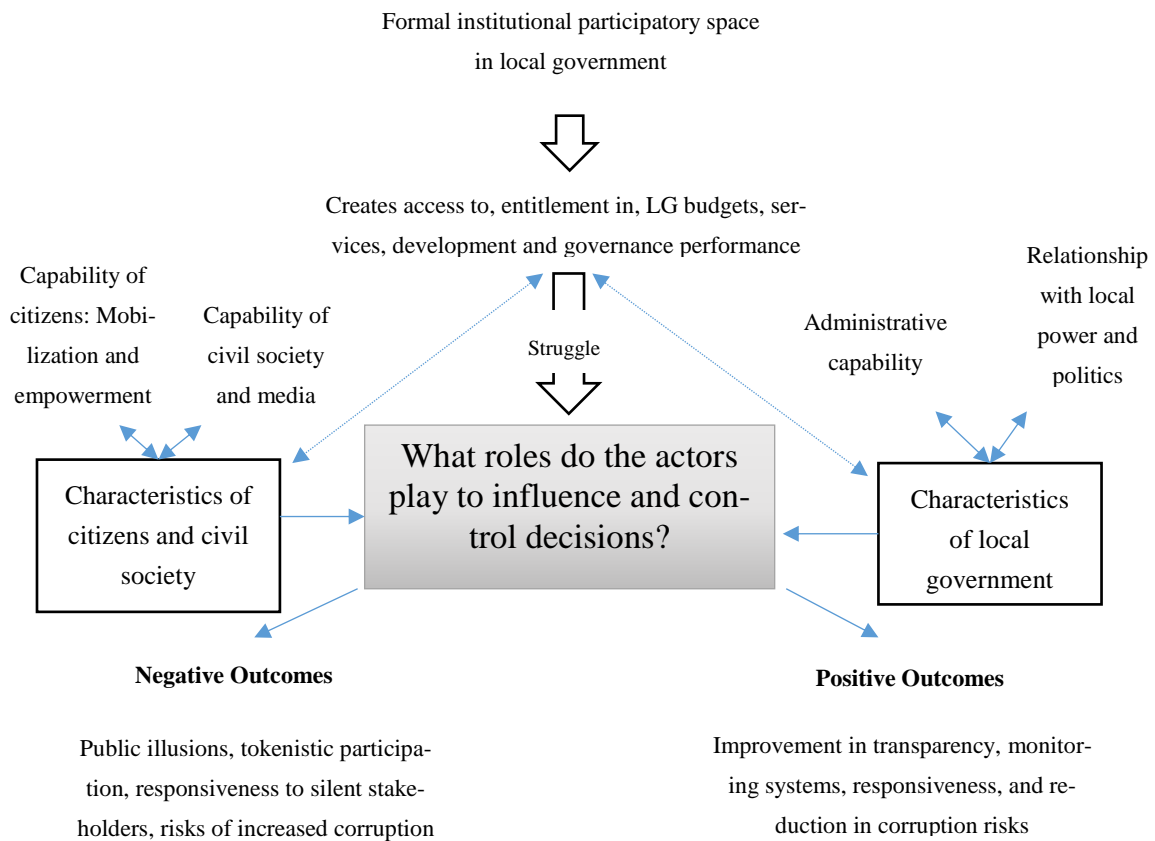
Data Analysis

To best use the data coding and analysis method, we reviewed literature on qualitative research (e.g., Creswell, 2014, Yin, 2014) as well as articles employing a qualitative research approach (e.g., Julnes & Johnson, 2011). We constructed codebook and coding process to develop a clear pathway between research questions and the entire coding and analysis process. The first author transcribed and coded each interview and discussion. Having initial coding of 25 percent of the cases, we refined the codebook two times, comparing claims with established theories as well as across the cases and texts. After reviewing the initial coding by participatory research experts, 17 redundant codes were condensed and two general codes were split apart. We then developed the concepts abstracted from coding and grouped them into categories through the rigorous and repeated process of collecting and reviewing the data. We sought to capture major themes and map the relationship of textual data to the key research questions. To control the authors' biases, we analyzed data in systematic ways by using a team analysis system (e.g., triangulation and member checking).

To develop the concept and interpret the data systematically, we applied a grounded theory approach to better understand the perceptions and experiences of LG officials, local politicians, and community people—who usually possess different perceptions about the performance of LGs—in an integrated and holistic manner. Based on inductive-deductive reasoning, we constructed an integrated research framework of citizen participation process and outcomes grounded in the data collected for this study and literature reviewed. As envisaged in Figure 1, participation outcomes on LG accountability pass through a process of three panel components. The top panel shows the characteristics of policy framework, which determines who will participate in LG decision-making and how they access and influence local governance and the development process. The middle-left shows the characteristics of citizens and CSOs (demand-side factors) that determine the levels of citizens' empowerment and mobilization. Finally, the middle-right shows the characteristics of LGs (supply-side factors determined by the administrative capacity and the nature of local power and politics. All these factors of the first and second panels struggle to influence how LGs benefit particular groups or the constituency of the people. The bottom panel shows the continuum of positive and negative participation outcomes, such as tokenistic participation, public illusion to improvement in transparency, responsiveness, and reducing corruption risks. In all these

interactive processes, there exists a black box between the goals of participation, citizens' expectations, and responses from LG officials.

Figure 1: An integrated framework about the role of citizen participation on strengthening accountability of local government



Source: Own research

OUTCOMES OF CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

Analysis of empirical data shows mixed effects of citizen participation on LG accountability. As shown in Table 3, of the 346 outcomes, we observed 224 (64.74%) positive outcomes with regard to enhancing transparency, strengthening monitoring systems, improving responsiveness, and reducing corruption risks. But we also observed 122 (35.26%) negative outcomes including the creation of public illusions, tokenistic participation, increased responsiveness to salient stakeholders, and new opportunities for corruption. But these changes cannot be attributed to citizen participation intervention alone; local governance reform programs, central-monitoring systems through performance-based grants and incentive systems, and reforms in the legal frameworks can also provide supportive role in achieving these outcomes.

Table 3: Outcomes of Citizen Participation on Local Government Accountability

Positive		Negative	
Outcomes	Number of comments (n=224) Percentage of respondents (n=130)*	Outcomes	Number of comments (n=122) Percentage of respondents (n=130)*
<i>Enhancement of transparency</i>			
Makes LGs more open and pro-active in their activities,		Creates public illusions about transparency,	
Helps to break bureaucratic barriers to transparency,	92 (41%)	Heads up to the possibilities of information obfuscation, hiding, distortion,	17 (14%)
Promotes in formal channels of communication,		Suffers from a lack of citizens' interests and capacity to use information	32
Facilitates direct interactions and dialogues among key stakeholders			
<i>Strengthening monitoring system</i>			
Leads to better verification and crosschecking of the progress,		Leads to just tokenistic or shallow participation,	
Helps to comply with laws better,	60 (27%)	Sustains the problems of power and domination,	39 (32%)
Reduces staff absenteeism		Creates conflicts among participants	45
<i>Improvement in responsiveness</i>			
Makes local bureaucrats more positive and sensitive to the needs of citizens,		Increases responsiveness to salient stakeholders and politicians,	
Creates popular pressure to public authorities to be responsive to the public	38 (17%)	Reinforces the risks of patron-client relations	23 (19%)
<i>Controlling corruption risks</i>			
Reduces the potential risks of corruption,		Creates the risks of new opportunities for corruption,	
Helps to correct malpractices e.g. misuse of resources	34 (15%)	Increases the risks of political captures	44 (35%)
Exposes hidden information and activities		Leads to the birth of new elites	53
Total	224 (100%)		122 (100%)

*Percentages do not add up to 100 as one informant identified several outcomes.

Enhancement of Transparency

In this study, transparency refers to the accessibility of information regarding the decisions and operation of LGs. Three-fourths of our respondents said that citizen participation in LGs contributed considerably to enhancing transparency of LG activities through four means: (a) making LGs more open and pro-active in their activities, (b) breaking bureaucratic barriers to transparency, (c) promoting informal channels of communication, and (d) facilitating direct interaction and dialogues among key stakeholders. Many respondents perceived that participation gave citizens easy access to information, official documents, and LG decisions (that were previously reserved for officials) compared to the past. LG officials explained that when they came under pressure from civil societies and media about their activities, they became more proactive in disseminating information and applying various openness mechanisms and tools to make their activities transparent and participatory. A LG officer of Lalitpur DDC noted that participation has become a major source of inspiration for many LGs to further push and develop “the practice of being transparent through publishing their relevant information in electronically and in news media periodically, [including] ... updating their websites, notice-boards, and hording-boards.” Expert respondents added that participation promoted the practice of informed and deliberative decisions in which citizens have an increased say and understanding of LG decisions. It helped to reveal hidden information about LGs’ budget expenditures and major decisions, which was subsequently used “to scrutinize the performance of LG officials for holding them accountable towards citizens,” a CSO activist emphasized.

Respondents further said that participatory actions helped to break the bureaucratic culture of secrecy and silence, compelling LG officials to justify their deeds. One LG officer explained that “[w]hen public suspect whether the budget is appropriately utilized or misused, the only option left to us is to become more transparent.” Another added that “[a]s ordinary people often suspect about our good conduct, we are increasingly practicing to use various means of transparency including transparent and participatory decision-making to avoid public blame that we are corrupt and getting extra-benefits from the state coffer.” A CSO activist emphasized that “[p]articipation created collective pressures to LG official to disclose information including the decisions related to project selection and budget allocation along with their justifications and reasoning. If there were no effective participation, there would be a little chance of getting such information without hard effort.” In fact, many informants have insisted that the practice of seeking justification and clarification through participatory process have shown broader implications in making LG transparent on a regular basis including the disclosure of hidden information not covered by the formal transparency process, such as dissemination of audit reports and progress reports.

In addition, respondents explained that participation practices were also closely associated with creating or enhancing informal channels of communication among community stakeholders. Participant observation found significant evidence to support this claim. For instance, in Irkhu VDC, the VDC Board meeting discussed problems of community governance including the services delivered by health posts, schools and agriculture offices. Upon visiting the village a week later, we learned that many villagers talked

about, or at least were aware of, information and issues shared and discussed in that meeting. A woman participating in Irkhu VDC meeting explained that:

I shared the story of the meeting to my family members. Next morning, my daughter-in-law went to bring water in the public water-tap and shared this story to other village women. My daughter also shared that story to her school friends. Then, these women and schoolchildren again did the same. Finally, the exchange of that information reached to many villagers.

The sharing of information in that meeting sowed the first seed of transparency, spreading across the community through the process of formal-informal social gatherings and interactions among community members. Social mobilizers, being mediators among the villagers, reinforced this process by exchanging information between public agencies and community people through organizing various meetings like CAC and WCF. Information flow was especially thick places dense with CSOs. Similar events were also observed in Godamchaur VDC. Thus, participation can be considered as an instigator of further informal discussions and debates about the performance of LGs among the villagers.

Many respondents believed that intensive use of downward accountability mechanisms, such as public hearing and public audit, provided ample opportunities for two-way communication—direct interactions and dialogues between citizens and LGs. They revealed that participation was crucial to improve information flow from LGs to citizens regarding LG policies and actions, as well as from citizens to LGs about citizens' preferences and grievances. "Instead of being dependent on intermediaries ... participation enabled ordinary citizens to communicate their problems directly to government officials and then influence in decision-making process, especially when citizens were mobilized and empowered through CSOs" another emphasized. In this line of thought, a community leader explained that "in many cases, through various participation mechanisms ... mainly through WCF, citizens have started an open dialogue with public officials about the issues of local governance and development. This process, in turn, has revealed the various hidden information and misdeeds of local officials" that were never disclosed due to perceived threat by the LG officials from the public. Such actions, in turn, not only made participants more aware, but also "greatly sensitized them [LG official] to ensure their commitments to openness and transparency" in LG functioning.

Several respondents reported that transparency activities were more effective in places where citizens were empowered through social mobilization and CSOs were active and vibrant. One respondent said that "[l]ocal media, particularly local FM radio, has become an important source for promoting participation and transparency" as it often pressured LGs to be more proactive in disseminating information. Especially in village areas, local FM radios have played an important role in reaching communities, providing information about LGs, and fostering interactions between citizens and government through 'question and answer programs.' For example, Community Radio Madan Pokhara Palpa regularly conducts a public hearing program with LG officials. This program exposed that a VDC secretary had taken Rs.53,000 for his personal benefit. The secretary returned that money when the public challenged his misdeeds (Program for

Accountability in Nepal, 2011). Interactions with community people in both VDCs also confirmed that CSOs and the media have played a significant role in promoting direct discussions and interactions between VDC officials and community people about VDC budgets, expenditures, and audit reports in participatory forums, including the meeting of IPC, public hearing, and VDC Council (see also Freedman et al., 2012). In fact, while the positive effects of citizen participation on improving transparency were frequently cited, but such achievements remain limited for specific institutional settings, such as the frequency of meetings, degree of citizen awareness, activeness and empowerment, and severity of sanctions that citizens could impose on LG officials.

But a third of respondents pointed out barriers that might have created public illusions about transparency as well as hindered critical actions in holding LG officials accountable. Respondents reported that the accessibility and usefulness of information provided was largely insufficient to assess LG performance. The media coverage of marginalized people, especially in VDCs and rural-and-remote areas, was reported to be very limited. According to some respondents, the provisions of transparency in some LGs only served to create a public illusion of transparency among many ordinary people. Rather than being helpful, it served to deliberately obfuscate information as some information disclosed by some LGs were noted as incomplete, unreliable, and difficult for the public to understand. The flow of information in many LGs was sometimes distorted through the dissemination of false or misleading information, or by withholding publicly sensitive information, such as the misuse of funds or public properties to escape from public criticism. A media person claimed that “[t]he most important decisions in some LGs are still made behind the closed doors and many common people still are deprived of publicly important information, particularly about actual income and expenditure of LGs.” Another added, “[l]ocal officials were often hesitant to disseminate information. They had often disseminated only the type of information that was favorable to them and thereby hiding much information that was contrary to their interests.” In addition, other media officials expressed that the language used was often too “abstract and prescriptive,” that the general public had a hard time grasping their meaning. Local officials in some cases used various pretensions to neutralize the media’s investigative coverage. An analysis of randomly selected yearly progress reports of 15 DDCs available at MOFALD also revealed that it was difficult to understand the real meanings of those reports as they presented raw data with little contextual information.

Low capacity of LG officials and low awareness among ordinary people was reported as constraining further transparency. The limited facilities and resources available to LGs and citizens remain a major challenge. Citizens’ capability to find, process, evaluate, and make use of publicly available information, as well as LGs’ competencies to communicate effectively were reported as far below average, which circumscribed the scope of the improvement in accountability needed. An expert informant said that comprehension capability gaps in ordinary citizens had led to asymmetrical access to information. He explained that “[e]ven if opportunities for getting public information were offered, many poor and vulnerable were unable for obtaining and utilizing available information” because they lacked sufficient time, communication skills, knowledge of legal procedure, and bargaining power to evaluate and utilize available information. Conse-

quently, several respondents claimed that in many cases, access to, and availability of, information was found to be limited to local elites including political bodies, influential persons, and community leaders in favor of pursuing narrow self-interests, leading to weighting self-interest over the good of the community.

The examples above demonstrate that citizen participation has largely improved LG transparency, especially in those places where citizens and CSOs play an active role in influencing the behavior of LG officials. But participation also sometimes created public illusions about transparency as the truth was distorted by the LG officials, leading to misleading or false information due to the domination of power and capacity gaps in both LGs and citizens.

Strengthening of Monitoring Systems

Promoting accountability also requires strengthening monitoring systems that require informed participation of citizens to explain and justify the behavior of LGs. 59 percent of respondents said that citizens' involvement in oversight activities was noticeably supportive towards strengthening LG monitoring systems in three ways: better verification and crosschecking of the progress, reduction of staff absenteeism, and increased compliance to the law.

First, many respondents said that citizens' involvement in LG oversight activities through citizenry monitoring committees opened up a new space to monitor LG performance and provided feedback for better services. Specifically, citizenry oversights helped to complete projects within the stipulated timeframe as well as to better verify the right usage or misuse of public resources, overall quality and quantity recent progress, uses of standard or sub-standard materials by government or associated contractors, or by the consumer's committees. In this line, a female social mobilizer of Godamchaur, supported by many respondents, found that citizenry oversight remained essential to diagnosing the overall performance of a particular project, including "verifying the deviations between the project's estimated standards and actual performance as participation provided valuable information to citizens and LGs, particularly about project actual cost and quality." She further explained that oversight often contributed to achieving a better quality of project management as it helped examine to what extent LGs were achieving their project goals, as well as correcting the lapses of the contractors' or consumer's committees in such matters as "the use of low quality cement or materials, or low thickness of wall, or the gravelling works in the construction projects" like roads and buildings. A chairperson of the consumer's committee explained that the oversight functions "often created a heavy community pressure for us to be responsive to the beneficiaries and to make all of our activities transparent. Thus, we have started bookkeeping of our income and expenditure so that no one can blame us for the misuse of resources."

Counting on the goodness of record-keeping, some expert respondents further explained that the involvement of project beneficiaries in oversight activities was important to strengthen LG monitoring systems as their involvement provided the possibilities of intensive interaction. Their involvement also strengthened bureaucratic monitoring systems and helped to crosscheck progress in the field against that claimed in official re-

ports. In addition, they said that citizenry groups often communicated real information to LG officials about the progress of projects based on their day-to-day experiences and observations due to their physical proximity to the project sites. LG officers acknowledged that the citizenry oversights have been “quite useful to know the field-based information exactly about how the public money is being used and what has been the actual performance,... [which] provided opportunities to clear the doubts about the negative perceptions on the misuse of public resources.” Many respondents supported these statements, adding that citizenry oversights enlarged the traditional monitoring system while improving program quality and reducing fiduciary risk at the local level. In this line, the secretaries of both VDCs substantiated that community monitoring was quite useful to track progress, ensure quality from the beginning, complete programs on time, and check for the potential misuse of resources, especially in places having greater LG responsiveness as well as an active and empowered citizenry.

Second, many respondents claimed that citizenry oversights often helped to reduce the absenteeism of VDC secretaries in their duty station. They reported that in those places having active citizens and CSOs, the absenteeism rate of VDC secretary was relatively low as citizens and their institutions were better able to closely monitor the attendance and performance of secretaries because of their physical proximity compared to the mechanisms of bureaucratic monitoring mechanisms. In this vein, in its annual progress report, LGAF (2012) reported that despite consistent warnings to VDC secretaries to be present at their VDC headquarters, 128 VDC secretaries out of 207 VDCs surveyed were found absent in their duty stations in 2011. But, when public hearing programs were launched in those VDCs in the same year, citizens lodged harsh complaints about their absence. Consequently, in 2012, it was reported that 103 VDC secretaries of those 128 VDCs were found in their duty stations.

Finally, several respondents said that citizenry oversights often pressured LG officials to follow the legal provisions of budget allocation towards poor and vulnerable communities. When these communities participated in budget allocation meetings and exerted pressure to allocate budgets in their favor, decision-makers were often compelled to do so due to better understanding the needs of the poor as well as the moral pressure for equitable distribution of resources. In this way, LGAF (2012) reported that in the fiscal year 2009/10 about 85 percent LGs (out of 371 surveyed) had failed to allocate budgets to women, children and DAGs as prescribed by the directives. But when public hearing events were conducted in those LGs, they immediately committed to following the budget allocation guidelines as the hearing events criticized the behavior of non-compliance and created heavy moral pressures to comply with the legal provisions. In the next fiscal year, follow-up meetings found that as many as 70 percent LGs had allocated budgets as per the directives. But LGAF (2012) also indicated, and many respondents confirmed, that citizenry oversights were working effectively only when it was carried out by active, influential, and experienced CSOs, as well as when citizens were aware, empowered, and informed enough to impose sanctions on LG officials.

Nevertheless, 45 percent of respondents also said that citizenry oversights in some cases did not make a real difference as the oversight activities turned out to be what Arnstein (1969) called “tokenistic”, allowing citizens to put forward their perspectives to the

government but granting little control over LG decision-making. Some informants said that the current fashion of citizenry oversight had become merely a state of pseudo-participation as the level of influence from oversight was much lower than that suggested by the legislation, as they were often carried out in “widow-dressing”, or “incident-based” manner. The purpose of oversight, in some cases, was just to meet the legal requirement to secure points in an annual performance evaluation rather than to improve service delivery. This was particularly pernicious in places dominated by power games within communal spaces. Many community people complained that participatory monitoring events, particularly at the village level, “did not happen as frequently as required by the laws and the reports and recommendations produced by such forums were just kept on the shelf” without implementing even a single recommendation. LG officials were blamed for “over-promising but under-committing” to perform their pledges made in the participatory forums.

Additionally, there appeared a stark difference between ordinary citizens at one end of a continuum and already highly engaged citizens and stakeholders at the other. For example, some events of citizenry monitoring were maneuvered by local power holders, who often placed powerless people as subservient to fulfill their vested interest. One respondent termed such monitoring events as “empty slogan”, of having no real influence over LG decision-making process. A woman from a Janajati community in Irkhu explained, “[i]f I tried to speak, no one gave me an attention. It was the high class people who were being heard.” An expert respondent argued that the better-educated and more vocal people often exerted disproportionate influence in decision-making, while the poor and the vulnerable were marginalized and manipulated. A member who had participated in public audit meeting recalled that “[t]hey [other participants] just requested me to get my signature, but I did not know what the purpose of my signature was.”

The responsibility granted to citizens and their institutions remained dysfunctional as citizens’ capacity and wiliness to pursue social accountability remained ineffective. Some community people showed little enthusiasm in carrying out the responsibility of community monitoring arguing that “complaining against the nearest and dearest neighbors is an ungraceful task... [which] may hurt our social and brotherhood relationship.” Accordingly, in some cases, responsible community persons for oversight functions remained dormant or worked as rubber stamp partly because some of them were found to be unaware of their responsibilities and partly because they were reluctant to make complaints against their neighbors, as such participation sometimes would create undue conflict among them, particularly in the allocation of already limited financial resources.

In summary, consistent with Ma’s (2012) finding that explained participation as a powerful force for enhancing social accountability in China, examples in our study show that citizenry oversight could be a potential means of raising additional concerns of LG stakeholders, enabling citizens to interact with LG officials. Conversely, some respondents also noted that some activities of citizenry oversights remained mostly tokenistic that served to satisfy the interests of elites, and sustained the problems of power and domination.

Improvement in Responsiveness

As claimed by Ackerman (2004) based on the evidence of principal-agent theory, 43 percent of our respondents reported that participation practices contributed to make LGs more responsive to citizen's preferences mainly through two ways: making local bureaucrats more sensitive to the needs of citizens and uniting the citizens to pressure LG officials.

Some respondents explained that participation contributed to make LG officers more positive and sensitive to the needs of citizens, particularly those of women, children, and DAGs. They reported that when LG officials were trained in participatory values and received public pressures, many were found to be proactive in delivering services and more sensitive to the needs of citizens (see also Local Governance and Community Development Program [LGCDP], 2014). An expert informant stated that "participation has, of course, contributed to alert the behaviors of public officials ... [by] making them more positive ... towards the demands of citizens, ... [with] often willing to provide services timely ... [and] courteously." Community leaders added that participatory practices made LG staff "more sympathetic to the dire needs of disadvantaged people than before ... as they have started disseminating more information, providing more prestige to citizens, and offering some access to LG decision-making." A female leader from Dalit community said that:

Before participatory practices, VDC staff and political representatives often used to turn a deaf ear to our issues. When we started active participation after social mobilization ... they are the same people but ... their response to us is positive. [In fact,] ... they respect our views while delivering services and allocating resources.

This is also evident in the increased number of participants from marginalized communities (from 25% in 2013 to 37% in 2014) and the choosing of more projects demanded by them from 38% in 2010 to 46% in 2011 (Freedman et al., 2012; LGCDP, 2014).

Consistent with Fung's (2006) claim that participation can pressure public authorities to respond to the needs of citizens, our respondents reported that citizen participation made the local planning and monitoring process more participatory, better matching local needs. It amplified the voices of citizens, providing them with a convenient space to express their grievances, discontents, and queries. It also gave the opportunity for face-to-face interaction with LG officials and to explain and justify their decisions and actions. Respondents perceived that participation activities, particularly the public hearing program, provided an opportunity to raise sharp questions about the perceived anomalies and irregularities of public agencies and then to get direct answers from the responsible officers. Such direct interaction in front of a large gathering created "a heavy moral pressure onto government officials to be responsible and responsive to the large public while delivering service and making any decision," a CSO activist explained. The secretary of Godamchaur VDC added that "[w]hen the public point out their finger against our staff about our each and every activity, it reminds every staff to be more responsive to the public." In fact, many respondents claimed that the increased opportunities of participation accompanied by increased transparency and voices in LG func-

tioning often helped even ordinary citizens to make LG officials more responsive and responsible to citizens' needs, which strengthened the relationships between LGs and citizens. Almost all respondents were in the consensus that responsiveness of LG officials in terms of delivery of services and the use of resources were found to be sufficiently improved, especially in places with highly organized CSOs and bold and active citizenry.

Nevertheless, 31 percent of respondents perceived that citizen participation for purpose of improving responsiveness was likely to hold limited appeal. LG officials, in some cases, remained insensitive to the views of citizens, particularly of low socio-economic status, and they sometimes made decisions incongruent with public opinions. LG officials were found taking sides and being more responsive to political bodies and higher authorities, and were more concerned for compliance with rules rather than acting in public interests. Many LG officials explained that political bodies often held supreme power in making major decisions, allocating budgets, and selecting projects "behind the closed doors" but giving little or no emphasis to public input from the participatory forums. There remained a considerable power imbalance between citizen participants and decision-makers, leading to the "risk of patron-client relations instead of participatory ones". According to an activist, "decision-makers have little interest in, and priority for, citizens' voices. They just patiently listen to what citizens say in the participatory forum but still regard ordinary citizens as non-significant objects. They provide limited space while making decisions." Field observations revealed that the relationship of LG officials with citizens was often vertical and hierarchal, treating citizens more as service recipient than as right holders. Consistent with this, an NGO leader noted that LG staff and politicians still "represent a culture of big-boss and hardly respect the voices of common citizens. Although voices were often heard, they were often neglected while making decisions. Their commitments to respond the needs of common people were mostly superficial." In fact, most of these examples echo the claims of previous studies for Nepal, e.g., Freedman et al., (2012), Kelly (2011), Mallik, (2013), and Pandeya (2015).

In essence, aligned with Putnam (1993) for Italy and Cleary (2007) for Mexico, the above evidence demonstrates that citizen participation increases the overall responsiveness of LG officials while allocating resources and delivering services. In contrast, supporting Crook and Manor's (1995) findings that participation has no discernible effects in promoting responsiveness, this study also showed that LG officials sometimes sang with the accent of salient stakeholders in the form of organized interests and, thus, became insensitive to the needs of ordinary citizens.

Controlling Corruption Risks

Although not the majority, about 36 percent of respondents reported that the participatory practices contributed considerably in promoting good governance activities, including controlling corruption risks. According to them, when citizens became aware of their rights and took action through social mobilization, they became more active in the process of reducing fiduciary risks and disclosing hidden practices inside LGs. Respondents cited many examples of success stories of participatory actions that checked

the potential risks of corruption, such as misuse of funds or making of false claims. The chief of the audit section at MOFALD claimed that “the financial irregularities have less been observed [in those LGs] if there was active participation from CSOs and local stakeholders who created pressures through various monitoring and oversight activities.” A CSO leader working in the field of anti-corruption reported that when CSOs were mobilized to investigate real progress against the progress claimed in the official report, “in many LGs, they [CSOs] often succeeded to find deviations between the official progress reports and the actual performance in the fields.” Respondents from the donor community added that better informed and mobilized citizens were observed actively investigating malpractices and then warning when public officials had misused the funds, engaged in nepotism and favoritism, or spent budgets against the public spirit.

Analysis of meeting minutes of both case VDCs demonstrated that the IPC meetings of each VDC had not only discussed development budgets but also expanded its jurisdiction, such as sanctioning of administrative expenditure and contingency funds which are prone to high chances of misuse but not legally required to sanction. In their evaluation study, Asian Development Bank (2014) and LGAF (2013) reported many examples of how citizen participation compelled LG officials to correct the malpractices of LGs. For instance, the chairperson of the consumer’s committee for Bichare drinking water supply project in Gulmi district was compelled to refund Rs.100,000 that he had received as an advance payment for the project that was never constructed. Similarly, the secretary of Kalika VDC at Humla district used to take illegally Rs.500 from the public while issuing identity card of social security allowance. When public hearing meeting disclosed this, the secretary returned the amount to the respective payers and made commitment to the public that he would not repeat such activities in the future. Many informants perceived that when citizen incentives for improved and efficient service delivery and LG commitments for good governance align, the possibilities for collective actions for fighting against corruption increase.

However, 53 percent of respondents perceived that participatory forums were sometimes misused, which led to new opportunities for corruption and rent seeking behavior. They reported that the participatory planning process led to greater rewards for local politicians and elites to fulfill their own interests by exerting influences over LG decisions in the name of public demand. These opportunities for participation turned to be “an industry of rent-seeking and elite-driven political distribution to their political allies,” an informant from donor community complained. Another added, “[t]he official language is that the projects...[and] resources are allocated by participatory process based on public demands. But they are often decided by political heads and elites to serve their own interests or ... their nearest and dearest.” Many interviewees supported these statements, saying that participatory events sometimes created the opportunity (within the legal frameworks) to politicians and elites for being co-opted to reward their core-supporters, and fostered a culture of pork-barreling and clientelism.

Respondents said that politicians allocated resources disproportionately to the particular pocket constituency or settlements by exerting formal or informal pressures in the name of public demands. Citizen participation was seen as an abstract notion of participatory

governance rather than a concrete mechanism for improved service delivery and good governance. These claims also align with the study report of MOFALD (2013), which mentioned that, in Fiscal Year 2010/2011, 47 DDCs out of 67 studied had spent funds in the strictly prohibited areas of LG expenditure, such as transfer of development expenditure to re-current headings and donation to political parties or their sister organizations (Table 4). The report further argued that “there appears a trend of keeping unallocated money ... then allocating that money in unproductive sector ... on piecemeal basis, and the decisions are often highly influenced and pressurized by local political parties, their sister organizations, and their associated agents” (p. 24).

Table 4: Allocation of budget by DDCs in the strictly prohibited area

Number of decisions	Number of DDCs
1-10	39
11-20	3
21-30	3
31-40	1
41-50	1
Total	47

Source: MOFALD 2013

In the same line, a study report by ICAI (2014) stated that many LG institutions in Nepal remained subject to political capture and that “[p]olitical elites were often able to use their status to influence the direction of government funds towards their preferred projects” (p. 22). Politicians not only allocated budgets to their political pocket areas but also enjoyed better access in public services, such as drinking water, electricity, roads, and schools. Coincidentally, a Dalit informant in Irkhu said, “[w]ell, see! How the better-off have been enjoying by the modern facilities. Look at here, the water tap is fixed in their homes or near to their homes and rural road construction is stopped near to the homes of the elites.”

Some participants of both VDCs also reported that participatory practices gave birth to new elites, such as elite-Dalit, elite-women, and elite-ethnic people as they often controlled the power of decision-making on behalf of their respective communities. Respondents said that these new elites often misused the public fund for their narrow interests, such as taking benefits only within elite members by sometimes creating the ghost projects or fake demands. An LG officer, supported by many informants, reported:

There are many examples of the misuse of funds. Take the case of women’s group. Only few women of the group ... (five or seven), often use the budget allocated for women empowerment. Sometimes, they just create bogus project where the project does not exist in the field. For them, participatory planning process has become a means of *milijuli khane bhando* [a vessel for collusive benefit].

Furthermore, one interviewee claimed that although CSOs and citizens have exposed malpractice, sanctions have rarely taken place. In some cases, local elites became involved in the misappropriation of public funds as they used the fund into unauthorized areas of investment, but created false documents as per the legal requirements. For instance, due to the dominance of local teachers, they spent budget meant for school building to employ new teachers while leaving false paperwork behind to hide their actions.

Citizen participation can be expected as a means of reducing the potential risks of corruption, elite captures, and clientelistic politics, and, thus, promoting good governance activities. But it can sometimes create new opportunities for corruption and captures along with expanding the circles of elite influence. There appeared a considerable degree of political and elite captures with sizeable extent of rent-seeking and clientelism practices, aligning with the claims of Mansuri and Rao (2011) who argued that decentralization of fiscal power often increases the opportunities for theft and bribes.

CONCLUSION

What can we infer from this evidence? Consistent with some emerging theories of participation (e.g., Blair, 2000; Gaventa & Barrett, 2010; Irvin & Stansbury, 2004; Rocha Menocal & Sharma, 2008), by and large, the evidence above demonstrates that citizen participation can strengthen LG accountability, with regards to improvement in LG transparency, responsiveness, monitoring system, and controlling corruption risks. Yet, unlike the claims of Box (1998), Chambers (1983), and Ostrom (1990) that participatory approach can fundamentally alter the nature of community power structure while tackling the behaviors of local elites who dominate them, our evidence shows that it sometimes has failed to create shared interests and concerns to address community demands to LGs rather sustained the problems of tokenistic participation and proliferated new opportunities for corruption and captures.

Such negative outcomes appeared to be even more desperate, especially in those places (e.g., Eastern Tarai region) where power imbalance, domination, and discrimination among participants are acute; in those communities (e.g., domination of high-caste people) where clientelistic politics, routinized forms of social exclusion, social hierarchy and caste systems, and gender- and ethnic-based discrimination are severe; and in those LGs where LG officials and local politicians have low levels of responsiveness and accountability to the demands of ordinary citizens (see also Kelly, 2011; LGAF, 2012, 2013). These findings confirm Joshi's (2014) argument that contextual factors related to community and LGs are critical to achieving the goals of citizen participation. Our findings are also in line with the claims of Pandeya (2015), but extend with the support of

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more evidence that negative outcomes appears to be more severe if the supply-side and demand-side of LG accountability have insufficient institutional capacity (e.g., low levels of responsiveness), power gaps (e.g., the dynamics of local power and politics), and agency problems (e.g., inadequate citizen empowerment).

As in the cases of Porto Alegre, Brazil (Fung & Wright, 2003; Osmani, 2007), Kerala, India (Venugopal & Yilmaz 2009), and Italy (Putnam, 1993), our findings suggest four implications. First to consider LG responsiveness to be dependent on robust legal frameworks and institutional mechanisms alone, although essential for creating participatory space and right-based participation, is an oversimplification. Participation outcomes are highly dependent on the interplay of forces from both supply-side and demand-side of local governance. Alignment of both side factors can mutually reinforce LG accountability. Second, LG structures, processes, incentives, and capacities to engage with citizens are more critical to ensure that participation input is solicited and responded. Creating an environment of local political support and building LG responsive capacity for effective participation is highly important to minimize the risks of captures and corruption. However, examples above show that LG officials insufficiently recognize the fundamental rights of citizens to demand accountability and their obligation to account to the citizens.

Third, as the capacity of citizens to be empowered, motivated, socially mobilized and collectively organized to exert agency on LG officials, are equally important and closely related. Sufficient capacity of citizens is an essential precondition to mobilize around shared interests and concerns, express collective demands, assess service delivery performance and problems, create individual and collective incentives, challenge existing structural barriers, and hold LG officials accountable to citizens. As suggested by McGee and Gaventa (2011), this shows that improvement in the conditions for critical actions by citizens is needed to hold responsible officials accountable. Finally, consistent with Putnam (1993) for Italy and Fox (2007) for Mexico, the role of civic organizations—CSOs, media, and local democratic institutions—for collective action is both important and essential to organize and mobilize citizens for their effective participation and influence the behavior of LG officials (see Blair, 2011). But achieving all these conditions are not easy in many LGs in Nepal (Kelly, 2011; LGAF, 2012; Mallik, 2013), suggesting that improving LG accountability through participatory approach is likely to be a challenging enterprise.

Although consistent with some emerging theories of participation, inferences drawn from this qualitative method may or may not be consistent with the findings from theory-based quantitative analysis. Given the fact that Nepal is geographically, socially, and culturally diverse, our findings may not be true in other contexts. Further research based on systematic comparative analysis of different contexts within and outside the country, theory-guided meta-analysis of case studies, and mixed methods of data analysis is warranted. The research framework developed in this study would serve to fill the gap in the literature as well as further examine the dynamics of citizen participation even beyond Nepal.

NOTES

¹ In this study, the terms ‘citizen’ refers to ordinary citizens, including representatives from civil society organizations, women, adult children, disadvantaged groups, media persons, and social activists; and ‘citizen participation’ refers to the direct involvement of local ordinary people in LG planning and decision-making process over the allocation of LG funds, as well as in project selection, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation process, but excludes local electoral or political participation.

² An ‘improvement of accountability’ is assumed when citizen participation has positive contributions to the enhancement of transparency, responsiveness, and monitoring systems of LGs, and to the reduction of corruption risks (Blair, 2000; Bryer, 2007).

³ Nepal has a two-tier LG system—217 municipalities and 3157 VDCs at the town and village level from the first-tier and 75 DDCs at the district level from the second-tier.

⁴ It should be noted that LSGA mandates LGs to have a productive relationship with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), CSOs (e.g., mothers groups, user groups), and the private sector in terms of local planning, service delivery, and resource sharing.

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APPENDIX: SEMI-STRUCTURED QUESTIONNAIRE FOR EXPLORATORY INTERVIEWS

1. What are the key outcomes of citizen participation in local planning process in relation to strengthening LG accountability?
2. How does citizen participation contribute towards strengthening LG accountability?
3. How citizen participation has created citizens' access to, and entitlement in, LG budgeting?
4. Whether citizen participation in LG decision-making has helped ordinary citizens to get the projects preferred by the community?
5. How do citizens influence LG decision-making process?
6. Is there any role of citizen participation in making LG officials responsive and pro-active to the demands and problems of citizens?
7. What is the state of relations between citizens and LGs? Do LG officials facilitate the participation process?
8. What is the role of local politicians in allocating resources and projects based on community demands?
9. How do you assess the outcomes of citizenry monitoring mechanisms and activities of LGs?
10. How do you assess the role of citizen participation in reducing the risks of corruption?
11. Are there any negative impacts of citizen participation, and why?
12. What are the key factors that influence the process of strengthening LG accountability through participatory approach? How and why?
13. What was the role of civil society and media in relation to encouraging citizens to promote effective citizen participation? How and Why?

Additional questions in FGDs

14. What is the level of transparency in VDC/ DDC? Do LGs provide important information about its their performance? How? Do you have easy access to information?
15. How do you voice your priorities and concerns? Does your voice make any difference in LG decision-making? How and why?
16. Is there equal chance to participate in the meeting for all strata of community people? Or someone dominates in the deliberation process? Why?
17. How do you evaluate the role played by the VDC officials and political parties in VDC planning, budgeting, and promoting social accountability?

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ISSN 1662-1387