Reframing the Concept of Participation in the Development Sectors Targeting Marginalised Group of People

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Abstract

This article attempts to address some issues raised through several debates on reframing the concept of Participation. It intends to analyse driving forces of participation towards empowerment and engagement of marginalised group of people. A discourse was held on 9 April 2022 virtually on the occasion of NEPAN Day. A total of 50 participants observed the event in which 7 speakers talked about participation on various development sectors: disaster preparedness, education, health, inclusion, CSO engagement, etc. Based on the discourse, learning and hindsight of authors, this article aims to draw attention of local government in order to mobilise civil society organisations (CSO) and promote information communication technologies (ICT) in order to ensure participation of marginalised groups toward their empowerment and engagement. The illustrations presented in the article reframes the concept and provokes further critical thinking towards marginalised peoples' engagement in the development process in the New Normal shaped by COVID 19. It also draws attention of local government and CSOs to work together and engage marginalised people in their own livelihood development by providing targeted support for digital literacy and ICT.

Keywords: Participation, Empowerment, Engagement, CSO, Marginalised Groups

1. Introduction

The concept of "participation" in the development sector dates back a long before the development tools such as rural appraisal introduced in Nepal. In Nepal, traditionally, people get together in a public platform called *Chautari* where people casually gather and discuss current development, social, economic and political issues. In true sense, *Chautari* offers a platform for participation of all people. In the late 1980', the concept of participation and participatory development emerged and flourished with tools of Participatory Rural Appraisal (Chambers, 1994) with

challenges, potentials and paradigm. The concept of participation through PRA tools and technique was buzz word in the CSOs.

Nepal Participatory Action Network (NEPAN) has championed the concept of participation over the last 27 years through various project activities, policy debates and dialogues, publications, training, and discussion forums. Originally founded by participatory approaches and strategies, NEPAN followed theory and practices developed by Prof. Robert Chamber. In the 1990s, NEPAN was on the forefront for participatory development values and approach which was partly linked with PRA tools. Over the years, NEPAN has moved away from its original engagement in the PRA because it faded away with the pace of community development and now has rather focused on governance, mutual accountability, participatory research and development, human rights and social justice. That being said, NEPAN has consistently reinforced ideas on the participatory development, networking, and institutional capacity development.

Over the last two decades, NEPAN has made every effort to redefine participatory development and expand its scope through various development paradigm such as inclusive participation, collective participation, etc. In the last two years, NEPAN has however realised that the original concept of Participation is no longer starkly relevant due to worldwide impact of Corona Virus (COVID) 2019. The COVID-19 phenomena has shaped our way of life and as a result, the business modality has changed ways of thinking and working approach. The virtual mode of participation has helped people to cope with the impact of COVID-19, because lockdown and mobility restriction have left people with only choice of virtual participation. However, here the importance of real participation as we think of its significance

and whether it has any connection with the accessibility, affordability, usability/ quality of services. Likewise, who could participate in the development process through virtual mode is the crux of the discussion. Hence, this article attempts to deep dive through thinking and arguments made by NEPAN members who had participated in the discourse on "Reframing Participation" on 9 April 2022. The event was organised on the occasion of NEPAN Day that falls on 6 April each year.

2. Results and Discussion

NEPAN members from a range of background put forward their insights on the participation of people in the development process. The insights emanate from their continued engagement in the community development to the policy change process. Basically, the reframing the concept of participation and thereby engagement draws on mutually reinforcing the driving force of reframing participation: a) polity and CSO governance b) social inclusion perspective c) Willpower and or capacity of local government d) CSO space and their engagement e) digital divide f) New Normal shaped by COVID 19. These formative blocks are drawn up based on the consultation with experts and the participation discourse held on 9 April 2022.

Figure: Formative Blocks for Reframing Participation

The reframing participation efforts revolve around these six dimensions. While talking of participation as a concept, it always comes in mind about who takes part in the development and policy influencing process. The views coming from NEPAN members unambiguously suggest that people who are already informed of available opportunity and linked with resources have always privilege to take part in the development process. However, political structure and legislative frameworks guarantee equal right for every citizen to participate and enjoy as equal citizen.

2.1 Polity and CSO Governance

With the promulgation of Nepal's new constitution on 20 September 2015, Nepal introduced federal model of polity and governance. The constitution has ensured provisional guarantees for right to participation. The Directive principles states, "The political objective of the State shall be to establish a public welfare system of governance, by establishing a just system in all aspects of the national life through the rule of law, values and norms of fundamental rights and human rights, gender equality, proportional inclusion, **participation** and social justice, […] It also states the economic objective of the State which shall be to achieve a sustainable economic development, while achieving rapid economic growth, by way of maximum mobilisation of the available means and resources through **participation and development of public**, private and cooperatives, and to develop a socialism-oriented independent and prosperous economy […]The state policies relating to development as mentioned in the Constitution under the Part 4 is to enhance local public participation in the process of development works.

The concept of Civil Society Organisations (CSO) emerged with the values enshrined

in the Charter of the United Nations: respect for fundamental human rights, social justice and human dignity, and respect for the equal rights of men and women as the Preamble of the UN Charter sets foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world. The globalisation trend and growing inequality in the economic development across the Globe account to the proliferation of CSOs around the World for the promotion of human rights, equality, equity, empowerment, democracy and sustainable development. CSOs represent the voice of the people and contribute in the advocacy and realisation of human rights. They have contributed to the attainment of millennium development goals (MDG), now sustainable development goals (SDG), thereby to the overall index of human development index (Pasha, 2005).

CSOs in Nepal are however being criticized for lack of accountability to the State and citizens. The internal transparency and organisational governance are critical issues within CSOs because a majority of CSOs are family-based. As a result, CSOs—like entities in other sectors in Nepal—tend to have poor governance practices, and generally lack fair elections for executive committees, regular meetings of executive committees, and clear divisions of responsibilities between the board of directors and the management team (CSO, 2014) (p. 29). The changing nature of some CSOs and their governance has at times undermined constitutional provision on proportional inclusion, participation and social justice. The example of which is manifested by political appointment from CSOs and donorship support for some vested agenda.

2.2 Social Inclusion Policies and Strategies

The Part 1 of the Constitution of Nepal has ensured right to equality and Rights of Dalit who have the right to participate in all bodies

of the State on the basis of the principle of
proportional inclusion. The Government at
various levels have developed their policies
and strategies for social inclusion in their
projects and programme.

In relation to the social and cultural
transformation, the constitution states
policies such as, " to make community
development through **enhancement of
local public participation**, by promoting
and mobilizing the creativity of local
communities in social, cultural and service-
oriented works. "

Under the Policies relating to social
justice and inclusion, States policies
should create an atmosphere conducive
to the full enjoyment of the political,
economic, social and cultural rights, while
enhancing the participation of youths
in national development, to make their
personality development, while providing
special opportunity in areas including
education, health and employment for the
empowerment and development of the
youths and provide them with appropriate
opportunities for the overall development of
the State. The functions, duties and powers
of National Women Commission has ensured
women's proportional participation in all
organs of the State. The functions, duties
and powers of National Dalit Commission
has ensured proportional participation of
Dalits in all organs of the State.

The government of Nepal has formulated
exemplary local level social inclusion
policies 2021. It has clearly outlined
provisional guidelines for local government

to formulate their social inclusion policies
and strategies. The strategies 2 of the policy
is to provide equal access to marginalised
community and enhance their participation
in the development process.

2.3 Willpower of Local Government

The Local Government Operation Act, 2074
BS that came into effect since 15 October
2017 has paved a strong legal foundation
towards institutionalizing legislative,
executive and quasi-judiciary practice of
the newly-formed local government. It
has spelt out function and scope of local
government to mobilise local resources
and enhance participation of people in the
development process.

The local government regulation and
operational procedures has outlined
mobilisation of local resources including
CSOs in order to support local government
in achieving results. However, there is
always outcry on the part of CSOs that the
appetite of local government is a major
barrier for many CSOs to deliver their
commitment. One of the major constraints
for CSOs to deliver is lack of adequate
resource because of dwindling funding
support from donor countries, INGO, but
working with the local government in terms
of fund mobilisation is a real challenge
because of governance issues. Increased or
adequate funding from government (local)
to CSO may enhance the service delivery
which otherwise was the responsibility of
the government, but this can potentially
weaken the 'advocacy' capacity of the
NGOs.

1.   The State shall not discriminate citizens on grounds of origin, religion, race, caste, tribe, sex, economic
     condition, language, region, ideology or on similar other grounds. It has provided that nothing shall
     be deemed to prevent the making of special provisions by law for the protection, empowerment or
     development of the citizens including the socially or culturally backward women, Dalit, indigenous
     people, indigenous nationalities, Madhesi, Tharu, Muslim,
           oppressed class, Pichhada class, minorities, the marginalized, farmers, labours, youths, children, senior
     citizens, gender and sexual minorities, persons with disabilities, persons in pregnancy, incapacitated
     or helpless, backward region and indigent Khas Arya.

2.4 CSO Space and their Engagement

The Constitution of Nepal promulgated in 2015 directs State under the Policies of the State to adopt a single door system for the establishment, approval, operation, regulation and management of community-based and national or international NGOs and to involve such organizations only in the sectors of national need and priority, while making investment and role of such organizations transparent and accountable. It outlines fundamental rights and duties, freedom of opinion and expression under the Article 3 (Government of Nepal, 2016). The legal foundation for the operation of CSOs is laid out by the Social Welfare Act 2049 which requires NGOs to register at the Chief District Office (CDO) and SWC (Kobek, 2004). The Citizen Right Act 2012 (BS) amended 2074 (BS) stipulates, "Freedom of expression at section six and sub-section three allows people to establish organisation" (p. 2).

Nepali CSOs work in a range of areas, including community and rural development; women's empowerment; human rights; public health; environment; youth activities; child welfare; educational development and social inclusion (CSO, 2014) (P. 27). CBOs represent self-help groups, mothers groups, and consumers groups recognized under the LSGA, mobilize resources from local Government authorities to serve communities at the grassroots level.

The social welfare regulation Act 2047 (BS) has outlined role of the state and the stringent conditions to be fulfilled by the CSOs in order to seek funding from donor and support function of the government. It has published its annual policy and program 2020 and one of the activities is to classify NGOs based on multidimensional indicators. It means that the CSO space has gradually shrunken with some tough measures that governments at three levels have consistently imposed.

2.5 Digital Divide

The term 'digital divide' refers to the differences in resources and capabilities to access and effectively utilize ICT for development that exist within and between countries, regions, sectors and socioeconomic groups. The digital divide is often characterized by low levels of access to technologies (Singh, 2010: p. 51).

Broadly defined, the digital divide refers to inequalities between the advanced economies and the rest of the world in terms of access and use of information and ICT. The digital divide refers to "situations in which there is a marked gap in access to or use of ICT devices" (Campbell 2001, p.1and OECD, 2007: p.24).

The relevance of this definition in the light of New Normal is grounded on the accessibility, usability and affordability to digital technologies by marginalised group of people who, in general, do not have ability to meet the expense of computer equipment and Internet usage (Franklyn and Tukur, 2012: p. 40). Chhetri (2015) cites that individual with higher levels of education are typically more open to using ICT such as online interactions (Ebbers, Pieterson, & Noordman, 2008; Streib & Navarro, 2006 cited by Bertot, et al 2010: p.267 and Bertot, 2003).

The policymakers should analyse the factors of digital divide mentioned above amongst individuals, organizations and countries and address broader socioeconomic and cultural challenges for marginalised people by bridging the digital gap with equal educational and economic opportunities for greater equality. The government should invest enough money and utilise the potential of ICTs to implement right policy measures at the right time for comprehensive socioeconomic transformation of marginalised group of people through digital literacy, equity and

equality. The researchers engaged in the ICT policy framework should dwell further in digging out facts and figures on how the digital divide can be abridged in the COVID context particularly in the LDC context (Chhetri, 2020).

2.6 New Normal

With the landfall of COVID-19 in January 2020, the World had already started trending towards working at home, shopping at home, DoorDash and UberEats, Netflix instead of Cineplex, says a University of British Columbia professor and clinical psychologist Steven Taylor (Chhetri, 2020).

In new normal shaped by COVID 19, people living in the far-flung region such as remote districts where there is poor communication infrastructure and where a majority of people are deprived of food security, cannot think of participation through virtual mode. There are many reasons: first of all, they do not have access to ICT so that they can use virtual mode of participation. Second, those who have access to ICT devices, they may not have knowledge to operate due to lack of digital literacy. Just thinking of video chat through Apps like Zoom, Viber, Messenger etc. who are connected with disability, poor and marginalised seems to be fairy tale (Chhetri, 2020).

3. Conceptual Framework of Participation

Looking at the formative blocks above, rethinking of participation is influenced when we have most favourable constitutional provision, policies and strategies, willpower of local government for the mobilisation of CSOs and application of ICTs pivots participation and engagement of marginalised eventually as it can potentially minimise the impact of digital divide.

Engagement with CSOs by local government for marginalised people active participation by ensuring accessibility, affordability and usability of ICT products can redefine modality of participation of most marginalised group of people. It entails local government policy shift on ICT resources which allows marginalised people to purchase ICT on subsidized rate and access services that they would need for their livelihood and life-skills. The local government should mobilise CSOs to put in place digital literacy services for engagement of people through digital Apps.

Participation	● Membership of group or any entity ● Attendance in meeting, training, etc ● Resources investment
Empowerment	● Sharing of information and knowledge with colleagues, neighbour, etc ● Speak up and raise voices. Be politically informed ● Demand for human rights
Engagement	● Take action utilising information and knowledge ● Invest additional resources and sustain results ● Take follow up action

Figure: Indicators of participation, empowerment and engagement

The re-thinking and reframing of Participation should clearly mean to embody indicators of empowerment and engagement in the current context of political and socio-economic setup. Moving forward from the departure point of participation, engagement of people (all sex, age, caste and so on) should be measure against actions informed by political (power relation) information and knowledge.

4. Conclusion

The last discourse on reframing participation and consultation with NEPAN members responds to continued call for action by NEPAN members. It explicitly suggests that development practitioners should move beyond conventional mode of participation (physical attendance of people in meeting, workshop, seminar or training). In the context of New Normal reinforced by digital divide, both CSOs and local government, policy-makers and other stakeholders (researchers, academicians, donors, private sectors, think tank) should re-engineer above indicators within formative blocks and develop engagement model. The development programs should consider "indicators of engagement" while thinking of participation of marginalised group to bring desired changes in their livelihood. Moving forward beyond right based approach, an enabling environment for engagement of marginalised groups should be created demonstrating empowerment, benefits and values of engagement, but the enabling environment needs to be ensured by the local government and CSOs along with other stakeholders to facilitate the engagement process. Access to digital resources and digital literacy of marginalised group of people entail policy and provisions to be enacted by local government. Herein comes role of CSO for advocacy and facilitation for effective participation and engagement of all ages, sex, caste and ethnicity.

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