

## Key points

**Youth disengagement is systemic**, not a matter of apathy. In Dharan city, Nepal, challenges such as unstable employment, unpaid participation and aspirations to migrate make it difficult for young people to engage consistently in civic life.

**Current 'participatory' planning is exclusionary.** Older adults dominate *tole* (neighbourhood) lane organisations and community action planning frameworks, which focus mainly on infrastructure and reach critical decisions opaquely. This restricts youth influence and erodes trust.

**Young people are active** in alternative, hybrid civic spaces. Many young residents organise through digital advocacy, volunteerism, cultural groups and issue-based campaigns that formal governance structures largely overlook.

**A policy window is open** for change. Nepal's federal-local structure formally requires inclusion, and the revised national youth policy extends the youth age band to 18–35, making this the right moment for institutional reforms.

## Promoting youth participation in urban governance in Nepal

Inclusive urban governance fosters youth participation, yet a gap persists between policy commitments and everyday realities in Dharan, Nepal. Despite inclusive constitutional and policy frameworks, young people face multiple barriers to participation, including unemployment, economic insecurity, migration pressure and exclusion from adult-dominated decision-making spaces. This briefing recommends institutionalising youth representation in local governance, enhancing budget transparency, investing in youth-focused development and integrating digital participation in municipal decision making.

### The challenge of youth exclusion

Nepal's rapid urbanisation, driven more by administrative reclassification than by organic growth, means 66.2% of the population is now considered urban.<sup>1</sup> This shift places immense pressure on urban systems and heightens the demand for inclusive, accountable governance.<sup>2</sup>

Despite official recognition as a priority group, young people (ages 18–35) in Dharan city remain marginal in the decision-making spaces that shape their futures. Our research in Dharan reveals persistent gaps:

- Older leaders and political intermediaries dominate formal civic spaces — *tole* (neighbourhood) lane organisation (TLO) meetings, ward consultations, budget forums.
- Youth participation is mostly limited to short-term events (sports, one-off training) and rarely extends to agenda setting or budgeting.
- Peri-urban communities experience compounded exclusion, facing both infrastructural neglect and minimal municipal engagement, with young people particularly sidelined.

### Blockers of youth participation

**Structural barriers are the root cause:** young people in Dharan face a 'double bind': economic insecurity makes unpaid civic engagement unaffordable. A desire to migrate to Kathmandu or abroad further reduces the appeal of local participation, while stigmatising narratives about 'misguided youth' dissuade institutions from genuine engagement. Participation opportunities for young people should therefore reflect their lived realities, addressing their need for employment, income, recognition, mobility and trust.

**Neighbourhood planning can reinforce inequality:** TLOs, envisioned as grassroots participation units, often function as procedural intermediaries, not true deliberative spaces. Executive-driven 'priority lists' and limited youth consultation restrict wider community input. Budget allocation is discretionary and lacks transparency, fuelling perceptions of politicisation and unfairness. Planning and decision making remain dominated by elite actors. Without strict transparency and fair, quota-based representation, participatory processes risk becoming performative, deepening exclusion.

## Youth-led alternatives

Many Dharan young people, although unable to participate in local planning, actively shape their city through urban networks, digital platforms, cultural initiatives and issue-based campaigns (such as on waste, public spaces, drug use, unemployment and community issues). Alternative modes of 'hybrid' in-person and digital participation offer opportunities for youth participation. Young people's efforts remain informal and disconnected from official systems; but they should be formalised for youth inclusion. Municipalities should therefore formally recognise and integrate these 'hybrid' civic spaces rather than treating them as external or informal.

## Policy recommendations

**Institutionalise youth representation where decisions are made:** municipalities should set aside mandatory youth seats (gender-balanced) in every TLO executive committee and in ward-level planning forums. Youth representatives should have clearly defined roles, rights and responsibilities — including voting, agenda setting and feedback. Each ward office or municipal social development section should have an appointed youth liaison to coordinate outreach, follow-up and reporting. This will make youth participation a rule, not an option, and reduce gatekeeping.

**Make budgeting transparent and accountable:** publicly share project pipelines at ward/TLO level. Show the full cycle from proposal to screening to approval, with reasons for each decision. Adopt simple public criteria for project selection (need, equity, climate risk, youth impact, cost-sharing and so on). Hold participatory budget hearings at ward level, with documented minutes and public response matrices. This will reduce discretionary opacity, build trust and help prevent elite capture.

**Rebalance 'development' beyond infrastructure:** earmark a portion of ward budgets for youth-centred initiatives (for example, skills development, employment pathways, mental health and substance use support, and safe public spaces). Pilot youth-designed micro-projects with small grants, rapid implementation and public reporting. Even a modest allocation from Dharan's annual budget (approximately NPR 2.2 billion, or US\$14.4 million for financial year 2022/23) can have significant impact if governed transparently.

**Integrate digital civic action into formal governance:** create a municipal 'youth civic interface' — a verified web platform or social channel for issue reporting, petitions and response

tracking. Recognise youth networks as official consultation partners for relevant policy areas. Host quarterly dialogues between municipal leaders and youth networks, rotating locations to include peri-urban wards. These steps will meet young people where they already participate and turn their visibility into institutional influence.

## Implementation roadmap

- Issue a municipal directive outlining youth inclusion standards at TLO and ward levels.
- Establish youth focal points in every ward office and create a public budget transparency template.
- Reconstitute TLO committees to meet youth representation requirements.
- Provide training on participatory planning, budgeting, facilitation, transparency and inclusive civic engagement.
- Provide regular capacity-building and orientation programmes for youth representatives, TLO executives and ward-level stakeholders on inclusive, integrated local governance.
- Enact peer-learning mechanisms to support newly engaged young people in governance spaces.
- Pilot transparent scoring criteria and publish project pipelines in two or three wards as demonstration projects.
- Expand transparency measures and youth representation and institutionalise quarterly youth–municipality dialogues.
- Launch a youth micro-grant programme with public dashboards for project tracking.
- Establish monitoring and evaluation indicators that include representation, influence, transparency, equity, responsiveness and trust.

## Conclusion

Dharan's young people are ready and willing to help shape a more inclusive, equitable and vibrant city — if given genuine opportunities to do so. By institutionalising youth representation, making budgets transparent, earmarking resources for youth priorities, and bridging digital and formal civic spaces, Dharan can become a national leader in meaningful youth inclusion. The time to act is now while the policy window is open and the benefits for both city and country are within reach.

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## Knowledge Products

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## FIND OUT MORE

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> National Statistics Office (2025) Urbanization and Development in Nepal. National Planning and Housing Census 2021. Kathmandu. / <sup>2</sup> Pandey, CL (2023) Capturing the Role of Civil Society for Urban Sustainability in Nepal, *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 36(3), pp.349–365.

