

Participation in Public Spaces in a Diverse Society
A Case Study of Community Organisation in a VDC from Eastern Tarai of Nepal

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Abstract

Through an ethnographic exploration of the practice of participation of individuals of an economically, culturally and politically diverse and divided society in donor supported Community Organisations (COs) in Kaseni village of Morang district, the paper illustrates how these COs have created and expanded intermediary spaces where many of the social, economic and political negotiations take place; and information and opinions are exchanged.

Socially embedded politics at the village level generally sets the condition for participation in such a public space. Therefore, we focus on political processes and dynamics at the local level to assess why some people participate and not others. Manipulation of the public space by political elites occupies the central space in this study. Participating in COs to maintain political support and alliances or not to participate to show political resentment crosscuts the various structural barriers for social inclusion or exclusion. Traditional patron-client relationships of interdependency and other inter-personal relations along with subaltern agency have important roles to play in ensuring or barring the participation of an individual in the public space. Therefore, the question of participation or avoidance is a structural as well as an agency issue, produced by the particular history and the contemporary practice.

Keywords: Public space, participation, community organization, Village Development Program

1. Introduction

This paper is an attempt to explore peoples' participation in the public spaces created by a development intervention in a village of Eastern Tarai. Through an ethnographic exploration of the practice of participation of individuals of an economically, culturally and politically

diverse society in Community Organisations (COs)¹ in Kaseni Village Development Committee (VDC) of Morang district, the paper illustrates how these COs have created intermediary spaces where many of the social, economic and political negotiations take place; and information and opinions are exchanged between and among the participants.

The paper further considers the following two interrelated questions, (i) whether the question of participation in public space is a structural or an agency issue; and, (ii) how the public space turns into a political space, among others. Based on empirical cases, the paper argues that only state policy and administrative procedures are not enough to ensure the greater level of participation in an economically, culturally and politically divided society. The paper suggestively argues to take the local political processes into consideration and examines the rhetoric of people's participation and inclusion through the practice of everyday life.

The paper begins with a general overview of political and development processes that facilitated to expand the public space in the recent decades, and, more precisely the beginning of an UNDP funded development program in the VDC. The discussion on how the processes and outcomes of participation in the COs provide a specific location at the local level where the process of social exclusion *vis-a-vis* inclusion take place in the everyday practice forms the central part of the paper. The paper concludes with how participating in COs maintains political support and networks and/or not participating as a means of political resentment cross cuts the various structural barriers for social inclusion, which, expectedly provide a new dimension in the study of social exclusion and inclusion in Nepal.

2. Political Changes, Expanding Public Spaces and Peoples Participation

Nepal experienced widening public spaces, after the restoration of the democracy in 1990, in particular, and the reforms in governance thereafter following the global trend and aid policies, which eventually has created opportunities for a wider and intense citizen engagement as compared to the past. Such an opportunity, in practice, was evidently created by the spectacular growth in the number and significance of Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs), the almost-ubiquitous neoliberal downsizing of the state, and attendant emphasis on promoting the NGO sector by international organisations (Roberts, Jones III and Fröhling: 2005).

¹ Community Organization (CO) is the term the groups I studied were commonly as well as specifically identified as. This is the official term given by the LGP/VDP to the groups formed under its program.

The Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP), the Tenth Five Year Plan of the Government of Nepal, in particular, emphasised, among others, poverty reduction through mobilisation of grassroots social organisations. It also stated the inclusion of marginalised groups, women and Dalits. International Non-governmental Organisation (INGO), many bilateral agencies, and UN agencies working in the area of community development also followed a similar approach of mobilisation of social organisations.

The process of development interventions with foreign assistance for the last 6 decades increased ‘political dependence’ and ‘economic dependence’ (Mishra 2007: 67) of the country, which, however, also ‘radically transformed the social fields in which people act and are acted upon, producing new sets of limits and possibilities for political actions’ (Fujikura 2004:2). This process continued undisrupted, rather in a speedy scale. Government and the non-government sectors continued receiving funds and ideas for ‘socio-cultural’ and ‘political’ projects (*cf.* Fujikura 2004), consequently it also expanded the social and political spaces simultaneously, opening the possibilities for more people to participate in those spaces, and, also, sometimes, creating alternative spaces, in the forms of resistance movements, and social movements (*ibid.*). Despite their fallacies and delusion created by them, external agencies including the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, UNDP, International Non-governmental Organisations (INGOs) favoured an added emphasis on ‘participatory development’, ‘bottom-up approach’ ‘community based organisation’ ‘civil society’ over the decades, which actually helped in creating and expanded public spaces in the country. In the single decade of 1990, the number of centrally registered NGOs increased to 10000, and thousands more at the district level (*cf.* Bhattachan et al: 2001). CBOs, be them traditional or the recent ones, ‘formed the foundation of local dominant social relationship’ (Mishra 2007:148), apart from household and kinship network in most parts of the country. More apparently, following the re-establishment of the liberal democratic form of governance in 1990, central as well as local government began to directly “patronize” and recognise the CBOs as “intermediaries” (*Ibid*:150), as this was to align with the Article 25 (4) of the Constitution of the Kingdom of Nepal 1990, that clearly stated, “It shall be the chief responsibility of the state to maintain conditions suitable to the enjoyment of the fruits of democracy through wider participation of people in the governance of the country and by way of decentralisation”. Hence, the restoration of democracy in the years to follow, eventually, among other factors, expanded as well as intensified the citizens’ engagement in the public spaces.

My own experiences and observations over the years have indicated that the opportunity to participate in public spaces bears some fruitful outcomes and benefits, tangibles and intangibles. However, these benefits may not be equally shared among the participants, as different individuals participate at the different levels for different reasons.

Participation, “the involvement of different members of a society – groups or subgroups – in the decision that will affect their lives, now and in the future” (Nolan 2002:160), is fundamentally a subject of “how much power they have to determine the shape and operation of the project” or process. (ibid. 21). Thus, participation may have wide ranging applications. Therefore, any useful discussion on the meaning of participation requires a context (Mosse 2001), and, participation, in our context refers to membership in COs created by a development program.

Hence, who participates and at what level is very much defined and determined by his or her social – political positions and status in the local community. Therefore, the question of participation and non participation, the question of social inclusion and exclusion at a discursive level, is a social and political process. Political processes in villages of Nepal are very much embedded in the social and cultural processes. Hence, socially embedded politics at the village level very much sets the condition for participation in the public space; therefore, political dynamics at the local level must be explored to assess why some people participate and not others.

3. Data, Data Analysis and Conceptual Framework

I study why a particular individual or household participates or does not participate in a relatively ‘open’, ‘accessible’ ‘secular’ and ‘beneficial’ public space. Participation in the Cos created by a particular development program is the ethnographic context for this study. The study uses both quantitative and qualitative information; collected during different times between September 2006 and June 2007 from Kaseni VDC of Morang district in the eastern Tarai (plains) of Nepal. Household level socio-economic data were collected through a census, whereas semi-structured interviews (with different CO Chairmen, Managers, members, etc.) along with key informant interviews and observations were used to enrich as well as to triangulate the information. Secondary information and relevant literatures have also been utilised.

In this study, the focus was not on understanding the system of governance, distribution of benefit, etc. Rather on describing the **history**, i.e. how the COs came into being and their present structures and functions, I intend to investigate the **practice**: who are participating or not in those COs and why. Assessing how far the **structure** viz. caste, ethnicity, class, etc. and the policies are responsible for enabling or restricting an individual, the **actor**, to participate in such COs. I will further explore how sometimes the **agency** becomes forerunner for determining such participation. Hence, local context, the particular cultural history of the emergence of CO, structure, composition, functions with reference to local political dynamics and power relationship, constitute the major focus of the paper.

My observations on how actors in everyday life use their ‘cultural frames’ to interpret and meaningfully act upon the given world to make it as a ‘knowable and manageable life place’, takes the central place in my analysis. Hence, at this point, my experiences of why some people participated and why others did not may lead closer to the theory of practice as used by Ortner in her *High Religion* (1989), where she also based her analysis on these four key aspects: practice in relation to history, structure, and actor.

Sherry B. Ortner, following the **practice theory**, originally made popular by Pierre Bourdieu, says, the theory of practice” ...*is* a theory of the relationship between the structures of society and culture on the one hand, and the nature of human action on the other.practice theory..... in itself a theory of translation between the objective world and a subjective one, between a world constituted by logics beyond actors’ perception and a world constituted by logics spun by thinking and acting agent” (Ortner 1989:11, 18). Her effort by using this theory is to understand, “how persons and human activity can be constituted through the social process, while at the same time society and history can be constituted through meaningful human activity” (ibid: 18). Hence, practice theory traversed through objectivist and subjectivist moments, where in the objectivist one, the world appears as “system and structure, constituting actors, or confronting them,” while in the second one, the world appears as “culture, a symbolic frames derived from actors’ attempt to constitute the world in their own terms by investing it with order, meaning, and value” (Ibid.).

Further, while looming into the question of the rhetoric (of inclusion) and practice (of exclusion) by discussing the case of Community Organisations (COs), that have expanded the public space, and thereby the political space in the study village, which have thus allowed people with multiple identities and grievances to participate in collective actions, for

collective and/or individual benefits, much of the analysis, therefore, centres not on the COs *per se*, but rather on the social space it creates for wider and active public engagements. Such a social space is characterised as a public space in this paper. The public space, created by COs in this particular case, is like an association or collectivity, with some basic features of an organisation and membership regulation. Such a public space shares some fundamental aspects with public sphere (Habermas 1989), which he further describes as "a network of communicating information and point of view (i.e. opinion expressing affirmative or negative attitudes); the streams of communication are, in the process, filtered and synthesised in such a way that they coalesce into bundles of topically specified public opinion" (Habermas 1998:360). Hence, despite the fact that the social space being discussed in this paper shares some commonality, but is not the same as that of the sociological notion of the public sphere, therefore, I have used the term public space for clarity and convenience.

4. Community Organisation as a Public Space: Context for the Study

The Community Organisations (COs) that we study are the major forum for civic engagement in collective actions in the study VDC. The COs are broad based groups formed by the Village Development Program (VDP) of the Local Governance Program (LGP) which is implemented through the Local Development Fund (LDF) established under the District Development Committee (DDC) with support from UNDP. These COs are formed at settlement level within the VDC and federated to form a Chairman-Managers Conference (CMC). Hence, COs provide a space where the majority of the people (or households) can participate.

The United Nations' Development Program (UNDP) supported Local Governance Program (LGP) was started in 1996 through Ministry of Local Development (MLD) in 30 districts of the country. It was said to build upon the previous experiences of a similar program, the Participatory District Development Program (PDDP) launched in 1991. From 2002, LGP has been continued under the Decentralised Local Governance Support Program (DLGSP). The program aims at strengthening the capacity of local bodies for local self-governance with a special focus on empowering Dalits and disadvantaged groups including women. Its main program implemented at the VDC level is called Village Development Program (VDP) with a slogan of 'empowerment for poverty alleviation', for this, the program follows a participatory planning process to design 'integrated development projects' based on 'social mobilisation'. Organising 'all' the people in COs is the main working strategy of the program. So far there

have already been formed 21730 COs covering 530108 members in 66 districts (of a total of 75 districts of the country), which altogether include 880 VDCs out of nearly 4000 VDCs of the country (www.dlgsp.org.np/vdp.php). LGP (now DLGSP) provides direct support and supervision for 5 years, and then the groups are supposed to run independently with minimum or no support from DDC, but with close coordination with the VDC. These groups are free to diversify the funding sources, and their programs, as well.

The program is implemented through the District Development Committee (DDC), which is formed by elected political representatives. Therefore, the political parties having a majority in the DDC can influence the selection of program VDCs.

Kaseni of Morang district in the Eastern Tarai is one of the VDCs where VDP was introduced in 2000 (DDC 2063 BS). In addition to the COs formed under the VDP, which cover the larger proportion of membership of households in COs as compared to any other collective forums/public spaces in the VDC, there are other such spaces in the VDC created by saving and credit groups, cooperatives, social clubs, sports clubs, etc. But they are sporadic, isolated, very much localized, and therefore, have less impact at the VDC level. Moreover, these groups do not have consistent and well defined rules, regulation and legislatures, except a particular cooperative, which was established recently and so far has a narrow coverage, but still is gradually gaining popularity among the locals. Likewise, there are school management committees, health post management committee, temple management committee, community forestry users group, Red Cross, Reyukai, etc., which also provide the locus for the politically contesting groups and individuals for exercise of power. All together 81 percent of the households are represented as members in one or another of those formal public spaces, including COs formed under VDP/LGP. Along with these, several traditional, informal, forums and spaces like, tea shops, *Hatiya* (weekly market), *chautari* (resting place constructed in open and public places), *garamati* (Tharu tradition of self-help, etc.) form the public (social) space in the VDC. We study these other public spaces in an adjoining paper.

However, the VDP/LGP supported COs that have distinct rules and regulations, and have been consistently working for the last 7 years and made different types of impacts on peoples' life, is chosen as the subject for this paper, where, as said, the focus is on why people participate or do not participate in any given public space at the local level. These COs alone cover the majority of households of the VDC, i.e. larger than any other such space.

5. The Study Area and the People

Kaseni, the study VDC, is one of the 65 VDCs of Morang, an Eastern Tarai/plain district of Nepal, see Map 1. The VDC covers an area of 15 square km., and is located 22 Km north-east from Biratnagar, a major city (DDC 2059 BS). It has a diverse population in terms of caste, ethnicity, migrants and indigenous groups. It is one of the most popular cultural, religious, recreational and historical spots in Morang district, as the popular cultural site, Dhanpal Gadhi is located in this VDC. The VDC is also known for sharp political contestation at the local level, during the Maoist-government conflict since 1996 in particular.



Kaseni VDC has 1689 households with a total population of 8932 (of which 51 % are female), with an average family size of 5.3 members. A total of 37 castes and ethnic groups permanently living in the VDC were recorded in the census carried out for this study. The ethnic/caste groups pertaining to hill origin is higher (55%) than the population of plain origin (45%). The family size of the Tarai origin is smaller than the average of the VDC. Nuclear families and higher child mortality among Tarai origin people may explain this puzzle. These caste/ethnic groups are also differentiated in terms of economic, social and cultural behaviours.

The local ethnic group of Tharu is the largest ethnic group in the VDC, and constitutes 28 percent of the population, followed by the hill origin high caste groups, Chettris (17%), Sanyasi (8%), and Brahmin (6%). Sanyasi is treated here as a single and separate group not only because they constitute a substantial proportion of the population of the VDC but also because they occupy a special position in local politics and has much influence in the public domains. If all the ethnic groups pertaining to the hill origin are combined, then they form the largest category of the population. Ethnic groups and Dalits are categorised according to hill and Tarai origin. (See, Table 1, for major groupings of the population).

Caste/Ethnicity	Total HH	Percent	Total Population	Percent
Tharu	505	29.9	2470	27.7
Hill Ethnic	350	20.7	1950	21.8
Tarai Ethnic	152	9.0	717	8.0
Chettri	260	15.4	1516	17.0
Brahmin Hill	104	6.2	556	6.2
Sanyashi	130	7.7	744	8.3
Brahmin Tarai	7	0.4	34	0.4
Tarai Middle caste	59	3.5	324	3.6
Dalit Tarai	62	3.7	294	3.3
Dalit Hill	60	3.6	323	3.6
Total	1689	100.0	8932	100,0

Field study 2006-07

I have categorised the population (as in the table) after observing their distinctness in the process of participating in the public life and their social makeup (including their particular cultural history, etc.). These, along with gender, are the social categories used in the analysis throughout this paper.

Another major division is the economic one. The economic differentiation is manifested in house types, landownership pattern, level of food sufficiency, and so on. The survey reveals that only 2.5 percent of houses are of *pakki*, the concrete, type, 17.7 percent houses are *ardha-pakki*, the semi-concrete houses, and, the majority (78.9%) of them is *kachi* type, the house made of woods/bamboos, mud and daubs.

Similarly, the agricultural land, still the main basis of the economy, is unevenly distributed among caste/ethnic groups. It shows a strong correlation with caste/ethnic categories and is very much skewed. According to the present study, 95 percent of Tarai Dalits and 57 percent of Hill Dalits are landless, whereas, the majority of the medium and large landholders are high castes and Tharus. A total of 64 percent report that they have a food deficit, and 37 percent survive only for 3 months or less with their own agricultural production. Only 36 percent can actually survive the whole year, and 12 percent produce surplus.

Hence, such a socially, culturally and economically diverse community provides a unique context to investigate the practice of participation or non-participation in any given public spaces, which are directly related to accessing resources and benefits.

6. Village Development Program in the Study VDC

Morang was one of the first districts to introduce the LGP program. In 2000, it extended its program from 8 to 13 VDCs (out of 65 VDC in the district), with Kaseni VDC being one of them. The program was launched in this VDC in April 2000 (DDC 2063 BS).

Generally, the DDC select the VDCs. Nepal Communist Party, United Marxists Leninist (UML) had a strong majority in Morang DDC, as the majority of the posts (47 VDC/Municipality of 66 were led by the UML) in the local election in 1996 (that was the latest local election of the country, since then the political processes was disrupted by the Maoists armed struggle) was won by UML. The elected VDC representatives elect the DDC. There were 17 out of 21 members representing UML in the DDC. One of the VDP staffs at DDC, responsible for social mobilisation aspects, agreed that the LGP was introduced naturally to those VDCs under the influence of UML. Since the UML party had the majority of the VDCs, there was a competition even among them for the new resources. Several VDC chairmen and the area leaders lobbied for bringing the programs into their respective VDC. So, all the VDCs selected for the VDP were won by UML in the local election.

Kaseni, the study area, was one of the VDCs where UML won with an overwhelming majority (43 out of 47 positions). An influential district committee member of the UML party from this VDC also influenced the DDC decision in favour of his VDC using his party position, linkages and networks. Hence, Kaseni VDC was able to bring in the LGP program in 2000. Because of the political process involved, UML supporters always claimed that the program was possible in the VDC due to their efforts. UML cadres tried to get more support for the program within the VDC and put all their efforts to make the program a success. UML leaders even told people that it was a 'reward package' to the villagers for their votes in the election. At the same time, supporters of the opposition parties wanted to make it a failure because they thought that the success of the program could strengthen the UML's political base in the VDC. Hence, since the beginning the program entered the political debate. After 5 years, i.e. in 2005, by the rule of the VDP, the program graduated ('matured' in their official term), and, was handed over to the VDC, therefore, the COs have been running independently for the last 2 years, receiving some inputs from the DDC, and in coordination with the VDC.

7. COs, CMC and their Functions

This UNDP supported program aimed at 'uplifting the socio-economic status of rural poor with focus on Dalit and disadvantaged groups including women through social mobilisation and positive discrimination' (www.dlgsp.org.np/vdp.php). The formation of COs covering at least 80 percent of the households of the VDC, not excluding the marginalised ones, has been claimed as the program's main strategy.

In Kaseni, there are 47 of these COs;² they are active in different levels, covering nearly 57 percent of the households of the VDC according to our census (well below the expected and reported level, as CMC states the number is 72%). There are 9 wards³ and 30 *toles* (clusters) in the VDC. The COs are also like neighbourhood organisations; only members of the neighbourhood can form or become members of a CO. Therefore, the size of COs, in terms of its membership, varies widely, at present from 12 to 50. The membership is voluntary. In each CO, there is one Chairperson and one Manager. The Manager should be at least literate as

² This number represents the total number of COs so far formed and federated in the CMC. Some of them are completely defunct by now and are at the verge of collapse; and some of the members of such groups even did not want to mention the members not any more. Therefore, the total member households also differed between the number presented by the CMC and the census we conducted.

³ Ward is the lowest political administrative units, 5 local representatives are elected from each ward. Each VDC has 9 wards, therefore, in VDC body, there will be 45 representatives from ward level, and 2 Chairman and vice-chairman are elected in the VDC level, forming a VDC body of 47 elected representatives.

he/she has to maintain minutes and accounts. Chairperson and Manager of each group are represented in the Chairman Manager Conference (CMC), which takes place every month at a fixed date (24th of the Nepali month in the study VDC). This CMC will form an 11 member executive committee, which will become the supreme committee and thereby powerful at the VDC level.

Each group has its weekly meeting in a fixed date and time. Different groups set the day and time according to their convenience. A Social Mobiliser, who facilitates group formation and capacity building, along with providing other technical inputs, was appointed by the DDC for the first five years. Due to the regular support from the DDC, the COs only maintained a semi-autonomous existence. After 5 years, i.e. after handing over of the program to the VDC, CMC appointed a Social Mobiliser locally. They have more autonomous existence now.

It is mandatory for each group member to attend weekly meeting on time, and make regular deposits. Saving and credit are among the main activities of all COs. Only one person from each household can be member of the group. If one fails to make a deposit within the given time, s/he is liable for a monetary fine. The regular deposit is decided according to the saving capacity of the poorest member of the group, so that no one should be excluded due to his or her saving capacity. Some group fixed 2 rupees for regular deposits in the beginning, at present the deposit amount ranges from 5-20 rupees.

The different members may have different interests and different motivations to participate in the COs. The COs, however, embody such features that any individual get benefits by being a member. Through the involvement in the COs, people of the upper layer (relatively rich) will get an opportunity for doing 'social service', whereas, the middle layer benefit from 'loans at low interest rate'. The poorest get benefits from 'reservations', for example, there is a specially designed leasehold vegetable farming program, an economic package, for the 'ultra poor'. And, occasionally, the CO members are provided various skill development training, seed grants, technology and credits in order to support income generation activities of those 'ultra poor' members.

Individual COs prepare income generating activities and present in the CMC, which, if approved, will be forwarded to VDP/LDF for funding. So far, they have been carrying out improved goat farming, veterinary shops, rearing improved male goats, oxen, and buffaloes for cross breeding. They prepare plans and pressurise the VDC to carry out development

works in their respective settlements/wards, e.g., maintenance of irrigation canals, paving/graveling the roads/trails, etc. Often external agencies contact them to reach the people at the local level for different purposes. Recently, they coordinated with different external agencies to conduct several programs related to the constituent assembly election.

8. Pattern of Participation in the COs

I first describe the participation in the COs (of the VDP/DLGSP) in terms of caste/ethnicity, gender, landholding, level of food sufficiency, literacy status, and so on, which will be followed by the analysis of why some people participate and not others.

There is only one member from each household who can be a member in one CO, however, other members can be in other COs, but that is very rare. Therefore, the characteristics of the individual members also become the characteristics of the households. For example, caste/ethnicity, land holdings, etc. of members actually describe the features of the households, but literacy denotes the individual status, and not the status of the households.

8.1 Membership according to caste and ethnicity

In Nepal, caste/ethnicity is considered to be one of the major structural factors in explaining participation of an individual or group of people in any public and political arena. One is often denied or accepted according to caste/ethnic identity. Since the COs are considered as secular and neutral in terms of caste/ethnicity, religion, gender, class, etc., investigating these dimensions remains an interesting question in its own sake. Table 2 presents the distribution of membership according to caste/ethnicity.

Table 2 Membership and caste/ethnicity

Caste/ethnicity	Total HH	% of total	Member HH	% of members	Member/ total
Tharu	505	29.9	264	31.9	52.3
Tarai Ethnic	152	9.0	62	7.5	40.8
Hill Ethnic	350	20.7	154	18.6	44.0
Dalit Tarai	62	3.7	18	2.2	29.0
Dalit Hill	60	3.6	28	3.4	46.7
Other Tarai Middle Castes	59	3.5	30	3.6	50.9
Chettri	260	15.4	135	16.3	51.9
Brahmin Tarai	7	0.4	2	0.2	28.6
Brahmin Hill	104	6.2	63	7.6	60.6
Sanyashi	130	7.7	72	8.7	55.4
Total	1689	100.0	828	100.0	49.0

Census, field study, 2006-07

Table 2 shows that, among the different caste/ethnic categories, Sanyasi, Hill Brahmin, Tharu and Chettri households are overrepresented compared to their actual share in the population. Whereas, Tarai Dalits, in particular, are underrepresented in these COs with only 29 percent as members, which is low compared to, for example, Hill Brahmin (60.6%) and Sanyashi (55.4%) or Tharus (52.3%). This contrasts with the aims of the program as it was reported that the COs were designed to include more of low caste people and ethnic minorities.

8.2 Landholding and participation in the COs

Traditionally the amount of land owned determines the economic wellbeing of a family. The land ownership pattern varies sharply between different castes groups, and a general pattern can be identified. Tharus are traditionally and at present too, the landlords of the eastern Tarai, however, the ownership pattern within Tharu is very much skewed. Otherwise, Sanyasi, Chettri, and Hill Brahmin have larger holdings whereas Dalits, hill and, in particular, Tarai Dalits have smaller holdings. Membership pattern in the COs also varies accordingly. The following table presents the distribution of membership households according to landholding categories.

Table 3 Land holding and membership

Land	Total HH	% of total	Member HH	% of members	Member/ total
Land less (<0.0135 ha)	685	40.6	283	34.2	41.3
Marginal landholder (up to 0.2 ha)	302	17.9	162	19.6	53.6
Small landholder (up to 0.5 ha)	248	14.7	134	16.2	54.0
Medium landholder (up to 2 ha)	355	21.0	189	22.8	53.2
Large landholder (>2 ha)	99	5.9	60	7.3	60.6
Total	1689	100.0	828	100.0	49.0

Field study, 2006-07

It is illustrated that even though the landless constitutes the larger proportion of the membership in COs, they are actually underrepresented as compared to their share in the total population. The level of representation increases along with the land size owned by the respective groups. Hence, this also indicates that those who own more land also hold the political and social power in the society.

The landholding pattern explains the level of food sufficiency of the households. And the evidence thus suggests that membership in the COs varies along with the level of food sufficiency, as well.

8.3 Gender and participation

A common discourse on participation or exclusion takes gender as one of the central variables, assuming that women are underrepresented as compared to their male counterparts. But, in these COs, more women (63.5%) than men (36.5%) represent their respective member households. Some COs include only one man as a Manager, as women find it difficult to keep all the records of the account and prepare reports. A Manager gets some remuneration for his job.

Among Chairmen and Managers, the key positions in the COs, who are represented in the CMC, only 21 (44%) Chairmen and 16 (34%) Managers are women. Similarly in the 9 member VDP Managing Committee, the executive body, only 2 are women, the rest are men. Some of these female Chairmen and Managers are themselves actively involved in politics,

for example, the Chairman of the Management Committee, is a woman who is also the female representative in the VDC. She is involved in almost a dozen of such committees.

Since the majority of CO members are women, they are frequently participating in COs meetings, thus participating in the public space in everyday life. One question that becomes relevant here is what women are participating in the COs, in terms of their caste/ethnicity, class, etc. In addition, how the different benefits thus garnered are shared or utilised may sometimes turn women participation into pseudo participation, or only as an ersatz.

One particular event may illustrate the lack of female influence. In November 2006, CMC organised an excursion to observe similar initiatives by farmers in other districts. LGP/LDF provided some financial support, CMC utilised some of its funds and a nominal cost had to be shared by the participants. This was primarily organised for the Chairman and Manager of each CO. They decided to go to Chitwan, so that they could also manage to visit Devghat and Manakamana temple while they were there. In addition they wanted to go to Lumbini. All three places are famous religious destinations. Many of the female Chairmen and Managers could not leave their home, and on top of that, investing some money to go on an excursion is a 'luxury' for them. Therefore, only a few Chairmen and Managers agreed to go for the tour, but, eventually almost 60 people participated. Actually the husbands of those female Chairmen or Managers and in some cases selected men representing their respective COs participated in the tour.

Despite the odds, the policy and practice of female participation appear to work. The policy of including more women provides a space for women to participate, and this is supported by the seasonal or long term migration, which obliged women to participate in the COs.

8.4 Literacy and participation

Literacy status is often related to the level of awareness and it is presumed that more aware people participate in collective forums and public spaces like the present one. The following table presents the literacy status of the members participating in the COs compared to that of the total population and the household heads.

Table 4 Literacy Status of the CO Members

Literacy status	Total HH	% of total	% of HH heads	Member HH	% of members	Member/ total
Literate	967	69.8	56.7	427	51.6	44.5
Illiterate	722	30.2	43.3	401	48.4	55.5
Total	1689	100.0	100	828	100.0	49.0

The table shows that the literacy rate of the total population is 69.8 per cent, while the literacy rate of household heads is 56.7 percent, and that of CO members is 51.6 per cent. The literacy rate of household heads and members are thus lower than for the total population, which can be explained by the fact that the majority of the literate population is constituted of young people. Usually household heads are males and members in COs are females, therefore, a lower proportion of CO members are literate. In total, only 33.2 percent of females and 66.8 percent of male are literate. Thus the overrepresentation of illiterate member in the COs is primarily explained by the higher presence of women than men. This is a significant contribution of the COs as they have created public spaces for the illiterate women of the villages whose participation hitherto were denied, and which conventionally used to be dominated by the educated, males.

8.5 Occupation and participation

Below we will discuss several explanations for why people do not participate. One is based on the occupation of the participating members. Some occupations may ensure income for the regular weekly savings that take place in the COs, and the time available to participate in the regular weekly meetings. The following table presents the distribution of the household head of the member households according to their occupations.

Table 5 Occupation of Member Households

Occupations	Total HH	% of Total	Member HH	% of members	Member/ total
Own Agriculture	740	43.8	500	60.4	67.6
Own Enterprises, Trade	90	5.3	51	6.2	56.7
Job/Services	35	2.1	23	2.8	65.7
Wages	336	19.9	156	18.8	46.4
Others	113	6.7	55	6.6	48.7
No Work	375	22.2	43	5.2	11.5
Total	1689	100.0	828	100.0	49.0

Field study, 2006-07

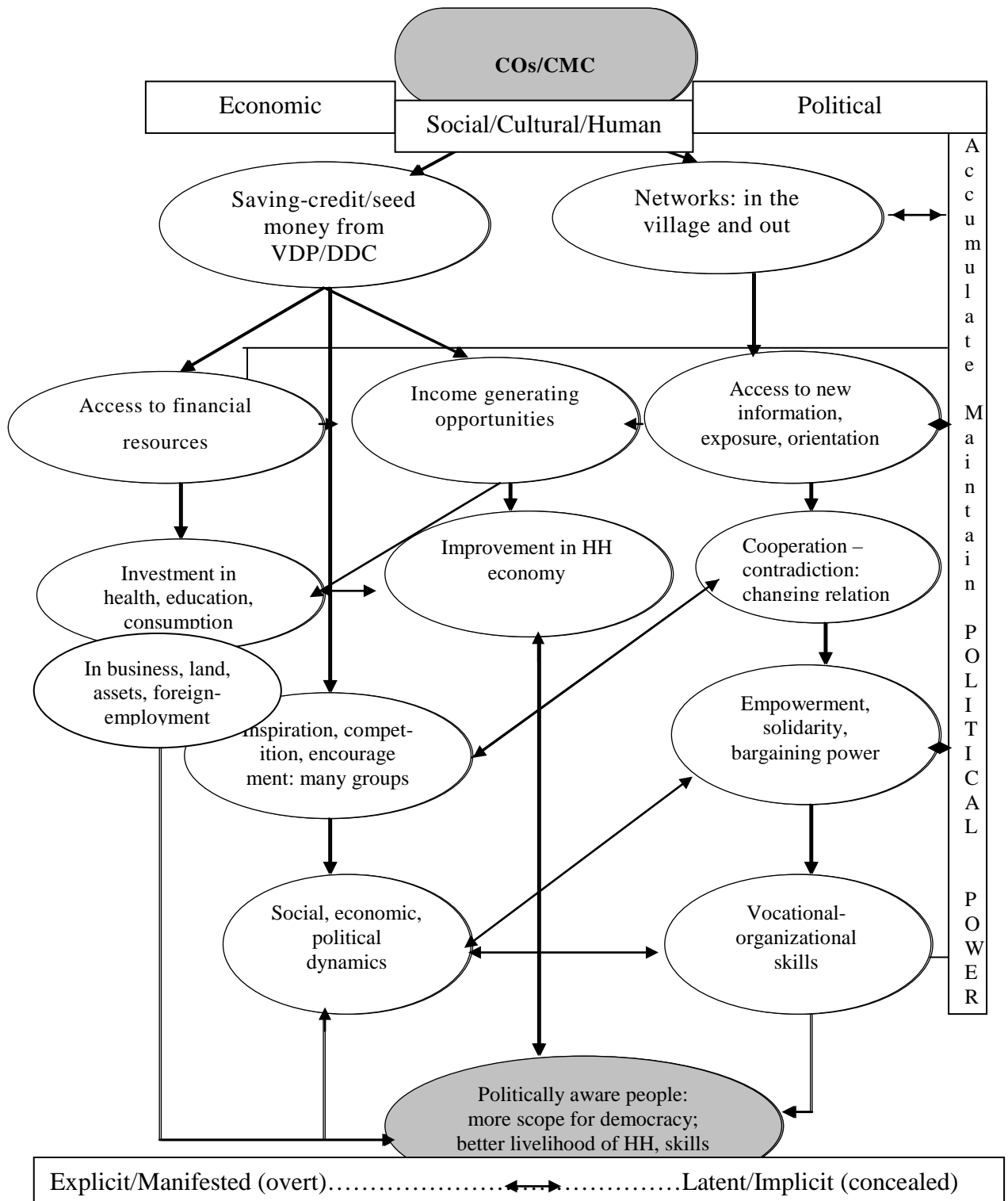
Table 5 illustrates that the proportion of farming households, i.e., households with own agriculture as the main occupation (of the household head) is high compared to their total share of population. For example, 43.8 per cent households has reported that their main occupation is own agriculture, while 60.4 per cent of the members are farmers, that is 67.6 per cent of the farmers are members. Similarly the table shows that households having their own enterprise or trade and job/services as the main occupations are overrepresented, whereas, there is lower representation of households having wage earning household heads, or household heads doing other informal, manual works, or being without any specific and regular works.

Hence, these statistical facts provide us with a general pattern of participation and non-participation in the COs, the prominent public space in the study village. These distributions of membership in the COs portray a general scenario where high castes and Tharus compared to low caste and other ethnic groups, and large landholders compared to landless, have higher membership rates in the COs. But all those members of the COs do not participate equally and as a result benefits are distributed unequally. The following paragraphs discuss the levels of participation and benefits sharing among the participants.

9. Participation and Benefits Sharing

Participation in COs means entering into a new kind of social networks and relationships that affects their everyday life. Otherwise, one is not entitled to some of the ‘common good’ these groups generate for their members. Benefits can be economic, social/cultural/human or political, see Figure 1.

Fig 1 Flow of benefits to the members of COs



Participation in COs is open to all, each and every household thus has a right to participate, and therefore, can have their share of benefits. The government allocated some resources (through UNDP funded programs such as VDP in Kaseni), so that each participating household can benefit.

But, neither all households are participating nor the different benefits or outcomes are equally distributed among the participants or members of the COs. Different individuals strategically deploy their participation in order to achieve some specific benefit. Accumulation and maintenance of political power were not intended targets for many participants, but some explicitly/implicitly participate for such benefits. Economic benefits are more explicitly expected whereas political implications are more latent and implicit. And, enhanced social/human resources in terms of different vocational and organisational skills, networks and orientations, have apparent implications on people's everyday life.

The (VDP) program is said to have been designed in such a way that people of different economic categories, social status and political interests can participate in the COs with different interests and motives. That means, different participants expect and compete for different benefits, and therefore, it is not easy to see whether members get equitable or fare shares.

A person who just follows his/her 'leaders' instruction, or the 'patron's order, has minimal roles in the COs expect his/her physical presence; they are never interested or encouraged to participate in interactions and thereby do not try to influence decisions. They are informed about the decisions, and they accept it as a news or piece of information they were just supposed to receive. At the same time, the politically motivated members, leaders and patrons, who often belong to the upper layer, frequently tell them, implicitly and explicitly, that the program is to do good for them, therefore, 'do what we tell you to do, and we make with you a fortune, if you just follow us'. Therefore, this kind of members rarely participate in any decision making process, they simply make their physical presence to approve the decisions and keep waiting and expecting something good will happen in their favour also.

Members belonging to the intermediate layer also do not intend to influence the decisions or the decision making process. One of their aims is to receive loan at the time of need. These types of participants, however, become calculative and set their strategies accordingly. Therefore, the more strategic of them, apply for the loan in advance for the expectedly more needed times, like during planting and harvesting seasons, during festival times, and so on. Some less strategic apply for the loan only on the time of need of immediate money, and often lose the chance to get the loan, when they really need it.

Members belonging to the upper layer are more active in decision making, networking, etc. Often people from this layer take the responsibility of Chairman, Manager, and the executive committee. Usually the COs are dominated by UML supporters. A few NC supports are asked or consulted, but their opinions and ideas do not make much influence in the decision making process. This is often a blame that NC and RPP supporters make against UML supporters. The UML supporters, the actual decision makers in the COs and CMC say that “we have asked them, we have asked every one, but as you know, the decisions are made by the majority of the members”. Maoists, at the beginning were against this program, however, recently they have been arguing that the programs should be more transparent and impartial. They are trying to make their influence within these groups, as many of the members turned to them during constituent assembly election.

Hence, levels of participation varies and consequently the benefits. The social and symbolic capital and the political power gained through such processes vary among the members; they are not equally and evenly distributed. However, despite the possibilities of several benefits, why some people do not participate in the COs will be discussed in the following paragraphs, also, in order to understand why some people do participate.

10. Participation as a Practice: Why do People not Participate

The sociological pattern of participation in the COs portrays a general picture where people from a particular social or economic category is not participating in the COs, and thereby, is deprived from the benefits. Often we tend to conclude that people are excluded because they belong to certain caste/ethnic, groups, and so on, without further investigating whether it is due to their caste/ethnic identity or some other processes operating at the local level. The contemporary discourses on social exclusion and inclusion tags certain groups as “excluded groups”, and the arguments are constructed to justify that. However, I explore the causes for participation or non-participation drawing evidences from the everyday practice of the people in their social world.

In the following I will present some potential explanations for why some people remained out, or could not come in, and on the other hand why some people, despite belonging to excluded categories, participated in the COs. The explanations were actually offered by individuals of different social, cultural, economic and political backgrounds. This leads us to discuss and

analyse who participate and why they participate in the actual practice, which hopefully contribute to the study of inclusion and exclusion.

10.1 The Political factor: Non participation as a political resentment vs. participation to maintain political support

Local political structures and processes – of political parties and their interrelationships - have occupied the centre stage in the VDC in explaining the participation or avoidance of COs. The COs under question were formed in a certain political environment. It was UML who won the majority of seats at the VDC level, and the same party had majority in the DDC. When the DDC had to identify some VDCs, it decided by a majority decision. With some influential local UML leaders, using their networks, Kaseni VDC lobbied for the resources and they were successful in bringing the program into the VDC. Since then, UML cadres and supporters kept claiming that the program came to the VDC because of their efforts; it was supposedly to take credit for their party. Those who were against UML, viz., NC and RPP, in particular, perceived it as a UML program, rather than the VDC's program. As a political strategy, some of the NC and RPP supporters worked to make the program fail. Therefore, they did not participate, and told their supporters not to participate. It was a kind of political resentment. The success or failure was interpreted in terms of political success and failure of a particular party. Likewise, those who became group members in the beginning revoked their membership later upon the request of party cadres. For a number of reasons, people maintained their political solidarity.

A school teacher and Nepali Congress Village Committee president, who left the group after 6 months, remarked, “UML had monopoly there, they did whatever they wanted to do, they used to make an agenda among themselves first, and endorsed it in the group. UML used it as a training ground to enhance their political capability, they were doing their politics and they were not transparent, therefore, I left the group.”

Similarly another person who left the group recently argued that, “*raajnitik khel rahecha, vote tanne melo* (it's like a political game, a way to secure votes).” A district level leader of Tarundal, (Nepali Congress's youth wing), out rightly asserted that “we are not so stupid that we knowingly support UML to strengthen their organisation by helping them in the COs”.

CPN-Maoist also tried to stop the program in the beginning. A local Maoists leader maintained that, “it was a reformist program; it prevents people from participation in radical

transformation, whenever ‘we’ grow stronger in this country, then the broker of imperialists (*samrajyabaad ka dalal haru*) comes into the villages with such programs. Therefore, not only we denied it but we also appealed to our people not to participate”. The Maoists not only ‘requested’ the people but also used ‘power’ (to create fear) for people not to form COs. Some prominent local leaders of Maoist come from ward no 2 of the VDC, therefore COs could not be formed till recently in that particular ward. In a number of cases, Maoists supporters and their family members withdrew their membership. This is one of the reasons for a low participation of landless and Dalits.

Local UML leaders and VDC representatives also alleged the same; that Maoists, NC and RPP stopped people from participating in the COs just because of their political views. Therefore, the political dimension for not participating in the COs is very strong.

In the same manner, many participants in the COs stated that it was actually a VDC program, and the VDC is run by elected UML representatives, and one has to make it a success because “we voted for them, they are doing good for us, we have to participate in the programs and be thankful to village leaders who brought the program to us. After all, the program guarantees equal opportunities for all regardless of political ideology (*rajnitik bichar ko adhaar ma*) and every one participating in it can benefit from the program”. This statement of the UML’s VDC secretary, is a generalised version of many of the respondents who are participating in the COs.

VDC representatives and UML leaders always kept claiming from day one that they had to struggle hard to bring the program into the VDC, now they also have taken up the challenge to make it a success as a political strategy. UML local leaders are committed to strengthen the program and thereby establishing themselves through the programs, and maintain their direct and constant contact with the local people in a formal structure of hierarchy conditioned by the unequal social power they have or assume. Therefore, those who were cadres, supporters, sympathisers of UML willingly joined the COs.

Some people having political career and interest at the local level have been participating in more than one CO. In some cases, husband and wife, or mother-in-laws and daughter-in-laws have been members in two different COs, that is in the big clusters where more than one COs are formed and not divided by any sharp geographical boundaries.

In a few cases there are some people who, despite being members in several committees and oppositional political organisations, tend to claim their rights to participate and try to make (political) space for him/her. Dukhram Choudhary, DCM of NC, Morang, and elected ward chairman of ward no 5, who is also in EC of CMC, clarifies that, “first, this is a VDC program, second, nobody is doing politics there, may be some are getting political benefits from there, but I do not see any one doing politics there. Our friend (a NC worker, who are not in the COs and keep saying that it was UML program) should have participated in the COs”. The Nepali Congress VDC president remarked, “that’s why we call him (Dukharam) a UML-Congress, because of such leaders without any stand we are not doing good (in terms of politics) here”. Another person appreciated Dukharam, and agreed that, “NC cadres labelled him as a UML congress”, but he has the most respectable image in the VDC among NC supporters.”

Despite some counter evidence, the main conclusion is that political dynamics and processes at the village level, with political contestations and cooperation have very much influenced the participation of individuals in the COs.

10.2 Inter-personal Relationships: Cooperation and Contestation

Social networks and traditional hierarchical ties between individuals and families still exist and functions as the regulatory mechanism in the study area. In addition, complex inter-personal relationships of cooperation and contestation between individuals are evident in the everyday life. Hence, the interpersonal relationship is framed in two ways, historically constructed hierarchical ties of dyadic relationship, and, relatively recently built inter-personal relationship of cooperation and/or competitions.

Evidences from the field suggest that, a person with a lower status in a traditionally constructed dyadic relationship does not go against the will of the one with the upper status. This is very much like a patron client relationship. For example, one ploughing the field of a landlord consults his landlord before subscribing a membership; he does not wish to get a membership without the permission of his landlord.

The landlord has been providing him with employment and patronage, and then it becomes natural not to go against the landlord’s will and advice. A sharecropper, a house servant, a *haruwa* (a ploughman under a long-term labour contract), etc., normally receives information on different opportunities from their masters. Even if they have information, they do not join a

group without their master's consent. A Chamar, a Tarai Dalit, from ward number 5 makes it implicitly clear saying that, "if people like us join the group, go to the meeting, deposit every week, then who will plough the field of the *malik* (the master)?" He did not allow his wife to join the group, saying that "if you want to deposit 2 rupees a week, then you can do that also at home, why don't you keep the money in a *khutruke* (the tiny pot/box for money collection, used especially by children). Since our *malik* is not a member, he says it is just a *kam nalagne* (of no use, bogus), so why should we go there".

Actually, supplementary to the political factors, those who were living under a relationship of interdependency with a UML leader, supporter or sympathiser, were told to participate in the COs. His or her 'patron' will present his or her participation as a grace or favour for him or her. Hence, his or her participation means to obey his or her masters' instruction, or to accept his or her masters' 'grace'. This means, one becomes a member of a CO, not simply because he or she wishes to be, but because of his or her 'patron's' will and instruction; to maintain the traditional dyadic relationship of interdependencies.

In addition, cases repeatedly cited as explanation for why some individuals do not participate in COs were the interpersonal relationships with other members of the COs; in most of the cases, with the Chairman or Manager. Usually the weekly meeting takes place at the Chairman's or Manager's house. Therefore, those who are in conflict with any of these do not join the COs. In such cases, the COs indirectly decide who is to be kept in and who is not an important member for them.

Similarly, in some cases it was reported that some individuals did not like to participate simply because there were people holding the post of Chairman or Manager, who were treated as inferior in social position to them in the society. A former NC activist, now a Madheshi Janaadhikar Forum (MJF) leader ridiculed in a public discussion that "what do they know, so that I go to them and apply for the membership?" Hence he/she did not like to be in the same COs where people he or she always looked down at were members. For some, to be a member in a CO means to be equal in status with others, which they do not want to be, and therefore remains outside.

10.3 Contesting Institutionalism

Tharus, the dominant group in terms of population size, has a very strong tradition of collective actions for mutual cooperation and social networks, called *Garamati*. It is a

traditional institution of self-help among Tharus where some families come together to help one of its members during ‘*marda parda*’, at the time of need and crisis, etc., for example, during birth, wedding and death rituals. They not only have pure functional and material cooperation among themselves but also a symbolic and ritual interaction. Therefore, *Garamati* is the strongest social tie among the Tharus, a *Garamati* may split due to some reasons, but no Tharu family lives outside this network. Therefore, if the majority of the Tharu members are opting out from COs of their respective settlement, for some serious and political reasons, then the remaining few may also not participate in the COs. These remaining few do not want to create a rift in their age old tradition, which has been proved more important for them in everyday life. The social, cultural and symbolic capital, the trust and the feeling of security they possess by being a member of a *Garamati* are considered more important than what they might gain by being a member in the COs.

Likewise, members of a ‘social club’ (‘social club’ is the common term given to a neighbourhood network, who come together for collective welfare to raise funds, buy necessary utensils and materials needed for feasts, festivals, and group functions, which, otherwise could not have been possessed by a single family) also have similar tendencies. If the majority of the members of a ‘social club’ have not joined the COs, then the others might also like to be out of the COs. The concept of neighbourhood is also very strong among the Tharus, and the hill *janajati* (ethnic groups) as compared to others.

In a similar manner, those who have been members in other saving and credit schemes do not consider it as important to be a member of the COs. A lady runs a tea shop in the main market area of the village and deposit 20 rupees a day in savings schemes, so she does not see any use of depositing another 10 rupees in a week. She maintains, “Since I am a member of 2 ‘finance’ companies, women come every day to my door and take 10 rupees each, and I do not have to bother anything, they just come and collect, that’s all. I do not have time to attend meetings every week and deposit 10 rupees, those women who do not have much work to do go there in the meeting. Rather I have been a member of a newly established cooperative, where I go to deposit once in a month and the office is next door, where I regularly serve the tea every day”.

10.4 VDP as a New Initiative: Sceptic Perceptions of the Villagers

In the 60s, the then government of Nepal had introduced a program called “*gaun farka*” (‘let’s go to the village’) movement, said to be inspired by Chinese model of development. One of the components of this program was a scheme of compulsory saving in kind (usually grain) for community development and collective welfare. This was called as “*dharma bhakari*” (charity/religious granary). It used to be under surveillance of the village head. The central government collected the grain all over the country saying that it would be returned to the village in the time of need, but never returned it. People felt that they were ‘cheated’, the government ‘betrayed’ them. People told such stories repeatedly to younger generations; it was a big issue in the villages by that time. Those who deposited the grains and felt ‘cheated’ are still alive. When similar program was introduced in the village, they immediately related these initiatives to the old one. To some extent, the two programs had similarities, both of them were coming from above, executed by the village head or VDC; both the programs had a group approach and included compulsory savings. Then, those who experienced the earlier incidence not only showed their disbelief in the program, but also spread the message that this program would also face the similar fate as the “*dharma bhakari*”. People, therefore, were very sceptic, suspicious, and were not sure about the eventual outcome of the program; and therefore, some withheld their participation in the COs. Those who wanted to make the program a failure also used this instrumentally to spread the rumour to discourage the villagers to participate in the COs. They said publicly that this is just going to be a new version of the same old “*dharma bhakari*”.

Similarly, the COs’ most visible regular activity is the weekly saving program. And, the minimum amount of the compulsory saving was fixed as per the wish of the poorest member of the COs, therefore, in some COs, the weekly savings were fixed at Rs 2 per week, which, however, goes up to 20 per week in some other COs. At the moment, the minimum saving amount is 5 rupees a week in a few COs, otherwise, the majority of them have at least 10 rupees; no single CO has 2 rupees as the minimum saving amount at present. Priority is given to the economically poor CO members while giving credits or leasehold plots for vegetables farming, etc. Therefore, some individuals were not attracted to these COs. A university graduate of the village, finds the program more suitable for people of lower rank, not for the middle class people, who could save more than ‘2 rupees a week’ and benefit more if a similar program had been there targeting to the middle class people. “When will one get enough money to borrow and invest in further income generating activities?” He left the CO

and took the lead in establishing a separate cooperative in the village. Such opinions were shared by many individuals.

On the other hand, some of the respondents who apparently had maintained their political neutrality expressed that these kinds of “developmental” and “social” activities should be “tried out”. These are people who comfortably can afford time and money for the weekly savings. Most of them are from hill origin, including hill ethnic groups (*janajati*). Such hopes have actually motivated people to participate, and they engage themselves in the production of common goods. But at the same time, chances are that they harness more benefits, too.

10.5 The Rules: Occupation, Regular Savings and Exclusion

The COs have a set of rules, applied to all 47 COs, with regard to membership and withdrawal of it, regular savings and compliance of fines, etc. These rules often tend to exclude a certain group of people from participation in the COs.

Those who do not have a regular wage income may find it hard to manage a mandatory weekly deposit, which may range from 5-20 rupees. It is also obligatory to deposit the required amount within a certain time of the weekly meeting, which usually lasts for two hours. But a poor landless family with small children and without any regular income, or wage in kind rather than in cash, cannot be sure that he or she can deposit money every week on a given day and time. If the meeting is not attended on time and they fail to deposit, then he/she is fined, in monetary terms.

Some Tarai Dalits and some other ethnic minorities, who could not enjoy the citizens’ rights in the past, have a fear of punishment, and a fine for them is a form of monetary punishment, for committing ‘crimes’. Consequently, some Dalits and ethnic minority families did not participate in the COs.

Likewise, the rules prevented the participation of certain occupation holders. A tailor from ward no 3, left the CO after sometimes, and explains, “the meeting used to be set for a fixed hour, once we could not attend it, we were fined; when our *bista* (traditionally a ‘patron’) is waiting for her blouse to be finished and we are in the middle of the task, we cannot simply stop the work and tell the *bista* to come later. Therefore, we could not continue in the COs after a couple of months, we even did not get our deposited money back, it could have been 40-50 rupees”. His family was relatively new to the area and they were interested to make

more *'bistas'*. Giving priority to the work rather than maintaining membership in the COs was more important for them. It had also to do with the immediate return he would get from the work, whereas in the COs it is 'uncertain'.

A landless Dalit, argued; "...who would feed me if I go to attend the meeting instead of ploughing the landlord's field? They set the meeting at the mid day; I have to live by ploughing the landlord's land, should I leave the oxen in the middle of the field and go to give them money in the meeting? If I send this woman (pointing to his wife sitting nearby), she does not know anything like this, and she also has to go for work." This story is not a unique case; most of the landless Tarai Dalits are in similar situations, and have similar stories. Hence, the nature of work, and the rules of the COs become incompatible for some of the landless wage workers, and they cannot participate in the COs.

The question was raised in the COs and CMC meetings, 'does it not prevent a wage labourers to participate in the COs, since meetings are usually held during the day time, and one has to pay a fine if not being able to present her/himself and deposit the money?' The participating members disagreed and said that, 'no CO has the mandatory rule that the member him/herself has to be present in the meetings. He or she may come for a minute and can go back to their work. Or he/she can send any family members to deposit the savings, or he/she can hand it over to his/her neighbours who could participate. But, one has to be there if he/she wants to take loans. Everyone cannot make his or her presence in all the meetings, but they send the money with another member. Had there not been provisions like these, many would have left the COs years ago'.

Late migrants are another group of people who are excluded from the COs. Those who migrated to the area after the COs were formed, mostly remained outside the COs. There were 1523 households in the 2001 census (CBS: 2001) which has increased to 1689 (the census for this study) in 2006. The addition of 166 households in the village in last 5 years time was primarily due to migration. Conflict induced migration was accelerated during the period. Those who wanted to join the COs later had to deposit the money of his or her share (total amount divided among the members) at once. This amount, though only a few hundred in some cases, to be paid to the COs to get a membership becomes 'much' for some and they rather stayed outside the groups; looking for alternatives.

A family, migrated to the area from Bhojpur some 3 years ago wanted to join one such group, but did not. The wife explained, “We were asked to pay 750 rupees to join the group, as each member in the group had already deposited that much by that time. Despite our interest we could not pay that much, therefore, we remained out. Now, I have been member in a newly established cooperative, and I also make daily savings in Grameen Bank.”

Many late migrants I have spoken to share similar experiences. One newly migrant woman in ward no 9, also expressed disappointingly that she does not feel like one of the fellow community members. “All women gather at *chautara*, deposit their savings and get loans, talk about training, but, I feel that I am not one of them, but rather an outsider.” Her statement also makes it clear that the COs are not only a shared public space, but also maintain the sense of belongingness among the villagers.

There are also cases where the members are not interested in maintaining the membership in the COs, but still they keep membership. “Want to leave but rules do not help”, said a Tharu man. He has been a member since the beginning, but many of his neighbours left the group years ago, “by then there were hardly any money in the group, I could have forgotten that, now it is a few hundreds, how can I simply forget that, otherwise, I would leave the group. I am not interested in it anymore; you know many groups are already dissolved”. I also interviewed several such CO members, who actually want to leave the COs for some reasons, but the rules do not allow them to leave the COs. One can leave only in two conditions, if he or she is migrating permanently, or the member dies and other family members do not want to continue. In all other situation he/she loses the deposited money. Hence, some people are retaining their membership in the COs but unwillingly. Now there are a number of other institutions which they find more beneficial, and therefore, they want to leave the COs.

Hence, the socially embedded local political processes, political contestations and social/personal relationships influence the condition for participation and/or non-participation in the COs, and not merely the structural barriers or facilitating factors.

11. Outcomes and implications

Finally, based on the preceding cases and evidences, I am now able to discuss the outcomes and implications of the program.

11.1 Making of a Public Space More Public: Conditions for the more Participation in the Public Spaces

The explanations offered for the present predicament of not participating (vis-à-vis for participating) in the COs hint at conditions that facilitate participation in a given public space at the local level.

Our study suggests that participation in a public space, like COs, increases if the community is politically and culturally relatively homogenous. If such a space is culturally appropriate, and not contradicting the existing traditional system, then it may attract more people to participate in it. And, to sustain participation, strict rules and regulations are instrumental; otherwise, members can revoke his or her membership for relatively weak reasons, for example, if ones' needs are not immediately fulfilled, or when some personal contradictions arise between the members.

If people with different interests still feel that their diverse interests are fulfilled by participating in a single forum, then the level of participation will be higher. If some participate with the objective of strengthening and maintaining their political positions and interests, while others participate only to receive financial incentives, then there will be space for different types of people.

The practice of participation takes place in a social space, historically constructed and politically contested. The specific history of the settlements, COs, participating members and similarly the local political structure and social networks actually determine the participation or non participation of a particular household as member in the COs. Upon considering these factors properly, the space thus created can be made more public and wider. Nevertheless, the findings of the present study suggest that no space can really be 'absolutely public', which is equally accessed by all, rather, it can be relatively 'more' or 'less' public.

11.2 Generation and Investment of the Social Capital

Social capital, if defined as "features of social organisation such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Putnam 1993:67); and if "captured *only* by social relations" (Lin 2001:19), then, COs generate social capital. Social capital is therefore, "a social asset by virtue of actors' connections and access to resources in the network or group of which they are members" (Ibid). Therefore, in the given

context, assets can be accumulated also by being a CO member. And, the ‘embedded resources’ or elements of this, namely ‘information, influence, social credentials and reinforcement’ (ibid: 20) which are not possible to access through personal capital like economic or human capital can be further invested to accrue political power.

Rankin (2002), following Bourdieu, finds, “[i]ndividuals do not generate social capital and are not the primary unit of analysis. Rather, social capital inheres in the social structure and must be conferred value by society consenting to its cultural logic. Within this logic, differently positioned individuals experience associational life differently; some benefit at the expense of others. The benefits and costs of participation are distributed unequally. One does not acquire or squander social capital on the basis of individual choice (the agency driven); rather, one accrues obligation and opportunity to participate in social networks by virtue of one’s social position” (2002:6).

Rankin’s findings are supported by the findings of this study, as well. UML supporters active participation and the opposition’s ‘active’ non-participation or participation with certain ‘claims’ is, in fact, a strategy to make political career by engaging in a ‘non-political’ public space.

NR Giri, a UML district leader and a high school teacher from the same VDC explicitly said that, ‘many future leaders for this village are being trained through the COs. Earlier it was tough to find a woman cadre who could also speak in public, now, you see, they are ready to argue with you’. And, he agrees that UML has not only been maintaining its political strength through the COs, they also have tried to patronize the process. The UML from the very beginning claimed that it was possible only through their efforts; hence, they constructed the discourse that it was for the overall development of the VDC. The VDC Chairperson says, “It was what I could give to the villagers in return for their votes”.

Hence, a growing modern condition in the village with weakening of the ‘thick’ trust: typical to traditional societies, where community is arguably strong and individuation weak (Varshney 2002, quoted in Bhattacharya et al. 2004), COs, an indicator of modern condition, have helped in restoring a ‘collectivist’ ideology. Eventually, the apparent success of the program in the beginning encouraged other political party supporters also to work with similar mechanisms, i.e. forming social organisations and deliver benefits to the people, which

ultimately helped the local leaders to keep their contact with the people functional. This in due course expanded the socio-politico-economic networks outwards.

11.3 Redistribution of Power: Shifting Power Relations and Democratisation at the Local Level

In the study area in particular, traditional power relationships have been rapidly altered in the recent years, which are, among others, credited to COs and the political space it has created for the villages. The predicament of caste society has been weaker in the Eastern Tarai, in the hill-Tarai mixed communities, in particular, compared to other parts of the country. The traditional headmen and ordinary village relationships have been dying, since 1990s in particular. Traditional patron-client relationship of hierarchical interdependency is weathering, and has become weaker. However, some have maintained the power relation by adopting new roles in the changing environment; primarily through taking up the roles as political representatives of the major political parties, supporting the observation of Hailey (2001: 94) that ‘the nature of group dynamics’ suggests that “power often lies in the hand of the most articulate or politically adept”.

Tanabe (2007) attempted to locate ‘endogenous potentialities for building local democracy’ in contemporary India by paying attention to the ‘agency of subalterns in redefining the ontology of caste’ and attempts to ‘culturally underpin the significance of democratic representation and cooperation of multiple social groups in local self-governance’ (Tanabe 2007: 558-574). This is equally true in our case also. In the study village, COs did not only bring in the discourse of ‘social inclusion’ of the excluded groups like Dalits, women, janajati, and marginalised people, they also in fact, had to include them in the COs, which eventually provided the growing space for subalterns. Many of the CO members are gradually becoming proactive and involving themselves in the political debates. Just before the CMC meeting began, I asked them if they feel that they also have been politically empowered, they replied that they are thinking of presenting all the female candidates in the upcoming local election. A NC leader, and a Manager of a CO, approved that, “if an all women panel is formed, we do not compete with each other, we rather form a consensus”. They also mentioned that, now the priorities have been given to the excluded ones. To some extent, they have taken up some political spaces and are considered as leaders in the VDC.

Similarly, for the last few years, the CMC functioned as an alternative to the VDC assembly, since the elected VDC was dissolved some 5 years ago, during the premiership of Sher Bahadur Deuba in 2002. Even in the absence of elected representatives in the VDC, COs/CMC are utilising their networks in all 9 wards and helped to produce a realistic VDC plan.

The VDC secretary agrees that COs are carrying out complementary as well as supplementary roles, especially when there were no elected VDC representatives in the offices. He described, “They (COs) have forced the VDC to maintain transparency and accountability”. He added that COs were influential also when there were still VDC representatives in their offices, ensuring that the work was done and in a transparent way.

Recently (in the beginning of 2007), when an 8 party alliance decided to form a similar alliance at the local level and assigned work to the VDC, then the COs demanded them to be more participatory, transparent and representative, not only in terms of parties but also in terms of gender and caste/ethnicity. “Otherwise”, as they demanded, “trust us, give us the rights, and we will deliver more than you have expected”. This was also an intended agenda of UML supporters, because by going through COs, UML would have more influence in the process.

11.4 The Expanded Networks and More Engaged People

Observing the last few years’ development in the VDC, it can be argued that social, economic and political life have been re-organised through these social networks, unlike the conventional kinship, marriage and social exchange network, however, these other networks are still the foundations for the society, but they are weakening and being replaced by a new kind of networks and exchange.

Along with the re-organisation of the socio-politico-economic life in the village, behavioural change (we may term it cultural change) has also become observable. Even non-literate women of any caste/ethnicity now give importance to punctuality, weekly meetings, writing minutes, etc., by doing so they are imparting a new value system, which we may label as a modern value system. Since most of the groups are formed and, in fact, led by women, and *mahila sasaktikaran* (women empowerment), *laingik samanta* (gender equity), and *laingik bived* (gender discrimination) have been established as key/buzz words in interactions and/public meetings. Through the programs, CO members have got easy information and

access to modern concepts of agriculture, linking their ‘domestic’ activities to the market. For example, vermiculture (earthworm breeding), commercial vegetable farming using pesticides, chemical fertiliser, and High Yielding Varieties (HYV) are other indicators of the village entering into modernity facilitated by the CMC activities.

Different training and orientation programs organised for the CO members, exposure visits, regular interaction with outsiders, expanded networks etc., have also helped to change and imparting a new value system, in terms of inter personal behaviour, and group behaviour. The VDC secretary, describes, “When I first came here (a decade ago), not only women but even many men did not know how to present themselves in front of outsiders. Being so close to Biratnagar, this was still a *kacchad* (peripheral area). After introduction of VDP 7 years ago, people have learnt a lot, and the place has changed. Many of these development programs were not provided by the VDP itself, but through the program people learnt how to make a collective effort”.

12. Conclusions

In this paper, I have showed that the VDP through COs has helped in expanding the public spaces in Kaseni. The public space now involves more people, with multiple identities and grievances including hitherto marginalised groups, in politically engaged debates and interactions as well as collective actions for collective and/or individual benefits, which still may not be equally shared among the participants.

In everyday practice, the participants of the same COs formed by VDP gain different, financial, social and political advantages, and, there is merely competition between these spheres, however, sometimes contesting interests of individuals may affect individual participation. The empirical cases illustrate that participation in the COs is largely influenced by endogenous political and social processes, and consequently the COs no more remains a ‘secular’, ‘apolitical’, or ‘neutral’ space, rather it turns to be a political space. Therefore, contesting political parties decides on the participation of their respective fellow political supporters.

In Kaseni, UML supporters made efforts to make the VDP program a success, whereas supporters of other political parties, mainly NC and Maoists, with two different logics and strategies tried to make the program fail. For some, it was a way to strengthen and widen a political base by encouraging participation in the COs, and at the same time, for others, it was

a way of raising political resentment by refusing and discouraging participation in the COs. Hence, our study of participation in the COs also provides a context to study the factional politics of the study area. Ferguson (1990) in his seminal work warned that development depoliticizes and masks its own politics, but in this study, COs, instead, unmasks the intended political aspiration of the participants. This observation is shared by a similar study of Saubhagya Shah in other parts of the country, where he establishes how local actors can use development projects to politicize other arenas of life (Shah 2004).

Similarly, Tarnowski (2002) based on his study of community forestry program, found that although the groups are supposed to foster participatory democratic processes at the local level by empowering the women, poor and disadvantaged sections of society, rather it has opened a new political space for the local economic and political elite. Rai-Poudyal (2008) also supports this argument based on her empirical studies. In both studies, these groups of elite have found the forest based organizations as an additional type of political space to run their political activities for the expansion of their power and authority among the members of their local communities. These findings correspond with the findings of several similar studies (*cf.* Platteau and Gaspart 2003), which have indicated that village level rent-seeking elites always tend to capture the resources in any given development project funded by donor agencies and executed by Non-governmental Organisations.

The political process in the study village is very much embedded in the social and cultural processes and practices. Hence, socially embedded politics at the village level generally sets the condition for participation or not in such a public space, and therefore, political dynamics at the local level needed to be explored to assess why some people participate and not others. Thus, the manipulation of the public space by political elites by being involved in it or by rejecting it was essential to understand. I argue that the question of participation or non-participation is a structural as well as an agency issue, produced by the particular history and the contemporary practice. Simply the state policy and the administrative procedure, which may provide a conducive environment required for participation, are not enough to ensure greater level of participation in an economically, culturally and politically divided society. Successful implementation of such policies and regulation is very much facilitated or constrained by the local political processes. Therefore, I urge that the importance of local cultural-history of the community and of the institutions under questions is very much essential to understand to know who may participate in which types of public forums and collective actions.

Democratisation of the VDC - through consistent urge for participation, transparency, and accountability, and by questioning the dominant caste-centred factional politics - should be considered as one of the political outcomes of the COs. The practice of participating and interacting in the COs, or other forums created by them, has also helped in the formation of subaltern agency and consequently to surface some of the tensions between old power structures and the new initiatives to bring the people of the margin towards the centre of activities. This has helped in alteration of existing power relations at the local level. But, it should not be overlooked that local elites still use these spaces to perpetuate the older power relation.

Studies of participation in public spaces, COs in the present context, (i.e. the question of exclusion and inclusion) should consider its particular historical context, given political and social structures and processes, the participants/actors, who potentially produce the '(subaltern) agency', and the actual practice, how has it been acted upon in everyday life. Otherwise a full, instead of a fragmentary, picture of exclusion-inclusion cannot be drawn.

Hence, participating in COs to maintain political support and alliances in one hand, and not to participate to show political resentment on the other, cross cuts the various structural barriers for social inclusion or exclusion. Traditional patron-client relationship of interdependency and other inter-personal relations along with subaltern agency have important roles to play in ensuring or barring the participation of an individual in the public space.

Acknowledgements

This paper is an outcome of the SIRF's research project: "Social Exclusion and Democratic Inclusion", funded by the Royal Norwegian Embassy in Nepal. The preliminary version of this paper was presented in a seminar at CMI, Bergen in 8 October, 2007, later at 'Social Exclusion and Conflict in Nepal' Seminar 20-21, November 2007, Kathmandu. On both the occasions I received many useful comments from several participants, I am thankful to them all. I am much indebted to Prof. Chaitanya Mishra, Prof. Dilliram Dahal, Prof. Gunnar Haaland and Masako Tanaka, who read the draft version of the paper and provided their valuable comments. Dr. Magnus Hatlebakk needs special mention as he not only facilitated to write this paper from the very beginning but also provided rigorous editorial inputs to bring out this paper to the present shape. However, I alone am responsible for the contents of this paper.

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