

## Community Participation in Sustainable Ecotourism Planning: A Study of Tourism-Centric Settlements of Khumbu Region, Nepal

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**Abstract:** *Community participation is considered as an integral element of ecotourism planning and development. It is vital to promote the goals of conservation and sustainable community development in the settlements around protected areas. Empowerment of local community is therefore a key concern of ecotourism planning specifically to contribute towards sustainable development. In this regard, this study considers a case of settlements from Khumbu region of Nepal to explore the context and role of community participation in ecotourism planning and its contribution toward sustainability. It has adopted multiple tools of data collection such as household's survey, key informants interview, participant observation, informal discussion with local residents and archival research for examining the context of community participation in the Khumbu region. Survey results revealed that current approach of ecotourism planning does not satisfy the core objectives of ecotourism development, i.e. inclusive community participation in the planning process. Community participation in the Khumbu settlements seems more like a tokenistic approach rather than inclusive and community controlled approach. It is suggested to empower and enhance the capacity of local residents to actively participate in the plan and policy making process and integrate them into tourism entrepreneurial activities so as to receive benefits of ecotourism equitably.*

**Key Words:** *Community Participation, Sustainability, Ecotourism Planning, Settlements, Khumbu Region*

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### 1.0 Introduction:

Sustainable Ecotourism has been strongly recommended as an appropriate form of tourism for improving quality of life of the destination communities through protecting natural and human environment and strengthening the local economy (Bhatta, 2014). Theoretically, it is considered as a responsible travel that conserves environment and improves well-being of local people (TIES, 1992). It has been linked to conservation efforts; resource protection policies; sustainable development initiatives, and community development strategies in many regions (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1993; Nenon & Durst, 1993; Wells, 1997; Honey, 1999, Bhatta, 2014 & 2019). With its own approaches, principles, and models, tourism planning has emerged as a specialized field which is largely influenced by the urban planning theories and methodology (Tosun & Timothy, 2001). Although, scholars have discussed on the models and types of tourism planning (Murphy, 1985; Getz, 1986; Inskeep, 1991, 1994; Mill & Morrison, 1992; Prentice, 1993; Gunn, 1994; Simmons, 1994; Timothy, 1998; Tosun & Jenkins, 1998; Hall, 2000; Burns, 2004); there is still lack of in-depth discussion on the role of community participation in sustainable ecotourism planning. In this context, this study aims to explore the context of community participation and their role in the sustainable planning of ecotourism development in the settlements from Khumbu region.

## 2.0 Theoretical Review

### 2.1 Community Participation in Sustainable Ecotourism Development

Participation of local communities in sustainable ecotourism development has become key factor to promote sustainability in the destinations. Community participation in sustainable tourism planning is crucial because whenever development and planning do not fit in with local aspirations and capacities, resistance and hostility can increase the costs of business or destroy the industry's potential together (Murphy, 1985). Therefore, if ecotourism is to become successful, it needs to be planned and managed as a renewable resource industry, based on local capacities and community decision-making (Chan and Bhatta, 2013; Bhatta 2014). The crucial issue is therefore how to conduct an effective community participation in the planning and management of ecotourism development to promote sustainable development goals.

Community participation is viewed as an interaction between the government and the people to consider the view of general public into decision making. There is now common agreement that if communities are given choices to participate in planning, it may produce better results in decision-making closely tied with the needs of local people (Bhatta, 2014). As per Paul (1987,p.2), public participation genuinely means "an active process by which beneficiary groups influence the direction and execution of a development project with a view to enhancing their well-being in terms of income, personal growth, self-reliance or other values they cherish".Local community participation is considered to be an important pillar of ecotourism development as they are capable of influencing success or failure of ecotourism development projects (Gumede and Nzama, 2021). Scholars widely argued that community participation is founded upon a voluntary and democratic involvement of people (Strawn, 1994; Warburton, 1998; Butler et. al., 1999); grass-roots initiatives as opposed to an imposition from above (Strawn, 1994; Butler et. al., 1999); participants' capability to make choices and influence outcomes (Warburton, 1998); shared decision making at all levels of the programs (setting goals, formulating policies, planning, implementing) (Strawn, 1994; Butler et al., 1999); and, equitably-shared benefits from development as a result of participation (Zetter & Hamza, 1998). It is perceived as an integral means to promote sustainability which according to Timothy & Tosun (2003) allows host communities to free themselves from the hegemonic grasp of outside tour operators and powerful leaders at the national level, and is therefore more sustainable than traditional approach (Bhatta,2014).

Since local people are the key tourism products as well as key receiver of impacts; tourism development should not exploit community resources for its own benefit without considering their needs, concerns and interest. The goals and desires of host communities for tourism development therefore should always be at forefront of development (Murphy, 1985, Inskip, 1991). It indeed demands genuine ideas, inputs and inclusive participation of local people. Certainly, debate of participation is not on whether the communities should be involved in ecotourism planning and development, but more on who should be involved, how and when (Wisansing, 2008).One of the widely cited models of participation is the Arnstein's (1969) Ladder of Citizen Participation, which reveals "participation is the redistribution of power that enables the have-not citizens, presently excluded from the political and economic-processes, to be deliberately included in the future". She presented different degrees of participation varied according to situations ranging from 'manipulation' as the lowest rung that represents the least citizen power to the highest rung 'citizen control' that represents total citizen control over decision making. The ladder conveys that community participation evolves from a tokenistic and therapeutic manipulation at the lower end to a more positive empowerment at the upper end where resource control and decision making are transferred to local interests(Bhatta, 2014).Pretty (1995) also developed a typology of public participation in development programs, and identified seven levels of participation, with manipulative participation at one end of the spectrum and self-mobilization at the other. Participation ranges from passive participation where local community are told

what development project is proceeding to the self-mobilization or active participation where people take initiatives that are independent of external institutions (Scheyvens, 2002; Telfer, 2003). It can be interpreted as passive participation versus active participation dichotomy. Pretty (1995) has underlined the significance of power relationships in tourism development projects. Although, there are several techniques of community participation; emphasis always need to be given to the “participation as a process” that is underpinned by a philosophy of empowerment, equity, trust and learning; but not as a “tool-kit approach” (Reed, 2008).

Bramwell and Sharman (2000) also highlighted three sets of issues which affect community participation in tourism planning, such as (i) scope of community participation; (ii) intensity of participation by the community; and (iii) degree to which consensus emerges among community members. It makes clear on several challenges of participation. Firstly, true participation cannot be achieved if the range of participants is not adequately represented of entire population. Secondly, whether or not adequate representatives from various groups included in planning and policy making process. Thirdly, whether the degree to which participants involve is open and meaningful dialogue. Finally, how often the community representatives are included in dialogue and meetings (Timothy & Tosun, 2003). Nevertheless, several techniques and typologies of community participation are discussed in the literature; the core objective is to empower local communities by distributing power to different groups of people including the women, youths and other socially disadvantaged groups.

## **2.2 Community Participation to Community Empowerment for Sustainable Ecotourism Planning**

Local community participation in ecotourism planning is vital to promote the goals of conservation and sustainable community development (Chan and Bhatta, 2013). It would be insignificant if the members of local community do not have a high degree of control over ecotourism activities (Ceballos-Lascurain, 1996) or it cannot meet the needs of the host population in terms of improved living standards, both in the short and long term (Cater, 1993). It arguably suggests that not only active participation, but the empowerment of local community is crucial in the planning process (Friedman, 1992; Scheyvens, 1999; Bhatta, 2014). Local community needs to be empowered to decide what forms of tourism facilities they want to be developed in their respective communities, and how tourism costs and benefits are to be shared among different stakeholders (Akama, 1996).

With regard to rural settlements, community-based approach to ecotourism is supposed to meet the needs of rural people as well as improving their livelihood. Empowerment of local community is therefore become a key concern of ecotourism planning specifically to contribute towards sustainable development (Bhatta, 2014). Since diverse group of people with varied interest involve in ecotourism development; it sometimes become hard to come up with a shared developmental goal among the stakeholders having different interest and power (Chan & Bhatta, 2013). Kreisberg (1992) stressed that power exists within the relationship between people and groups of people, whereby Shragge (1993) viewed empowerment as a process that involves not only personal change as individuals take actions on their own behalf but also changing power relations between individual groups and social institutions. Empowerment of communities and their inclusive participation is therefore a useful tool to reduce unbalanced development (Wisansing, 2008), and the prerequisite to promote sustainability (Woodley, 1993 cited in Timothy & Tosun, 2003).

Timothy (1999) suggested that participatory tourism can be viewed in at least two ways: (i) public participation in decision-making, such as by empowering residents to define their own goals for development, and encouraging them to cooperate with other stakeholders to promote development (ii) local involvement in the benefits of tourism such as increasing income, employment and social and cultural services and facilities. Acknowledging the significance of participation and empowerment, on one hand,

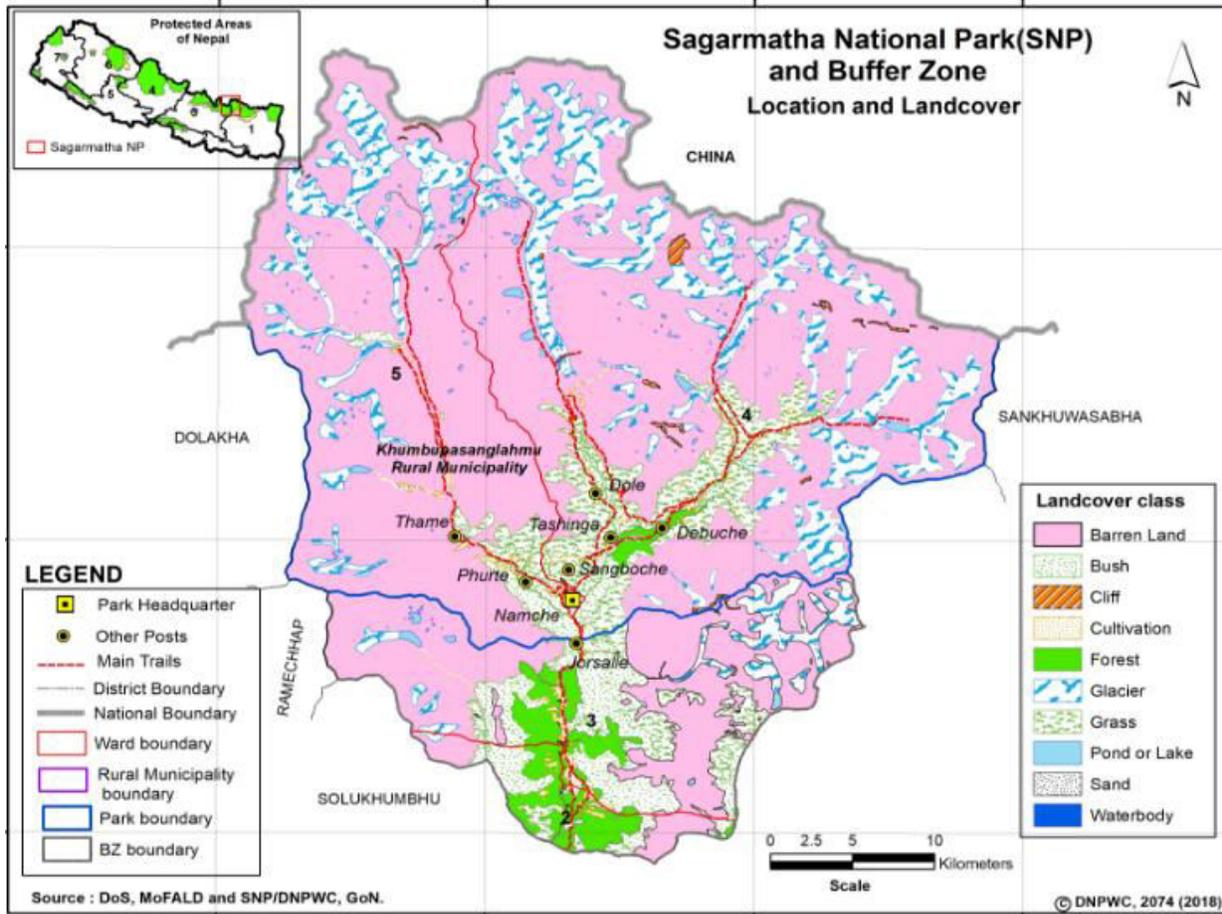
policy makers and responsible institutions need to be proactive to adopt the framework of inclusive participation and empowerment, while, on the other side, local communities also need to play stronger role by developing strong civil society, efficient community organizations as well as effective advocacy forums which can make political and policy changes through their political participation (Chan & Bhatta, 2013; Bhatta, 2014). It helps to prevent narrow special-interest groups from dictating the development process. Therefore, a visible, flexible, and credible decision-making process in which general public has easy access is always required (Huntington & Nelson, 1976; Reed, 2008). On the whole, in ecotourism planning, community participation should be adopted as a fundamental, incremental and continuous process, which expands once communities gain trust, develop mastery, and discover how they can make contribution in decision making (Bhatta, 2014).

### 3.0 Research Methods and Data Collection

This research employs case study as an approach to explore context and role of community participation in sustainable ecotourism planning and its contribution towards sustainability in the settlements around Khumbu region (Sagarmatha National Park). Khumbu region constitutes the most adventurous trekking trails of the world, commonly known as the Everest Trail (ET). It usually starts from the settlement of Lukla (2860m), the gateway to the Mt. Everest, and passes through Namche (3,440m), the tourist hub in the Everest region, and finally to the Mt. Everest base camp (5364m) and the peak (8848m). As a main access to Sagarmatha National Park (Khumbu region), the Lukla-Namche corridor is the most heavily used route. A total of 1619 households consisting of 7745 individuals now live in more than 20 settlements within 1148 km<sup>2</sup> of the park including 275 km<sup>2</sup> of adjacent buffer zone (Silwal et al. 2022). The *Sherpa* people are the major ethnic group in the region (90% of the resident population), whereby *Tamang*, *Magar*, *Rai*, *Chhetri*, *Damai*, *Kami*, and *Gurung* constitute the other ethnic minorities (10%). In recent years, increasing number of *Sherpa* and non-*Sherpa* renters seasonally inhibited the region typically to work in tourism sector (Spoon, 2011).

The settlements along the Everest Trail (ET) such as Lukla, Chheplung, Ghat, Phakding, Monjo, Namche, and Tengboche were selected for empirical investigation. These settlements along the trail have been transformed from the agrarian economic base to the tourism-oriented service based economy with significant changes in their local economy, resources and socio-cultural attributes. The context and role of community participation in ecotourism development and planning in the Khumbu region has been examined empirically with regard to local perceptions towards community participation in preparing tourism plans, policies and implementation of tourism development activities in their settlements. More specifically it is examined with regard to (i) governance and dynamics of community participation in ecotourism planning; (ii) effectiveness of parks authority in fulfilling local needs; (iii) community involvement in the preparation of plans and policies; (iv) level and means of community participation in ecotourism planning; (v) community participation in skill development trainings and educational awareness programs; and (vi) capacity of local community to participate in the planning process, and perceptions towards future tourism development.

Figure 1: Study Area (Sagarmatha National Park and Buffer Zone)



To understand local context of the study area, an in-depth field survey was conducted during September to November 2012, the peak seasons for tourists in the Everest region. In addition, a field visit was again conducted on September 2015 and October 2019 to explore changes and context of local community participation in ecotourism development in the settlements. Due to heterogeneity of the activities the households are engaged in, a stratified random sampling was considered appropriate to explore community views towards community participation. During the selection of survey unit, stratification criteria such as location of households, type of enterprises, use of the buildings, and the households' activities were used. Considering the spatial context, households were selected from the major trail (MT) as well as from off-the major trail (OT), the branch streets in the settlement. These were selected as survey unit through systematic and stratified random sampling. The approximate distance of a peripheral household from main trail is supposed to be 500 meters (maximum). Altogether 195 households were surveyed, of which 70.3 % (n=137) are living along major trail (most of the households in Lukla and Namche belong to this group), and 29.7% (n=58) are living off-the major trail (OT). Majority of respondents depend on tourism either fully (74.4%) or partially (20%). In addition to spatial location, type of use of the buildings and the engagement of households in specific activities were considered as criteria for selecting household as survey unit. Attempts were made to seek maximum responses from different group of people engaged in different types of activities. The selection of households was conducted in a proportional manner such as sample size covers at least 20% of the total strata that helped to validate the survey process a reliable and justifiable. Multiple methods of data collection including structured questionnaire survey with households (n=195), semi-structured interview with key informants (n=10), participant observation, informal discussion, and documentation analysis was

employed for empirical investigation. The set of questionnaires were designed with open and close ended questions that provided respondents an opportunity to express their opinions and suggestions.

#### **4.0 Results and Discussion**

The theoretical review highlighted that local communities are largely influenced by the process of ecotourism planning and the governance approach adopted in the destinations. The effectiveness of ecotourism plans and policies to maximize community benefits depend largely on how effectively ecotourism has been planned and managed with active involvement of local communities. In this regard, it is obvious that impacts of ecotourism development are the output of the planning and governance process adopted in the Sagarmatha National Park, which would have been influenced by the plans and policies adopted over the years (Bhatta, 2014). Since inclusive participation of local communities in the planning process is crucial to achieve sustainability in tourism and community development; following sections critically examine the context of community participation in the Khumbu settlements.

#### **4.1 Community Participation in Ecotourism Planning**

Since the establishment of Sagarmatha National Park, community involvement in ecotourism development and natural resource management remains as one of the key priorities of the park plans and policies (Bhatta, 2014). For example, the Sagarmatha National Park Management Plan (SNPMP) 1981 stressed on significance and need of community involvement in the management of park resources. It was further highlighted with the adoption of Buffer Zone approach to the national park in 2002. Acknowledging the potential conflicts between park authority and local communities, the Buffer Zone Management Plan 2004 stressed on the decentralization of power, and adoption of bottom-up planning approach through institutionalizing community institutions and providing them responsibility of planning and management of tourism, local resources and heritage conservation (Bhatta, 2014). The Sagarmatha National Park Management and Tourism Plan (SNPMTP) 2007-2012 and other subsequent plans further underlined the enhancement of community capacity and their empowerment to make them able to actively participate in the planning and decision-making process. It also explicitly highlights on equitable sharing of park revenue among local communities.

Various research and past experiences also suggest that the goals of conservation and community development could be achieved only through local participation, social inclusion, and their engagement in decision-making processes (Brandon & Wells, 1992). Realizing the pressing need of community participation, the management approach to Buffer Zone was designed as a shared-governance between park authority and local communities whereby local residents could participate in the planning process through grass-root community institutions. It is, in fact, a form of decentralized governance aiming to promote conservation, ecotourism and community development at the grassroot level. There exist three tiers of community-based organizations (CBOs) strongly connected with each other, such as i) Buffer Zone User Groups (BZUGs) at the settlement level; ii) Buffer Zone User Committees (BZUCs) at the sector level; and iii) Buffer Zone Management Committee (BZMC) at the park level (DNPWC, 1999; GON, 1996; SNP, 2016). At ward level, each BZUG is the smallest governing unit of Buffer Zone institution. Each household of the ward become user member of the BZUG. The Chief Conservation Officer of the park is the main authority to approve and implement the BZMC's decisions, such as to call meetings of the BZMC; implement meeting outcomes; prepare and submit five year buffer zone management plans and annual work plans; and report to the government of Nepal. Empowered by the Buffer Zone Regulations and the Guidelines, the Chief Conservation Officer has the responsibility to monitor and supervise the role of the buffer zone institutions (Bhatta, 2014).

In cooperation with Buffer Zone institutions, a number of other community organizations such as Clubs, Mother's Groups, Monastery Management Committees, Hotel Association, and Tourism Entrepreneurs also

participate in the tourism and community development activities. Since, tourism is a major component of local livelihoods, and it could provide both benefits as well as costs at the destinations; several community organizations have essentially considered tourism as one of their key priorities. The park authority, since the introduction of buffer zone area, plows back 30- 50 percent of its revenue to the buffer zone institutions. The community development activities under the Buffer Zone management program would be uncertain in the absence of tourism, because tourist entry fee is the major source of income for the park authority (Jana & Paudel, 2010; Sherpa, 2013). As multiple institutions have been involved in the planning of ecotourism and community development activities, the cooperation and collaboration between and within different levels of organizations along with inclusive community participation is crucial for enhancing good governance in the different levels. It needs linking organizations horizontally across space and vertically across levels of organizations (Ostrom et.al, 2002). The active involvement of local people in ecotourism planning through different layers of organizations is crucial for maximizing community benefits, while maintaining cultural integrity and sustaining biodiversity. Ecotourism needs to be developed in harmony with needs and aspirations of destination communities so that it would not adversely affect local culture, tradition, heritage and environment (Chan & Bhatta, 2013, Bhatta, 2014). Additionally, inclusive participation of residents in the sharing of tourism benefits through their integration in tourism entrepreneurial activities, employment opportunities, management of trekking and mountaineering expeditions, and decision-making process is crucial to promote sustainability of ecotourism and the communities. In this context, effectiveness of tourism plans, policies, and institutions (Park Authority) in addressing local needs, and ensuring their genuine participation in sharing of tourism benefits and decision-making process has been explored critically through local community perspective.

#### **4.1.1 Effectiveness of park authority in fulfilling local needs**

There has been a significant shift in the management plans and policies of SNP specifically from the protectionist approach adopted in 1976 to the inclusive Buffer Zone model in 2002; however the grass-root communities yet criticize that the Park authority has not fulfilled their genuine needs but restricted residents from using natural resources. When asked about the effectiveness of PA administration in addressing local needs, significant proportion of respondents in ET (31.8%) perceived the effectiveness of Park authority as 'low'. Whereas slightly less than half of the respondents (46.7%) perceived it as 'average', and only 21.5% perceived as 'good'. The respondents in MT (24.8%) are more likely positive towards effectiveness of park administration than that of OT (13.8%). Slightly less than half of the respondents in OT (48.3%) and MT (46%) perceived as 'average' while significant proportion in both areas (38% in OT, and 29.2% in MT) perceived it as 'low'. Essentially, resident's perceptions such as 'average', and 'low' towards effectiveness of park administration signifies their growing dissatisfaction with park authority.

The survey results revealed that local people were skeptical about the role of BZMC in fulfilling local needs. Although BZUGs and BZUCs are solely represented by local residents, and have freedom to prepare their plans and budget program; the BZMC at the park headquarter review and decide on the plans and programs. Therefore, genuine needs and interests of grass-root communities which are included in their plans would be influenced by the interest of members of the BZMC. Local representatives at the BZMC have also no rights to sign financial accounts and approve income and expenditure documents (Sherpa, 2008; Paudel et. al., 2011, Sherpa 2013). The Chief Conservation Officer as an ex-officio member secretary of the BZMC takes the major decision making authority (Jana, & Paudel, 2010). The politics and power among the different levels of institutions including local community organizations, and within the members of each institutions particularly to influence the plans and projects for their benefits would have also made local residents frustrating about the park authority and BZMC. It is true that most of these institutions are operated with the interests of tourism entrepreneurs (hoteliers, owners of lodges, and restaurants, and mountaineering/trekking related entrepreneurs) who are the local elites and have occupied the executive

position in local institutions. Therefore, the park authority and BZMC although aim to address needs and aspirations of local communities; final decision on the plans, policies and budget allocation is largely influenced by the interest of Chief Conservation Officer of the Park, the executive member of the BZMC, and local elites rather than grass-root impoverished communities. Their interests, attitudes, and behavior towards local communities largely influence the ecotourism and community development activities.

Local residents perceived that the Buffer Zone Institutions are not autonomous. Moreover, there is lack of trust between park authority, executive members of the BZMC and local residents. It is not only because of the different attitudes and interests of the Chief Conservation Officer and the park staff; local elites, entrepreneurs, and other stakeholders are also equally responsible. The politics, power, and diverse interest of the stakeholders play crucial role in the development process. With these diverse reasons, majority of respondents thus believed that the Park authority and the BZMC are not able to effectively address the needs and interests of local people. So, majority of them rated the effectiveness of Park authority as 'low' and 'average', with only small proportion rated it as 'good'.

#### **4.1.2 Community involvement in the preparation of plans and policies**

One of the most pressing concerns of ecotourism development is to adopt an inclusive approach to community participation in the preparation of plans, policies, and projects specifically from early stage (i.e. identification of problems) to the implementation and monitoring process (Bhatta,2014). The inclusive and genuine participation of local residents throughout the process of development would help addressing needs and interests of local communities, and enhance their feeling of ownership. It would also motivate them become more responsible towards implementation and monitoring of the plans and policies(Bhatta,2014). In the Everest region, although the buffer zone management approach is portrayed as a community-based management of natural resources, ecotourism and community development; nearly half of the respondents (49.7%) acknowledged that they have not been invited to participate in the preparation of plans and policies initiated by the Park authority (SNP, BZMC, BZUCs, BZUGs). Research findings also revealed that higher proportions of respondents in MT (53.3%) were invited in the plan- making process than that of OT (43.1%). Essentially, residents along MT (tourism entrepreneurs and trekking/mountaineering professionals) were more likely to participate in the planning process than the residents in OT (porters, farmers, and other less affluent people). Tourism planning in the Everest region is therefore largely influenced by the interest and power of the tourism entrepreneurs (owners of the lodges, hotels, restaurants, and other tourism-related enterprises) and mountaineering professionals.

Additionally, although community participation is considered as key objectives of the Buffer Zone Management Plan; the Park authority and BZMC have been playing dominant role in decision-making process. The grass-root communities usually participate in the planning process through local level institutions such as BZUCs and BZUGs; final decision-making and approval of the plans and policies on ecotourism and conservationis yet done by the Chief Conservation Officer of the park. Certainly, local Sherpas pose certain degree of control on the management of resources and planning of ecotourism through local community institutions; it is crucial to note that these grass-root organizations yet largely operate with support and guidance of BZMC and Park authority that have direct influence on local development process. The community participation where decisions are already described by the authority and advice is received from residents but not acted upon can be equated as a form of tokenism in community participation (Arnstein, 1969; Hall, 2003). The research findings in ET also revealed that effectiveness of Park authority in addressing local needs in the plans and policies is perceived as 'average' by the majority of respondents (51.8%). Only small proportion of respondents (13.3%) perceived it positively ('good'), while rest (34.9%) perceived negatively. It arguably suggests that genuine needs and voices of local residents have not been addressed by the park authority or BZMC. So, majority of respondents rated its effectiveness as 'average' and 'bad'. The

survey results revealed that interest and voices of entrepreneurs along MT are more likely to be addressed by the Park authority than voices of residents in OT (e.g. farmer and porters). The power holders such as local elites and entrepreneurs often tend to exert influence on the planning and decision-making process than that of less affluent residents.

#### 4.1.3 The level and means of community participation in sustainable ecotourism planning

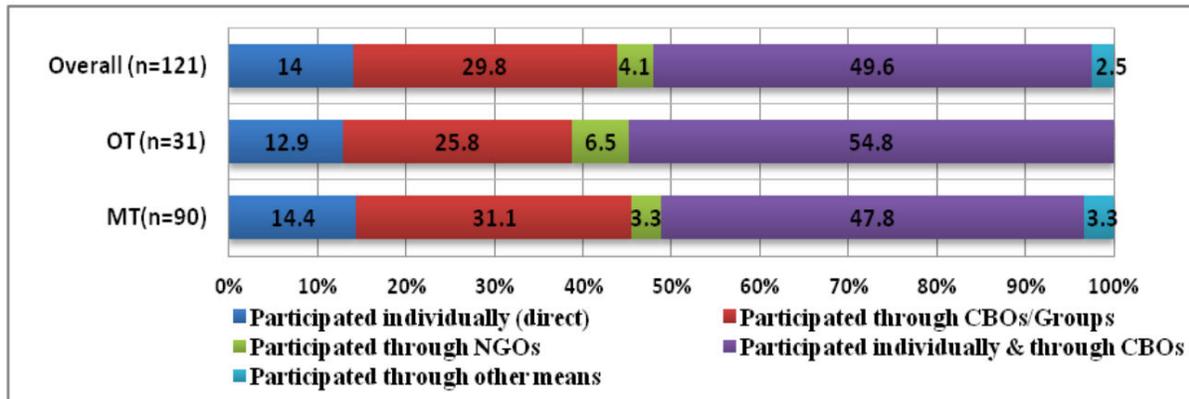
In order to examine the degree of local control and ways of participation in ecotourism development, respondents were asked to explain “which stages they have been participated and how”. About 51% respondents replied that they participated in the stage of ‘developing plans and strategies’, whereby there is minimum participation in the early stage of ‘identification of problems’ and ‘monitoring and evaluation’. Significant proportion of respondents (25.5%) also participated in the implementation of plans and policies. Survey findings revealed that local residents are not participated throughout the process of planning; only small percentage of them participated from early stage of problem identification to implementation, monitoring, and evaluation. The plans and projects on community development in the Buffer Zone area are decided based on the availability of financial resources, usually 30% to 50 % of the park’s annual revenue. In many cases, decisions on the projects are negotiated between BZMC and park authority, although views from the BZUGs and BZUCs are also taken. The priorities of the projects such as which project need to be first designed and implemented is largely influenced by the interests of the executive members of BZMC, Park authority and local elites. The needs and priorities of less affluent and less educated people such as porters, farmers, and low caste minorities as well as non-local entrepreneurs are not often heard with full attention. One of the non-local entrepreneurs in Namche commented that:

*“Buffer Zone Management Committee only listens to the specific section of local Sherpas such as tourism entrepreneurs and political leaders. All the decisions are influenced by the Chairman of the BZMC. His ideas and decisions about ecotourism, conservation and community development are not generally opposed by the local Sherpas. Thus, community participation in Khumbu is mostly related with participation of few tourism entrepreneurs.”*

As noted earlier, politics and power often influence the plans and decision making process. Once the preliminary concept on the project is decided by the BZMC and Park administration, it will be then presented to local residents to seek their views to prepare detail priorities and strategies of the plan. In this stage, local residents specifically the members of grass root-organizations, entrepreneurs, trekking employee, and local leaders usually participate. Essentially, residents participate through community institutions which communicate with BZMC and park authority. Interview with the members of BZMC reveals that park authority usually consults BZMC before allocating budgets, and approving the plans, whereas BZMC also seek suggestions from local community organizations which include representatives of local residents. On the whole, local development projects are initiated and implemented by the BZMC through its subcommittees such as BZUCs, BZUGs, and functional organizations at the local level than solely by the local villagers.

Additionally, local residents also participated in ecotourism development through community organizations such as local Clubs, Mother’s Group, Hotel Association, Monastery Management Committee, Porters Group, and individually (direct participation). Of the total respondents participated in tourism development process (n=121), 14% confessed that they participated individually, whereas 29.8% participated through community organizations and groups, 4.1% through NGOs, and nearly half of them (49.6%) participated through both community organizations(CBOs) and individually (direct). Survey findings also revealed that almost similar proportion of respondents in MT (93.3%) and OT(93.5%) participated through CBOs, individually and both way.

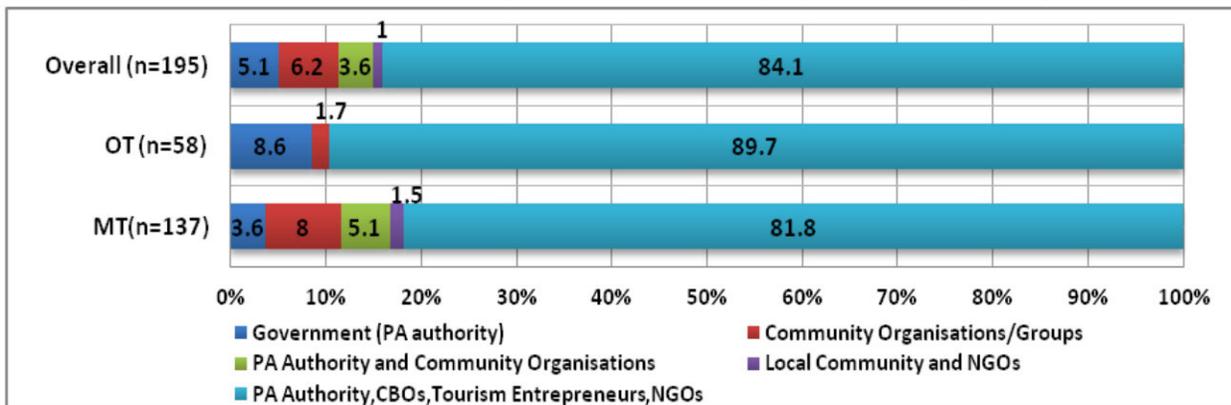
**Figure 2: Means of participation in tourism development activities initiated by Protected Area (PA) authority**



(Source: Authors Survey)

Respondents were also asked to express their views about the most important and responsible stakeholders for encouraging community participation in ecotourism development process. Interestingly, majority of them (84.1%) believed that all the stakeholders including Park authority/BZMC, local community organizations, NGOs and tourism entrepreneurs are the important stakeholders for ecotourism planning and each should be equally responsible for encouraging inclusive participation of local residents (Chan & Bhatta,2013; Bhatta, 2014).

**Figure 3: Who do you think is the most responsible for encouraging community participation?**



(Source: Authors Survey)

#### 4.1.4 Community participation in skill development trainings and educational awareness programs

Survey results suggested that most of residents in OT lack skills, knowledge, and education about ecotourism entrepreneurship, hospitality, and its proper management. There is also lack of skill development trainings and educational awareness to the residents. Trainings and educational awareness are crucial to enhance their capacity and integration in tourism entrepreneurial activities and motivate them towards appropriate practice of ecotourism, and conservation. One of the key concerns in the buffer zone is to motivate young people to strive for vocational trainings and education as many of them leave school and choose trekking guide as their profession. Although, tourism plans and policies, and buffer zone management plan have focused on skill development trainings and awareness to local communities; only some have been benefited

from these programs (Bhatta, 2014). Local residents commented that trainings were conducted occasionally by the organizations; however in the recent years, no trainings have been provided to local residents. Survey results showed that only small proportion of respondents (16.4%) participated in skill development trainings and educational programs, whereas majority (83.6%) was not involved. Comparatively, higher proportion of respondents in MT (19.7%) participated in these programs than that of OT (8.6%). It suggests that tourism entrepreneurs in MT were more likely to benefit from the trainings than residents in OT.

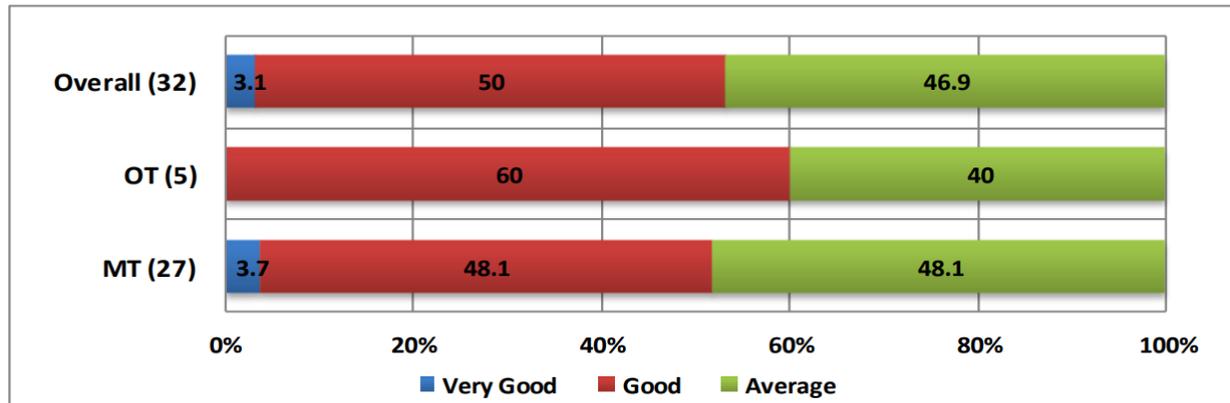
**Table 1: Participation in skill development trainings and educational programs**

Have you ever been invited to participate in skill development trainings or educational programs?	Along the Trail (MT)		Off-the Trail (OT)		Overall (MT+OT)	
	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)	No. of respondents	Percentage (%)	No. of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Yes	27	19.7	5	8.6	32	16.4
No	110	80.3	53	91.4	163	83.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>137</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>195</b>	<b>100</b>

(Source: Author’s survey)

Residents who participated in skill development activities were further asked to express their views about the effectiveness of skill development trainings and educational activities. It is interesting that most of them viewed the programs effective in satisfying local needs. For example, of the total respondents (n=32), over half of them (53.1%) perceived the programs positively (very good & good), while rest (46.9%) perceived ‘average’. Since participation of residents in skill development trainings seems limited, emphasis need to be given to provide trainings to the maximum number of local residents so that they could be well integrated into tourism industry (Chan & Bhatta, 2013).

**Figure 4: Effectiveness of skill development trainings and educational programs**



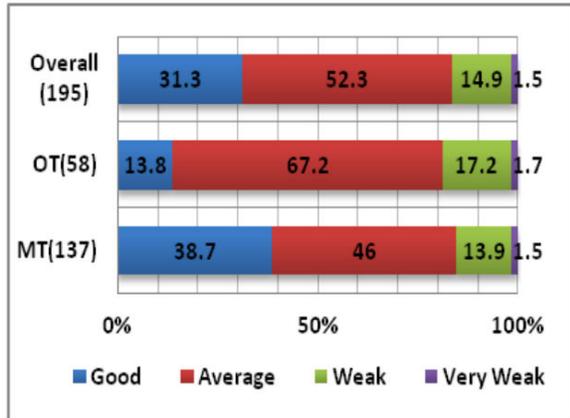
(Source: Author’s Survey)

#### 4.1.5 Capacity of local community to participate in the planning process, and perceptions towards future tourism development

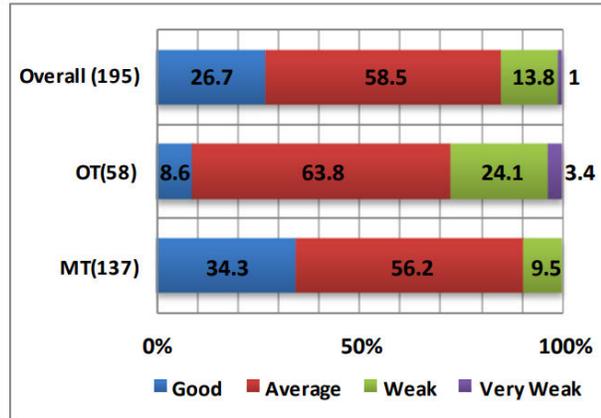
One of the crucial concerns of ecotourism planning is to enhance capacity and effectiveness of local residents to participate in and influence tourism planning and decision-making process (Bhatta, 2014). Local communities specifically the underprivileged people are not usually able to raise their voices properly resulting into the less influence in the planning process. In case of Khumbu settlements, survey results

demonstrate that only specific group of local community (i.e. local elites), to some extent, is able to effectively participate in the tourism planning process. For example, only less than one third of respondents (31.3%) believed that effectiveness of local people towards influencing planning process is 'good', whereas majority (52.3%) perceived it as 'average', and rest (16.4%) perceived as 'weak' and 'very weak'.

**Figure 5: Effectiveness of local residents to influence tourism decision-making process**



**Figure 6: Capacity of local residents to integrate into tourism entrepreneurial activities**



(Source: Author's Survey)

It seems that higher proportion of respondents in MT (38.7%) perceived the effectiveness of local people as 'good' than that of OT (13.8%). It suggests that tourism planning in Khumbu settlements is largely influenced by the residents along MT. In both areas, majority perceived the effectiveness of local people as 'average' (46% in MT & 67.2% in OT), and rest (19.4% in MT, & 18.9% in OT) perceived as 'weak'. Respondents were further asked to express their views about the local capacity to integrate into tourism entrepreneurial activities. Majority of them (58.5%) confessed that their capacity is average, while 26.7% believed its good, and rest (14.8%) perceived as weak. Respondents in MT were more likely positive towards capacity of local community than that of OT. Majority of respondents in MT are the entrepreneurs who are usually more capable to integrate into tourism development activities than porters, farmers, and unskilled residents from OT. Community perceptions revealed that there are several weaknesses in the planning, governance, and development of ecotourism. Decisions are largely influenced by the local elites pushing poorer communities away from active participation, and further into the poverty (Bhatta, 2014). In the current governance system, neither the equitable benefits nor the inclusive participation of local people is achieved. With regard to future tourism development and its effects on local communities, only 17.4% respondents perceived that its effects would be 'good', while over half of the respondents perceived (53.3%) as average, and rest perceived negatively (24.1% as weak & 5.1% as very weak).

### 5.0 Conclusion

Based on in-depth study of context of community participation and diverse issues of sustainable ecotourism planning, it is arguably concluded that the current approach of tourism development and planning does not satisfy the core objectives of ecotourism development, i.e. inclusive community participation in the planning process. It is arguably concluded that context of community participation in the planning and management of sustainable ecotourism in the Khumbu settlements is more like a tokenistic approach rather than inclusive and community controlled approach. The peripheral residents (OT) seem less active in tourism development than the residents along major trail (MT). Interview with key informants also revealed that decisions about tourism policies and conservation are mostly taken by the park authority and BZMC where tourism entrepreneurs often tend to influence the decisions. The key factors for lower participation of local residents

especially the farmers, porters, and underprivileged residents are reported as the lack of financial resources, knowledge and skills about tourism services, hospitality, and business activities as well as lack of support from Park authority and stakeholders so that it can promote sustainable development goals. It is therefore crucial to empower and enhance community capacity to integrate them into tourism entrepreneurial activities (Chan & Bhatta, 2013; Bhatta, 2014). More specifically, inclusive community participation in the planning process and sharing of benefits where all the sections of communities would have equal chances to raise their voices that would be properly addressed in the plans and policies is critical to promote sustainability of ecotourism development.

## 6.0 References

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