LANDSCAPE MAPPING REPORT ON CHILD-LED AND CHILD-CENTRIC PLATFORMS IN BANGLADESH AND NEPAL

Children Know Better Project

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Landscape Mapping Report on Child-Led and Child-Centric Platforms in Bangladesh and Nepal.

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INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVE

Children's participation is internationally recognised as a fundamental human right under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which states that children are capable of forming their own views have the right to express them freely in all matters affecting them, with their opinions given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.[1] Since the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of the Child, the concept of children's right to participation has been adopted in laws, practices and public discussions as well as the lives of families worldwide.[2] Research demonstrates that meaningful child participation contributes not only to better policy outcomes but also to children's empowerment, protection, and social inclusion.[3]

As of 2023, South Asia was home to over 625 million children, accounting for slightly over a quarter of the world's child population.[4] Bangladesh and Nepal have sizeable youth populations, with children making up over 30% of their national populations,[5] making child participation critical to their national development agendas.

Bangladesh has made efforts to institutionalise child participation as a fundamental component of its national child rights agenda. Central to this commitment is the National Children Policy adopted in 2011[6] and the 8th Five Year Plan for 2021-2025,[7] which endorses children's right to be heard and actively engage in decisions affecting their lives. The National Children Policy lays the groundwork for integrating children's voices into protection, education, health, and development programmes.[8] It encourages their participation not only in formal structures but also within families and communities, recognising children's potential to meaningfully contribute to society.[9]

Similarly, Nepal has made explicit policy provisions for child participation, grounded in its Constitution (Article 39 (3)) and Act Relating to Children (Article 8), which guarantee child rights and participation in decision-making processes.[10] Building on this foundation, the government introduced the National Child Friendly Local Governance forum in 2017[11] with national strategies and operational guidelines, which guides its implementation across all levels of government.

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[1] United Nations. (1989). Convention on the Rights of the Child.
[2] Gal, T., & Duramy, B. F. (2015). Enhancing capacities for child participation: Introduction. In T. Gal & B. Duramy (Eds.), *International perspectives and empirical findings on child participation: From social exclusion to child-inclusive policies* (pp. 1–6). Oxford University Press.
[3] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2024). What Does Child Empowerment Mean Today?
[4] UNICEF. (2023)
[5] UNICEF. (2024). The state of the World's Children 2024: Demographics.
[6] Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs. Bangladesh National Children Policy (2011).
[7] UPR Info. 4th cycle of Universal Periodic Review (UPR), Child Rights Governance Factsheet.
[8] Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, Ministry of Women and Children Affairs. Bangladesh National Children Policy (2011).
[9] *Ibid.*
[10] Government of Nepal. (2015). Constitution of Nepal.
[11] Government of Nepal. 2021. Child-Friendly Local Governance (CFLG): Operational Guideline.

While child participation is increasingly recognised and institutionalised in both countries, the structures, levels of engagements, and thematic focus areas including protection concerns, particularly child sexual exploitation and abuse, remain uneven and underexplored. This mapping takes children's right to participation a step further by focusing on child-led and child-centric platforms, where children are not merely beneficiaries or informants but are recognised as active agents of change. Such platforms prioritise children's agencies, enabling them to meaningfully influence decision-making processes, co-create agendas, and hold duty bearers accountable. Crucially, they provide safe, inclusive, and empowering environments where children can express their views freely and influence outcomes that affect their lives. By examining the many dimensions of child participation, this analysis provides a holistic understanding of current efforts and gaps to children's agency, laying the groundwork to identify opportunities to strengthen child participation as a means to advance child rights in Bangladesh and Nepal.

OBJECTIVE AND METHODOLOGY

This landscape mapping draws on two complementary methods: a structured literature review and targeted key informant interviews. Together, these approaches aimed to identify currently active child-led and child-centric platforms in Bangladesh and Nepal, to understand their structure, reach, and influence in each country. By examining these dimensions, the analysis aims to provide a more holistic understanding of ongoing practices and gaps relevant to child participation and child protection in the country. These outcomes will help identify opportunities to strengthen child participation as a pathway to advancing child rights in both countries.

Literature review

The literature review formed the foundation of the mapping and focused exclusively on platforms that are active in countries as of 2025. Past or discontinued initiatives were excluded. This review involved the analysis of a range of sources including grey literature (such as reports from non-governmental organisations, evaluations, and project documentation), government publications, and selected academic or donor resources where relevant. The review was conducted between May to July 2025.

The review process began by developing clear inclusion and exclusion criteria, followed by an exhaustive search for relevant documentation. Identified materials were reviewed and synthesised using a summary table, allowing for comparison of platform types, levels and types of child leadership or involvement, links to formal child protection systems, and mechanisms. Relevant country backgrounds were added to contextualise the findings. In total, eight platforms in Bangladesh and seven in Nepal met the criteria and were included in the analysis.

Key informant interviews

Interviews with five key informants from Nepal and three from Bangladesh supplement and validate findings from the desk review. The interviews aimed to provide deeper insight into how current platforms operate in practice, the enablers and barriers to child participation, and the wider policy or programmatic environment.

Informants were identified based on their experience with, or proximity to, child-led or child-centric platforms. After identifying potential participants, interview invitations were sent out along with relevant background information about the project. A semi-structured interview guide was used to maintain consistency while allowing space for contextual depth. All interviews were conducted between July and August 2025, using a combination of online and in-person formats. To ensure ethical standards, participation was voluntary, and informed consent was sought from all interviewees. Interviews were recorded and thematically analysed to draw out cross-cutting insights.

This analysis is not an evaluation of the whole child-led or child-centric platforms operating in Bangladesh and Nepal, nor does it aim to document all good practices and gaps. It is based on the information from above-mentioned methods and attempted to identify existing gaps for further efforts.

COUNTRY ANALYSIS: BANGLADESH

OVERVIEW OF THE PLATFORMS

The landscape of child-led and child-centric participation in Bangladesh reflects a growing yet fragmented array of initiatives. These platforms offer children opportunities to engage in advocacy, social accountability, civic learning, and policy dialogue. While not all platforms directly address child sexual exploitation and abuse, many provide entry points for children to speak out against violations, demand safer environments, and contribute to localised protection solutions. These platforms vary in terms of structure, sustainability, and the depth of child participation, but together they illustrate an expanding awareness of the importance of child agency in development, governance, and in addressing forms of violence that disproportionately affect marginalised children. Based on the analysis of eight selected child-led initiatives, they fall into three overlapping categories:

Student cabinets, child forums and community-based groups

These include school-based child clubs. In 2015, the Bangladesh Government enacted the Student Cabinet programme in secondary schools with aims to practice and develop democratic values among the students.[12] Their role is largely limited to promoting peer education, leadership training, and extracurricular engagement. They offer valuable skill-building opportunities and orientation to democratic practices for children.[13] However, based on the desk research, their integration with local governance structures or influence on policymaking processes is limited. According to the Student Cabinet Manual, cabinet roles include assisting teachers, admissions, and connecting parents[14] but there is no mention of participation in broader local governance or policymaking structures. While they function within the school environment, there's no formal linkage to Union Parishad (the oldest and lowest local government system in Bangladesh), municipal bodies, or national policy channels. Their mandates remain school-centric, not extending influence into policymaking.

Programmes such as Child Forums, Child Space, and Community Journalist Groups led by Action Aid Bangladesh enable children to speak out on local development, child protection, and community issues.[15] These initiatives engage children in leadership, advocacy, and protection activities from

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[12] Directorate of Secondary and Higher Education (DSHE), Ministry of Education, Bangladesh. (2015). Student Cabinet Manual. Dhaka: Ministry of Education.

[13] New Age. (March, 2019). School cabinet elections 2019.

[14] UNESCO. (n.d.). Bangladesh: School leadership. Education Profiles.

[15] Action Aid. Child Participation Protection. Retreived July 10, 2025.

conducting child marriage surveys and organising awareness events to reporting local issues through creative media.[16] Children are trained in journalism, art, leadership, and cultural activism, equipping them with tools to voice concerns and mobilise peers.[17] Additionally, the National Children Task Force, which is a network of trained child rights advocates, leads campaigns, conducts research, and engages in dialogues with decision-makers. These platforms are critical for amplifying the voices of marginalised children, including children from rural areas, ensuring diverse representation. The approach emphasises experiential learning and meaningful participation, where children are not merely beneficiaries but active agents of change within their communities.

Issue-focused and thematic networks

The Youth Led Innovation Lab, jointly organised by Save the Children in Bangladesh and corporate partner BSRM, offered a dynamic, youth-centered space for marginalised children and young people (aged 16-24) in Dhaka, Chattogram, and Satkhira to transform local challenges into sustainable business solutions. From organic poultry production addressing malnutrition in Satkhira to green entrepreneurship in Dhaka and Chattogram, the initiative catalysed youth creativity and connected them with key institutional actors including the Ministry of Youth and Sports and private sector mentors. The process included district-level bootcamps, re-mentoring sessions, and a high-profile final event, underscoring commitment to skill-building and public recognition.

Similarly, the Fund Our Future campaign in Chanpara, held in October 2023, demonstrates how children and youth can lead compelling climate justice advocacy rooted in community realities. Addressing environmental

challenges such as pollution, overcrowding, and lack of infrastructure, local youth mobilised a creative campaign involving a flash mob, climate-themed performances, and a child rights rally. Their campaign messaging focused on the link between climate resilience and child investment and reflected a nuanced understanding of intersectional vulnerabilities and developmental priorities. The campaign fostered broad-based community engagement, with nearly 300 children participating, and conveyed a powerful call to invest in young people for a more sustainable future.

Institutionalised platforms

Child-Friendly Local Governance stands out in Bangladesh as one of the most systematic, local, and rights-based child participation concepts nationwide. It adopts a rights-based approach to ensure children's inclusion in local planning, monitoring, and service delivery processes. It brings child voices into formal local governance structures and is characterised by a bottom-up governance model where children are considered active stakeholders in development planning, implementation, and monitoring. Unlike ad-hoc child participation mechanisms, Child-Friendly Local Governance institutionalises child involvement via *ward shava*[18] (village councils); open budget sessions; school management committees and education watch groups. The Child-Friendly Local Governance is aligned with local government operations under the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act and approved by the Ministry of Local Government Rural Development and Cooperatives.[19]

The Child Parliament in Bangladesh is a nationally recognis[20], mock parliamentary forum where 128 children aged 12-18, two representatives from each of the country's 64 districts convene to debate and present

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[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid.

[18] Save the Children (2023). Child Friendly Local Governance (CFLG) Approach for Education Sector in Bangladesh: Evidence and Opinions.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Save the Children. (2015). Speaking Up for Rights: Child Parliaments.

issues affecting children, making policy recommendations to government officials, development partners, and civil society. The platform was established in 2003 with support from Save the Children. It functions as the advocacy arm of the National Children's Task Force, a government-recognised children's organisation. Its mandate is to influence policymaking in line with the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, and its sessions have led to tangible outcomes, such as amendments in the Child Marriage Restraint Act following discussions in 2014. The most recent, 23rd session in May 2024, carried the theme "Every Child is Precious,[21] will Contribute to Nation's Progress," reinforcing the role of youth as active stakeholders in national development. Mock parliaments have also been identified by key informants as one of the more effective child participation mechanisms. However, they noted that these forums have become less active in recent years compared to their earlier years.

Another parallel initiative is the Generation Parliament (a UNICEF and Bangladesh Debate Federation initiative), which brings 300 young people (aged 13–17) face-to-face with members of Parliament to discuss national priorities, including health, education, disabilities, and climate action.[22] In June 2024, children involved in this initiative participated in the first-ever pre-budget briefing at the national parliament,[23] In February 2024, the Child Rights Advocacy Coalition Bangladesh organised a Mock Universal Periodic Review for children at the International Conference Centre of the Centre on Integrated Rural Development for Asia and the Pacific[24] in Dhaka. This innovative platform introduced children to the international human rights review mechanism and offered them a meaningful opportunity to engage with child rights-related recommendations received

by the Government of Bangladesh during its fourth[25] in November 2023. Out of 300 recommendations, approximately 90 focused on children. A total of 75 children from organisations members of the Child Rights Advocacy Coalition Bangladesh participated as observers, while 26 children took on active roles representing[26] and Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. The mock session provided a space for children to critically reflect on the UPR recommendations and share their views on how these could be adapted and implemented by the government. Participating children underwent a two-day rehearsal to prepare, gaining insights into the purpose of the Universal Periodic Review and the broader child rights monitoring framework.

None of the identified platforms in Bangladesh were established with the explicit aim of preventing child sexual abuse and exploitation because of the sociocultural context and conservative mindsets that stigmatise such issues. However, several initiatives provide indirect but important entry points for addressing protection concerns related to child sexual abuse and exploitation. Some existing platforms create opportunities for children to raise issues linked to their safety and well-being. While direct references to child sexual abuse and exploitation are limited, many platforms focus on interconnected vulnerabilities, such as child marriage, unsafe public spaces, inadequate infrastructure, and climate-related risks, that disproportionately affect marginalised children and may heighten their exposure to sexual violence.

[21] Child Parliament Facebook Page (May, 2024). https://www.facebook.com/childparliament/videos/1129241138300907
[22] Unicef (June, 2024). Children and UNICEF join hands to advocate for a child-centric budget at the National Parliament.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Child Rights Advocacy Coalition in Bangladesh. (February, 2024). Children Mock Universal Periodic Review (UPR).
[25] Ibid.
[26] Ibid.

OWNERSHIP REGARDING EXISTING PLATFORMS

Ownership of child-led and child-centric platforms in Bangladesh is currently shaped by a diverse constellation of entities and professionals, with varying degrees of child involvement and institutional anchoring. Civil society organisations and international development partners remain the primary drivers of most initiatives, designing and facilitating platforms such as the Child Forums, Community Journalist Groups, Youth Innovation Labs, and the Fund Our Future campaign. These initiatives often operate with external funding and technical support, with limited transfer of long-term ownership to local communities or institutions.

However, there are encouraging examples of government co-ownership and institutionalisation. The Student Cabinet programme and Child-Friendly Local Governance are directly embedded within public systems, and the Child Parliament operates with formal recognition from government ministries. In these models, children's participation is increasingly seen as part of broader accountability and governance processes, rather than solely as advocacy or awareness raising exercises.

However, children's actual ownership remains partial. In many cases, children are positioned as participants or implementers rather than co-designers or decision-makers in the creation, direction, and evaluation of these platforms. The meaningful transfer of ownership to children, including budgeting, agenda-setting, and monitoring, remains an evolving challenge. Genuine ownership will require shifting from adult-led facilitation toward child-led governance models with consistent mentorship, accountability safeguards, and sustained support.

> "[…] tokenism is a very prominent phenomenon on such platforms, mostly due to an unequal power dynamic between adults and children. Children are often told what to do, what to say and which issues to talk about rather than discussing with them together."
>
> – Key Informant 2, Bangladesh

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Strengths

Bangladesh presents a mixed landscape in terms of promoting child participation, marked by both commendable strengths and persistent gaps. On the one hand, the country has institutionalised several platforms that reflect a growing commitment to children's civic engagement from school-level initiatives like Student Cabinets to more nationally recognised structures such as the Child Parliament and the Generation Parliament. These initiatives symbolise a positive shift toward recognising children as active stakeholders in governance and development. Structured participation models, such as the Child-Friendly Local Governance framework and the Child Parliament, demonstrate systematic efforts to embed child voices in formal processes. Similarly, thematic and issue-based platforms like the Youth-Led Innovation Lab and the Fund Our Future campaign exhibit creativity, inclusivity, and responsiveness to contemporary challenges, including climate justice and youth entrepreneurship.

These initiatives are further strengthened by the involvement of development partners, civil society, and in some cases, government ministries which indicate a degree of institutional buy-in. For instance, the Mock Universal Periodic Review with children and

Generation Parliament not only introduce children to international and national governance mechanisms but also provide them with practical experience in advocacy and policy dialogue. Moreover, platforms such as the National Children Task Force and child journalist groups have proven effective in amplifying the voices of children from marginalised and rural backgrounds.

Findings from the key informant interviews underscores how child participatory platforms are not only symbolic but have also created meaningful shifts across different levels. According to the informants interviewed, at the individual level, children are increasingly aware of the challenges they face and feel empowered to voice their concerns and take ownership of solutions. At the family level, parents are beginning to consult children more actively, fostering new spaces for dialogue and trust that benefit both children and caregivers. At the community, national, and international levels, children's voices have reached policymaking arenas, influencing agendas at home and abroad. A notable example is the drafting of the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

"[…] tokenism is a very prominent phenomenon on such platforms, mostly due to an unequal power dynamic between adults and children. Children are often told what to do, what to say and which issues to talk about rather than discussing with them together."

– Key Informant 2, Bangladesh

"During the Convention's drafting, our chief executive director, who is also a disabled person, proposed an idea of including a separate clause regarding children with disabilities, which was initially rejected. Later, his ideas were heard. He brought 2 children with disability from Bangladesh to the UN at that time. Those kids shared their justification for why there should be a separate clause regarding children with disabilities. And because of their advocacy in the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, there is a separate section regarding children and disabilities."

– Key Informant 1, Bangladesh

Weaknesses

Despite notable advances, however, several limitations undermine the depth and sustainability of child participation in Bangladesh. A key concern is the project-based nature of many platforms, which are often short-term, geographically limited, and heavily reliant on external funding or facilitation. One-off events, while symbolically significant, frequently lack follow-up mechanisms, long-term impact assessments, or institutional pathways for children's input to be adopted into policy. This limits the continuity and transformative potential of children's contributions. For example, while the Fund Our Future campaign demonstrated strong community engagement, there is little evidence of mechanisms to sustain its momentum or scale its impact beyond the project cycle.

Key informants also highlighted that while funding is important, it is not sufficient on its own. What matters equally is building children's leadership, advocacy, and negotiation skills so that, even when projects end, they are equipped to take on roles independently. According to the informants, this need is particularly pressing for children with disabilities, who are often excluded from capacity development opportunities

The key informants further shared how adult gatekeeping, tokenism, and entrenched sociocultural norms further restrict meaningful participation. Deeply rooted hierarchies around age, gender, disability, ethnicity, and geographical location create unequal opportunities to speak and be heard. Children themselves often fear repercussions for voicing their views or challenging adults:

"Bangladesh is a conservative society. This also affects how children take leadership, talk about their issues, and navigate power dynamics with adults. Children fear they will get in trouble if they speak their minds, and they cannot counter-question adults."

– Key Informant 3, Bangladesh

For girls, these barriers are compounded by cultural restrictions and parental resistance. Many parents discourage daughters from joining clubs, especially in conservative communities, reinforcing male-dominated spaces. As one key informant put it:

"Older boys are more active now. Girls used to be more active on such platforms back in my days almost 30 years back, now we are moving backwards, and people are more conservative which is unfortunate."

–Key Informant 2, Bangladesh

"Girls are more vulnerable and discriminated against than boys. When equipped with the right skills, they do better than boys."

– Key Informant 1, Bangladesh

Another critical weakness identified by the informants is the lack of child protection policies on most platforms. They mentioned that even though the *Children Act* mandates committees from the national to the local level, these structures are often unresponsive or dismissive of children's voices.

"Adult facilitation and domination are very prominent. Children's voices are suppressed, not just on platforms like these but also in families and communities."

– Key Informant 2, Bangladesh

Importantly, informants noted that even successful initiatives like the Child Parliament face limitations in terms of actual policy uptake. While recommendations may be submitted to parliamentary bodies or ministerial task forces, the extent to which these influence laws or programmes is often dependent on external factors such as media attention, political cycles, and advocacy by adult allies. This reflects a broader need for sustained investment in building institutional and adult capacities to facilitate child participation in a meaningful, safe, and empowering way.

FINDINGS FROM FGDS CONDUCTED WITH CHILDREN: BANGLADESH

Children's involvement in protection and safety initiatives in Bangladesh is acknowledged but limited. Schools have sexual harassment committees for anonymous complaints, and children's peer networks provide potential engagement pathways. Participants stressed that activities should be co-designed with children, who understand their safety needs best. Child clubs and youth programs offer participation opportunities, but awareness and access are uneven. Children noted that structured guidance and early decision-making involvement build confidence, knowledge, and risk-management skills.

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COUNTRY ANALYSIS: NEPAL

Nepal presents a vibrant ecosystem of child-led and child-centric platforms, reflecting a strong culture of participation embedded within formal governance mechanisms. Seven active platforms were identified in Nepal that reflect a strong culture of child and youth participation embedded in formal governance mechanisms. These platforms operate across national, provincial, and community levels, demonstrating an ecosystem where children are not just heard but have real influence in shaping policies and programmes that serve them. However, while participation is increasingly valued, the extent to which these platforms meaningfully contribute to preventing child sexual exploitation and abuse remains uneven and insufficiently documented.

OVERVIEW OF THE PLATFORMS

The child-led and child-centric participation landscape in Nepal is characterised by a dynamic mix of initiatives, providing children with opportunities to engage in governance, community development, and advocacy. Broadly, these platforms fall into four overlapping categories:

Child clubs and community-based groups

These are the most widespread and locally rooted forms of participation, often initiated or supported by civil society organisations. Examples include Jagriti Child and Youth

Concern Nepal and Srijanshil Child Club. They operate primarily at the district and community level across districts such as Kathmandu, Lalitpur, Nawalparasi, Rasuwa, Sunsari, and Sindhupalchok. While some are informal, Jagriti Child and Youth Concern Nepal are more structured with defined leadership roles and regular engagements with local councils or development actors.

Their activities broadly focus on promoting child rights, fostering engagements, and addressing key social issues affecting children and their communities. For instance, Jagriti Child and Youth Concern Nepal focuses on child-friendly local governance, youth employment, safer migration, gender equality, child well-being, disaster response, and nutrition, with interventions in rescue, rehabilitation, and reintegration efforts for children affected by child labour. The Srijanshil Child Club, active in Sunsari district, brings together a diverse membership including Dalits, ethnic groups, and other castes, meeting regularly and sustaining its activities through self-raised funds. Furthermore, these clubs often prioritise inclusiveness by targeting marginalised groups such as Dalits, ethnic minorities, and girls, providing a grassroots entry point for civic learning and peer support.

Child clubs provide spaces where children can raise concerns, develop leadership skills, and connect with decision-making structures. Every local government in Nepal has a Child

Rights Committee, which actively involves child club representatives in planning and decision-making processes. At the ward level, multiple child clubs operate alongside municipal-level Child Networks, which receive budget allocations to support events. Ward Child Rights Committees also receive funds and typically include two children (one girl, one boy) alongside adults such as educators, medical personnel, child protection professionals from civil society organisations, the ward president, and a female child focal point from local government. Through these structures, children's voices are linked to formal governance mechanisms, allowing them to raise community and rights-related issues with local authorities.

According to the informants, child clubs also serve as a pipeline for broader advisory committees and leadership platforms. Many children who gain experience in these grassroots spaces go on to integrate child participation into other forums as they mature, demonstrating the long-term impact of these initiatives on fostering civic engagement and empowering the next generation of child leaders.

At the same time, reportedly children's engagement is influenced by family and cultural backgrounds as well as the nature of the activities. Participation tends to be higher when activities align with children's capacities and interests. However, adult facilitation can sometimes overshadow children's contributions, and social norms may discourage engagement. A key informant highlighted the ongoing need to balance adult guidance with genuine child-led participation:

> *"Adult facilitation is more, they overlook children. Some children are discouraged by adults saying children should study at this age; not work for organisations."*
>
> – Key Informant 4, Nepal

Social accountability and dialogue platforms

Platforms like Baal Kachahari and Baal Bhela (children's assembly) provide structured spaces for dialogue between children and local authorities at ward, municipal, and provincial levels. These platforms are often established through NGO-government collaboration and are structured to enable children to raise local issues, propose solutions, and connect children with decision-makers at the municipal or provincial level. Baal Kachahari, which is active in Karnali province, functions as a child- and youth-centred social accountability forum addressing key concerns such as child marriage, violence against children, food security, livelihood, and education, successfully raising awareness among elected representatives and influencing public investment in child welfare.

Baal Bhela, supported by local governments and non-governmental organisations, serves as a child-led consultation platform where many children and adolescents gather, often at ward, municipal, or provincial levels, to voice issues, share experiences, and influence local policies and planning processes. Key informant interviews suggest that Baal Bhela has been a critical space for raising concerns about safety and well-being, including protection from sexual exploitation, although documentation of outcomes remains limited. Aligned with Nepal's Child-Friendly Local Governance framework, Baal Bhela's recommendations often inform local child protection policies, education budgets, WASH services, and investments in child-friendly infrastructure. These platforms emphasise collective action, planning, and resource allocation, sometimes impacting budget decisions related to education, sanitation, and protection services. While not always focused specifically on preventing sexual exploitation, many address related issues like harmful social norms, menstrual hygiene access, and overall child safety, contributing to stronger protection outcomes.

Issue-focused and thematic networks

National and regional platforms such as Green Chakra and activities supported by networks like Family for Every Child, provide specialised advocacy on pressing and often underrepresented issues, including climate change (creating a safer environment for children), sexual and reproductive health rights, mental health, and protection from sexual abuse and exploitation. These spaces adopt creative and inclusive approaches, such as radio advocacy, campaigns, and policy dialogues to amplify the voices of children and young people from marginalised and excluded backgrounds.

Green Chakra, a nationwide initiative supported by CWIN-Nepal, an ECPAT member organisation, focuses on climate change as a child protection issue, advocating for safer environments for children. The platform engages in policy dialogue, lobbying with government institutions, and campaigns that promote the inclusion of child workers, street-connected children, and children from sexual minority groups in environmental and governance initiatives. Furthermore, Family for Every Child, a global network of child protection organisations operating in Nepal, empowers children and youth to become advocates on sensitive topics such as sexuality and relationships education and child sexual abuse and exploitation, mostly focused on boys. In Nepal, the platform has introduced radio and listener clubs as accessible tools to spread awareness, reduce stigma, and reach broader audiences with child-led messaging. While fewer in number, these platforms tend to be more agile and capable of reaching youth excluded from formal participation spaces.

Institutionalised platforms

At the national level, platforms such as the National Child Friendly Local Governance Forum serve as institutional anchors for advancing structured child participation in governance. Established in 2017, the forum is a government-led, multi-stakeholder initiative supported by international NGOs, civil society partners, and local governments. It is dedicated to mainstreaming child-friendly governance across all three levels of government: national, local, and provincial level. The Forum functions as a multi-stakeholder network with over 90 member organisations, including CWIN and Jagriti Child and Youth Concern Nepal.

The Forum is grounded in the Child Friendly Local Governance National Strategy,[27] Operational Guidelines[28] and the Implementation Guideline.[29] Its approach is structured around three key pillars: planning with children, budgeting for children (requiring 10–15% of local capital block grants to be allocated to child-focused sectors), and ensuring meaningful child participation in decision-making. The Forum works closely with municipalities and rural municipalities to institutionalise these practices by integrating children into annual planning cycles, budgeting frameworks, and participatory bodies such as Ward Citizen Forums and local planning committees.

Institutionalisation at the local level is further reinforced through child rights committees, which are legally mandated in every municipality. Each committee includes two child representatives (one girl and one boy), ensuring that children's perspectives are embedded in governance structures. In parallel, every ward and municipality designates a child focal point or child welfare officer to coordinate children's issues across sectors. These officers liaise with schools, civil society organisations, and local authorities, serving as a critical bridge between children and governance systems.

Finally, these institutional mechanisms connect closely with child clubs, which remain the most accessible grassroots-level platforms

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[27] Government of Nepal. (2018). Child Friendly Local Governance: National Strategy.
[28] Government of Nepal. (2011). Child Friendly Local Governance: Operational Guideline.
[29] Government of Nepal. (2021). Child Friendly Local Governance: Implementation Guideline.

for child participation. Together, the Child Friendly Local Governance Forum, child rights committees, focal officers, and child clubs form an interconnected ecosystem that embeds child participation across governance levels. Since its inception, Child Friendly Local Governance has been adopted by hundreds of local units, contributing to increased investments in child protection, education, WASH, and child-sensitive infrastructure, alongside capacity-building for local officials, evidence generation, and national campaigns.

> Notably, none of the identified platforms in Nepal were explicitly established with the primary objective of preventing child sexual exploitation and abuse. One platform was found to have included child sexual abuse, sexuality education, and relationships on their advocacy. Key informant interview explored engagement of several informal child clubs on such sensitive issues. However, not any specific responses were reported on policy/government part. Furthermore, many of the other platforms actively address a range of intersecting risk factors that heighten children's vulnerability to sexual exploitation and abuse. For example, issues such as early marriage, unsafe migration, digital safety, and gender-based violence frequently emerge in agendas and advocacy efforts of several initiatives.

OWNERSHIP REGARDING EXISTING PLATFORMS

In Nepal, child participation platforms are characterised by a mix of civil society, hybrid, and government ownership, though the degree to which these are truly child-led varies considerably. Civil society organisations such as Green Chakra and Family for Every Child

have played a catalytic role in initiating and supporting platforms that prioritise child-led advocacy and inclusion. While these initiatives are often framed as child-led, they also rely heavily on adult facilitation and support by civil society organisations, raising questions about the sustainability and autonomy of such platforms in the long term. Hybrid models, such as Baal Kachahari and Baal Bhela (children's assembly), reflect collaborative efforts between non-governmental organisations and local governments. These offer structured spaces for children under 18 to engage in community dialogues, planning processes, and local decision-making. However, the extent to which children genuinely influence outcomes, rather than participate symbolically, remains unclear and varies by municipality. At the community level, many child clubs such as Jagriti Child and Youth Concern Nepal and Srijanshil Child Club are established through civil society facilitation but gradually transition into locally owned platforms. While some manage to institutionalise participation through school and municipal partnerships, others remain dependent on external resources or lack consistent engagement, especially as children age out or leadership changes.

The National Child Friendly Local Governance Forum stands out as the only government-owned platform explicitly designed to institutionalise child participation. While Child Friendly Local Governance has existed in Nepal since 2007, it was only with the adoption of the National Child Friendly Local Governance Strategy in 2017 that a more formal structure was established. This platform aims to integrate child rights, particularly survival, development, protection, and participation, into the local governance system.

Overall, Nepal presents a rich and diverse ecosystem of child participation platforms, yet questions of sustainability persist, particularly for those reliant on external facilitation. While government ownership has shown promising results, it does not always translate into consistent practice. Key informants stressed that genuine sustainability requires

government commitment to allocate sufficient resources and fully mainstream child participation into its mechanisms. As one key informant noted:

> *"Funding is not always a reason for sustainability for children's clubs; it is a loose network and does not require much funding from external sources. Silent participation can still be continued."*
>
> – Key Informant 3, Nepal

This highlights that sustainability is less about funding and more about institutionalisation and support. At the same time, concerns remain about whether government-led mechanisms ensure meaningful participation or risk becoming merely procedural. Evidence from key informant interviews suggests that most existing platforms are child-centered, reflecting genuine efforts to amplify children's voices. However, they are not yet fully child-led, as adult facilitation and guidance remain significant. While progress has been made compared to the past, further investment in time and resources is needed before these platforms can be considered truly child led. According to key informants, children who do participate often report gaining confidence, awareness, and advocacy skills, though their actual influence over decision-making continues to be uneven.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES

Strengths

One of Nepal's greatest strengths is the advancement in law and policy that explicitly supports child participation. Another major strength is the diversity of participation modalities: radio, accountability forums, school-based clubs, and inclusive youth-led NGOs. These offer both reach and resonance, enabling children from a range of backgrounds to participate in ways that reflect their identities and lived realities. A third strength is the emphasis on equity and inclusion. Platforms like Srijanshil Child Club specifically aim to reach children who are most often excluded by caste, gender, disability, or geography. Green Chakra drives an intersectional focus on child workers, street-connected children, and children from sexual minority groups. Similarly, the Baal Kachahari forums' focus on child marriage and menstrual health directly intersecting gendered vulnerabilities concerning child sexual exploitation and abuse.

Nepal's relatively open and less restrictive cultural norms, especially compared to Bangladesh, also support child participation. Children feel empowered to question adults, express concerns, and advocate for their peers. As one key informant observed:

> *"Child club members are vocal enough to articulate issues very well. In some situations, they are even ready to present themselves as though they are the victim, but they're actually speaking on behalf of their friend. They can easily say, 'What are all the interventions to be done? Who is responsible for what? And what steps should be taken?'"*
>
> – Key Informant 3, Nepal

Weaknesses

Despite these strengths, several structural and operational limitations undermine the full potential of child participation in Nepal. First, safeguarding protocols are inconsistently applied. While most organisations are required to have child protection policies in place, these are often treated as donor compliance tools rather than operational safeguards. A participant noted:

> *"It is now mandatory for every organization to have safeguarding policies or child protection protocols in place, especially for national networks or they do not get membership. National Child Rights Council, a government body, ensures child protection in all spaces in Nepal, but implementation is a huge problem... Monitoring nowadays is more like 'moni-touring,' recreational trips."*
>
> – Key Informant 3, Nepal

> *"It takes at least three to four months to bring them out of their comfort zone and to speak about themselves in this kind of platform. Sometimes it takes longer time to bring girls in."*
>
> – Key Informant 5, Nepal

> *"There are a lot of budgets, part is returned every year but could not organise programs to use up the budget. Very difficult to engage children, especially post-COVID."*
>
> – Key Informant 1, Nepal

Findings from the mapping result suggest that participation remains unevenly distributed across provinces and diverse communities. Platforms are more visible in places like Karnali, while many districts in other provinces remain underserved. Compounding this is the lack of age disaggregation; many initiatives use "children and youth" interchangeably, obscuring the different needs of younger children versus adolescents or young adults above 18. Key informants highlighted gender dynamics in child participation. While girls tend to be more active overall, leadership positions in child clubs are often dominated by boys. Access also varies by school type; public schools, where most girls study, offer greater access to clubs, but preferential treatment by teachers and staff can influence activity levels.

Although ward-level Child Rights Committees include both adults and children, adults are often disengaged, leaving children dependent on volunteers or focal person. Financial management also remains adult-dominated, limiting children's ownership. Children's platforms are heavily influenced by adults, with children's voices collected but not meaningfully considered in decision-making. Key informants reported that children often feel manipulated into saying or doing things they did not plan. Cultural norms also play a role; some communities dismiss children's voices or discourage their participation in favor of focusing solely on education.

Despite ambitious commitments made in international forums (e.g., pledging to make Nepal a "street child free country"), budget allocations have declined in recent years. Implementation is heavily dependent on civil society and, in turn, on international funding.

While child participation at the local level is notable, its impact on national policymaking remains nascent. Most platforms lack systematic monitoring of whether children's input leads to policy or service changes. Children often lack clarity on the purpose of consultations, rarely receive feedback on how their input is used, and face inconsistent opportunities to engage with policymakers. While Baal Kachahari has built in feedback loops, many others focus more on process than outcome, limiting their long-term influence.

While platforms like the National Child Friendly Local Governance Forum offer strategic access to policymaking spaces, they are often hindered by bureaucratic processes and may struggle to sustain meaningful engagement without external support or funding. A qualitative assessment of child friendly local governance practices in Nepal conducted by Jagriti Children and

Youth Concern Nepal observed a significant gap in human resources at the local level in implementing Child Friendly Local Governance. As reported in the assessment, in many cases, local governments and organisations rely heavily on experts from Kathmandu or regional hubs. This dependence has, at times, led to a disconnect between external technical support and the realities of local contexts, raising concerns about flexibility and sustainability

Key informants echoed these challenges, underscoring the need to build and retain local capacity. There is not enough capacity among local stakeholders, governments, schools, and civil society organisations, to facilitate meaningful participation without outside support. Short-term staff assignments within government structures further exacerbate the issue. Officials with limited child rights expertise are often given responsibilities for only a few months before being reassigned to unrelated departments. This rotation disrupts continuity, weakens institutional memory, and limits progress in embedding child participation practices.

"Sometimes, when government staff are involved in the process, it is only for a short time. Due to the shortage of staff with expertise in child rights, the same officials are reassigned to completely different departments after a few months. This creates gaps in sustained and effective work."

– Key Informant 3, Nepal

Although the Child Friendly Local Governance strategy includes provisions for developing local human capital, this aspect has seen limited realisation in practice.[30] Some

governance-related challenges persist in implementing Child Friendly Local Governance more effectively and efficiently. Commonly reported issues include the absence of locally accountable officials, non-democratic and non-inclusive planning processes, limited transparency in government operations, and the absence of elected representatives. However, strong political will and support at the local level have helped make Child Friendly Local Governance implementation more effective and efficient.[31] This phenomenon is reflected in the interview as below,

"[…] exists in name, but it's not accountable/monitored. The policy itself is great, objectives are sound. But when it comes to implementation it's not implemented, problem is accountability."

– Key Informant 2, Nepal

FINDINGS FROM FGDS CONDUCTED WITH CHILDREN: NEPAL

In Nepal, children advocate strongly for inclusion in interventions affecting them, citing their knowledge of personal experiences and safety needs. Schools, child/health/eco clubs, NGO programs, and digital platforms like the Lalitpur app provide some engagement, though opportunities remain limited. Children emphasized joint decision-making with adults, considering age and maturity, which fosters responsibility, leadership, and practical child protection skills. Despite existing structures, participation is inconsistent, highlighting the need for accessible, inclusive platforms that empower children's voices in effective, child-centered interventions.

30 Dharel, M., & Shrestha, B. T. (2018). *Child Friendly Local Governance in Nepal: Practices, learning and opportunities (A qualitative assessment of CFLG practices in Nepal)*. National CFLG Forum; Jagriti Children and Youth Concern Nepal.
31 Dharel, M., & Shrestha, B. T. (2018). *Child Friendly Local Governance in Nepal: Practices, learning and opportunities (A qualitative assessment of CFLG practices in Nepal)*. National CFLG Forum; Jagriti Children and Youth Concern Nepal.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are proposed to strengthen child-led and child-centric participation in Nepal and Bangladesh. They focus on sustainability, inclusiveness, and creating meaningful opportunities for children to engage.

1. Sustainability through government systems

★ Institutionalise child participation within smaller units (provincial, municipal, ward) of local governance structures and move beyond short-term projects

★ Constantly equip local governments with resources, training, and authority to facilitate effective participation.

★ Simplify and integrate scattered child-related policies to make them practical and enforceable.

> *"Too many policies make it difficult to follow and lack accountability,..... scattered everywhere. CFLG in Nepal has 51 indicators, difficult to coordinate, although it is mandatory."*
>
> – Key Informant 4, Nepal

2. Meaningful engagement

★ Design safe, comfortable, and respectful spaces, where children are encouraged to raise their voices without judgement and adult influence and make it truly child led.

> *"Child participatory platforms in Nepal and Bangladesh are child-centric but not child-led, not yet. There is still a conscious effort from adults. They plan and they decide, they take action, and they lead. It takes time and resources to get there. It has been better than before but needs further efforts."*
>
> – Key Informant 5, Nepal and Key Informant 3, Bangladesh

★ Clearly communicate the purpose of consultations, report back on how children's input is used, and be transparent about challenges where inputs cannot be acted on.

★ Provide small incentives (e.g., school kits, umbrellas, bags) to make participation rewarding and valued.

3. Inclusive participation

★ Nepal should fully implement existing inclusion guidelines, while Bangladesh needs a dedicated national policy and plan of action on child participation— backed with clear funding and monitoring.

★ Enough resources and planning to address the special needs and tailored support for especially abled and marginalised children

"Different disabilities require different supports, attention and resources to promote meaningful participation."

– Key Informant 5, Nepal and
Key Informant 3, Bangladesh

4. Foster collaboration and accountability

★ Promote stronger partnerships across NGOs, government, and child-led platforms to reduce duplication, pool resources, and amplify children's voices.

★ Establish regular monitoring and feedback loops that track how children's input influences real decisions and change.

★ Ensure participation processes are backed by thorough risk assessments, safeguarding focal points, and accessible venues (physically, socially, culturally, and religiously).

"Safeguarding and protection should be a full package of services to ensure meaningful, active, and inclusive participation."

– Key Informant 5, Nepal and
Key Informant 3, Bangladesh

Landscape Mapping Report on Child-Led and Child-Centric Platforms in Bangladesh and Nepal

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