

THE EMERGENCE OF ACCESSIBLE TOURISM IN NEPAL

PROSPECTS AND PROBLEMS (Research Brief)



राष्ट्रिय अपाङ्ग महासंघ नेपाल
NFD-N





The Emergence of Accessible Tourism in Nepal Prospects and Problems (The research brief)

Studied and published by

National Federation of the Disabled – Nepal (NFDN)
In partnership with CBM

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First Edition: December 2018
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Acknowledgment

We take pride in presenting this research brief, which gives an overview on prospects and the existing situation of accessible tourism in Nepal. We are highly indebted to **Mr. Obindra Bahadur Chand**, health and social sciences researcher for his tireless efforts in conducting the research and preparing a research into the present form.

We are equally grateful to all participants of the consultation workshop held in March 2018 for providing invaluable insights and sharing their unique experiences. Our special thanks goes to Nepal Tourism Board, Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC), CBM NCO team, some DPOs members and Institute of Disability International (IDI) who persistently contributed their knowledge, expertise and experience to enhance the entire research work. We are confident that without them, it would not be possible to develop this research and writing.

We are thankful to Mr. Manish Prasai- Admin and Program Chief of NFDN, Mr. Bimal Paudel- Program Coordinator of NFDN, Mr. Sagar Prasai-program coordinator of NFDN, Mr. Milan Bagale-Accessibility Specialist (Architect) of NFDN and Mr. Krishna Sunar-Program Officer of CBM International whose valuable support, comments and inputs made the process more effective and produced this comprehensive and meaningful document. Finally, we are equally thankful to NFDN's board and staff member, and all stakeholders whose persistent support has been invaluable for completing the task.

Executive Summary

The tourism sector has witnessed phenomenal growth in terms of the number of tourists traveling across the world in recent decades. It is estimated that annually more than two billions of people travel across the globe. Furthermore, it has become one of the largest sectors in the world economy creating millions of jobs, which directly contributes to the global economy. Despite the significant implication of world tourism in lives of people, the limited available literature explains that accessible and inclusive tourism has not received adequate attention in global tourism until recently even though approximately a billion people worldwide, almost 15 percent of total population, are living with some forms of disabilities and experience different degrees of accessibility problems in their respective societies, either in personal or professional lives. The situation in Nepal is no exception. However, several conventions, guidelines and universal goals including the United Nations Convention on Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD)-2006, Universal Design-For Promoting Universal Accessibility, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been designed primarily for the equal treatment and elimination of the discriminatory practices and making society accessible for all. Tourists with disabilities traveling to Nepal have to face multiple burdens, not all of which may be visible. Close collaboration and coordination between key actors including the Government of Nepal, Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs), and private sector to initiate accessible and inclusive tourism in Nepal have remained a driving force in creating some landmark events in the country in a brief period.

The Government of Nepal along with its implementing and supporting partners has to pay serious attention in developing, designing, and implementing appropriate policies, programmes, and projects to reduce the current challenges prevailing mainly in the tourism sector of Nepal, particularly for developing accessible and inclusive tourism in the country. This then provides opportunities to new segments of the people to travel Nepal independently in a barrier-free environment. This has the potential to contribute to many levels by providing an opportunity to people with disability to exercise their rights enjoyment, entertainment, and involvement in recreational activities, which will ultimately help diversify national economy.

Introduction and Background

Exploring the intersections between tourism and disability in relation to accessible tourism is not only relatively a new phenomenon¹ but also a new research area.^{2,3} However, issues of accessibility, coupled with an aging population, has increasingly become a significant field of study as it has far-reaching implications for both tourism and unique demand and supply of a substantial number of population living across the world.^{4,5} Tourism has witnessed phenomenal growth in terms of the number of tourists traveling across the world in the recent decades. It is estimated that more than two billion people visit each year. Furthermore, it has become one of the largest sectors in the world economy, creating millions of jobs,⁶ which directly contributes to the global economy. Against this backdrop, this research brief attempts to raise the following issues:

- ❖ Can everyone travel within or beyond one's country independently?
- ❖ Is the situation of physical and social environment everywhere and across the sectors similar?
- ❖ Does tourism sector accommodate the needs and requirements of a wide range of people regardless of their physical conditions and age limit?

If not, why is it so?

To answer these questions is not an easy task. It requires an interdisciplinary approach and multi-sectoral effort to address any gaps and eventually make society accessible and inclusive for all, ideally without any barrier, which could influence the functioning of daily lives and be enjoying recreational activities without any burdens.

To begin with, everyone has a right to enjoy leisure and tourism services regardless of their age, sex, gender, caste, and ethnicity, physical or bodily conditions among others. But about a billion of people across the world, approximately 15 percent of total population,⁷ are living with some forms of disabilities and experience different degrees of accessibility challenges in their different aspects of lives, including in tourism sectors such as traveling, visiting various destinations and public places. The situation is more poignant in the developing countries, as they house 80 percent of such population and lack even low or minimum facilities and services for catering to their unique needs and requirements that could make their everyday lives as well as recreational opportunities easier. This will involve facilitating accessibility and promoting their entire well-being and public participation by respecting everyone's needs and requirements. Moreover, the number of this population in the Asia and the Pacific region is about 650 million⁸ while in the case of Nepal, data shows that the population of people with disability comprises less than two percent of the total.⁹ Although the reported data on the population of people with disability is far less than the global average in Nepal, activists working in this area claim that the population of people with disability in Nepal is far more significant in reality. Activists further argue that this is due to mainly two reasons: (a) inappropriate way of collecting data, or methodological flaw, and (b) by virtue of being a historically neglected area with the deeply entrenched social stigma, which discourages bringing disability into public or mainstream.

Globally, people with disability usually face numerous challenges, obstacles in their everyday and professional lives, primarily due to inaccessible environment on the one hand and many other reasons such as social, cultural, and economic on the other side that prevent them to enjoy their lives and participate in different events as equally as their counterparts, i.e. people who do not have disabilities. However, the needs and requirements differ with the nature and type of disability and the socio-cultural and political context in which the individual is living in. Therefore, a blanket approach does not work and it requires a targeted approach to address and accommodate the unique needs and requirements of different categories following the type of disability or disabilities individual living with.

In line with the International Classification of Impairments, Disabilities and Handicaps (WHO-

1980)¹⁰, Nepal has also defined and categorized disability in several categories and sub-categories^{11,12,13} so as to include every possible type within the umbrella.

Addressing their needs would contribute in fulfilling the requirements of individuals living with certain bodily conditions and play a vital role in respecting human rights and dignity and celebrating human diversities, and more importantly, creating the accessible and inclusive society for all where everyone can enjoy life without a feeling of discrimination and inequality.

Realizing the importance and impact of accessible and inclusive tourism on lives of people with disability and possibilities to contribute in world economy, on the one hand, and constant challenges and pressing needs of the time to create enabling Environment to the segment of the people who have distinct needs, on the other, the United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) recently marked the World Tourism Day of the year 2016 with the slogan ‘Tourism for All—Promoting Universal Accessibility’.¹⁴

This was one of the historical events celebrated for promoting accessible tourism at the global level, which has reiterated the essence of existing conferences, major conventions, and frameworks for promoting accessibility and creating a barrier free society with active and inclusive public participation in all aspects for everyone. These include The World Tourism Conference of 1980, also known as the Manila Declaration, which incorporated the concept of tourism and accessibility for the first time though this call would not be taken up until recently. The United Nation Convention on Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCRPD 2006), The Universal Design and The Sendai Framework (2015) among others. Addressing the existing gaps and encouraging accessible and inclusive tourism has significant implications on many levels and several aspects of everyday lives ranging from meeting universal goals such as leaving no one behind to making cities accessible.¹⁵

Many international conventions and frameworks are implemented for promoting rights and providing the required services and facilities to live a dignified and respectful life independently. Some of these will be briefly described here, particularly concerning fostering accessibility and enjoying recreational, leisure and cultural event(s) without any obstacles as well as participation in respective areas.

(a) United Nation Convention on Rights of Persons with Disability (UNCRPD 2006), as an international instrument, has a primary objective to promote, protect and ensure the full enjoyment of all human rights and fundamental freedoms by all persons with disabilities.¹⁶ Its clauses and articles deal principally with different dimensions of lives of people with disabilities, e.g., Article 2 promotes the Universal Design, which seeks to guarantee the rights of people with disabilities, and it is a precondition for improving accessibility in society in general, and tourism in particular. Likewise, Article 30 of the Convention provides for the right to access all areas of cultural life, including that of tourism and sport without any barriers and discriminations. Moreover, Article 9 mentions that the state, as a responsible key actor, has a duty to create an accessible environment and introduce programmes to remove physical barriers. Also, information and communication should be made available to all, eventually creating equal opportunity for all.¹⁷

(b) The Universal Design or Design for All (DFA) emphasizes human-centered design aiming to eliminate the existing barriers and make things/products usable to everyone with seven key principles ranging from equitable use to size and space for approach and use.¹⁸ Inappropriate design inhibits access to goods and services to key areas of social participation, including travel, work and full participation in civic and cultural life for the majority of people with disability. Furthermore, it also decreases their independence, dignity, equity and self-determination, consequently giving rise to the misconception regarding their potentialities to travel by themselves.¹⁹ It has been further argued that besides Design for All, there should be responsible behavior, the inclusion of the local communities in a transparent system of remuneration and participation, working opportunities for the socially excluded group. Furthermore, tourism should be developed as an industry that promotes understanding, inclusion and well-being for all equitably.²⁰

(c) UN Habitat-III linked with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Habitat III) and the New Urban Agenda contribute to shaping more accessible and inclusive urban places including buildings in the future. Furthermore, Habitat III aims to support cities to fulfill their role as drivers of sustainable development, therefore stimulate new global development, and address climate change. In addition, the New Urban Agenda provides an opportunity to include and further implement accessibility and Universal Design as a key principle guiding how cities, towns and villages are planned, built and managed. It is widely seen as a critical mechanism to mobilize action and coordinate the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with local authorities.²¹

(d) Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs 2015-2030), as global development goals, including several vital issues regarding people with disabilities. These include equal access in education, social, economic and political inclusion, accessible cities, transport system, and collection of data disaggregated on disability.²²

(e) The Sendai Framework 2015, as disaster-risk reduction approach, invites engagement of all sectors of society and seeks partnership among themselves. Primarily, it seeks empowerment and inclusive, accessible and non-discriminatory participation, paying particular attention to those disproportionately affected by disasters, especially the vulnerable ones. While designing all policies and practices, gender, age, disability and cultural perspective should be included and women and youth leadership should be promoted. The improvement of organized and voluntary work of citizens should be taken into consideration with a focus on contextual nuances.²

Accessible and inclusive tourism is an emerging field within tourism requires collaborative processes and multi-sectoral (between/among) stakeholders for enabling people with access requirements, including mobility, vision, hearing and cognitive dimensions of access, to function independently and with equity and dignity through delivery of universally designed tourism products, services, and environments. This definition adopts a whole-of-life approach where people through their lifespan benefit from accessible tourism provisions. These include people with permanent and temporary disabilities, seniors, obese, families with young children working in safer and more socially sustainably designed environments.²⁴

Additionally, accessible tourism, or else often referred to as disabled tourism, is also widely known as inclusive tourism as well. Its primary aim is not only to make the tourism sector accessible to people with different types of disabilities but also to cater to the needs and requirements of wide ranges of people regardless of their gender, age or physical status and other grounds, and provide them with the opportunity to enjoy tourism experiences.²⁵

Moreover, the idea of accessible and inclusive tourism entails a holistic approach for offering a set of services and facilities for individuals with special needs, who are, for example, people with disability, elderly travelers, pregnant women, parents pushing their children in strollers, or even people with temporary injuries, such as a broken leg or chronic ailments. All these categories of people are in need of particularly enabling environment during their travel²⁶ to make it barrier-free. Scot Rains defines Inclusive Tourism as a global movement to ensure the full social participation of all persons with disabilities in travel, citizenships, and cultural contribution and the process, to ensure the same for everyone else.²⁷

Making tourism sector accessible and inclusive for all not only could provide an opportunity to a considerable section of the people who have not enjoyed their recreational rights but also create economic opportunity from new segments of the people. Additionally, this would create an integrated effort among the principal actors involved in the tourism sector. However, in the absence of adequate research and exploration, depth and breadth of both problems and pleasure needs of these categories are yet to be explored for many countries^{28,29} including Nepal.

Accessible and Inclusive Tourism in Nepal

Accessible and inclusive tourism is at a nascent stage in Nepal.³⁰ There is still a long trail to walk to make the tourism sector of Nepal accessible and inclusive and not only to meet the unique needs and requirements of persons with disabilities but also to include people from different sections of society such as children, aging population, and pregnant women among others in the tourism sector of Nepal. Pilgrimage is one of the oldest and common forms of traveling in Nepal and usually involves the adult and older adults visiting various religious shrines within and beyond the country. However, in the recent years, Nepal has also witnessed the noticeable growth of domestic tourism and openings of homestays in different communities across the country.

The formal development of accessible tourism in Nepal began with the visit of Dr. Scot Rains, a wheelchair user, an expert on accessible tourism, in May 2014 at the unofficial invitation of Four Seasons Travel, which has been working for the promotion of accessible and inclusive tourism in the country. This occasion is/was marked as a critical juncture in the history of accessible tourism in Nepal for several reasons: (a) Dr. Rains travelled to different tourist destinations of Nepal in coordination with Four Seasons Travel, and Independent Living Center Nepal, also known as CIL-Nepal, provided a guide during the tour, (b) Dr. Rains along with the team travelled to several tourist destinations and shared his travelling experience in different forums with Disabled People's Organizations (DPOs) including one at the Embassy of United States of America in Nepal. In addition to the sharing of personal experiences and memories from the journey, discussions also focused on past, present, and future of accessible and inclusive tourism in Nepal. Following this event, the financial contribution that could be made from this new segment of people was realized, but lack of the accessible environment for traveling independently without barriers was taken as a crucial challenge for promoting accessible and inclusive tourism and attracting the tourist with a disability to Nepal.³

Nonetheless, people with disabilities began to travel to different parts of the country, and a few successfully climbed Mt. Everest, but these activities are few and are usually made through personal effort and remain unrecorded. There is even a lack of official record on arrival of first foreign tourist with disability in Nepal.³² This sort of activity has a comparatively short history. Tom Whittaker was the first person with a disability (right foot amputee after a car accident) to climb the Mt. Everest in 1998.³³ Erik Weihenmayer, a visually impaired American, is known as the first person with a disability to conquer Mt. Everest, which he did on May 25, 2001.³⁴

Subsequently, Mark Joseph Inglis from New Zealand has become the first double-leg amputee to climb the world's tallest peak from the Chinese side on May 15, 2006.³⁵ Similarly, Sudarshan Gautam, a Nepali-born Canadian, is the first double-arm amputee to climb the world's highest mountain on May 20, 2013.³⁶ Arumina Singha from India was the first Indian female amputee to climb Mt. Everest successfully. She climbed the peak on May 21, 2013.³⁷ And, recently Xia Boyu from China, a double amputee, scaled Mt Everest on May 14, 2018.³⁸

Despite several challenges, Nepal has made significant strides in bringing tourists in the country, the trend which is increasing in Nepal and outside. This has created thousands of job opportunities and made a significant contribution to the Gross Domestic Production (GDP) of the country.³⁹ Australia's National Visitor Survey (NVS)-2017 shows that people with disability spent as much as \$3.3 billion on tourism services, accounting for 17 percent of total tourism expenditure.⁴⁰ Likewise a market study showed that travelers with disabilities took 31.7 million trips in the United States of America and spent \$13.6 billion annually; however, the most significant finding of the initial study, quite contrary to the stereotypical notion of disability, was that travelers with disabilities would double their travel spending if enhancements to accessibility were made.⁴¹ This indicates the economic benefits and potentialities of accessible and inclusive tourism in other parts of the world by creating an enabling environment in respective places.

Nepal has witnessed an increasing trend in terms of tourist arrival in the country in the recent years. However, when it comes to accessible and inclusive tourism in Nepal, the story does not end only in facing multiple burdens while traveling but such visits/tourists are not even incorporated in official reports. Nepal had set up a target to see almost a million tourists in the country in the year 2011, which was known as ‘Nepal Tourism Year Campaign 2011.’^{42,43}

Recently, in 2017, Nepal saw the arrival of as many as 940,218⁴⁴ Tourists in the country. The number for the year 2016 was recorded as high as 753,002. Of these 399,091 were male and 353,911 were female tourists. Likewise, 199,139 tourists were of age group 46-60 and 130,627 belonged to 61 and above of the total.⁴⁵ The official record does not present any disaggregated data on the travelers/tourists with a disability. This is primarily because of low/no priorities on accessible and inclusive tourism in the country. Furthermore, tourism is generally understood as adventurous activities, which are not for people with disabilities.⁴⁶ Nonetheless, disaggregation is essential as it allows developing and designing policies, plans, programmes and projects that accommodate the unique needs and requirements of different types of disability in the tourism sector of Nepal.

Historical Initiatives, Positive Initiatives, and Best Practices

Following the Nepal visit of Dr. Scot Rains, Nepal has initiated several events and programmes with the aim to not only to promote accessible and inclusive tourism in the country but also to show the vast and diverse cultural and natural heritage of Nepal to tourists living with disabilities.⁴⁷ These efforts have become landmarks in Nepal’s history of accessible and inclusive tourism. These include The Wounded Heroes Trek to Nepal-2016. The event was organized in Nepal to celebrate the essence of the World Tourism Day of 2016 ‘Tourism for All’ and with an attempt to initiate action for making the accessible country destination for all and raise awareness on accessible tourism in the country which will, in turn, promote accessible and inclusive tourism. The Wounded Heroes Trek to Nepal-2016 was marked as the crucial step where a team of 19 members was involved in exploring the Himalayas.⁴⁸ The team consisted of people with different types of disabilities including amputation^{49,50} who trekked to the Annapurna region. This trip was organized by Four Seasons Travel and was supported by the US Embassy in Nepal.⁵¹

The Asia Try is another remarkable event of such kind. This was held in Nepal in 2016 with a goal to accelerate barrier-free society for people with disabilities and promote their rights for inclusion in all aspects of their lives.⁵² More than 200 persons with severe and profound disabilities and their attendants from Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Cambodia, Mongolia, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and India participated in the campaign. The campaign was centered in and around Kathmandu, and four adjacent districts and participants delivered speeches and distributed pamphlets and informational items to sensitize the local people on the needs of the people with disabilities. These focused on the challenges that people with disabilities experience in roads, footpaths, public toilets and public buildings with services and facilities.⁵³

Likewise, the International Conference on Accessible Adventure (ICCA) 2018 is a milestone for promoting accessible and inclusive tourism in Nepal. This was a three-day event held in Pokhara, Nepal, in March 2018. The conference was first of its kind in Nepal, which saw participation from academics, activists, researchers, DPOs representatives, private sector among others. The papers and discussions focused on different areas of issues dealing with disabilities and tourism in Nepal.

More importantly, the conference made history by announcing March 30 as the new annual Tourism for All Day, a day to dedicate on improvement and the significance of accessibility in the tourism industry in Nepal.⁵⁴ Despite the several challenges that Nepal has been struggling with to make its tourism sector accessible for all, it has made significant strides in a short span of time as well. Some of the achievements are worth noting:

Recently Built Accessible Trekking Trail in Kaski

The Nepal Tourism Board built 1.3-km trail access for all from Deurali to Naudanda of Kaski. In addition to promoting accessible and inclusive tourism in Nepal, this trail enhances the prospect of appealing to a substantial segment of the population in the tourism sector of Nepal.⁵⁵ This trail is known as Asia's first trail of such kind.⁵⁶ However, this trail needs to be further improved for making it accessible for people with all kinds of disabilities, including people with visual impairment. A participant traveling on this trail stated that tactile stones should be placed at the center of the trail from beginning to the end to sensitize the white cane, which will make the trail accessible to people with visual impairment. A group of people with visual impairment consisting of both male and female traveled on the trail.⁵⁷ The next step is to ensure the sustainability of this trail by making it functional with proper maintenance and monitoring for the benefit of the target groups.

Accessibility Audits in Urban Nepal

In line with the broader mission of making cities accessible and inclusive endorsed by SDGs, National Federation of Disabled Nepal (NFDN), in collaboration with Kathmandu Metropolitan City (KMC) and CBM-Nepal, has initiated accessibility audit programmes in public places and star hotels of the city with the technical support from the Square Unit Private Limited, a professional group of Architects & Engineers. The first access audit of Ratnapark, a public space with parks and transportation links, in Kathmandu was undertaken.

In addition to removing the physical barriers and making it accessible for all in line with Universal Design, the goal of the access audit was to create mass awareness on accessibility, which will, in turn, enable persons with disability to live independently and participate fully in different aspects of life.⁵⁸ NFDN has undertaken such audits in 150 sites in the valley, and few more sites were audited outside the valley.⁵⁹ For example, access audit of Chamuja Hariyali Park at Dolakha district resulted in designing and developing an intervention programme accordingly for making it accessible for all.⁶⁰

Additionally, for the promotion of accessible and inclusive tourism in the country, NFDN has initiated to work on Model Works. These initiations include establishing at least a park, picnic spot, a hotel a public toilet among others with total accessibility features which ideally serve as a 'role model' for promoting accessibility, which then could be replicated elsewhere. This has been imitated in the Aircraft Museum, where the audio guide is installed, so that is beneficial for tourist with visual impairment. Moreover, Innovative Measures and Public Honor and Rewards are two other key areas in which NFDN has been working. A multidisciplinary team of professionals consisting of disability rights activists, engineers, architects, Information Technology (IT) experts discusses accessibility problems and provides solutions accordingly. The team holds a meeting on a regular monthly basis, monthly and quarterly in a year, and works for the promotion of accessibility features under the Innovative Measures. Likewise, institutions and individuals are awarded for making their places are accessible for catering to the needs and requirement of all ranging from children to elderly. The honors and awards are provided based on the comments and feedback from the users. These could be installing ramps, making toilets accessible for wheelchair users. However, the total accessibility features are not limited to installing ramps and creating an enabling environment for only wheelchair users or just installing ramps.⁶¹

Furthermore, the audit team suggested that limited signage, hurdles in the walking pathways in the city, staircases, ramp standards, small pathways, inaccessible toilets and other facilities are some of the key challenges related to access for user committee.⁶² In addition to these, an engineer involved in the access audit mentioned referring to his own experience the entire structure of the city is challenging for making it accessible as issues regarding promoting accessibility have been overlooked in the designing phase. These features should be paid adequate attention from the designing phase to construction. Moreover, those who had considered these issues in the designing phase to construction, unfortunately, do not apply standard measures in practice, so even newly constructed buildings turn out to be inaccessible. He cited two interrelated reasons for this: (a) accessibility issues are addressed in designing phase, but (b) there is no strict monitoring system in different phases of construction of public and private buildings due mainly to less involvement of engineer(s), so people do not even follow the plan. In other words, the blueprints of the buildings are indeed designed/made with

accessibility features; otherwise, approval to begin construction will not be provided from the concerned authority.⁶³

Semi low floor buse by Sajha & Mahanagar Yatayat

SajhaYatayat and MahanagarYatayat recently introduced semi-low-floor buses in Nepal.⁶⁴This provides better access to children, women with babies, pregnant women, senior citizen and people with disabilities. Like UNCRPD-2006, the Incheon Strategy also aims to enhance access to the physical environment, public transportation, information and communication and knowledge.⁶⁵The accessible transportation is linked to several other aspects of the city such as road, and more precisely the road should also have accessibility features. This calls for another step to work on how we can make total use of a low-floor bus to benefit those segments of the people who need such facilities in their lives.

Approach and Key Findings

The study on Accessible and Inclusive Tourism in Nepal: Prospects and Problems was carried out in two phases, i.e., a desk review and the field research from December 2017 to August 2018. The field research included Key Informants Interviews (KIIs)and Focus Group Discussion (FGDs) with individuals having different types of physical conditions and organizations working in the area of disabilities commonly known as Disabled Peoples' Organizations (DPOs), and hoteliers among others, a total of 22 people among which six were female, and others were male. The KIIs and FGDs were focused towards developing a better understanding about the opportunities and the challenges for promoting accessible and inclusive tourism in Nepal from the experiences of individuals as well as of groups. The information gathered from KIIs and FGDs was insightful for identifying the challenges encountered at different levels, social and structural, and understanding the collective experiences of facing such challenges constantly. Furthermore, possibilities and potentialities of accessible and inclusive tourism were discussed with key factors and actors involved in the tourism sector to understand the present status of Nepal in terms of meeting the unique needs and requirements of the tourist(s) with disabilities. Additionally, emerging issues and key findings of the research were further validated by organizing a workshop among key stakeholders. A total 25 participants, 19 male, and six females participated in the workshop. This research also benefited from the discussions and debates held on International Conference on Accessible Adventure-2018.

In relation to problems and prospects of promoting accessible and inclusive tourism in Nepal, the following are the key findings:

Tourists with Physical Disabilities in Nepal Face Multiple Burdens Ranging from Structural to Attitudinal

The perceptions and responses for the promotion of accessible and inclusive tourism in Nepal are varied. They range from inaccessible environment almost everywhere from practical to political challenges, generally across the sectors and specifically in the tourism sector in Nepal. In short, people and/or tourists with a disability traveling across the country have to face multiple burdens.

Accessibility is not only a prerequisite for people with disabilities for regulating and promoting mobility in the desired way but also one of the key challenges people with disabilities face across the world. However, the situation is even worse in the developing countries, where this group of people have to struggle constantly and encounter countless challenges, primarily due to low or no supporting facilities, services via conducive environment for meeting their distinctive needs and requirements on the one hand and pre-conceived notion or prejudiced eyes of people towards people with disabilities or tourists with disabilities on the other. This has a significant influence on personal, professional, recreational aspects of lives of billions of people across the world⁶⁶and millions of people in Nepal.⁶⁷Therefore, accessibility has become a key concern for this group of people as an inaccessible environment via unfriendly (infrastructures) structures, be it in the public or private places, including almost in all hotels and tourist destinations, are found to be a significant challenge that tourists with disabilities both national/local and foreign encounter in Nepal.

While discussing further with various key stakeholders⁶⁸, they reiterate with their personal accounts and professional experiences that inaccessible and unfriendly environment or social structure is the first and foremost challenge in the context of Nepal. The situation is even more so in the rural setting. It is further noted that tourist destinations, hotels, public parks and religious shrines situated in the rural locations are least accessible and inclusive in terms of catering to the respective needs and requirements of all people. Many older adults used to visit different religious shrines with the help of family members or relatives long before such destinations were connected with motorable roads.

Furthermore, accessibility is not only a physical or structural issue but also is closely linked with several other crucial aspects including mobility, public participation, employment and livelihood, and traveling. More importantly, it is associated with practicing fundamental human rights and eventually creating a barrier-free society and promoting an accessible and inclusive community where every person, regardless of one's physical condition, age and other biases, could enjoy life in totality including participating in recreational activities without any discriminations and obstacles.

Due to mostly inaccessible geography, tourist and people with disabilities in Nepal have to face numerous challenges regarding accessibility in several places, including airport, hotels, roads (zebra crossings), public and private buildings and tourist destinations, recreational areas such as parks and picnic spots generally across the country. The inaccessible environment or structures influence not only multiple aspects of people with disabilities and tourists with disabilities but also add numerous burdens to these categories of people while living and traveling across the country. As promoting accessibility is a multi-sectoral phenomenon, it is equally linked with many vital aspects such as structural and policy formulation, appropriate implementation. The promotion of accessible environment has been further problematic as people with disabilities who are living their lives in constant struggle in the society are neither adequately consulted nor are they included in different stages of policy formulation.

A 42-year-old wheelchair user from the far-western part of Nepal opined:

While the issue of accessibility comes to the front, I think, primarily, policymakers must understand what makes structure accessible. When I visit different ministries, their toilets are not very convenient because even when a ramp is installed at the door of the restroom, whether a wheelchair is easily or freely movable inside the restroom has not received adequate attention. It is a similar situation at the airport, both international and domestic sections of Tribhuvan International Airport (TIA). As many of my friends from abroad ask about the issue of accessibility to travel in Nepal, I have to answer them shamelessly it is less/not accessible, and they are bound to cancel the trip. This situation is equally valid in sports as well. There is no single stadium in Nepal where people with disabilities can independently visit. However, this issue has begun to be addressed in newly constructed buildings [hotels] in the recent days. Addressing these challenges and promoting accessible and inclusive tourism in Nepal is a daunting task but certainly not an impossible one because remedied by appropriate designing and planning for the new ones and restructuring of old or existing ones.

A key informant further informed that, as there are few or no consultations with technical persons, engineers/architectures, whether a design is accessible, but instead it is made only for design's sake. In other words, accessibility is limited just in design or blueprint, and it does not translate into the actual building. An architect argues that this happens mainly for two reasons: (a) it is due to financial cost; however, he further argues that if one pays adequate attention in the designing phase, it will not be as costly as we expect but the case of reconstructing later on for making accessible would be different, and (b) unlike in designing, as there is a less involvement of engineers/architect in the construction process which results in failure to ensure that the construction goes as per the design.

The situation is further exacerbated by less or no monitoring visits required for different phases of construction, and as a result, building(s) turn out to be inaccessible for all kinds of the population. Echoing an earlier KII, a hotelier also noted that, however, addressing accessibility problems in the hospitality sector has been taken up, and "we have tried our best to make our hotels accessible for all, but as it is also linked with financial, technological and structural aspects, we have to do more for installing total accessibility features for all kinds of people with

disability. For instance, we do not have braille and signs to guide people with visual impairment and deaf and speech impairment respectively in our premises”.⁶⁹ Therefore, creating and promoting an accessible and inclusive society in general and endorsing accessible and inclusive tourism in Nepal, where accessibility is a key challenge despite the fact there are abundance potentialities for the pro- motion of tourism, requires multi-sectoral effort and interdisciplinary approach for developing a better understanding and identifying the existing gaps. This will, in turn, provide firm ground to move ahead for ensuring accessibility and inclusiveness in the tourism sector of Nepal in days to come.

Lack of Awareness among Key Stakeholders and Community People

In addition to the multiple burdens, lack of awareness among key stakeholders and community people alike on unique needs and requirements of people and tourist with disabilities in general, and accessible and inclusive tourism, in particular, is reported as another challenge by most of the inform Disability and related issues have been over- looked, if not neglected, in almost every aspect of Nepali society. This practice has not only promoted a particular biased or discriminatory worldview but also prevented people from developing awareness. As a result, misconceptions and myths regarding disability largely influence in shaping and reshaping perspective, which has been reflected on larger social structures as well as the way people with Disabilities are being treated in the society.

Furthermore, lack of awareness among the key stakeholders and community people, and people with disabilities themselves is another challenge that has been a key obstacle for promoting accessible and inclusive tourism in Nepal. People’s lack of awareness coupled with prejudiced eyes leads to the humiliation and indignity of the individuals while they visit tourist destinations. A young lady with visual impairment mentioned that “Waiters in restaurants never ask me for my order of food when I visit with my dad; rather he would ask my father for my food order.” Her father instead would ask the waiter to ask her food order with herself.

Similarly, a young man with visual impairment from Panauti shared his experience: a guard along with other people ridiculed him when he entered into a female toilet in the town for obvious reasons. Likewise, a group of four young women with visual impairment recalled being stopped by the guard at the main gate and given NPR 200 after asking the owner for the money. Given the stereotypical understanding of disability, a guard mistook them as beggars when they had actually gone to the famous restaurant in the tourist area of Kathmandu to try the food.

This situation not only represents the problems and challenges that people with disabilities face in an urban setting but also indicates the perception of different people on disability, livelihood, and individual choices but more importantly, the perception of people who are involved in the hospitality sector towards people with disabilities. Besides, an adult wheelchair user explains that as there is less/no interaction between people with disabilities and people from the hotel(s) mainly due inaccessible environment in such places, this then prevents the hoteliers from knowing about unique needs and requirements of people with disabilities. If this situation persists forever, then it does not contribute positively to raising and spreading awareness on this issue among the people across the sectors. These include hoteliers, tours operators, travel and trekking agencies among others. On the contrary, appropriate interactions, hospitality, unbiased attitude, friendly and accessible itineraries through key stakeholders, amicable and barrier-free environment, both physical and social, are prerequisites for promoting accessible and inclusive tourism. Nevertheless, less/lack of awareness primarily among key stakeholders and community people seem to be one of the causes for making situation further complicated, which could be only resolved by raising awareness on accessible and inclusive tourism among individuals and organizations involved.

Visible & Invisible Challenges

Despite the several pioneering steps taken, there is a need for the promotion of accessible and inclusive tourism in Nepal, mainly with the initiations of the private sector, Government of Nepal, and DPOs. Nepal has some practical challenges that impede development and promotion of accessible and inclusive tourism across the country. These include:

- (a) Geographical challenges: Despite the profound beauty of nature along with magnificent views of mountains, hills, and forests, access to road and accessible transport in the majority of the part of the country remain a significant challenge for those who are in need of accessible facilities to get around.
- (b) Prejudiced mindset: Although there seems to be a major shift in models of disability from charity to rights-based, the worldview that people see the people with disabilities has yet to be changed. Every respondent reflected on their experience and mentioned that “Society sees us with biased eyes; that is why our concern has been historically overlooked in many sectors, and this is true in case of tourism sector as well. This has, in turn, curbed our right to cultural activities and recreational activities”.
- (c) Poverty and illiteracy: Recognizing and understanding the disabled person as consumers is a very recent phenomenon.⁷⁰ A disability leads to poverty and poverty hinders in meeting the needs and requirements of people with disability; and if this two are coupled with illiteracy, then the situation gets further complicated. This has implications for health, well-being, and mobility of the people with disabilities in their society and beyond. In addition, illiteracy on the part of the community people is linked with their perspective on seeing people with disabilities and their unique needs. Illiteracy and ignorance often lead to lack of adequate awareness on various issues related to disability that contribute to stigmatizing and continuing stereotypical views towards people with disabilities. A participant of Female Focus Group Discussion mentioned that in addition to a geographical challenge and prejudiced mindset, widespread illiteracy and rampant poverty are other causes that significantly hinder in living a dignified and independent life without any discriminations inequalities.
- (d) Hesitation among people with disabilities: Along with inaccessible physical environment and the biased or prejudiced views of people, overprotective care of parents and family members of people with disabilities not only create a humiliation among themselves but these are also triggering factor for hesitation to participate in social functions and enjoy rights to entertainment in their society and beyond. This has remained as one of the stumbling blocks for people with disabilities because this notion is intrinsically linked with several factors including level of education, awareness regarding disability, financial status, cultural and social context and structural barriers. Above all, recognition of disability across the sectors in the community and beyond.

An adult person with visual impairment stated: Majority of the people with disabilities have very low self-esteem and inferiority complex among themselves, so they do not like to come into the front; however, those who are working hard to achieve their respective goals have achieved them too. But low self-esteem coupled with lack of opportunities have made the situation even worse.

Gaps between Existing Policies and Practice at the Ground

Despite endorsing the international policies and legal frameworks to enhance the participation of people with disabilities in different sectors of the society and provide the opportunity to enjoy all aspects of life, mainly by making society inclusive, this study finds striking gaps between the existing policies which should ensure and envision a barrier-free society and the ground reality. A 42-year-old male wheelchair user explained:

One of the sad truths in Nepal is that policies and programmes regarding people with disabilities are designed and developed on their behalf, rather than including them during different stages of policy formulation. There are differences between seeing and experiencing/living through disability everyday life. To benefit the target population, their involvement in policymaking process is mandatory.

The key legal frameworks and policy guidelines of Nepal developed to address the issues of accessibility, dignity and respectful life are as follow:

Constitution of Nepal 2015

The Constitution of Nepal 2015 has guaranteed that everyone has a right to live with dignity. Further, discrimination based on the grounds of origin, religion, race, caste, tribe, sex, physical condition, the condition of health, marital status, pregnancy, economic condition, language or region, ideology or on similar other grounds is legally prohibited.⁷¹

Tourism Act 1978

The government of Nepal has enacted Tourism Act (1978) to regulate tourism sector in more legal and professional manner. It has contained several provisions such as license to be obtained to work as travel and trekking agency, standard hotel, lodge, restaurant or resort and bar, medical check-up, personal accident and insurance but has not precisely mentioned about accessible tourism or accessible features or accommodating the needs and requirements of people with disabilities in the hospitality sectors including hotels rather the Act has ambiguously mentioned that hotel, lodge, restaurant or resort and bar shall submit an application to the Government of Nepal in a prescribed format.⁷²

Tourism Policy 2008

Realizing the tremendous potentiality of tourism development in the country, this Policy has formulated with key aims to increase national productivity and income through the earning of foreign currency. Furthermore, it has also envisioned that Nepal will be developed as center for adventure tourism and established as a major tourist destination with focus on quality of services and security of places. In addition, finally develop and promote Nepal as an attractive tourism destination.⁷³

Disability Rights Act 2017

The Government of Nepal enacted Disability Rights Act recently. The Act is a significant milestone for the implementation of contextualized UNCRPD and disability-related constitutional provisions to improve the life experiences of persons with disabilities in Nepal. When effectively implemented, the Act is expected to improve access of persons with disabilities for essential services and facilities, human rights, opportunities including health, education, and employment, rehabilitation, accessibility, justice including the right to enjoy cultural activities and recreational activities on an equal basis to that of other persons.⁷⁴

Accessible Physical Structure and Communication Service Directive for People with Disabilities 2013

The Government of Nepal has endorsed Accessibility Guidelines regarding Physical Infrastructures and Communication Services for People with Disabilities 2012 with the aim to make public facilities, public buildings, and other facilities accessible to all. These include the guidelines on how to correctly implement the features of accessibility in the infrastructures, bathroom facilities, and school systems.⁷⁵

Political Will and Commitment and Policy Initiation to Work for Promotion of Accessible and Inclusive Tourism are Commendable

Despite the abundance of opportunities and viability, evidently, the tourism sector of Nepal has not been able to transform national and domestic social and economic condition/status, reduce poverty in an expected way, and more importantly, this sector is not accessible and inclusive for all regardless of their age, gender, and bodily conditions. Nonetheless, recent political commitment and will and policy initiation have remained an impetus to work further for making tourism sector accessible and inclusive for all. For instance, along with the political will, commitment and policy pathway that the recently elected political leaders from local to central level, mayors from municipalities and sub-metropolitan cities, have publicly pledged, on the occasion of International Conference on Accessible Adventure- 2018 held in Pokhara, to move forward for the promotion of accessible and inclusive tourism in Nepal.

On occasion, one of the mayors stated that realizing the importance of accessible and inclusive tourism in the area, the meeting of the city council of the sub-metro politician city officially approved the policy measures for making all the newly built public infrastructure accessible for all kinds of people including people with different

types of disabilities. He also announced that his sub-metropolitan city would pay the cost of the royalty of two persons with disabilities who are going to climb Mt. Everest in 2019 to Government of Nepal. Likewise, two other mayors also showed commitments to adopt all the legal measures and policy frameworks for making all of the public and private infrastructures accessible for all. Such exemplary actions will, in turn, not only work for the promotion of accessible and inclusive tourism at the local level but also will create enabling environment for all people to live a dignified and respectful life and enjoy their recreational activities independently and freely.

Similarly, a mayor from another city in the eastern region, Dharan, also officially announced that accessibility features would be paid adequate attention for making all the newly constructed public buildings accessible for all.

However, all the panelists of the conference concluded that since promoting accessibility is a multi-factorial concept, policies alone is not a key to ensuring accessibility on the ground. The apparent gaps between policies and their implementation and lack of awareness equally remained as major challenges for guaranteeing accessibility across the sectors. Issues of disabilities have been historically neglected in Nepal, which is reflected in almost all the public and private buildings, which are already constructed. It is even more challenging to make existing structure accessible and inclusive to cater to the respective needs and requirements of all the people.⁷⁶

Finally, the successful completion of all levels of elections in the country, which has filled out the long political vacuum and developed a new structure and institutional set-up, has also provided local structures with total rights of resource mobilization, programmes implementation and policies formulation. Given this context, prioritizing accessible and inclusive tourism at local levels and translating all the aforementioned political will and commitment into actions could be starting points to work towards meeting the goal for promoting accessible and inclusive tourism in Nepal. While doing so, both formulation of appropriate policies without losing the social and cultural diversities and efficient implementation of formulated policies should be taken into consideration by all key stakeholders ranging from all level of governments agencies, supporting and implementing partners to DPOs.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Accessible and inclusive tourism is an emerging arena calls for further exploration and promotion in Nepal. Despite the profound possibilities of tourism in the country, this field has not received adequate attention from key stakeholders, government, and private sectors alike until recently. Therefore, tourists with disabilities traveling to Nepal have to face several visible and invisible challenges. Conversely, Nepal has made good progress in this sector within a short span of time since its formal beginning in the country. The praiseworthy collaboration between the government bodies such as Nepal Tourism Board and private sectors namely travel agencies, hotels, and DPOs is playing a catalytic role in making progress quickly. Furthermore, the political will and commitments from local to central governments and authorities are found to be a key motivating factor for moving forward to develop and promote this field in the future. Nonetheless, Nepal still needs to go a long way for making its tourism sector accessible and inclusive to eventually accommodate the unique needs and requirements of all categories of people regardless to any background and provide an opportunity to enjoy the right to travel freely and independently. Based on the findings from the research, the following recommendations are pertinent to address the existing gaps and promote accessible and inclusive tourism in Nepal.

Need to Work Seriously for Effective Implementation of Existing Policies and Legal Frameworks

Effective implementation of existing policies and legal frameworks to ensure accessibility for the people with disability in almost every sector in Nepal in general, and tourists with disability in the tourism sector of Nepal in particular, was found to be one of the key challenges in creating an accessible environment. Therefore, the Government of Nepal, mainly the concerned bodies such as Department of Urban Development and Building Construction (DUDBC) of Ministry of Urban Development, National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) and the local government units and implementing agencies, are suggested to work collaboratively to enforce the existing policies and follow the standard mechanism(s) of the guidelines at the one hand and design and

develop appropriate policies and legal frameworks with proper consultation(s) with key stakeholders including targeted population groups.

Despite the policies and legal frameworks for ensuring the needs of people with disabilities, and promoting accessibility for all to create an inclusive society, it is found that these provisions are yet to be translated into practices to a greater extent. There is a need for regulating and timely/periodic monitoring of unit/team in respective government bodies and working further to ensure that legal provisions are implemented in practices. For instance, ensuring curb on the roadside is compatible with the low-floor bus so that wheelchair user can quickly and comfortably get on the bus while traveling across the city could contribute in addressing this gap and promoting accessibilities required for all kinds of people with disabilities.

The accessibility features at any public building should be made mandatory, and in the case of star hotels/resorts, approval should not be granted unless all the accessibility features are installed in all the buildings.

Suggestions for Taking Appropriate Initiative to Translate Political Will and Commitment to better Policies and Programmes

The political will and commitment shown at different levels from federal to local should be translated into proper policies, programmes and projects with a significant focus on accessible and inclusive tourism from local to central levels.

Recommendations for Designing and Conducting Effective Awareness raising Programmes/ Orientations

As disability is both a stigmatized subject and a historically overlooked area, different key actors such as government bodies, I/ NGOs and DPOs working in this field should work collectively to raise awareness among the community people in general and primary players involved in the tourism sector in particular. These could include (a) making tourism in Nepal accessible and inclusive destination and (b) identifying the potential needs and requirements of disabled tourists traveling to/in Nepal possibly in different places including the airport, hotels, trekking routes, tourist destinations among others.

- While raising awareness in this area, adequate attention should be paid to different types of disabilities and variations in individual needs and requirements according to the nature of disability one has.

- For promoting accessibility as a change of attitude, key actors involved in tourism sector should be able to understand individual needs and requirement of tourists with a disability for which appropriate training and awareness programmes should be launched to respective groups of people. These could be (a) launching special tourist guide training where one can learn how to provide guidance and support to tourist with different types of disabilities and (b) similar training for the staff of hotels in terms of how to coordinate with guests with disabilities while serving them food or to accommodate them in the hotels and their premises.

Suggestions for Better Coordination and Collaboration

Disability and accessible and inclusive tourism are multinational concepts, which require a collective and multi sectoral effort to be promoted in Nepal. Therefore, it calls for appropriate and robust coordination and collaboration between/among key actors to address the challenges existing in respective areas. These include coordination between/ among ministries such as Ministry of Women, Children, and Senior Citizen, and DUDBC of Ministry of Urban Development, Tourism Board of Nepal of Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation and Department of Road of Ministry of Physical Infrastructure and Transport.

Adopting Best Practices for Making Place Accessible for All

As several initiatives for promoting accessible and inclusive tourism in country have already been taken, the government and supporting and implementing agencies should work collaboratively to establish model works as such standards of parks/hotels/ trails/public toilets totally accessible for people with all kinds disabilities in the major cities and replicate them in many places across the country with active monitoring and periodical maintenance services.

Established Reward System

•Although hotels, resorts work in the hospital- ity sector, they are primarily for-profit entities, hence they pay more attention to making profit, so the government either should introduce some schemes such as subsidy or recognize and should provide awards to those who have worked for the promotion of accessible and inclusive tourism and have ensured this in their hotels or resorts, which would motivate them to work further on making accessibility features in their buildings and these could replicate in many other places.

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