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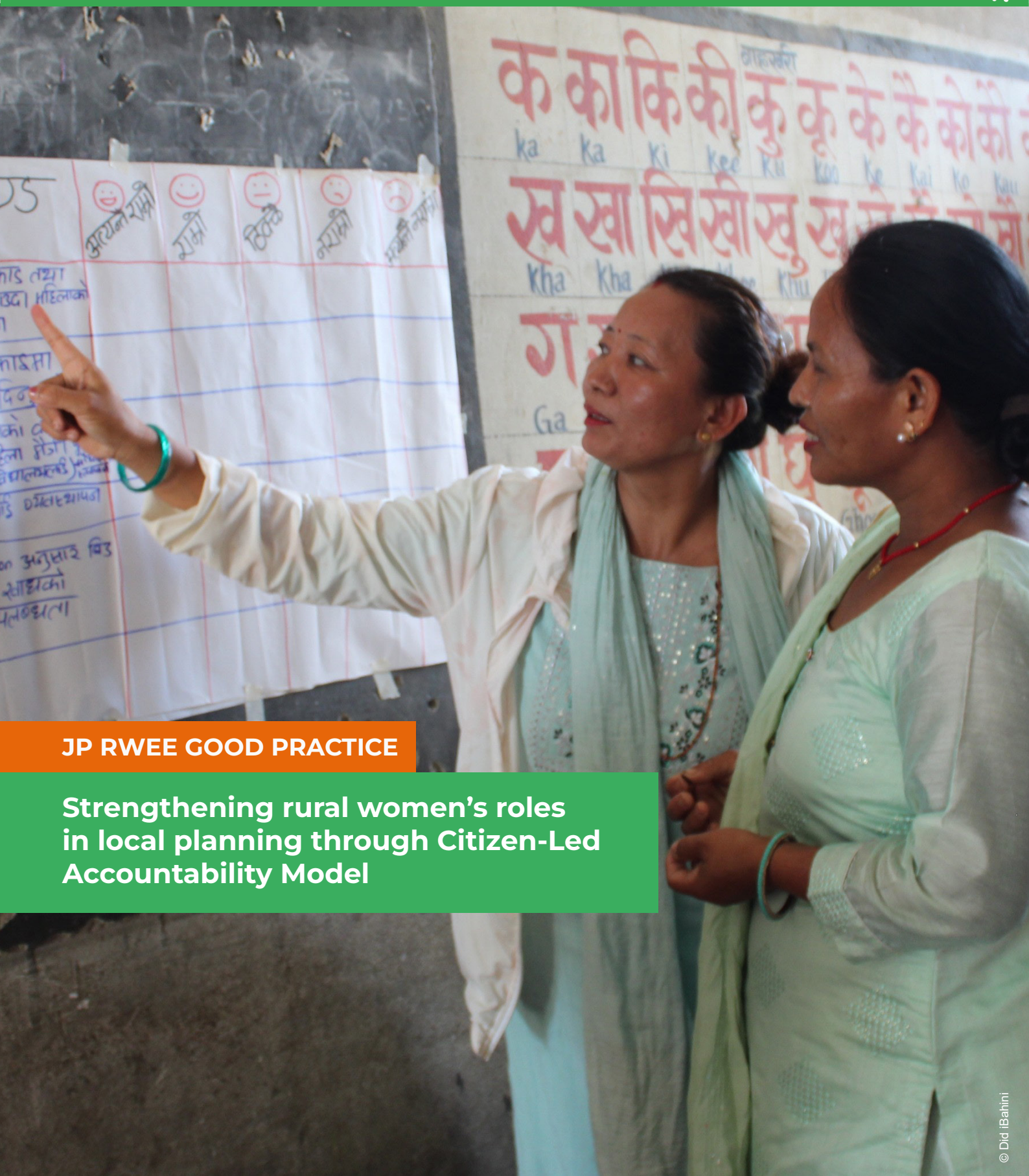
LIFAD
Investing in rural people

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JOINT PROGRAMME:

Accelerating Progress Towards
Rural Women's Economic Empowerment



JP RWEE GOOD PRACTICE

**Strengthening rural women's roles
in local planning through Citizen-Led
Accountability Model**

Overview of the good practice

 Coverage	• 5 local Governments • 13 wards • Siraha and Saptari Districts, Madhesh Province
 Participation	• 461 participants engaged • 397 rural women farmers • 64 local government representatives and officials (24 women and 40 men)
 Citizen-Led Accountability Process	• 13 Community Score Card (CSC) sessions conducted • Municipal-level public hearings organized across participating local governments • Joint Action Plans developed between communities and local governments
 Key Priorities Identified by Women	• Agriculture and irrigation services • Agricultural extension services and market access • Health services and birthing centres • Safe drinking water and local infrastructure • Women's participation in governance • Transparent governance and grievance mechanisms • Prevention of gender-based violence and harmful social practices
 Key Outcomes	• Strengthened the collective voice and leadership of rural women farmers • Improved dialogue, trust and accountability between communities and local governments • Increased awareness among local officials of barriers limiting women's meaningful participation in governance • Secured public commitments to improve inclusive planning, service delivery and accountability mechanisms • Influenced local planning priorities, including allocations for skill development, drinking water infrastructure and irrigation-related interventions



About the Joint Programme on Accelerating Progress Towards Rural Women's Economic Empowerment

The Joint Programme on Accelerating Progress Towards Rural Women's Economic Empowerment (JP RWEE) Phase II is jointly implemented by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), the United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women) and the World Food Programme (WFP) jointly with local partners.

The programme supports rural women to strengthen their economic opportunities, leadership, collective action and participation in local governance processes.

In Nepal, the programme is implemented in partnership with the Government of Nepal and works in close collaboration with federal, provincial and local governments, as well as implementing partners, to promote gender-responsive and inclusive development outcomes.

Context

Rural women farmers play a vital role in agriculture and household food security in Nepal. The agricultural sector is increasingly characterized by women's participation, with around 74% of employed women engaged in agriculture, highlighting their central role in sustaining rural livelihoods, food systems, and local economies. However, despite their significant contributions, many women, particularly those from marginalized groups, have limited influence over local planning and budgeting processes.

While Nepal has established participatory planning mechanisms, structural barriers often restrict women's ability to meaningfully shape local development priorities. These barriers include limited access to information, inadequate representation in decision-making spaces, restrictive social norms, and unequal power dynamics that constrain women's voices. As a result, priorities related to agriculture, irrigation, livelihoods, health services, social inclusion and women's empowerment are often insufficiently reflected in local development plans.

Nepal operates under a three-tier federal governance system comprising federal, provincial, and local governments. The country's 753 local governments are responsible for local development planning, budgeting, and service delivery.

Local governments follow an annual seven-step planning and budgeting cycle that includes determination of budget ceilings, community consultations, ward-level prioritization, municipal review, consolidation, and approval through the municipal assembly. Although the process is designed to be participatory, rural women often face challenges in accessing information and influencing decisions throughout the planning cycle.

These challenges were evident across 13 wards in five local governments in Siraha and Saptari districts of Madhesh Province, where women consistently identified participation in local planning and decision-making as one of the weakest aspects of local governance.

Assessments revealed concerns about limited access to information, inadequate consultation, and insufficient opportunities for women, especially those from marginalized communities, to influence local priorities and resource allocation.

Good practice: Citizen-Led Accountability Model

To address the gap between women's participation and influence, UN Women jointly with Didi Bahini, a national partners, under JP RWEE introduced a Citizen-Led Accountability Model that combines Community Score Cards (CSC) and Public Hearings. This approach enabled rural women farmers to collectively assess local governance processes, identify priority concerns, generate evidence and engage directly with decision-makers.

What is the Citizen-Led Accountability Model?

The model combines two complementary accountability mechanisms:

Community Score Cards (CSC): A participatory tool through which community members assess public services and local governance processes, identify challenges, generate evidence, and propose solutions.

Public Hearings: Structured dialogue platforms where communities present findings directly to local government representatives, discuss priority issues, and jointly agree on actions and commitments.

The process began with 13 Community Score Card sessions involving 461 participants, including 397 rural women farmers and 64 ward representatives and local government officials. The local government participants included ward chairpersons, elected ward members, and ward officials responsible for local planning, budgeting, administration and service delivery. Among them, 24 were women and 40 were men. Their participation ensured that both community and government perspectives were reflected in the accountability process.

Women first met in facilitated discussion groups where they were able to openly analyse challenges and prioritize issues before engaging with government representatives.

This approach helped reduce power imbalances and enabled women, including those from marginalized caste, ethnic and social groups, to articulate common concerns and collectively identify solutions.

At the same time, ward representatives independently assessed local governance performance and service delivery. The two groups subsequently compared findings, discussed differences in perceptions, identified areas of consensus, and developed evidence-based recommendations. This process transformed individual concerns into a collective voice supported by community-generated evidence.



The priorities identified by women reflected a broad vision of inclusive development and included:

- Access to quality seeds, fertilizers, irrigation and agricultural inputs;
- Agricultural extension services, collection centres and market access;
- Health services, birthing centres and female health workers;
- Safe drinking water and local infrastructure improvements;
- Meaningful participation of women in planning and budgeting processes;
- Transparent governance and grievance redress mechanisms;
- Prevention of gender-based violence, child marriage, dowry practices and other discriminatory social norms.

The subsequent public hearings created formal platforms for dialogue between rural women farmers and local governments. Women representatives presented consolidated CSC findings directly to mayors, deputy mayors, ward chairpersons, planning officials and other stakeholders. Local governments publicly responded to the issues raised, negotiated practical solutions, and agreed on joint action plans outlining priority actions, responsible institutions and implementation timelines.

Results and lessons learned

The initiative generated results that extended well beyond participation alone.

Most importantly, women engaged with local governments not as isolated individuals raising individual concerns, but as organized groups presenting collectively generated evidence. This strengthened the credibility of their recommendations and significantly enhanced their ability to influence local decision-making processes.

A defining feature of the approach was the transformation of individual experiences into collective evidence-based advocacy. Rather than approaching local governments with isolated complaints, women collectively identified issues, prioritized concerns through discussion and voting, generated scores, documented strengths and gaps, and engaged decision-makers with a unified agenda for change.

The process also improved accountability and mutual understanding between communities and local governments. In several locations, local government representatives initially assessed their performance on women's participation and accountability much more positively than women themselves. Comparing the two assessments fostered constructive dialogue and helped local officials better understand why existing mechanisms were not translating into meaningful participation for women.

Beyond the commitments secured, the initiative contributed to a shift in the relationship between communities and local governments. The process encouraged greater openness, responsiveness and

recognition of women's priorities within local governance systems.

It demonstrated that accountability mechanisms can do more than identify problems. They can also change mindsets, strengthen trust, and promote more responsive governance.

The CSC findings further confirmed that barriers to women's participation were often structural rather than procedural. The intervention therefore addressed not merely women's presence in planning spaces, but the underlying factors that limited their ability to influence decisions and resource allocation.

As a result of the public hearings, local governments committed to:

- Strengthening information dissemination ahead of planning and budgeting processes;
- Improving women's participation in local planning and budgeting;
- Institutionalizing public hearings and grievance mechanisms;
- Expanding agricultural, irrigation and health services;
- Supporting women's livelihoods and economic empowerment initiatives; and
- Promoting social inclusion and prevention of gender-based violence.

While comprehensive follow-up of all commitments is ongoing, early evidence suggests that several priorities raised by women farmers are already beginning to be reflected in local planning and budgeting decisions. For example, Ward No. 1 of Laxmipur Patari Rural Municipality allocated NPR 450,000 (USD 2,960) for skill development programmes and prioritized the installation of a drinking water tube well in response to demands raised by women farmers through the accountability process.

Similarly, Ward No. 5 of Karjanha Municipality prioritized irrigation-related investments, reflecting concerns and priorities identified by rural women farmers during the CSC and Public Hearing processes. These examples demonstrate the potential of citizen-led accountability mechanisms to influence local development priorities and resource allocation.

The approach also created an important foundation for more gender-responsive governance and budgeting. By generating evidence on women's priorities before the annual planning and budgeting cycle, local governments were better positioned to consider and respond to the needs of rural women farmers in future plans, programmes and budget allocations. This helps bridge the gap between citizen participation and gender-responsive decision-making.

As the public hearings were conducted ahead of the annual planning and budgeting cycle, follow-up will continue through budget reviews and programme monitoring to assess the extent to which these commitments are reflected in local policies, plans and budget allocations.

Key insights

- Meaningful participation requires more than attendance; it requires opportunities to influence decisions.
- Structured and inclusive engagement spaces enable women to articulate priorities more confidently and effectively.
- Community-generated evidence strengthens advocacy and contributes to more constructive engagement with duty bearers.
- Citizen-led accountability mechanisms can help bridge perception gaps between communities and local governments.
- Public commitments and joint action plans provide an important foundation for accountability and follow-up.
- Combining evidence generation with direct dialogue creates a practical and scalable approach for strengthening women's influence in local governance.

Building on this momentum, continued engagement with local governments will be essential to support implementation, monitor progress, and strengthen accountability for commitments made.

There is also significant potential to institutionalize Community Score Cards and Public Hearings within regular local government planning and budgeting cycles, enabling citizen engagement to become a sustained governance practice rather than a one-time intervention. Embedding these mechanisms within existing local governance processes can help ensure that citizens, particularly women and marginalized groups, have continuous opportunities to influence decisions that affect their lives and livelihoods.

This good practice complements other JP RWEE interventions that strengthen rural women's leadership, collective organization, gender-responsive planning and budgeting, and engagement with local governments. Leadership development initiatives help women build the confidence and skills required to participate effectively, while the Citizen-Led Accountability Model provides a practical platform through which those capacities can be translated into influence and action.

The evidence generated through the accountability process can further inform gender-responsive budgeting, Gender Equality and Social Inclusion (GESI) mainstreaming and broader policy advocacy efforts. Together, these interventions create a pathway from women's empowerment and collective action to evidence-based advocacy, institutional dialogue, and more accountable and inclusive local governance.

Way forward

The next step is to systematically follow up on commitments made during the public hearings and assess the extent to which women's priorities are reflected in local policies, plans, budgets and service delivery.

Initial evidence from participating local governments indicates that some of the priorities raised by rural women farmers are already beginning to influence local planning and resource allocation.



Potential for replication and scale-up

The Citizen-Led Accountability Model demonstrates a practical, inclusive and replicable approach for strengthening women's influence in local governance. By combining community-generated evidence, structured dialogue and institutional accountability mechanisms, it moves beyond participation towards meaningful influence over local decision-making.

The approach enables women, including those from marginalized groups, to collectively identify priorities, engage directly with decision-makers, and contribute to planning and budgeting processes in a more informed and organized manner.

The model also strengthens accountability and trust between communities and local governments by creating regular opportunities for dialogue, reflection and joint problem-solving. Emerging evidence from participating local governments suggests that priorities identified by women farmers are beginning to be reflected in local planning and resource allocation decisions, demonstrating the model's potential to contribute to more responsive and gender-responsive governance.

As a low-cost and adaptable approach that builds on existing local governance structures, it can be replicated by local governments and development partners seeking to promote inclusive planning,



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This brief was developed jointly with the
Nepal Programme Management Unit

Joint Programme on Rural Women's Economic Empowerment

Rome, Italy

Required citation: FAO, IFAD, UN Women and WFP. 2026. Strengthening Rural Women's Roles in Local Planning Through Citizen-Led Accountability Model - JP RWEE good practice, October 2026. Rome.

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