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Project Management Update from Nepal
Yamanta Raj Niroula
Regional Report

Project Management Update from Nepal[1]

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Project Management in Nepal's Development Sector: Current Practices and Emerging Trends

1.   Introduction

Effective project management is central to Nepal's development sector. All major actors; government bodies, non-governmental organizations (NGO), and United Nations (UN) agencies; depend on it to translate plans into tangible outcomes. Recently, project managers have faced a host of new challenges: rapid infrastructure expansion, the transition to federal governance, evolving donor expectations, and added pressure to achieve global targets like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and strengthen climate resilience.

This report explores how NGOs, UN agencies, and development partners are currently managing projects in Nepal. It highlights ongoing changes on the ground, drawing from examples such as Karnali Province's digital project database, earthquake reconstruction efforts, and the national nutrition program. Using data from 2023 to 2025, the report offers clear recommendations to help Nepal's development sector improve project management - because the consequences are too significant to accept anything less. It also looks at where current practices fall short and what practical steps can help project teams deliver more consistently, on time, and with clearer accountability.

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2.   Background

Project management in Nepal has been influenced by decades of foreign aid and political transition. In the 1950s and 1960s, most projects were designed centrally with foreign technical assistance and little local involvement. Formal project management practices were largely absent. Over time, the project portfolio grew to include roads, electrification, and social programs. The 1990s marked a turning point, with the Social Welfare Act and NGO Regulation establishing oversight bodies such as the Social Welfare Council (SWC). By the 2000s, several local and international NGOs were implementing donor-funded projects, relying on ad-hoc methods or personal experience rather than standardized frameworks.

Major crises reshaped project management practice. The Maoist insurgency (1996-2006) and the 2015 earthquakes triggered large-scale reconstruction programs. The National Reconstruction Authority created Central-Level Project Implementation Units (CLPIU) to manage housing grants and provide technical support. Donors also followed this model, setting up parallel Project Management Units (PMU). Despite these institutional efforts, several weaknesses remained evident. A recent Auditor General's report observed that many projects started without detailed reports, suffered from vague implementation modalities, and experienced delays due to poor coordination (Office of the Auditor General, 2023).

Nepal's project management history shows strong dependence on foreign aid and reactive institutions, with limited local ownership or professionalization. Over the past decade, federal restructuring, growing focus on inclusion, and evolving donor expectations have begun to transform the practices. However, legacy issues remain, as donor-driven project cycles still dominate and there is an ongoing shortage of formally trained project management professionals.

3.   Current Project Management Practices

3.1.   Professional Recognition and Capacity

Within NGOs, UN agencies, and government programs in Nepal, project management roles are rarely formalized. Few organizations maintain dedicated "Project Manager" positions staffed by individuals with certified training. Instead, responsibilities for planning and oversight are typically assigned to program officers, engineers, or field coordinators, who pick up project management skills on the job. As a result, project design and delivery depend more on individual experience than on consistent methods.

This skills gap shows clearly in data. The Project Management Institute (PMI) projects that Nepal will need 27,000 to 35,000 additional qualified project managers by 2035, an increase of 50-70 percent over the current workforce (PMI, 2025). In practice, however, certified professionals (such as PMPs or PRINCE2 practitioners) are concentrated in large agencies and remain rare in NGOs or smaller programs. Reports note that NGO management duties are generally assigned informally, with little budget set aside for project management expertise (Bhattarai, et al., 2024). High staff turnover makes matters

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worse, as personnel shift between NGOs or into the private sector, leading to recurring loss of institutional knowledge.

Donors have tried to close these gaps through capacity-building. For example, United States Agency for International Development (USAID)'s Civil Society: Mutual Accountability Project (CS:MAP) introduced Organizational Capacity Assessments and customized training for Nepalese NGOs. UN agencies and multilateral partners have also organized workshops on monitoring, financial management, and technical skills for both NGO and government staff. But these efforts are fragmented and rely on external funding. Evaluations show that training is often one-off, with little follow-up, leaving minimal long-term improvement.

While professional credentials are slowly increasing in Nepal, progress remains uneven, and sustained capacity development is still a persistent need.

3.2. Common Methodologies and Tools

Development organizations in Nepal use a mix of traditional and emerging project management methods. In planning, most projects continue to rely on Logical Frameworks (Logframes) and Results-Based Management (RBM) as prescribed by donors. These frameworks define objectives, outputs, and indicators in advance and form the basis for detailed proposals that include activity schedules and milestones. For day-to-day management, NGOs usually depend on basic tools like Microsoft Excel and Word. Gantt charts are often maintained in spreadsheets, and Logframe matrices are used for monitoring. These methods are widely understood but provide only limited visibility into real-time project progress.

A recent development is the digitalization of project information systems. Provincial and district governments, supported by United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the European Union (EU), are beginning to implement Project Information Management Systems (PIMS). The leading example is Karnali Province's GIS-based PIMS, launched in 2023. The system consolidates data from all provincial development projects including government and NGO activities, into a single interactive database. Users can filter projects by location, sector, budget, or implementing agency, and view them on a map. The web-based interface allows local officials to track progress and identify funding gaps. Karnali's PIMS listed 748 active projects including sectors such as health, education, and agriculture (UNDP, 2024). The system also tags projects that contribute to gender equality or climate objectives. Beyond compliance, it enables cross-sector analysis and evidence-based planning.

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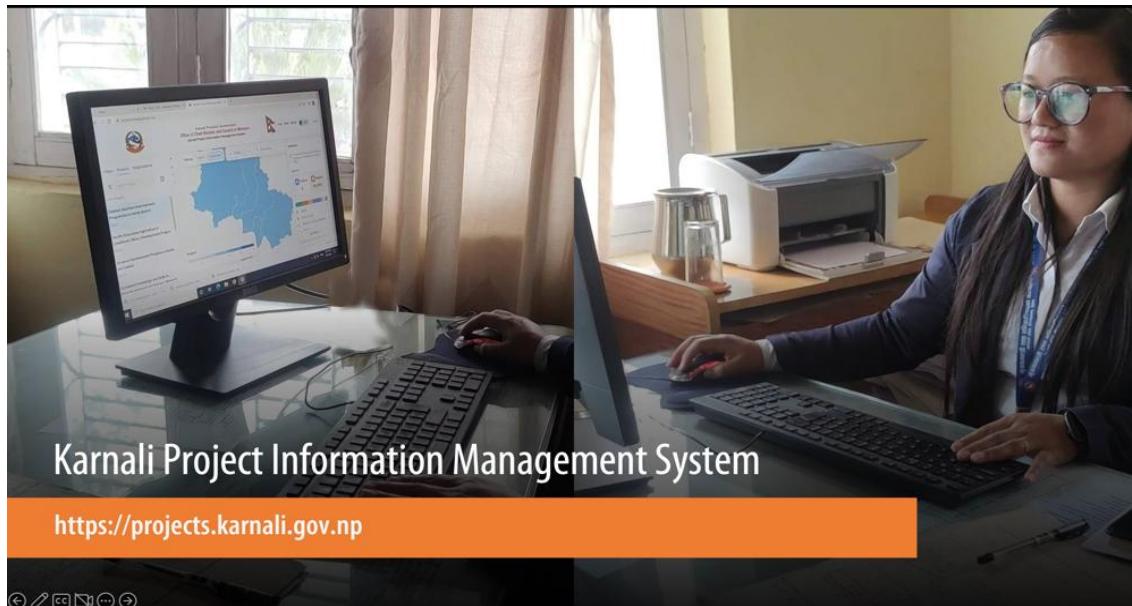
Karnali Project Information Management System
https://projects.karnali.gov.np

A Karnali provincial official views the GIS-based PIMS interface (Source: UNDP Nepal)

The system provides a real-time dashboard of project locations and implementation status. Following Karnali's experience, other provinces such as Lumbini have begun developing similar systems. Beyond GIS platforms, NGOs and UN-funded projects are increasingly using mobile data collection applications (ODK, KoBoToolbox, SurveyCTO) for field surveys, as well as cloud-based monitoring and evaluation platforms. Mobile data capture is now common in public health and education, where it improves both speed and accuracy. However, access remains uneven, as many smaller NGOs continue to depend on paper forms and infrequent site visits.

Tool / Methodology	Description	Adoption in Nepal	Examples
Logical Framework (LogFrame)	Planning framework linking objectives, outputs, and indicators.	Universally applied (mandated by donors).	Standard in nearly all NGO project proposals and government plans.
Geographic Information Systems (GIS)	Spatial mapping of projects and beneficiaries.	Emerging within government; piloted in select NGOs.	Karnali's GIS-based PIMS; occasional GIS maps in infrastructure projects.
Project Management Software (e.g., MS Project)	Specialized scheduling and resource management tools.	Rare among NGOs; spreadsheets dominate.	ADB and large contractors use MS Project; smaller NGOs rely on Excel Gantt charts.
Mobile Data Collection	Applications for surveys and monitoring (e.g., ODK, SurveyCTO).	Growing use, especially in health and education.	Vaccination surveys by health NGOs; tablets used for school monitoring.
Cloud-based MIS / Dashboards	Centralized databases and real-time dashboards for project tracking.	Limited but expanding adoption.	DHIS2 in health sector; Karnali's PIMS for multi-sector projects; NGO CRMs for beneficiary data.

Summary of Tools and Their Use

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Large NGOs and UN projects often establish PMUs composed of engineers, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) officers, and procurement specialists, especially for infrastructure or emergency programs. However, smaller organizations continue with simpler manual approaches. Despite the gradual shift toward digital tools, basic practices remain common. For example, NGOs are still required to post signboards at project sites showing donor information and budgets. Photographs and community meetings are also widely used, ensuring a degree of transparency in areas with limited internet access.

4. Reporting and Evaluation Practices

Nepal's development sector remains largely donor-driven, particularly in reporting and accountability. Almost all projects, whether managed by international NGOs, local NGOs, or government bodies, must comply with detailed Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) and reporting requirements set by donors. These typically include quarterly progress reports, annual reports, and financial statements aligned with pre-approved results frameworks. These formats are often rigid. Project-specific periodic reporting, monitoring and evaluation reporting, and other need-based reporting, have put the NGOs under tremendous administrative pressure, which sometimes diverts their focus to compliance instead of program quality (Bhattarai, et al., 2024). In practice, staff can become so focused on filling forms and tracking indicators that reflection and learning receive less attention.

The emphasis on data has nonetheless encouraged more systematic monitoring. Most NGOs track outputs such as the number of trainings conducted or kits distributed. Many hire dedicated M&E officers design indicator matrices, collect field data, and update dashboards. Larger UN programs often commission third-party evaluations to review results mid-term and at project completion, while government agencies normally hire consulting firms for external audits. However, studies highlight a recurring problem: data collection and evaluation frequently serve reporting obligations rather than adaptive management. For example, UNDP's evaluation of an SDG support project concluded that "monitoring and evaluation tasks seemed to serve more for reporting purposes than collecting feedback, documenting learning for improvement and informed decision-making" (Khanal & Tuladhar, 2023). As a result, evaluation findings are not consistently integrated into project adjustments, limiting opportunities for course correction.

Some progress has been made in introducing participatory accountability mechanisms. Social audits, which allow beneficiaries to review project finances and outputs, are required under certain laws and have been piloted by NGOs. In the education sector, community schools are legally mandated to conduct annual social audits (Kafle, et al., 2012). A World Bank study found that approximately 83 percent of schools carried out such audits, though many faced challenges due to limited capacity and inadequate information. When implemented effectively, these processes identified gaps and increased community ownership. Building on this model, several NGOs have adopted beneficiary feedback sessions and public report-backs. Regular district- and provincial-level coordination meetings also function as informal accountability platforms where NGOs, donors, and government representatives exchange updates and raise concerns.

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Efforts are also underway to reduce duplication in reporting. The SWC has proposed creating a centralized NGO project repository, the Social Sector Information Management System (SSIMS), where organizations could submit project data in a single format rather than filing multiple reports. As of 2024, the system had not yet been fully implemented (Bhattarai, et al., 2024), but once operational it could offer policymakers and donors a consolidated overview of NGO activities. Similarly, donors are exploring the use of harmonized indicators aligned with the SDG, which would allow multiple projects to report progress against common benchmarks.

In summary, reporting practices in Nepal are largely shaped by donor requirements. While these frameworks bring structure and consistency, they often add reporting workloads that limit time for reflection and program improvement. Two areas need attention:

1. greater use of digital reporting platforms and shared management information systems to cut down manual work, and
2. wider use of participatory evaluation tools, such as social audits and community scorecards, so monitoring data feeds into better decisions and results.

Aspect	Current Practice	Emerging Solutions
Reporting focus	Compliance with donor templates (quarterly, annual, financial reports).	Streamlined systems (e.g., SWC's planned SSIMS) for centralized reporting.
Use of M&E data	Primarily for donor accountability, findings rarely feed back into project design.	Participatory approaches (social audits, community scorecards) to link data with local decision-making.
Tools & Systems	Excel, Word, paper-based forms; fragmented data storage.	Digital dashboards, cloud-based MIS, and harmonized SDG indicators across projects.
Capacity & Roles	Heavy workload on program staff; limited specialized training.	Dedicated M&E officers; donor-funded capacity-building workshops.
Accountability mechanisms	External audits and third-party evaluations.	Beneficiary feedback sessions; public report-backs at community or provincial forums.

Summary of Reporting Practices

5. Challenges

Project managers in Nepal continue to face persistent challenges, most of which arise from limited capacity, institutional fragmentation, and resource constraints.

- **Human Resource Gaps:** Nepal has yet to build a sufficient pool of trained project managers. In both NGOs and government, complex programs are often led by individuals without formal project management qualifications. This contributes to ad-hoc planning and inconsistent quality. When projects encounter obstacles, such as budget shortfalls or community resistance, there are few senior professionals available to provide technical guidance. High staff turnover further weakens institutional memory, as lessons learned are frequently lost once project teams disband.

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- **Governance and Coordination:** The federal system, with three tiers of government, often blurs lines of responsibility. Multiple agencies may intervene in the same sector; for example, road projects sometimes involve different ministries working in parallel. Most sectors lack a central Project Management Office (PMO) to provide consistent oversight, leading to duplication and delays. Audit reports have cited cases where major projects suffered from "non-approval of environmental reports" or overlapping jurisdictions due to weak coordination. NGOs also face parallel demands from central and local governments, while donor-funded projects sometimes bypass local planning processes, reducing long-term sustainability and local ownership.

- **Financial and Procedural Constraints:** Funding unpredictability remains a widespread concern. Late donor disbursements or mismatched fiscal calendars can bring projects to a halt. Oversight agencies have noted that even with intensive monitoring, several "National Pride Projects" remained below 30 percent completion because construction began before feasibility studies or full budgets were finalized. In the NGO sector, multiple donor compliance rules, each with its own financial restrictions and procurement standards, place a heavy administrative burden. Audit reports have criticized practices such as end-year fund shifting ("virements") and preferential hiring, which undermine transparency. At the same time, limited administrative budgets mean that planning and M&E functions are often under-resourced. Many NGOs continue to rely on basic cash ledgers or disconnected spreadsheets, which complicate reporting.

- **Technological and Data Limitations:** Digital tools are being introduced, but gaps remain in connectivity and user capacity. As a result, data often sits in silos: project teams may track outputs but lack integrated systems to monitor outcomes. A 2024 PMI report projected a rising demand for IT-enabled project management, yet Nepal's digital skills shortage, especially in rural areas, is a key bottleneck.

The table below summarizes some of the core challenges and potential strategies to address them:

Capacity Challenge	Strategic Response
Shortage of trained project management staff	Expand professional training programs (PMI, PRINCE2, university-level courses); establish formal project management career tracks; promote mentoring schemes.
Fragmented institutional oversight	Create cross-sector PM coordination bodies (PMOs) at provincial and federal levels; clarify agency roles; convene joint planning forums.
Cumbersome donor compliance requirements	Harmonize donor reporting frameworks; invest in digital reporting platforms; train NGOs in streamlined M&E practices.
Limited technology use	Introduce user-friendly MIS tools (e.g., PIMS); provide ICT training; pilot e-tools for government and NGOs.
Weak community engagement	Mainstream participatory mechanisms (social audits, beneficiary feedback sessions); strengthen local monitoring capacity.
Inadequate financing continuity	Align donor funding calendars with national cycles; establish contingency funds; improve financial transparency to maintain donor confidence.

Core Challenges and Potential Strategies

6.   Emerging Trends

Even with the challenges, several encouraging shifts are changing how projects are managed in Nepal's development sector:

- **Digital and Geospatial Systems:** The Karnali PIMS shows how digital dashboards and GIS are moving project management towards real-time, evidence-based oversight. Provincial governments are adopting these tools in line with Nepal's Digital Nepal Framework. NGOs are also trying mobile-based monitoring, cloud databases, and even AI for early disaster warning. As internet access spreads, such tools are likely to expand, making projects more transparent and adaptive.

- **Focus on Outcomes and Evidence:** With the SDGs as a national priority, projects are expected to show clear contributions to targets. Donors now require tracking of gender equality and social inclusion (GESI) outcomes, not just activity counts. Karnali's PIMS, for example, tags projects by SDG goal and GESI focus. UN agencies and NGOs are also using baselines and evaluations to adjust plans during implementation, marking a shift from monitoring outputs to learning-oriented management.

- **Decentralized Collaboration:** Federalism has pushed more authority to provinces and municipalities. Local governments are now preparing their own plans and budgets, sometimes with technical support from NGOs and UN bodies. As a result, NGOs must work with both central and local governments. This has given rise to multi-stakeholder steering committees that include officials, communities, and donors. These structures improve ownership and relevance, while donors themselves are slowly moving toward pooled or country-led funding instead of isolated projects.

- **Professionalization and Standards:** Project management is gaining recognition as a career path in Nepal. A local PMI chapter is being set up, and more professionals are obtaining PMP certification. Universities are also considering project management modules in development and business programs. Although this is still at an early stage, these changes are starting to build a more consistent professional practice.

- **Participatory and Accountability Tools:** Beyond social audits, NGOs are testing citizen scorecards and mobile feedback apps to spot issues quickly, such as poor-quality construction. Some donors are experimenting with blockchain and digital ledgers to track aid delivery. These approaches remain at the pilot-level but signal openness to new accountability methods in the sector.

- **Institutionalization through the M&E Act:** The Monitoring and Evaluation Act requires major government projects to undergo structured evaluation. Provincial and local planning commissions are also tightening reporting requirements linked to the SDGs. Over time, this national push for stronger evaluation may influence how NGO and donor-funded projects are assessed as well.

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In summary, project management in Nepal is gradually aligning with global standards. Digital tools, stronger evaluation systems, and professional training are spreading, while local context, language, culture, and community practices remain central. The most effective projects tend to combine modern approaches with traditional knowledge, ensuring both accountability and relevance.

7.   Case Studies

- **Karnali Province PIMS (2023-Present)**

The PIMS in Karnali Province highlights the shift toward technology-driven project oversight. Initiated by the Karnali Provincial Planning Commission with UNDP and EU support, PIMS serves as a centralized database of all development projects in the province. Users can log in and immediately view details such as the number of water projects in a district or which municipalities have approved climate-related interventions. By 2024, the platform tracked 748 projects across multiple sectors. Projects are also tagged by SDG target and gender focus, allowing stakeholders to visualize progress toward social priorities.

Public access has strengthened accountability. Local officials note that PIMS has improved coordination, as ministries and NGOs consult the system to avoid duplication and identify gaps. Provincial authorities also use the tool in budgeting, aligning resources with planned interventions. The model is now being replicated: Lumbini Province has begun adopting it, and the Ministry of Federal Affairs is exploring a national roll-out. Karnali's experience demonstrates how digital tools can integrate efforts across agencies and levels of government; an approach rarely applied at this scale in Nepal before 2023.
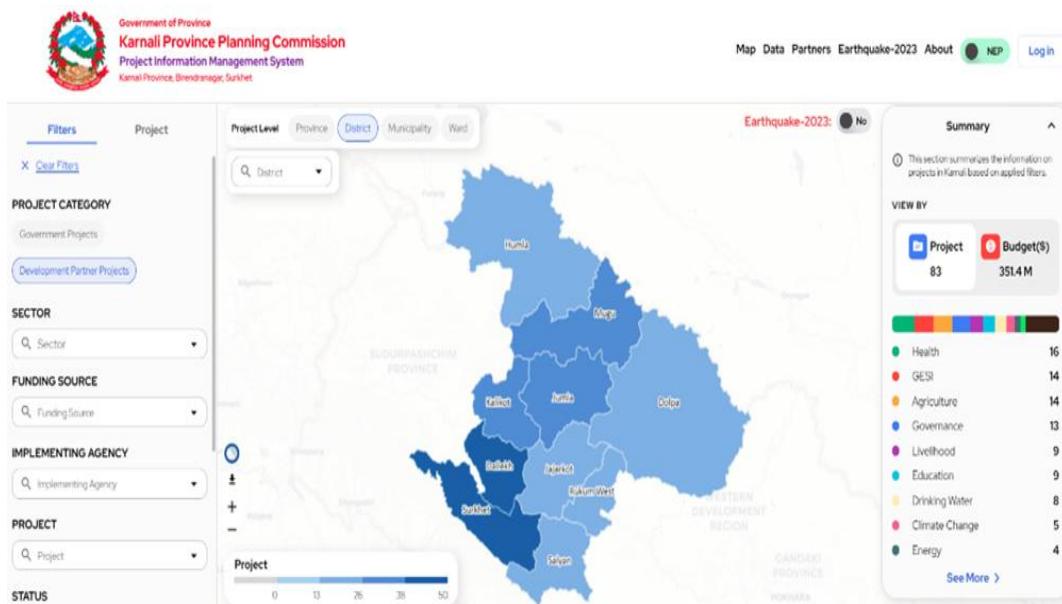
Screenshot from Karnali Province's PIMS, showing the distribution of active projects across municipalities (dark blue = more projects). This GIS-based system allows filtering by sector, funding source etc. (Source: PIMS Portal)

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- **Post-Earthquake Reconstruction (2016-2020)**

Following the 2015 earthquakes, Nepal confronted the challenge of rebuilding hundreds of thousands of homes. The National Reconstruction Authority (NRA) introduced a sectoral project management structure by establishing two CLPIUs in Kathmandu: one under the Ministry of Urban Development (technical and building standards) and another under the Ministry of Federal Affairs and General Administration (grant payments and safeguards). These CLPIUs acted as centralized project management offices, coordinating donors and government initiatives under a common framework.

The CLPIUs harmonized reporting formats, standardized monitoring, and managed nationwide housing grant disbursement. This brought order to what had previously been fragmented, donor-driven efforts. At the same time, the arrangement highlighted risks of over-centralization, as decision-making bottlenecks in Kathmandu occasionally slowed progress. The experience emphasized the importance of balancing central coordination with building provincial and local project management capacity.

- **Integrated Nutrition Program: "Suaahara II" (2016-2023)**

Suaahara II, funded by USAID, focused on improving nutrition outcomes through a multisector approach spanning health, agriculture, Water, Sanitation & Hygiene (WASH), and gender across 42 districts. Given its scope, the program required a strong project management framework. A unified M&E system was developed from the outset, with all implementing partners reporting on a core set of indicators such as child dietary diversity and women's nutrition. Regular coordination meetings ensured that data from different sectors fed into joint decision-making, for example, revising training content when targets lagged.

Adaptive management was central. Field teams collected survey data on tablets, enabling near real-time reporting and faster responses. Community volunteers also contributed monthly updates, creating a continuous flow of information that informed management decisions. This approach improved coherence across multiple partners and government counterparts. An evaluation in 2021 concluded that Suaahara's integrated design worked because it was backed by a dedicated management unit to oversee interdependencies, a model now influencing newer projects in areas like climate-smart agriculture and education.

These cases illustrate key lessons:

- Digital systems (e.g., Karnali PIMS) unify fragmented data and strengthen coordination.
- Centralized management units (e.g., NRA's CLPIUs) bring consistency to large-scale, multi-donor programs but must be balanced with local capacity.
- Shared M&E frameworks (e.g., Suaahara II) help multi-partner initiatives align around common results and adapt strategies in real time.

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8.   Conclusion

Project management in Nepal's NGO and development sector is undergoing steady change. While elements of ad-hoc planning and donor dependency still linger, new practices are pointing in a stronger direction. Digital platforms such as Karnali's PIMS are improving access to real-time data; updated monitoring and evaluation frameworks are shifting attention from outputs to outcomes; and professionalization, through training and PMOs, is gradually taking root. But constraints in resources, coordination, and staffing continue to challenge managers on the ground.

For project managers, the priorities ahead are clear. Use technology to make data visible and actionable. Treat every report and evaluation as a learning tool. Involve communities as active partners to ensure projects respond to real needs. And most importantly, invest in people, through training, mentoring, and empowering local project leaders who balance international standards with Nepal's own realities.

Looking toward 2026 and beyond, Nepal's development goals, from infrastructure and energy to health, education, and climate resilience, will increasingly depend on strong project management. By applying best practices in ways suited to local conditions, NGOs and agencies can deliver with greater efficiency and accountability. Evidence already shows a sector moving toward more transparent, outcome-focused management. With sustained commitment, Nepal's project managers will remain at the core of turning development strategies into measurable progress.

AI Use Declaration

In preparing this article, AI tools were used only to make the language clearer and easier to read. All content was written, reviewed, and edited under human oversight. The author takes full responsibility for the accuracy, integrity, and originality of the work.

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Yamanta Raj Niroula is an accomplished Project Management Professional with more than 17 years of rich experience in engineering, infrastructure development, and project management across a variety of global settings. His skill set includes project planning, procurement, contract management, stakeholder engagement, and risk management, all with a particular emphasis on delivering projects in remote and developing areas under challenging conditions.

Yamanta holds a Bachelor of Engineering in Civil Engineering and a Master of Arts in Rural Development, along with a Diploma in Civil Engineering. He is a certified Project Management Professional (PMP®) and an active member of the Project Management Institute (PMI) since 2010.

Yamanta has extensive experience in overseeing construction projects from the initial planning stages to final evaluations, Yamanta specializes in the management of complex processes such as procurement, contracting, and project execution while ensuring efficiency and compliance with regulations. By keeping abreast of industry trends and innovations, he ensures that the projects he manages are sustainable, forward-looking, and adaptable to the ever-changing environment.

Yamanta has successfully managed large-scale infrastructure projects, including roads, electrical infrastructure, wastewater treatment plants, logistics facilities, and disaster recovery programs. He has served in various capacities as Project Controls Specialist, Design Manager, Planning Manager, Engineer and Project Manager across international organizations and UN agencies in Nepal, the Maldives, Singapore, Afghanistan, the Philippines, Nigeria, Yemen, Sudan, and Ethiopia.

He has been responsible for project design, planning, execution, and control, ensuring timely delivery, budget adherence, and quality assurance while enhancing overall program outputs.

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