

The background of the page is composed of several large, solid-colored rectangles. At the top is a wide orange rectangle. Below it, the page is split into a large green rectangle on the left and a light blue rectangle on the right. The bottom section is divided into a large red rectangle on the left and a medium blue rectangle on the right. A horizontal row of four smaller rectangles (dark red, dark blue, white, and dark red) separates the green and light blue sections from the bottom red and blue sections. The title text is centered within the green rectangle.

Freedom Forum's Annual Report- 2013/14

1. INTRODUCTION:

1.1 Brief Introduction to Organization:

Freedom Forum is a non-governmental organization, working for the institutionalization of democracy, protection and promotion of human rights, press freedom and freedom of expression and right to information in Nepal. This is a purely social organization registered with the District Administration Office of Kathmandu and the Social Welfare Council of Nepal. Its head office is in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Basically, the organization works in the area of policy research, evidence-based advocacy and campaign, capacity building and media mobilization. Freedom Forum has five regional contact offices in regional centers to coordinate programs at local level. It has 13 executive committee members and 50 general members.

1.2 Aims and Objectives:

- Promotion of democracy and institutionalization of democratic republic in Nepal
- Promotion and protection of press freedom and freedom of expression
- Monitoring the situation of human rights and civil liberty
- Taking necessary initiative for reconciliation and peace building
- Contribute to promote public accountability and transparent governance.
- Promotion of the Right to Information through building capacity of demand and supply side.
- Provide input to the Constituent Assembly during constitution drafting process.
- Undertake action research and advocacy on its main thematic areas.
- Contribute to enhance public financial management and open data.

1.3 About the Report:

This is an annual report explaining the major activities accomplished and achievements made by Freedom Forum during a year-long period spanning from July 16, 2013 to July 15, 2014. The primary objective of the report is to document the actions, learning, observations and outcomes of the organizational initiatives and demonstrate its track record and competence to execute ideas aligning the key themes of the organization for the period of fiscal year 2013/14. The report is expected to serve on attainment of organization's objectives and to consolidate the contribution Freedom Forum made to the country's national development objective.

Information contained in this report have been widely taken from the regular newsletters, project documents, programme completion reports, press releases, website updates, meeting and discussion notes, media coverage and sharing through social media. This report has been prepared based on the historical records. Reports are built on reports of previous periods for consistency of the report.

2. Major Activities and Accomplishments:

Freedom Forum Carries out several activities as core activities on each theme even when there is no external funding. Other activities are conducted with support of partners based on agreed terms and conditions. The major activities Freedom Forum carried out during the F/Y 2070/71 are presented in a following manner.

2.1 Partnership Programmes:

Partnership programme refers the projects or interventions executed in collaboration with different funding agencies.

I. PROJECT NAME: LOCAL GOVERNANCE ACTION RESEARCH PROGRAMME

DURATION: April 2012 to December 2013

BENEFICIARIES: Training to 10 officials and 45 youths of five municipalities namely Bhimdatta, Narayan, Byas, Dhulikhel and Dharan were the direct beneficiaries of the initiative. Beneficiary citizens of these municipalities were the ultimate beneficiaries.

FUNDING AGENCY: The Asia Foundation

GENERAL OBJECTIVE OF THE INITIATIVE

- Enhancing social accountability of local government through increased access to information

MAJOR ACTIVITIES

As one of the implementing partners, Freedom Forum executed the programs focused on increasing demand for, as well as supply of information in the selected municipalities. The major activities were;

- Trainings to youths on the demand side,
- Training to information officers on the supply side and
- Engaging youths in promoting RTI

Trainings to campaigners was carried during fiscal year 2012/13. Training to officials and youth engagement in promotion of RTI were the activities conducted this fiscal year. Ten officials including

Executive Officer and Information Officers were provided 3-day training on July 2013 in Kathmandu. The training contents were;

- Concepts and principles of RTI
- Constitutional and Legal mechanism in RTI in Nepal and their development
- Proactive disclosure of information
- Classification of information
- Record management, roles of executive officers and information officers.
- Bridging the gap between demand and supply side of information

Trained youths from same municipalities were encouraged to file RTI applications seeking strategic information from each municipality. They were also engaged in conducting orientation programs on RTI at the community level. All RTI applications and response of municipalities to those applications were tracked and analyzed as one of the component of action research. The other tools had been implemented by Samudayik Sarathi, NEFEJ and IIDS. Final report of action research will be published by the Asia Foundation.

OUTCOMES

- Increased demand for information at the five selected municipalities
- Improved readiness and capacity to proactively disclose information and address demand for information on the supply side &
- Enhanced awareness among people about Right to Information

II. PROJECT NAME: LOCAL GOVERNANCE ACTION RESEARCH PHASE II

This is expansion of previous year's initiative. This program has been targeted to 20 different municipalities. Municipalities have been categorized into four clusters of five municipalities each namely Dhangadhi, Butwal, Pokhara and Hetauda.

DURATION: 25 April 2013 to 25 January 2014

FUNDING AGENCY: The Asia Foundation

BENEFICIARIES:

645 stakeholders of 20 selected municipalities including about 120 municipality officials, 120 civil society representatives including journalists and 405 representatives of political party are the direct beneficiaries of the initiative. About 500 cadres of political parties are expected to be

benefited as representative is encouraged to share knowledge with their cadres. About a million people residing to these municipalities are expected to have benefit from the result of this initiative.

PROJECT OBJECTIVE

The major objectives of the initiative is to enhance municipal governance by

- Improving access of citizens to fiscal information of municipalities and
- Reducing information asymmetry among citizens and political parties

ACTIVITIES TO BE CARRIED OUT

A. Technical support to IGD:

Institute for Governance and Development (IGD) is a partner organization on this initiative. Freedom Forum will support IGD in building RTI friendly websites of municipalities to promote proactive disclosure of information as required by RTI Act 2007.

B. Trainings on RTI :

2-day trainings on use of Right to information will be imparted to the officials of municipalities, representatives of political parties to both demand and supply side and demand side of information in all twenty municipalities. Municipalities will be selected by IGD in coordination with Freedom Forum and MoFALD. Relatively developed and under developed municipalities will be selected based on socio economic development, MCPM score, population and geographic location.

C. Training on Media Communication

Municipalities are required to timely update and release information for public. Media plays important role to make that information reached to the target audience. Two slots of trainings will be provided on media communication to information officers and journalists to enhance functional relationship between municipalities and journalists to enhance access of citizens on access to easily understandable information. Tools and techniques of disclosure and dissemination of information will be the main focus of training.

D. Monitoring and Tracking

Cluster managers to be appointed by IGD in four different clusters namely Dhangadhi, Butwal, Pokhara and Hetauda will monitor the cases of RTI applications in the municipalities and status of proactive disclosure of information through the websites and other tools. A comprehensive report will then be prepared jointly by IGD and Freedom Forum as a report of action research.

Among above activities technical support has been provided to IGD to prepare content details required for municipality to promote proactive disclosure of fiscal information. Monitoring and tracking form has been developed and a syllabus for trainings has been prepared. Trainings have been planned from the first week of August 2014.

IV. PROJECT NAME: ENHANCING ACCESSIBILITY AND TRANSPARENCY OF NATIONAL BUDGET FOR PUBLIC IN NEPAL

DURATION: June 2012-June 2013

BENEFICIARIES: Direct beneficiaries of programme are 40 Journalists, Main PFM actors including Ministry of Finance, National Planning Commission, Ministry of Education, Auditor general and general public at large are the ultimate beneficiaries.

FUNDING AGENCY: Centre for International Studies and Cooperation (CECI) under Programme for Accountability in Nepal (PRAN)

PROJECT OBJECTIVES:

- strengthening transparency, efficiency and inclusiveness of national public financial management

MAJOR INITIATIVES

- **Independent gender and pro-poor budget and revenue analysis** of education sector was carried out based on past five years' budget allocation, expenditure, on-budget grants and their compatibility with policy guidelines. 500 copies of analysis report were disseminated among policy makers as policy inputs and among CSOs to further fact based policy advocacy. Reports published in a form of book '*Education and Budget*' were sent to all 75 district education offices and national level government offices including ministry of education and department of education.
- **Open Budget Guidebook** a demystified budget guidebook containing information such as budget codes and budget classification (functional, economical and line-item-wise), important budget documents and issues of budget transparency based on Nepal's budget process was published and disseminated to various stakeholders including CSOs working on budget related issues, finance beat journalists and PFM actors. Guidebook is a guide to support literate people to understand depth of budget information from red book to audit report.
- **A case study on access to entitlements** was conducted in Kapilbastu district. Access of Dalit and girl students on scholarship target to these groups studying at primary and lower secondary level was conducted taking sample of 5 public schools of the district. It was found that number of Dalit and girl students are different at different level starting from district

schools to department of education showing that allocation and expenditure on scholarship is being done without reliable data. The case study was conducted using public expenditure tracking survey (PETS) approach. The report was published both as a part of gender and pro-poor budget analysis and independent electronic publication. The report was disseminated among different government and non government stakeholders.

- **Two slots of consultative meetings were undertaken** with key PFM actors to prepare a framework for pre-budget statement and citizens budget. Meetings were conducted in a context that Nepal is lying behind the average level of budget transparency based on bi-annual open budget survey conducted by International Budget Partnership (IBP). Through the two slots of meeting, Freedom Forum prepared a outline of pre-budget statement and citizens budget for Nepal. Report was shared with important stakeholders including budget section of ministry of Finance.
- **17 journalists and 26 senior students of journalism** were provided a training on public finance management journalism. Training for journalists was of three day while that students of journalism was of 2-day. 40 journalists and students of journalism were trained on public finance management issues including budget process, important budget information, availability and accessibility of budget information and role of media as an intermediary between ordinary citizens and government in promoting access to national budget. Thematic experts had been used as resource persons for the training. Trained journalists and students of journalism trained prepared stories on different aspects of PFM. Those stories were compiled and published in the form of book. Compilation visualized the impact of training.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

- Policy makers and national CSOs, media and stakeholders of education were informed of a gap between national policies in education sector and the budget allocations (including revenue analysis), especially in relation to their pro-poor and gender orientation of budget. The flow of funds were also tracked on scholarship of girls and Dalit students checking the strengths of rules, regulations and policies governing scholarship.
- A critical group of influential stakeholders were informed of a need for reform to enhance budget openness. The skill of preparing pre-budget statement and citizens budget has enhanced. As a result of engagement of those stakeholders a framework for pre-budget statement and citizens budget has also been prepared. Open budget guidebook has prepared and published has been an important guide for PFM actors in this connection.
- Capacity of journalists has enhanced to access and work with the budget for their news and stories. Skill of sectoral budget analysis has also been enhanced.

V. PROJECT NAME: OPEN BUDGET SURVEY 2014

DURATION: August 2014 to March 2015

BENEFICIARIES: Government (Ministry of Finance), general public, national and international organizations, civil society, researchers, policy makers and shapers,

FUNDING AGENCY: International Budget Partnership (IBP), Washington DC, US

PROJECT OBJECTIVES:

The major objectives of the initiative were:

- Comprehensive assessment of:
 - public access to timely & comprehensive budget information throughout the budget process
 - opportunities to participate in the budget process
 - strength of oversight: legislatures & external auditors
- Enhance equity and credibility of policy choice
- Improves effectiveness and efficacy of budget execution
- Contribute to increase budget transparency level through evidence based advocacy

ACTIVITIES CARRIED OUT

- Key budget documents identified and gathered
- Important PFM actors contacted
- Survey questionnaire filled up
- Filled up questionnaire reviewed and refined through back and forth process

Survey report will be prepared on December 2014.

VI. PROJECT NAME: ENHANCING CAPACITY OF MEDIA AND CITIZENS TO INVOLVE IN THE ELECTORAL DISCOURSE

DURATION: July 2013 to June 2014

BENEFICIARIES: Journalists, political parties, CSOs and Media

FUNDING AGENCY: INTERNEWS

PROJECT OBJECTIVES:

The principal goals of this project as agreed between Internews and FF were:

- Strengthening Capacity for Citizen Input on the Electoral Process and
- Media are better informed to cover election related issues at the national and district levels
- Media are utilized to facilitate debates on the results of national public opinion polling

ACTIVITIES CARRIED OUT

Freedom Forum focused especially on updates of news, opinions and press freedom violation in both versions of the website. Daily newspapers were scanned; opinions, news, reports selected and updated in both versions of the website.

The Radio programs 'Loktantra Mantra', produced by the partner organization, Antenna Foundation, were uploaded up to 13 editions. However, the National Opinion Polls and monthly dialogue papers could not be updated through the website as the project coordination side informed that a separate website was made for the updates.

The social media especially facebook and twitter were extensively utilized during the second election to the constituent assembly. To recapitulate here, the facebook page was extensively used during election.

The likes on facebook page of the website was increased after strategically selecting national and international media persons, organizations and political candidates of the CA election which helped to boost up the website visit.

The number of Facebook page of the website was liked by 1,822 at the last of 2013 which was around 1,000 in beginning of the October. Similarly, the number of facebook friends reached to 852 at the end of 2013 from around 170 in the beginning of October. This rising in visit and likes also showed the growing relevance of the website.

OUTCOME/ACHIEVEMENTS

During a year's reporting from June 15, 2013 to June 15, 2014,

- A total of 122,663 people's visits to the English version of the website- www.nepalelectionchannel.org/english
- A total of 122,663 people's visits to the Nepali version of the website- www.nepalelectionchannel.org
- Increment in facebook page like- 1909 to the website,
- With the constant updates of the new items, and growing number of visitors, the website has been a centre of knowledge generation on election, constitution making process and media.
- It helped people make healthy public opinion and exercise their right to vote for selecting good representative.
- A resourceful site developed on electoral process, legislative activities (constitution writing) and media and political development

VI. PROJECT NAME: EXPLORING THE USE AND IMPACTS OF OPEN BUDGET AND AID DATA IN NEPAL

Duration: May 2013-July 2014

BENEFICIARIES: Data users and producers in Nepal including journalists, CSOs, researchers, government agencies and techies

SUPPORTING AGENCY: World Wide Web Foundation

PROJECT OBJECTIVES:

A key research objective of this project component is to forge a better understanding of the ways in which various actors do in fact take advantage of the aid and budget information that is available and to identify the gaps in this information. The specific objectives are as below;

Budget Study:

- To identify the main interests of different types of external in budget information, cross-referenced against the different types of stakeholders.
- To identify the main ways different external stakeholders are in fact using budget information, again cross-referenced against the different types of stakeholders.
- To identify shortcomings in the provision of budget information relating to the above, in terms both of the information that is disseminated and the extent to which it is presented in formats that are accessible and understandable to external stakeholders, including by cross-reference this against the Open Budget Survey (OBS) standards.
- To generate recommendations for improvement in budget openness in the country which go beyond the formal rating represented by the OBS, and which link transparency weaknesses to actual democratic and business needs.
- To feed the results of this research into both an advocacy programme and the OBS process.

Aid study:

There are four objectives that frame this project component:

- To gather and share a baseline of the aid data landscape in Nepal, including a mapping of available data, demand for aid data from civil society and capacity to analyse and use it and a mapping of information intermediaries. This will be used to inform the development of the IATI standard and advocate for its implementation
- To gather and share evidence of impact of open aid data to inform the development of the IATI standard and advocate for its implementation

- To understand and document the governance context of Nepal and the particular challenges and incentives faced by aid data users and potential aid data users
- To foster and nurture a community of organisations working on open aid data in Nepal

ACTIVITIES CARRIED OUT

- Stakeholder mapping workshop was undertaken in participation of about 30 individuals from various groups including government, civil society and journalists specifically those who are using and releasing aid and budget related information.
- Interview was undertaken with key stakeholders also representing these groups
- Training was provided to journalists to see the effect of open data training on accessing, visualization and release of budget information
- Desk review was undertaken to assess availability and accessibility of budget and aid information
- Structured questionnaire was filled up by different groups of stakeholders on availability of data in different form
- Data were gathered, processed edited and tabulated
- A study report on Aid study was prepared
- A brief study report on budget study was undertaken

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Study assessed the availability of aid and budget data in Nepal in various form. Most of the data are hard data. Their availability in open data is limited. Lack of proper assessment of data needs and diverse understanding about open data data in an open format found to be highly limited. Key findings regarding use of data are as below;

- Though data providers, intermediaries and users are aware about the fundamental benefits of data openness for greater accountability and transparency, there was a lack of common understanding among the actors in regard to the basic concepts, use and impacts of open data.
- The senior government officials serving in the Ministry of Finance, National Planning Commission, Prime Minister's Office and Nepal Rastra Bank interviewed for this research acknowledged the importance of data openness to improve governance of the country, particularly given the government has to deliver much with limited resources.

They seem more conscious about the disclosure of information rather than data through the official websites, concerned about the risk of manipulation by users of the unprocessed data, and the potential for making wishful interpretations. The challenge is that, in many cases, Nepal's bureaucracy is not proactive enough to initiate innovations by itself. Rather, the bureaucracy's culture is that it will carry out works which have to be done only when mandatory. The concept of open data is very new for government, and they are wary of it because of this and hesitant to adopt it due to the perceived extra burden of adopting something new. A forward-looking attitude, so that innovative ideas of open data may become a priority for government, is lacking. However, as NPC Joint Secretary Gopinath Mainali suggested, "proactive social pressure and CSOs demand for data may create much to this effect. There are several political and policy bottlenecks that can be removed only with social pressure. Leadership prevails much to take ahead the institution and institution-based reforms can only sustain such efforts".

- Government data providers want users to be tech-savvy and sensitive to protect the integrity of the data they consume and re-use. Government officials said they should be provided with briefings and orientation to ensure their buy-in and ownership of the open data agenda. In addition, government officials were generally sensitive about potential negative consequences of openness of raw datasets, and argued that data should be disclosed reactively based on user requests.
- To the contrary, journalists, CSOs and techies wanted to see greater proactive disclosure of data in open formats so that they could go to the root of corruption, mismanagement and problems in financial flows. They noted that the availability of and accessibility to disaggregated data would help them come up with different analysis and get people to easily understand the situation, making them better able to question authority as and when there is problem.
- Taking stock their arguments and counterarguments regarding open data, there should be several interfaces and interactions to engage all potential actors to create the data ecosystem. An open and healthy discussion is needed to shape the customized model of data openness and disclosure in the specific context of Nepal. As there is no watertight understanding of open data, its policy and practice should be brought to public discourse to make it an innovative dimension of greater transparency, accountability and participation. In conclusion, the interview evidence points towards the need for the new movement to be braced in tandem with the earlier established RTI movement in order to help deliver better governance.

The study has facilitated to built common understanding among stakeholders about open data, assesses the availability and need for data and provided a recommendation to the different communities and government to increase supply and use of open data.

PUBLICATIONS OF FREEDOM FORUM

- Open Budget Guidebook (*Khula Budget*)
- 4 Issues of Quarterly Newsletter (*Free Expression*)
- Budget Journalism (*A compilation of PFM related stories by Journalists*)
- Education and Budget (*A gender and pro-poor budget analysis report of education sector*)
- Posters on budget and revenue of education sector
- Electronic publications of case study on access of Dalit and Girl Students to scholarship
- Electronic Publication of framework for pre-budget statement and citizens budget