

ANNUAL REPORT

2015-2016

FREEDOM FORUM

1. Introduction

1.1 Brief Introduction to Organization:

Freedom Forum is an independent, non-governmental and not-for-profit civil society organization working for the cause of democracy and human rights focused on press freedom, freedom of expression and right to information in Nepal. Incepted in 2005, Freedom Forum has emerged as a prominent national organization in promoting access to information, freedom of expression and open development through dialogue, research, training, public advocacy and campaign and programme execution. The organization is also working on the issues of open governance/open data, public finance management, budget/aid transparency and political and parliamentary accountability and electoral reform based on its on-hand experience and learning. The Forum has brought out numerous books, research journals, newsletters, periodic reports and analytical papers on different dimensions of open development agenda and its effect and impact on empowerment and transformation.

This is a purely social organization registered with the District Administration Office of Kathmandu (Regd.127/062/063) and the Social Welfare Council (Affiliation No.18518) of Nepal. Its head office is in Kathmandu, Nepal. Freedom Forum has different contact offices in regional and district sites to coordinate programs at local level. It has 13-member Board of Directors, 30 general members and 12 regular staff. FF's General Assembly is held every year.

1.2 Major Objectives:

The key objectives of the organization are

- a) Protection and promotion of freedom of press and of expression
- b) Promotion and development of professional journalism
- c) Defending journalists, Right to Information activists and freedom of expression practitioners
- d) Promotion, protection and practice of the right to information
- e) Promotion of human rights and democratic norms and values
- f) Research/study, civic monitoring, oversight and education and advocacy for the guarantee of free and fair elections

- g) Promotion of the use of media, Right to Information, Open Data and Public Financial Management (PFM) tools to support the movement and campaign for social justice and development of disadvantaged people
- h) Contribution to the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through exchange of ideas, experience and learning at national and international level being focused on attaining the targets of Goal 16
- i) Affiliation and participation in regional and global networks related to transparency, right to information, freedom of expression, free and professional press, civic engagement and Open Government Part
- j) Undertake action research and study to draw evidences for advocacy in its core areas of works.

1.3 About the Report:

This is an annual report containing major activities and achievements accomplished by Freedom Forum during a year-long period spanning from July 17, 2015 to July 16, 2016. The primary objective of the report is to disclose overall core and partnership activities, learning, and outcomes of the organizational initiatives and demonstrate its track record and competence to execute ideas aligning the key themes of the organization. The report is expected to serve as a well-documentation of the key efforts of the organization to attain its objectives and a consolidated contribution Freedom Forum made to the country's national development objective.

Information contained in this report have been widely extracted from the newsletters, project documents, project reports, press releases, website updates, meetings and discussion notes, media coverage and sharing through social media.

2. Major Activities and Accomplishments:

Freedom Forum carried out several activities to promote its core values even if there were no funding partners to support some of its initiatives. Many of its activities were conducted with support from partners. The major activities undertaken by FF during the period are presented in a following manner.

2.1 Partnership Programmes:

Partnership programs refers project and intervention executed in collaboration with different funding agencies.

A. Project Name: SANCHAR (Support for Accountable National Institutions for Citizen's Access to RTI)

Duration: 1 year (July 17, 2014-July 16, 2015),

Actual Date of completion-August 15, 2015 (due to devastating earthquake)

Funding Agency: Governance Facility (Danida, SDC and UKAid)

Project site: Implemented in consortium of nine strategic partners/CSOs across the country under CCRI leadership

Background:

CCRI had signed an agreement with GF to implement the project SANCHAR. While developing the project proposal, 8 strategic partner CSOs were identified in order to implement the project in different parts of the country promoting RTI in district and local level through several activities conferred by the agreement. FF as one of the strategic partner CSO for this project shall lead the activities related to the media of the project.

Strategic Partner CSOs:

1. Integrated Development Forum (IDF), Jhapa,
2. Yuwa Sarokar Abhiyan (YSA), Bara,
3. Vijay Development Resource Center-Nepal (VDRC), Nawalparasi,
4. Humanitarian Organization for People and Democracy (HOPE) Nepal, Bhaktapur,
5. Freedom Forum (FF), Kathmandu,
6. Information and Human Rights Research Centre (IHRC) Banke,
7. Karnali Self-Help Development Forum-Nepal (KSDF), Kalikot,
8. Far -West Media Development Centre (FMDC), Dhangadhi.
9. Citizens' Campaign for Right to Information (CCRI)

Project Objectives:

The objectives of the project are as follows:

- i. To enhance the awareness at local level regarding the meaning and importance of Right to Information;
- ii. To enhance the capacity of public agencies and their officials regarding the regulation of Right to Information laws;

- iii. To increase the practical usage of Right to Information in district and local level;
- iv. To develop various public agencies (especially different Village Development Committee (VDC) offices) into "Right to Information Friendly" offices.

Key Activities Performed:

Some of the activities under this project were delayed due to devastating earthquake and hence, completed a month later. Details on delayed project activities are as follows:

1. Second National Convention on RTI:

A two-day National Convention on Right to Information (RTI) was organized in Kathmandu on August 7 and 8, where the RTI campaigners showed concern over growing security threats on them. The Convention was inaugurated by Minister for Information and Communications, Dr Minendra Rijal. He requested RTI campaigners to be aware of the right to privacy while seeking information. The participants numbering over 350 issued the 37 points Kathmandu Declaration with the resolution on expanding RTI network throughout the country. RTI campaigners from 55 districts, and legal practitioners, RTI activists, researchers, government officials, university teachers, social scientists, and development practitioners, among others reviewed the challenges and achievements of the RTI since the first convention of 2011 and suggested the government, NIC, public agencies, and civil society organizations on how they could be committed to protecting and promoting RTI to build informed citizenry, an essential element of participatory democracy.

On the first day, four working papers were presented: i) "25 Years of RTI in Nepal" by Taranath Dahal, Chairperson of FF, ii) "Role of National Information Commission to Promote RTI" by Kiran Pokharel, Commissioner at NIC, iii) "Role of Nepal Government to Promote RTI" by Shreeram Pant, former secretary at NIC, and iv) "Safety Threat on RTI Campaigner" by Dharmendra Jha, General Secretary of FF. Similarly, on the second day, v) presentation on "RTI and Youth Students" was made by Haribinod Adhikari, Vice-Chairperson of FF, vi) "Disclosure for Open and Transparent Culture" by youth activist Anirudra Neupane, vii) "RTI in Disaster" by Dr Sudhamshu Dahal and viii) "Role of NGOs to Promote RTI" by Tanka Aryal, Executive Director, CCRI.

(For more information, please refer the link: <http://freedomforum.org.np/second-national-convention-on-rti/>)

2. Meeting with Parliamentarian and major policy makers:

FF organized a dialogue among the parliamentarians on July 31. It was organized in a bid to make them aware on the provisions of the draft constitution which are hostile to freedom of expression and journalists' rights. Gathering 40 persons, including a dozen of parliamentarians from various political parties, legal practitioners, press freedom advocates and senior journalists, discussion was focused on how to ensure the press freedom and protect journalists' rights in the new constitution. Most of the speakers from the media fraternity underscored the need to delete the unnecessary provisos under the fundamental rights to freedom, especially the freedom of expression. On the occasion, most of the CA members admitted that the draft constitution was verbose, lengthy and ambiguous. Lawmaker including CPN-UML, Prakash Jwala; Ramhari Khatiwada of the Nepali Congress, member of the Constitutional Political Dialogue and Consensus Committee Gopal Dahit, Ram Narayan Bidari of the UCPN (Maoist), Yogendra Chaudhari of the Madhesi Janadhikar Forum (Democratic), Garima Saha among others, said they would try their best to address the genuine demands on the guarantee of FoE and press.

(For more information, please refer the link: <http://freedomforum.org.np/dialogue-with-parliamentarians-on-constitutional-provisions-on-foe-and-press-freedom/#prettyPhoto>)

3. Fellowship for the journalists for making investigative stories using RTI:

Under this activity, selected journalists were provided fellowship to carry out investigative reporting.

4. Launch of a book- Information and News:

The book was launched and distributed during the Second RTI Convention. These books- one English and another Nepali- are a compilation of the news stories and features written by the RTI trained reporters who applied the RTI and made the stories investigative. The stories here are the ones selected out of more than 150 stories. Meanwhile, journalists writing best 3 stories were awarded during the program.

Key Learnings:

- Policy dialogue from CSO on RTI gives impetus to the policy makers and shapers for necessary preparation for policy design and interventions

- The organizing of periodic national convention offer a very useful platform for RTI advocates and practitioners to share important learning and discuss to resolve challenges faced during implementation. Importantly, it also encourages information requesters to overcome challenges including the growing threat to life.
- Review of context as well as strengths, challenges, opportunities and threats of RTI implementation helped know the current situation for future reforms interventions
- It helps develop a uniform understanding of demand side and supply side on RTI and its use and build collaborative approach for addressing the gap.
- It develops the capacity of journalists to use RTI to bring evidence-based stories on corruption and irregularities.

B. PROJECT NAME: 'Organizing dialogue between media workers and professional associations of journalists to develop a safety protocol for dealing with safety issues including that of workplace safety and responsiveness to gender concerns'.

Duration: Two months (July 16, 2015-September 31, 2015)

FUNDING AGENCY: UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization)

Project sites: Biratnagar, Hetauda and Kathmandu

About Project:

Keeping in mind the Nepali journalists facing intimidations from various sectors for lack of safety measures and the documents as guiding policy to make them safe both from physical and professional viewpoints, Freedom Forum realized the need to prepare a protocol for safety of journalists under the UNESCO Kathmandu's project of Increasing the Safety of Journalists.

Objectives:

- a. To address growing threats- both professional and physical- on the working journalists
- b. To prod media houses to devise their own protocoll for journalists' safety
- c. To ensure safety of journalists' in view of their protection and professionalism

KEY ACTIVITIES PERFORMED:

1. Dialogue on Protocol for Journalists' safety in Biratnagar and Hetauda:

As part of the project, a dialogue among media owners and professional organizations was held in Biratnagar on July 30, 2015. The program was attended by over 49 persons including media owners, managers, editors, chiefs of the professional organizations of media, chairs of the women journalists and the indigenous journalists.

On the occasions, Chairperson of Freedom Forum, and media expert Taranath Dahal, presented a working paper on 'Role of Media Owners and Professional Organizations for Journalists' Safety.' With the presentation, he made aware the participants on indicators of the safety of journalists, stakeholders to make the journalists safe as state and political actors, civil society and academia, media and intermediaries, and UN and other intergovernmental bodies, and the challenges of professional and physical safety of journalists in Nepal.

Similarly, another expert Vice-President of the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ), Anita Bindu, presented a working paper on how the women journalists could be made safe at the workplace. According to her, there were only 16 percent of women among the total journalists in Nepal. She complained that women were not made sources of news, and the women journalists were assigned only on women issues.

Similarly, on August 3, the dialogue was organized in Hetauda. Presentations similar to that of the Biratnagar dialogue were made in Hetauda too.

(For more information please refer the link: <http://freedomforum.org.np/dialogue-on-protocol-for-journalists-safety/>)

2. Dialogue on Protocol for Journalists' safety in Kathmandu:

The Dialogue among Media Owners and Professional Associations on Developing Protocol for Journalists' Safety in the capital city was organized on August 18. The aim of the dialogue was to share the suggestions, recommendations and commitments from the media owners and professional associations from Biratnagar and Hetauda, and seek additional responses and recommendation from the similar persons (media owners and associations). The program attended by more than 30 persons was univocal on the need of the safety protocol. In the dialogue Freedom Forum Chairperson Taranath Dahal, and Vice-Chairperson of Federation of Nepali

Anita Bindu made presentations on the findings (suggestions, recommendations and commitment) from the Biratnagar and Hetauda dialogues. Some of the points Mr Dahal made on the presentation were:

1. Monitor safety issues and have a safety policy that is written, available to staff and the wider public and fully operated.
2. Provide appointment letter and identity card to journalists before providing employment
3. Prepare and implement employees service regulation
4. Report to the Office the Press Registrar on its human resources (journalists, workers, laborers) regularly
5. Extend safety policy to columnists and stringers, their assistants, local employees and support personnel, and family of the journalists
6. Provide ToR to journalists, including columnists and stringers, with respect to safety and personal risk.
7. Ensure that workplace are safe and secure to protect journalists from intruders,
8. Provide hostile environment and risk awareness training before journalists are sent on dangerous assignments.
9. Provide adequate back-up to journalists on dangerous assignments.
10. Ensure that stress counseling is available.

(For more information, please refer the link: <http://freedomforum.org.np/dialogue-on-protocol-for-journalists-safety-in-kathmandu-and-hetauda/>)

C. PROJECT NAME: Increasing the safety of journalists

Funding Agency: International Media Support

Duration: Six months (July- December 2015)

Project sites: Kathmandu and Sarlahi (Hariban)

About Project: After an International Media Mission- now known as National International Partnership Mission, the Federation of Nepali Journalists (FNJ) made a request to National Human Resource (NHRC) for forming a special mechanism for preventing abuses of human rights of journalists, and to end impunity for those accused of attacks on media and journalists. UNESCO has contracted IMS to coordinate the implementation of several activities in its larger project on safety of journalists and support the establishment of mechanism at the NHRC in

collaboration with NIMP partners. With this background, FF undertook the implementation of the project in collaboration with IMS.

Objectives:

- Establish a nationally owned mechanism that ensures a safe environment for journalists
- Enhancing the capacity of state authorities, including security sector institutions and the judiciary system, to better protect journalists with support from civil society and the public at large, and
- Enhancing the capacity of journalists and media houses to protect themselves.

Key Activities Performed:

1. Dialogue on Journalists' safety in Madhes:

FF and FNJ Sarlahi Chapter jointly organized a program with the journalists from the most suffered eight districts which fall in province no 2 as per the new constitutional set up, so that the problems of the journalists could be heard and the future plans for better media freedom mulled. The program named 'Journalists' Safety in Madhes' was organized at Hariwan of Sarlahi district on December 21 gathering 40 journalists from federal Province No 2, new set up provisioned by the new constitution. The province no 2 lying in the southern plains of the country are – Sarlahi, Parsa, Bara, Rautahat, Mahottari, Dhanusha, Siraha, and Saptari.

Key Findings:

1. Journalists/media houses are facing double pressure- in between State/security and protestors. Both intimidate for reporting or not reporting any program/protest,
2. They are divided whether to write advocating or not/supporting or not Tarai protests. It has created division on free reporting, and even jeopardized professionalism ,
3. Very little space and sometime even distortion of content by the national media to the protest news posing additional risk to reporters,
4. Failure to write about humanitarian crisis, as they were not able to do justice to the people when they're in desperate need,
5. Many national newspapers blocked from entering Tarai district for nearly four months,

6. Difficulty to continue publication of local newspapers in districts.

2. Survey report on women journalists' status in Madhes media:

The report was prepared by a team mobilized from FF after survey on madhesi female journalists of 10 districts (Bara, Parsa, Rautahat, Sarlahi, Mahottari, Dhanusha, Siraha, Saptari, Sunsari and Morang). Survey was carried out from July 26, 2016 to August 6, 2016 and the report was prepared according to its findings.

Key findings:

- 68% women journalists were found employed in radio stations, and those employed in television channels was minimum with no any women reporters in online media.
- Only 6% journalists had above ten years of experience, whereas 68% had less than five years of experience.
- 66% journalists were found in the state of high-strung facing various physical challenges such as uncertainty of working hours, threats of kidnap, and trends of hostile acts against women.
- Traditional social customs and values were found to be the major restrictions on women journalism.
- Status of professional journalism was found to be very weak because of feeble editorial freedom and self-censorship.
- Majority of the women journalists surveyed were found to be affiliated with local level media with minimal affiliation to national level media.

D. PROJECT NAME: Open Budget Survey 2015

Duration: 1 Year (2015/16)

Funding Agency: International Budget Partnership (IBP)

Project Site: Kathmandu

Objectives:

The key objectives of the OBS are to

- Make 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
- Improve effectiveness and efficacy of budget execution
- Contribute to increase budget transparency level through evidence based advocacy.

Major Activities:

1. Launch of Nepal's 2015 Open Budget Survey report:-

FF launched Nepal's 2015 Open Budget Survey (OBS) findings and recommendations amid a gathering of concerned actors and stakeholders in the capital on November 25. The organization brought together 47 participants including government officials, CSO representatives, media and donor communities and IBP colleague to allow opportunity for discussion on the issues of budget transparency, people's participation in the budgetary process and effectiveness of budget oversight institutions. The survey report revealed that the Government of Nepal provided the public with minimum budget information limiting chance for citizen engagement in the budget process. Nepal's score in the OBS has dropped to 24 out of 100 in 2015 from 44 in 2012 which shows country dwindling budget transparency situation.

OBS Manager Elena Mondo made a presentation on 2015 OBS Results, Trends and Way Forward besides the methodological part. "The OBS assesses three pillars of the budget accountability system – transparency, participation and oversight. Some 109 indicators out of total 140 of the Open Budget Index were used to measure the transparency while 16 and 15 indicators were related to assess the opportunities for public participation and strengths of the legislatures and auditors". The survey involved 18 month rigorous research process that included completing survey by country experts, IBP review, external review, government review and IBP final check. OBS Researcher for Nepal Krishna Sapkota presented key findings and recommendations of the country based on the OBS country summary report.

KEY FINDINGS:

Nepal's OBS score of 24/100 shows that the Nepal government provided the public with minimal budget information.

- With 19/100 on public participation, the Government is weak in providing the public with opportunities to engage in the budget process.

- Budget oversight by legislature in Nepal is weak with 18/100 by legislature while budget oversight by SAI is adequate with 75/100.
- Nepal's score of 24/100 is substantially lower than the global average score of 45; Bangladesh made the highest score (56) in region followed by India 46, Pakistan 43, Afghanistan 42, Sri Lanka 39.
- Nepal scored 36 in 2006, 43 in 2008, 45 in 2010, 44 in 2012 and 24 in 2015. Nepal's score of 24 on 2015 OBI is substantially lower than its score in 2012. However, the regression in transparency observed in Nepal appears to be temporary in nature. The decline is largely due to its failure to make the fiscal year 2013-14 EBP publicly available. However since the end of the OBS research period on 30 June 2014, Nepal has returned to its previous practice of publishing EBP in a timely manner.

E. PROJECT NAME: Assessing Post Disaster Impact on Overall media Industry

Funding Agency: The Asia Foundation

Duration: 2 months (July 17, 2015 to September 30, 2015)

Project sites: 8 districts (Sindhupalchowk, Kavrepalanchok, Dolakha, Ramechhap, Gorkha, Nuwakot, Dhading and Rasuwa)

About the Project:

The 'Gorkha Earthquake' was a devastation manifold in a sense that it had equally affected all walks of life including media and journalism sector. Even four months after the disaster the effect is still strongly felt. On one side, the recurring aftershocks are reminding people of the impending disaster and on the other the recovery process poses a daunting challenge. There is still a problem to come back to normalcy in the day-to-day operation of media. In this context, Freedom Forum in collaboration with The Asia Foundation conducted an assessment of disaster-triggered damages on media sector in eight of the government-declared 14 crisis-hit districts.

Objectives:

- Assessment of the disaster-triggered impact on overall media industry in eight most-affected districts.
- To map the losses caused to media industry by the disaster and to help in designing further interventions to cater to the need of media for smooth operation in future.

Major Activities:

1. A field assessment was undertaken using a rigorous assessment tools including damage assessment indicators to map the status of Nepali journalism following the recent disaster. The assessment categorically covered the damages caused to the six vital areas of impact including those on newspapers' offices (daily, weekly, fortnightly and monthly) and printing press; television stations and cable service providers; news agency and online media; media associations; media development institutions and NGOs; and media worker and journalists.
2. A meeting between field researchers and the authors was organized to make the study more representative and largely binding.
3. Study report- Nepali Media in Disaster (Assessing the aftermath)

Key Findings:

- Among the six different sectors of media – newspapers & printing press; television stations & cable service providers; news agency & online media; media associations; media development institutions & NGOs; and journalists & media worker –study found that total damages caused to the entire media sector in the eight crisis hit districts amount to NPR 477 million.
- The worst-hit among the media and journalism sector is the journalists themselves who had suffered big loss in terms of both huge financial loss accounting in equipment's and properties and a constraining psychological situation.
- Journalists and media workers suffered the most loss amounting to nearly 90 per cent of the total loss.
- A total of 455 journalists and media workers became directly affected from the earthquake. Among them most of the affected are from Sidhupalchowk district (89 in number) followed by Ramechhap (68) and almost equal numbers of them were affected in Kavre, Dhading and Dolakha districts (60 each).
- As per the enumeration of loss in terms of monetary value Dolakha district suffered the maximum loss in the media sector amounting to nearly NPR 120 million. Sidhupalchowk followed next with a loss amounting to nearly NPR 70 million. Despite being an epicentre of April 25th earthquake Gorkha district suffered comparatively lowest loss among the eight crises hit districts.
- Media owners are in the state of dismay whether to return to the business or to start something a new.

- Besides media and media workers the organizations and associations pitching for the rights and professional development of media also came across a substantial damage in aftermath of the earthquake.

F: Project Name: Study on Freedom of Expression on the internet

Duration: December 31, 2015- March 30, 2016

Funding Agency: International Freedom of Expression Exchange (IFEX)

Project site: Kathmandu

About the Project:

Internet is the fastest and easiest global channel people opt for exercising freedom of expression. Remarkable changes have occurred in political, economic and social systems with the exercise of FoE on internet. Nepal, though a Least Developed Country (LDC) striving to graduate to a developing nation, has not remained aloof in this regard. The internet penetration has reached out nearly to 50 percent of the total population. The social networks as Facebook and twitters and the news portals are luring significant number of youths from diverse sectors. With this background, Freedom Forum, as a civil society organization, devoted to the cause of democracy, with the commitment to the advocacy of the broader freedom of expression, and with the financial support from the International Freedom of Expression Network (IFEX), the global network of freedom of expression, Freedom Forum reviewed and analyzed laws, policies and stakeholders' concerns on Freedom of Expression on Internet in Nepal.

Objectives:

- To study the practice of existing laws and policies relating to freedom of expression on internet
- To create awareness among stakeholders on the issues relating to FoE on internet

Major activities:

1. Discussion program on FoE on internet in Nepal:-

FF organized a discussion program on “**Freedom of Expression on Internet in Nepal**” in Kathmandu on May 4. The program was focused on FoE on internet to streamline this issue in view of the rise of social networks and the news portals inviting multi-stakeholders' internet and concern in Nepal. Multifarious issues relating

to the FoE on internet emerged in the program attended by the journalists, FoE defenders, university teachers, technologists, media researchers, advocates and legal practitioners, among others.

Presenting a paper on “Freedom of Expression on Internet in Nepal,” the advocate and Chairman of Internet Society Nepal Chapter, Baburam Aryal, argued that major legal hurdle in practicing FoE on internet is Section 47 of Electronic Transaction Act 2008. “This section has criminalized FoE on internet. As a result, various journalists and citizens have been targeted by the security agency, and cases were filed,” he added.

Other speakers including Online Journalists Association’s Chairman, Prabesh Subedi, UNESCO representative JB Biswokarma, Chairman of Media Action Nepal, Laxman Datt Pant, and US journalist Jill Filipovic, media law advocate Rishi Ram Ghimire and Tanka Aryal, freelance journalist Shiromani Ghimire, FF Vice-Chair Hari Binod Adhikari, Executive Director Krishna Sapkota, Public Affairs Officer at US Embassy, Kathmandu, Meena Kaini, ICT and development expert Dr Sudhamsu Dahal pointed out the need of building ICT awareness, sharing of internet knowledge among diverse stakeholders, and congruity between jurisprudence and practice to bolster FoE on internet.

(For more information, please refer the link: <http://freedomforum.org.np/debate-on-freedom-of-expression-on-internet-stressed-in-nepal/>)

Key Findings:

- As most of the internet users are city-dwellers, a large section of population is still waiting for access to high-speed internet and computers.
- Because of the poor internet and ICT literacy, and lack of recognition to the internet as the effective modern medium of communication, the debate on internet freedom is quite new.
- Importantly, Nepal’s policy does not seem very hostile to FoE but has not explicitly mentioned internet in relation to FoE in the latest policies and laws as ICT Policy, and Constitution of Nepal.
- For lack of clear and comprehensive policy and laws, free expression practitioners including common citizens and journalists are harassed and even the cases filed as Public Offence.

- In order to realize the FoE provisions in the Constitution, comprehensive acts to see the FoE on internet is the present need.

G. Project name:

Media Audit on Climate Change, Disaster Risk Reduction and the European Union in the SAARC Region

Duration: 2 months (May 26, 2016 to July 13, 2016)

Funding agency: IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature)

About the Project:

International Union for Conservation Nepal (IUCN), in consultation with the European Union and in collaboration with the Centre for South Asia Studies, conducted a two-day workshop focused on disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation in the SAARC region on May 26-27. A media audit was designed in order to assess the success of the workshop – primarily the increased awareness of disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation in the region as well as the increased visibility of the EU.

With this in background, Freedom Forum in collaboration with the IUCN conducted a media assessment to provide evidence to understand current reporting/visibility of the European Union (EU) as well as Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and Climate Change Adaptation (CCA) in the SAARC Region.

Objectives:

- To assess SAARC media outlets on their coverage over sensitive issue of climate change.
- To study media coverage on the themes- EU, Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) and Climate Change Adaptation (CCA) before and after the EU workshop among selected media outlets.

Key Activities Performed:

The assessment was carried out based on the coverage of selected SAARC media outlets on the topics during two months.

Total 61 media outlets including 20 (10 print, 5 online and 5 television) from Nepal, 10 online from India, 5 online from Pakistan, 5 online from Bhutan, 3 from the Maldives, 5 from Afghanistan, 5 from Sri Lanka 5 and 8 from Bangladesh were monitored to audit media. The ten dailies include Kantipur, Annapurna Post, Nagarik,

Gorkhapatra and NayaPatrika and a Nepali weekly - Nepal Saptahik - and four English language dailies - namely The Himalayan Times, Republica, The Kathmandu Post and The Rising Nepal. The outlets were chosen both due to their large circulation figures and to provide something of a cross-section of Nepali media.

Key findings:

- Nepali media was found to have given less emphasis on the burning and sensitive issue like climate change (26 contents) with increased response on DRR (51 contents) and EU visibility being maximum (121 contents).
- On monitoring issues published on Four online media and a news portal of National News Agency, Nepali online were not found to significantly cover news about CCA and DRR while they covered 29 news, six articles and one editorial about EU.
- The prime time news of five television channels (Nepal, Avenues, Kantipur, Himalayan and image) of Nepal was monitored in the study. The channels were found covered 19 contents related to CCA, 27 contents on DRR and 19 news item on EU.
- Among 41 media outlets monitored from other SAARC countries, total 150 media contents were found published and disseminated on CCA while it was 50 on DRR and 42 on EU. Total coverage was 242 with India bearing the highest share and Bhutan and Afghanistan bearing the least share on the media coverage relating to CCA, DRR and EU.
- During the monitoring period, total 77 media contents were found published before the EU workshop on Climate Change Adaptation and Disaster Risk Reduction in the SAARC Region whereas it increased to 253 after the workshop with Nepali news print media contributing the biggest share (31 Pre- and 170 Post- conference media contents).

2.2 CORE PROGRAMMES:

Besides several programs implemented in partnership with funding agencies, FF's regular organizational activities inline with its themes as Freedom of Press, Freedom of Expression, Right to Information, media rights and media policy have been described in this section.

A. ANNUAL MEDIA REPORT 2015

As a regular and core activity of the organization, Freedom Forum produced an annual media report of media monitoring including press freedom violation cases and developing issues of internet as new media.

According to the report, Nepali media/journalists remained at the receiving end of the political agitation in the year 2015. FF recorded total 83 incidents of press freedom violations were recorded in the year 2015, where Province No 2 and 3 witnessed highest number of violations- 26 and 29 respectively. Province no 2 had the murder of young journalist Rohan Chaudhari. Attack and manhandle were common (29 out of total). Interestingly, Province No 6 and 7 witnessed only one violation each.

Some highlights of the report:

- Around 44.11 percent of the total population in Nepal, which is more than 11 million Nepali people, have the internet access.
- The draft of the broadband policy is another achievement that creates infrastructure to expand internet service.
- As the State side including political parties remained in the forefront to violate press freedom and intimidate journalists, it shows the lack of political culture and tolerance to respect media.
- Political parties/leaders are in need of teaching their cadres how to respect press freedom, a fundamental element to make democracy functional. Similarly, the security persons seemed unaware how to segregate journalists from the protestors.

(For details, please refer the link:

<http://freedomforum.org.np/publications/reports/media-monitoring-reports/>)

B.RTI campaigns:

1. Open Singha Durbar campaign:

Encouraged by the Freedom Forum's initiative, an application bearing signatures of 342 youths was registered at the National Information Commission (NIC) on May 5, demanding easy access of the general public to Singha Durbar. Youths from the districts in the Kathmandu Valley to the outside as Lalitpur, Sindhupalchok, Chitwan, Nawalparasi, Sindhuli, Dolakha, Nuwakot, Rasuwa, Terhathumhave expedited the campaign under the leadership of the Swabhimanch Nepal and collected the signatures for that purpose. The application calls on the NIC to make the government that it issued instructions for providing easy access to the general public

to Singha Durbar. The Office of the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers and the Parliament Secretariat were also informed of the applications at the NIC.

2. National Information Day:

During the celebration of National Information Day on 20 August, FF including Chairperson Taranath Dahal, and staff s registered a total of 340 information request applications in different public agencies. The information applications were dispatched to the concerned offices through post office. The public agencies were District Development Committees (75), District Public Health Offices (75) and Municipalities (190). In the first request, among the 340 public agencies, only 10% public agencies responded to the information requesters within the time. After that, RTI requesters Mr. Dahal and Nodanath Trital filed complaint letters to the chiefs of the offices demanding the same information which was denied from Information Officers through post offices. Interestingly, the responses from public agencies increased from 10.88 to 23.53 percent.

C. Impunity watch: Nepal police, after six years of the murder of media entrepreneur Arun Singhaniya from Janakpur, a city in the southern plains of Nepal, proved that suspended member of the parliament (MP), Sanjay Sah, was the mastermind.

D. Policy watch:

- The Ministry of Information and Communications formed a committee to study the overall media and formulate a new media policy. As the country has witnessed the big change on political and constitutional setups, broader media policy is imperative, but, the committee lacks the farsighted vision to incorporate the views from the wider range of stakeholders for perspective media development.
- Press Council Nepal, a State agency to see code of conduct on journalists, brought a preliminary draft of the Journalists' Code of Conduct-2016. It is learnt that efforts are made by the Council to classify journalists and making journalists to take eligibility exams signals possible State control on media and journalists.
- The government has passed the directive which has the provisions that breach freedom of expression on internet and right to the operation of online media in free atmosphere. The meeting of the Council of Minister approved the Directive on June

14. The Directive had the provision that government could block websites if they failed to renew their registration on time, and published content against the law.

➤ As per the directive, one needs to register online media before launching it, that is to say, any website that wants to do online journalism should apply for registration with details of editor or broadcasters.

➤ The government had fixed the monthly wage of working journalists at Rs. 19,500 in minimum to be effective from 16 July 2016. The government made this decision after the recommendation by the Minimum Wage Fixation Committee. Earlier, the minimum monthly wage fixed for the working journalists was Rs. 10,000.






E. FF celebration:

i. Right to know day- Freedom Forum marked this year's International Right to Know Day (September 28) by making social media updates and campaigning on citizen's Right to information. Through the social media especially Facebook and twitter, the FF updated the present status of the right to information in Nepal, its challenges and measures to implement it more effectively.

ii. Open Nepal Week 2015- Freedom Forum on 16 December 2015 organized a daylong OGP sensitization workshop followed by a half-day strategic meeting in the capital. The event was a part of the Open Nepal Week 2015 where representatives from civil society, academia, and media discussed issues concerning a more open, participatory and evidence-based approach to development and governance. OGP Asia-Pacific Civil Society Coordinator Ms Shreya Basu delivered her two presentations on OGP & its Importance and Achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through Accountability and Transparency on the occasion. The presentations were followed by group works on political mapping in the context of Nepal (identifying champions and reformers within the government; who we can engage in open government agenda?; what policy changed they want to bring?; what are the policy practices of current government?; what are the initiatives that are already taking place in Nepal?); the open government policy priorities of the organizations the participants are working and the challenges they foresee in getting the Government of Nepal endorsed the OGP.

iii. World Press Freedom Day - Freedom Forum marked the World Press Freedom Day-2016 by organizing a discussion program on "Freedom of Expression on Internet in Nepal" in Kathmandu on May 4.

F. FF Participation:

-  Freedom Forum Chairperson Mr Taranath Dahal participated in the IFEX Council meeting held in Port of Spain, Trinidad and Tobago from October 5 to 8. He also participated in the Third Global OGP (Open Government Partnership) Summit held from October 27-29, 2015 in Mexico. The OGP is a unique coalition of governments and civil society organizations (CSOs) dedicated to making governments more open, accountable and responsive to citizens. Chief Secretary of Nepal Government Dr Som Lal Subedi also attended the Summit.
-  Executive Director Mr Krishna Sapkota participated in the Asia Development Bank (ADB) Open Government Partnership (OGP) Asia-Pacific Regional Meeting with CSO in Manila, The Philippines, in preparation for third OGP Global Mexico Summit in September 7-8, 2015. Likewise, Mr Sapkota also attended Open Budget Survey 2015 Researchers Training organized by International Budget Partnership (IBP) in Washington DC in 21-23 August 2015.
-  Media Monitoring Officer Mr Narayan Ghimire attended the UPR Pre-session held from October 6-9, 2015 in Geneva. The UPR Info organizes on a regular basis the UPR Precessions meetings, which aim at strengthening collaboration between different actors engaged with the UPR process.
-  Newly appointed Executive Chief of Freedom Forum Mr Taranath Dahal, Planning and Policy Advisor Mr Krishna Sapkota and Media Monitoring Officer Mr Narayan Ghimire participated in 'No News is Bad News (Needs Assessment for Media Development in Nepal) Workshop' organized by Free Press Unlimited, Netherlands in Lalitpur on July 4-6, 2016.
-  Chairperson Taranath Dahal was honored by the National Information Commission on the occasion of the Right to Know Day on September 28, 2015 in recognition to his contribution to the protection and promotion of citizen's Right to Information in the country.

G. Publications: This year FF brought various publications in the areas of RTI, Press Freedom, Freedom of Expression and budget transparency.

i. Book for Government Facility (GF): Manual of Proactive Disclosure under RTI Act submitted to National Information Commission

ii. Information and News: Both in English and Nepali scripts

iii. Nepali Media in Disaster- Assessing the aftermath of earthquake

iv. Budget Transparency in Nepal

(For more information, please refer the link:

<http://freedomforum.org.np/publications/?cp=1>)

v. Newsletters: FF published total three issues of newsletters during this year. All the issues highlighted the activities carried out by the organization. It mainly covers media monitoring reports, policy/ impunity watch, RTI campaigns. Those issues were also uploaded on its website and made public. For more information, please refer the link: <http://freedomforum.org.np/publications/newsletters/>)

H. Institutional Development:

During the activities under various projects, capacity of the organizational staffs was also enhanced through several orientations, field activities and their immense participation in the programs. Similarly, financial staff was also strengthened through orientation and application of newly developed and advanced accounting software and methodologies.

I. Financial Information: This year FF received total grants amounting NRs.3,791,378.02 under different project headings.

J. Annexes: Annexes of the report are as specified below:

1. Five-year strategic priorities, plans and programme areas of FF
2. Second RTI National Convention Kathmandu Declarations
3. Consolidated Audit Report 2015-16
4. Photographs.

Annex 1

Freedom Forum

Five-year strategic priorities, plans and programme areas

(2016 to 2021 AD)

1. The five-year priority areas of Freedom Forum are as follows

- Protection and promotion of freedom of press and of expression
- Promotion and development of professional journalism
- Defending journalists, Right to Information activists and freedom of expression practitioners
- Policy and legal study, research and advocacy for evidence-based media reforms
- Promotion, protection and practice of the right to information
- Proactive civic watchdog for the promotion of good governance
- Study, research, practice and evidence-based advocacy of Open Data
- Research/study, promotion and evidence-based advocacy of Open Budget
- Research/study and advocacy in the area Internet Freedom
- Policy study and advocacy in various sectors of Public Financial Management
- Research/study and advocacy to advance social accountability and responsibility
- Promotion of human rights and democratic norms and values
- Research/study, civic monitoring, oversight and education and advocacy for the guarantee of free and fair elections
- Promotion of the use of media, Right to Information, Open Data and Public Financial Management (PFM) tools to support the movement and campaign for social justice and development of disadvantaged people
- Research and advocacy for the establishment and advancement of Public Service Broadcasting
- Research and advocacy in the area of parliamentary transparency and political accountability

- Contribution to the attainment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through exchange of ideas, experience and learning at national and international level being focused on attaining the targets of Goal 16
- Affiliation and participation in regional and global networks related to transparency, right to information, freedom of expression, free and professional press, civic engagement and Open Government Partnership

2. Freedom Forum will adopt following strategic approaches in the areas of above mentioned strategic priorities

- a) Knowledge construction (research and study), management and dissemination
 - b) Training and mentoring
 - c) Policy Advocacy, lobby and campaign
 - d) Collaboration with CSO/government/academic institutions/media and international organizations and networks
 - e) Media mobilization
 - f) Institutional capacity development and transfer
 - g) Dialogue and facilitation
 - h) Networking at local, national and international level
 - i) Sustainability
3. Freedom Forum will raise and mobilize fund and supports from national and international donors and development partners by formulating programmes and projects in consistent with the priority areas and strategic approaches
 4. Freedom Forum will not receive any government aid and subsidy for institutional management and operation apart from the operation of collaborative project in the strategic priority areas
 5. Freedom Forum will remain fully committed to the values of institutional governance, transparency and civic freedom and adopt them in practice accordingly within the organization
 6. Freedom Forum will adopt into practice the values and principles of gender equity and anti-discrimination
 7. Freedom Forum's mission is to sustain its interventions as an academic and knowledge centre.

Annex 2.

Second National Convention on Right to Information (RTI), Kathmandu

7-8 Aug 2015

We, the participants of the Second National Convention on Right to Information (RTI), held in Kathmandu on 7-8 Aug 2015, which was attended by RTI activists from 55 districts across the nation as well as civil society members, political party representatives, journalists, legal practitioners, and government officials, including the Chief Information Commissioner and Commissioners, hereby adopt the following resolutions as the Second Kathmandu Declaration on the promotion and practice of Right to Information:

Acknowledging Right to Information as the internationally accepted right of everyone to access information held by public bodies at all levels—local, national as well as international, in principle; and acknowledging the spirit of the nation's commitment for ensuring public access to information, as outlined in the Preamble of the Right to Information Act 2007, and also recalling the fact that the nation's Constitutions since 1990 have upheld Right to Information as one of the fundamental rights of the people;

After an intensive deliberations for two days on various aspects of the use and exercise of Right to Information, and also based on the sharing of experiences among ourselves, in relation to the situation of RTI practice in the Capital as well as its neighboring and the far flung districts;

Reassured by the success stories of a number of people in this regard, and also by the optimism expressed by RTI activists in acknowledging the scope of RTI as effective tool to empower people and promote social accountability and culture of openness through information, despite lapses and lacunas;

And also reviewing the progress and challenges in the aftermath of the First National Convention held in Kathmandu in March 2011;

We have come to a conclusion that the following points deserve serious consideration for the effective practice of Right to Information in Nepal:

1. Application: Application process ought to be simplified. Citizenship certificate should not be made mandatory in asking for information, as not all citizens have received official citizenship papers. Also, dissemination purpose should also be accepted as a valid reason for information requests. (NIC precedence in this regard has to be widely circulated.)

2. Online application should be allowed. Public bodies must be urged to design and post RTI application slog on their website. Institutional requests should also be allowed for RTI.
3. "Oath of Office and Secrecy" has to be replaced or redefined in a way that does not clash with the spirit of Right to Information.
4. RTI Act's overriding clause 37 should be clearly amended to avoid confusion and it should categorically override all other laws regarding information, wherever it appears to contradict with other acts/ rules; and laws such as National Secrecy Act, Data Protection Act and Individual Privacy Act should be made noncontradictory with RTI Act.
5. Regarding constitutional provision on RTI, a phrase „impart" has to be added after „right to seek and receive" and „citizen" has to be replaced with „people" in the clause as per the international standard. Thus, the clause recommended is „Every people shall have the right to seek, receive and impart information on any matters of concern of his/her or of public concern'.
6. As the nation prepares to embark on federal structure, provincial Information Commissions must be brought under the umbrella of Federal NIC, to prevent conflict.
7. National Information Commission: National Information Commission must be empowered with sufficient resource bases, and power to take or recommend actions against those violating its ruling. It must also be empowered to question officials over information issues, based on media or any other reports. Pressure should be mounted to make it a fully empowered Constitutional Body in the new Constitution.
8. Law must be amended to expedite information access. Requests for specifically pointed out and available documents should be made instantly available or at least no later than three days!
9. Many public bodies are not ready even today to provide information. Invoking Clause 32 is recommended whenever appropriate.
10. Stronger punitive measures should be taken against officials providing wrong information, as it can cause much harm to the concerned.
11. Media: Media community should promote the use of RTI as it helps journalists produce and disseminate fact-based, and data-supported authentic information, and thus promote credible journalism.

12.There is slackness in proactive judicial measures/interpretation in upholding the spirit of Right to Information. Hence, judicial sectors are urged to address the issue progressively, acknowledging the prevailing international norms and practice.

13.Transition from feudal to democratic setup is felt to be partly responsible for slackness in optimum exercise of RTI/FoI. Therefore appropriate orientation packages are necessary for stakeholders in both demand and the supply side of the Information, that is, from people to the officials as well as the institutions at both governmental and non-governmental levels. Orientation is felt strongly needed both at educated and illiterate levels (from general public to the higher level government officials)

14.All public agencies—public or private—should be brought under the purview of RTI laws. The I/NGOs, Civil Society Organizations, Donor Agencies, Political Parties and Private Sectors among other public agencies should fully adhere to the RTI provisions in practice as set out in the Act and ensure their transparent operation and management. The agencies including NGOs, political parties as well as private sector are also urged to promote suo mottu disclosure and RTI in general.

15.Data leads to Information and Information leads to Knowledge, thereby empowering the one who holds knowledge. Hence data infrastructure has to be upgraded, improving the record management system. Information and Communication Technology (ICT) has to be optimally used for ensuring efficient record and flow of information in particular and overall process of the RTI.

16.Right to Privacy and Right to Information should be taken side by side, not conflicting with each other, through proper record management.

17.Government should opt for being the part of global initiatives for promoting transparency and openness such as Open Government Partnership (OGP), Open Government Data (OGD), and Global Partnership for Social Accountability (GPSA).

18.Government must promote proactive disclosure among its bodies. Classification of information should not go beyond the five categories of information outlined in the law, and it must be done immediately in a scientific manner.

19.The RTI coordination and monitoring units of the government needs to be boosted up in terms of their authority and resource-base.

20.Safety of RTI activists has come as a new challenge. Government, judiciary both should be serious about the safety of the RTI activists. A comprehensive security policy should be formulated for information seekers. A quick coordination mechanism

is essential for tackling the issue of security in course of exchange of information.(In this respect we appreciate the courage of all RTI activists who have worked amid threats and challenges and express full solidarity with them!). Role of security bodies is very important. Law is silent about safety of RTI activists, so it must be revised/amended. RTI activist security helpline is necessary. An appropriate safety response mechanism has to be developed to address the growing threats to information seekers. Federation of RTI activists, networks, and NGOs suggested; coordinated efforts/campaign at institutional levels should be encouraged. NHRC and NIC must work in coordination in safeguarding security of RTI activists.

21.The RTI movement of Nepal has to be developed in a way to make the country's democratic governance transparent, accountable and people-centered for public good.

22.Public information center has to be created to facilitate various information.

23.Regional-level convention is also necessary to ensure wider public participation.

24.A comprehensive research is essential to know the objective level of public awareness and use of RTI as well as the impact and associated challenges of eight years of RTI practice in the country

25.Reward package has to be set-up to encourage RTI friendly activities.

26.RTI curriculum has to be developed in higher education. Research institutions have to be developed to undertake study on Right to Information on different fronts.

27.Proactive Disclosure: As openness is way to transparency and good governance, proactive disclosure is an indication of a culture towards it. Hence, public bodies must work to ensure that they disclose their information through various means, even without citizens asking for them. For this, budget should be allotted for improving the record management system, and both NIC and Nodal Agency at PMO should monitor the status of Proactive Disclosure.

28.Crisis mitigation: Correct flow of information holds greater importance in times of natural calamities. The governments as well as other responsible bodies are urged to disseminate both pre-calamity and post-calamity information fairly and truthfully, so that crisis could be mitigated more effectively. A separate agency for strategic inclusive of crisis information centre should be established in line with RTI Act to ensure timely information in crisis in a proactive manner.

29.National Information Commission (NIC) is urged to host periodical problem redressing camps. Answer sheets of examination papers must reach parents hands

30. NIC must work proactively to expedite information dissemination based on the cc of applications. Otherwise, cc wouldn't have any meaning except for its listing.

31. Tangible incentives are necessary to Information Officers to boost their performance.

32. Mention of Information officer must be made mandatory when renewing NGOs/institutions.

33. Code of conduct for RTI activists is necessary.

34. A central web portal should be developed to voluntarily share experiences, learning and challenges facing RTI campaigners and activists across the country.

35. Periodical action plan and long-term national strategic plans ought to be devised in order to promote RTI practice. The national plan has to be developed on the involvement of broad-based stakeholders.

36. The Postal Service Department, Regional Postal Service Directorate and District Postal Offices should be made more resourceful from human, technical and economic perspective and proactive in discharging the government-designated responsibilities. A monitoring body comprising District Administration Office, civil society organizations and postal office has to be put in place in every district to leverage the monitoring functions. Capacity building measures have to be taken to strengthen technical skills and knowledge of concerned human resources to perform the responsibilities.

37. At least one civil society organization working on RTI has to be promoted in each district and strengthened with resources and capacity. The government has to collaborate and cooperate for generating resources to enable such organizations to effectively work on the RTI.

Annex 4

1 Debate on Freedom of Expression on Internet stressed



2 Dialogue on Protocol for Journalists' Safety in Kathmandu



3 Second National Convention on RTI



4 Dialogue on Protocol for Journalists' Safety



5 Dialogue with parliamentarians on constitutional provisions on FoE and press freedom



6 Discussion on Journalists' safety in Terai/ Madhesh



7 Nepal's Open Budget Survey 2015 National launch

