



FREEDOM FORUM

"A Nepali CSO (civil society organization) dedicated to democracy, human rights and governance"

ANNUAL

REPORT

2020-21

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Foreword

At a time Nepal is yet to stand upright and move ahead for economic prosperity and good governance with well functioning democracy following the change in system, the corona virus pandemic evidently huge threat for Nepal. In view of the global threat, Nepal government too has announced measures to contain the COVID-19 and protect people's lives. Strong and effective cooperation from citizen's side is expected to this end, as we have no other effective alternative in sight till date. At the same time, other essential works like strengthening of medical and health facilities and related human resources is continued for the test of COVID-19 among the suspected people. It is essentially a matter of public concern.

Nepali media has been continuously working on the frontline for citizen's right to information despite facing risk. The role of media is unparalleled in this COVID-19 crisis too.

The Nepali media at present is in sheer stress and uncertainty. A weak media means weak watchdog. So, it is imperative to keep intact the media current and watchful to correct system. Concerted endeavors can revive the strength of media where journalists are able to work in comfort and freedom. The watchdog role of media must not be diminished because the crisis can be handled as an excuse by the state which impedes democratic delivery. Along with the clean digital public sphere, vibrant digital media can seize the opportunity the pandemic created, being the voice of voiceless. In this view, Freedom Forum accelerated discussion and debate among the stakeholders that work to protect and promote well functioning democracy like media, CSOs, academia and political parties. Only sustainable, free and independent media works effectively to prop up the integrals of democracy- press freedom, justice, accountability, rule of law, and good governance which Nepal is yet to materialize fully.

This past year remained challenging for freedom of expression (FoE), freedom of assembly (FoA) and other civil rights in Nepal. The global menace of Covid-19 heavily affected national life where media and civil society suffered worst. However, FF stood firm in its actions and interventions in the protection and promotion of human rights throughout the year. All the activities carried out and self disclosure updates are encased within the report.

Hari Binod Adhikari
Chairperson
Freedom Forum

Introduction

Freedom Forum is an independent non-governmental organization, not-for-profit working for the institutionalization of democracy, protection and promotion of human rights, press freedom, freedom of expression and right to information in Nepal. Basically, the organization works in the area of policy research, evidence-based advocacy and campaign, capacity building and media mobilization.

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. It has different representatives in regional and district sites to coordinate programs at local level.

It has 11-member Board of Directors, 65 general members, and 9 staffs. Its General Assembly is held every year. Board meetings are held twice a year. Freedom Forum has seven representatives/ stringers at seven provinces of Nepal.



Executive Board members:

Chairperson	Hari Binod Adhikari
Vice- Chairperson	Sahaj Man Shrestha
General Secretary	Dharmendra Jha
Joint Secretary	Yekraj Pathak
Secretary	Ram Maya Lamichhane
Treasurer	Kedar Dahal

Members Bishnu Sharma
 Dr. Sudhamshu Dahal
 Bin Kumar Bishwakarma
 Narayan Bhattarai
 Shiwaa Dahal

Objectives

The key objectives of the organization are:-

1. Protection and promotion of freedom expression and information
2. Promotion and development of professional journalism
3. Defending journalists, Right to Information activists and freedom of expression practitioners
4. Promotion, protection and practice of the right to information
5. Promotion of human rights and democratic norms and values
6. Research/study, civic monitoring, oversight and education and advocacy for the guarantee of free and fair elections
7. 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
8. 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
9. 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
10. Undertake action research and study to draw evidences for advocacy in its core areas of works.

About the report

This is an annual report containing major activities and achievements accomplished by FF during a year-long period spanning from July 17, 2020 to July 16, 2021. The primary objective of the report is to disclose overall 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 FF 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 on social media.

Activities and projects executed

Overview of the partnership projects executed this year:-

1. Contributing to create atmosphere for free expression and reduction of impunity on crimes against journalists

Duration: 1st October 2020 to 30 July, 2021

Funding Agency: IFEX

Project Site: Kathmandu

Project Nature: Research and Advocacy

Financial Grant: \$15,000



2. Open Budget Survey 2019

Duration: 1st December, 2018 to 30 September, 2020

Funding Agency: International Budget Partnership (IBP)

Project Site: National Budget System of the country

Project Nature: Research and Advocacy

Financial Grant: \$10,000

3. CAFIFIR (Contributing to the Atmosphere Favorable to Improved FOE and Information Regime) in Nepal

Duration: 1st January, 2020 to August 31st, 2020

Funding Agency: Free Press Unlimited (FPU)

Project Site: Seven Provinces

Financial Grant: Euro 67000

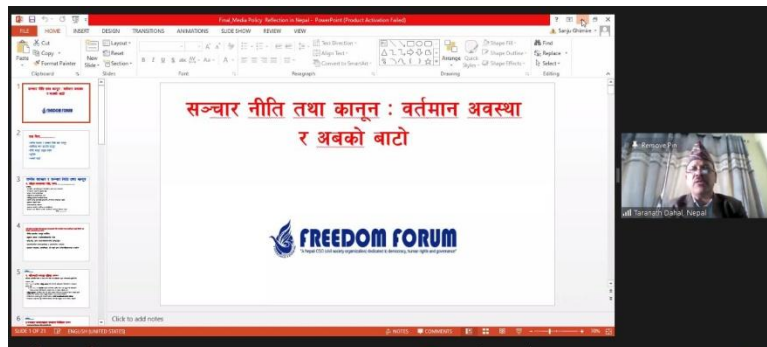
4. Enable Environment for Media law Reforms and Improved RTI Practice (EEMIR) (CS:MAP)

Duration: 1st January 2017 to 30 September 2020

Funding Agency: Family Health International 360

Project Site: Kathmandu

Financial Grant: NRs.2,25,84,850



5. Sustainable use of Technology for Public Sector Accountability in Nepal (SUSASAN)

Duration: June 2017 to March 2021

Funding Agency: Global Affairs Canada/ CECI

Project Site: Sindhupalchowk, Lalitpur, Dadeldhura, Achham, Kailali and Bajhang

Financial Grant: NRs. 59,80,426

6. Legal Defense Fund

Duration: May 2020 to November 2020

Funding Agency: Free Press Unlimited (FPU)

Project Site: Kathmandu

Funding Grant: \$12,500

7. Driving Audit Accountability: Audit Report for Collective Action to Strengthen Government Responsiveness (DAA)

Duration: September 30, 2019 to September 30, 2021

Funding Agency: International

Budget Partnership (IBP)

Project Site: Kathmandu

Funding Grant: \$55,000

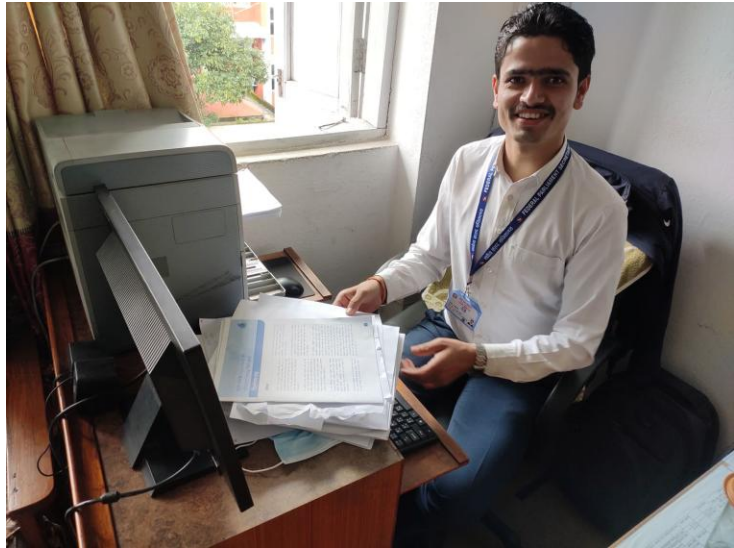
8. Review of National Statistics Bill through Open Data perspectives

Duration: November 2020 to December 2020

Funding Agency: The Asia Foundation (TAF)

Project Site: Kathmandu

Funding Grant: NPR 5,25,250



9. Mainstreaming Human Rights in Cyber security and Cybercrime policy (MHRC)

Duration: January 2020 to September 30 2022

Funding Agency: Global Partners Digital

Project Site: Kathmandu

Funding Grant: \$49,500



10. Consultancy service for Development of Citizen Engagement Strategy in Nepalese Public Finance Management

Duration: December 2020 to December 2021

Funding Agency: Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability Secretariat

Project Site: Kathmandu

Funding Grant: NPR 24,88,200

11. Open Budget Survey, Support to IBP in Developing Capacity Building Materials for civil Society Organizations

Duration: December 2020 to November 2022

Funding Agency: International Budget

Partnership
Project Site: Kathmandu
Funding Grant: \$28,150

12. Consultancy service for digital workshop on Media Content Monitoring for Gender, Bangladesh

Duration: March-December 2021
Funding Agency: Free Press Unlimited
Project Site: Kathmandu (Virtual)
Funding Grant: 702 Great British Pounds

Activities accomplished under thematic areas

1. Democracy/ Governance:-

Advocacy on open and transparent government is one of the major themes FF has been working through various projects. Activities carried out under this theme this year are as follows:-

a) Dialogue on 'Nepal's' Participation in Open Government Partnership (OGP), Status and Readiness':

Freedom Forum organized this virtual dialogue on November 30, 2020. The main



objective of the event was to discuss the status of readiness and reflection on OGP from both CSOs and government side.

This discussion was the part of OGP initiative led by FF. Series of thematic discussions were held surrounding OGP themes and the nationwide stakeholders mapping of

working CSOs in different OGP themes was also completed. The representatives of CSOs from across the country, government officials (NPC and NIC), OGP and governance experts and practitioners were major participants in the event.

The virtual meeting was moderated by Sanjeeb Ghimire and Taranath Dahal. It was held as part of the program 'Civil Society Mutual Accountability Project (CS:MAP)' with the support of FHI 360 which had attendance of 70 participants. Out of 70 participants, there were 12 females in the event.

For details: <http://freedomforum.org.np/forward-process-to-join-ogp/>

b) Dialogue on 'Freedom of Association (FoA): Present Status, Challenges, and Way Forward':

The dialogue was conducted virtually on August 10, 2020. The dialogue was attended by 21 participants representing CSO, practitioners, academia, researchers, lawyers and writers

including freedom of association and expression defenders.

The main objective of the discussion was to develop uniformed conceptual understanding and perception on FoA at practical level when the government was introducing tough measures and actions against the civil society organizations in the country.

For details: <http://freedomforum.org.np/discussion-on-freedom-of-association/>

2. Freedom of Expression, Press Freedom and Media Policy:-

Freedom of Expression is a fundamental right of the citizens enshrined in the Nepal's constitution however; citizens have been victim of several incidents of violations for its exercise especially on the digital platform. Hence, FF continues its advocacy for protection and promotion of freedom of expression in Nepal.



Activities carried out under this theme this year include:

a) Sharing of recommendations on Universal Periodic Report on Freedom of Expression:

Freedom Forum (FF) organized a program on UPR (Universal Periodic Review) report recommendation sharing in Kathmandu on February 7, 2021.

The program brought together representatives from diverse sectors including media, national human rights institutions, government offices including ministry and CSOs.

There were 27 participants who were distributed both printed UPR reports at the program. FF had also invited the officials from Prime Minister's Office (Human Rights and Law Division), Information Ministry, Nepal Police (Human Rights Cell) but they failed to show up at the event. Both reports have been published in FF website.



For details:

<http://freedomforum.org.np/freedom-forum-shares-upr-recommendations/>

b) UPR reports submitted on FoE, and Civil Space

Freedom Forum's advocacy of freedom of expression and unobstructed civic space has not only limited within the country but also reached the international human rights platforms like UN that help create moral pressure on the State to respect, protect and promote FoE and civic space in Nepal.

This is the third time FF submitted Universal Periodic Review (UPR) report on freedom of expression, and first UPR on civil space. Under the FoE, the themes were FoE, access to information and safety to journalists. The UPR report was submitted jointly by FF and Netherlands-based organization Free Press Unlimited (FPU) in the thirty-seventh Session of the Working Group on the UPR.

For details: <http://freedomforum.org.np/upr-reports-submitted-on-foe-and-civil-space/>



c) Celebration of End Impunity Day 2020:

Freedom Forum organized a virtual programme on the occasion of the International Day to End Impunity for Crimes against Journalists in Kathmandu on November 27. The event gathered 33 participants ranging from the family members of the victim journalists, FoE defenders, academia, media persons and officials from human rights body and transitional justice mechanisms.

In the programme, the family members of the journalists killed during the insurgency period in Nepal appealed for cooperation from all sides-journalists, FoE defenders, transitional justice mechanism and government- for justice.

For details: <http://freedomforum.org.np/end-impunity-day-2020/>

d) Discussion on Digital media to promote civic space:

According to NTA, mobile phone penetration in Nepal has exceeded 100% while internet penetration crossed 70 % of population. With this, the traditional media are joined the bandwagon of digital world.

Lately, Covid-19 crisis pushed further the legacy media to adopt technological sphere, the digital sphere, for their visibility and sustainability. In this context, Freedom Forum

organized a dialogue on “Digitalization of Media and Civic Space in Nepal” on October 16. The main objective of this event was to discuss the shift of the traditional media to digital media and its impact on the future media landscape, public opinion, civic space and fundamental freedoms. The participants ranged from media professionals, CSOs working for media and information, academia and the researchers.

The discussion, moderated by Taranath Dahal and Sanjeeb Ghimire, was attended by 45 participants. Out of 45 participants, there were 5 females in the event.

For details: <http://freedomforum.org.np/how-digitalization-of-media-affect-civic-space-in-nepal/>

e) Assisting journalists, saving media, serving public: Media in Crisis

With the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown imposed in Nepal since March 24 as the only measure to contain the spread of corona virus, entire media activities were disrupted. Media industry faced huge crisis for survival. Working journalists witnessed tough time to continue their profession. Employers failed to pay them.

Some journalists even thought of quitting the profession.

With this in the background,

Freedom Forum introduced stipend to the working journalists so that they could continue their profession, earn

a living though little, adopt safety measures, help survive media, bring forth issues of public interests ranging from corruption and wrongdoing. FF hopes its initiative helped a lot on survival of small media.

Total 121 feature stories by 120 male and 3 female journalists surrounding COVID-19 were published in various media outlets. Stories were focused on the financial, economic, social, health areas with reference to COVID-19 pandemic. Stories highlighted the content such as financial irregularities in the name of relief collection and distribution by the public agencies. The stories covered misuse of fund used to prevent and control corona virus at federal and provincial levels.

For details: <http://freedomforum.org.np/assisting-journalists-saving-media-serving-public-media-in-crisis/>



f) Online TV Regulation Directive:

Recently, Nepal has witnessed the spurt of online media, thanks to the expansion of internet and growing use of smart phones. Even the legacy media have joined the bandwagon of digital sphere to augment their visibility. The digital/internet has been the best platform for media convergence- reading, listening, watching facility at the same

platform. It is evident that it is the reason behind the increase in the number of Youtubers in Nepal.

In this regard, the Youtubers from across the country gathered and showed keen interest to work themselves as the television – the online television. Freedom Forum was keenly observing the development. Since the very beginning, FF was aware that any debates and discussion surrounding internet and digital spaces should not undermine freedom of expression online. Therefore, FF grew interested on the formation of Online Television Association with the gathering of the You Tubers.

Now, the Association came up with the idea that those involved in it were for the self-regulation on it and could follow the code of conduct the journalism adopted. It suggested they were aware that their works should contribute to citizen's freedom of expression online. Invoking the section 1.7 and 2.6 of the National Mass Media Policy, the Association brought the 'Online TV Self-Regulation Directive, 2077'.

For details: <http://freedomforum.org.np/online-tv-regulation-directive/>

g) Media law and policy in Nepal:

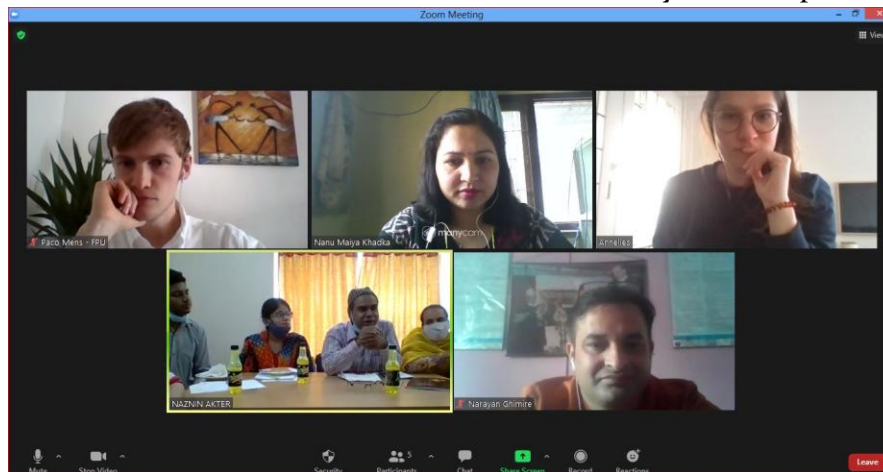
Freedom Forum organized a dialogue on “Media Law and Policy in Nepal: Present Status, Challenges and Way Forward” on November 13, 2020. It was held virtually.

Reflecting on the recent trends of the government formulating regressive laws that suppress citizen's right to free expression and information, Sanjeeb Ghimire, called upon the participants to suggest the way forward to overcome the challenges posed by the policies governing media.

For details: <http://freedomforum.org.np/concern-on-regressive-media-law-policy/>

h) Citizen engagement in law making:

Freedom Forum organized a virtual dialogue on 'Citizen Engagement in Law-Making Process' on the occasion of the Constitution Day on 18 September 2020. On the occasion,



former Chief Secretary at Parliament Secretariat Surya Kiran Gurung stressed that citizens' groups, stakeholders and experts must be engaged from the process of identifying the scope of new law or reforms.

As many as 65 participants including

lawmakers, experts, CSO representatives, and media persons attended the event.

For details: <http://freedomforum.org.np/demand-for-citizen-engagement-in-law-making/>

i) Regional digital workshop on media monitoring for gender:

FF trained staffs of South Asian Center for Media in Development (SACMID) Bangladesh on media content monitoring for gender inclusion. FF's media monitoring team delivered basic knowledge of monitoring, techniques, lessons learned and success stories monitoring had brought in newsrooms.

3) Right to Information:

RTI is an effective tool to ensure transparency at the government offices and hence, to hold the public authorities accountable towards good governance. With this view, FF continues its campaign to promote use of RTI thus, making citizens' informed and aware of the public issues.

a) RTI for people-centered governance

FF organized a total of 27 orientation workshops bringing together people on the knowledge of useful RTI Nepal App. This nationwide campaign to promote RTI Nepal App covered all seven provinces of Nepal where total 877 participants including 381 females (43%) learnt about RTI as their fundamental right and the RTI Nepal App as a convenient and useful tool to exercise their fundamental right. The workshops were organized through Zoom meeting, thereby reaching the targeted groups for the promotion of RTI App Nepal.



For details: <http://freedomforum.org.np/rti-for-people-centered-governance/>

b) Celebration of International Right to Know Day:

i. FF organized a virtual program on the occasion of the International Right to Know Day on September 28. In the program that focused the present challenges before the implementation of RTI in Nepal, another expert and former Commissioner at National Information Commission (NIC), Sabita Bhandari, said major challenge of RTI movement was lack of RTI awareness among the citizens and weak management of information records and ignorance of RTI obligations by public bodies.

For details: <http://freedomforum.org.np/boost-rti-regime-to-ensure-good-governance-experts/>

ii. Another virtual program was organized among various RTI campaigners where they shared the problems they faced while exercising the right to information. They also stressed the need to raise the issue of safety of RTI requesters and campaigners in order to keep the information campaign living. FF has been organizing such programs marking September as the RTI month. September 28 is marked as the International Day of the

Universal Access to Information across the globe.

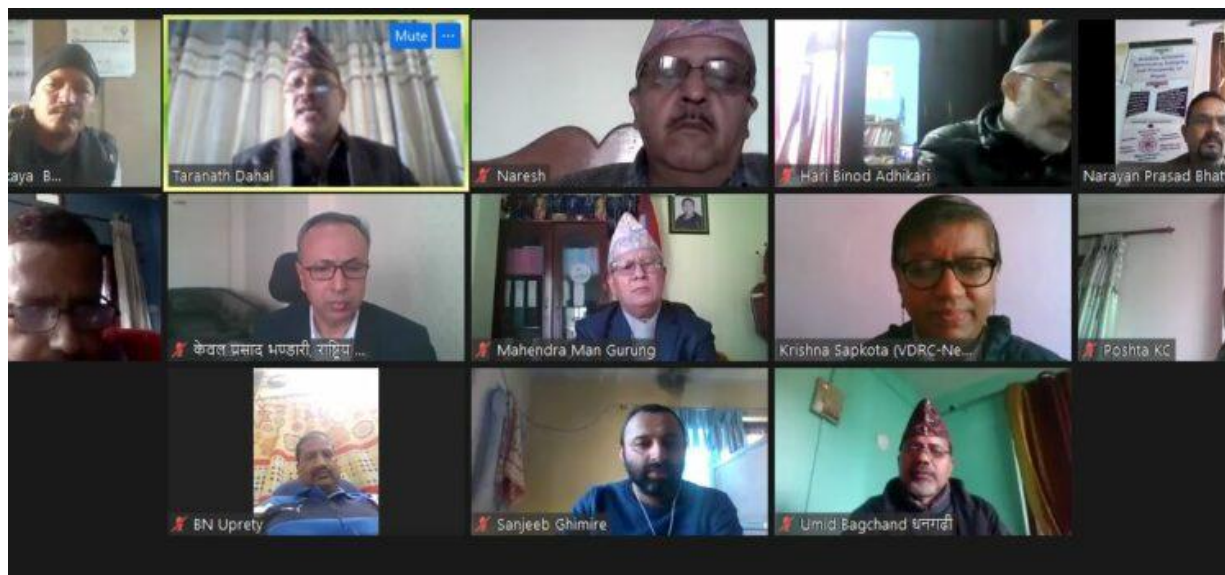
For details: <http://freedomforum.org.np/rti-campaigners-worry-about-safety/>

c) Discussion on 'Use of Right to Information, its Challenges, and Opportunities'

The thematic discussion was organized on July 24. The main objective of the event was to bring together the representatives of CSOs, RTI activists and experts from across the country to build the agenda and strategy of RTI, taking this as part of the open government partnership (OGP). Linking RTI to OGP is believed to ensure governance transparency and accountability.

This event was held under a part of the series of OGP thematic workshop. The dialogue was also expected to strengthen joint efforts of CSO's, National Information Commission and RTI activists to strategically forward the use, challenges and opportunities of RTI in the present context of Nepal.

For details: <http://freedomforum.org.np/strategic-collaboration-is-must-rti-community/>



d) Information sought from local government on details of COVID-19 expenses

Freedom Forum requested information at local levels of Province-2 and all districts of Bagmati Province, seeking details on expenditure they made in response to COVID-19. The applications for the information were sent via post offices. Total 220 information applications were filed, seeking details so that it would be clear how transparently the local levels worked in crisis.

The information applications were filed as part of the month-long observation of the International Day of Right to Information/International Right to Know Day. FF organized various activities related to the right to information during September.

For details: <http://freedomforum.org.np/information-sought-from-local-govt-on-details-of-covid-19-expenses/>

4) Open Budget Survey and Open data

Freedom Forum has continued open budget survey in partnership with International

Budget Partnership since 2006. It is an independent, comparative and fact-based research instrument practiced worldwide that uses internationally accepted criteria to assess public access to central government budget information; formal opportunities for the public to participate in the national budget process; and the role of budget oversight institutions such as the legislature and auditor in the budget process.

a) Assessment of transparency and accountability of COVID fiscal management

This year too, FF worked with the International Budget Partnership (IBP) to undertake a rapid assessment of emergency fiscal policy packages in the period from March 2020 to September 2020.

For details: <http://freedomforum.org.np/transparency-and-accountability-of-covid-fiscal-management-in-nepal/>



b) Virtual dialogue on ‘Fiscal openness practices, challenges and opportunities in Nepal’

The experts addressing the dialogue observed reforms in budget transparency and citizen engagement and oversight in the budgetary process of the country has been stressed for the effective and efficient mobilization of public resources. At the event organized on August 30, the keynote speaker and Secretary at the National Planning Commission (NPC) Kewal Prasad Bhandari said, “There are several rooms for reforms in public financial management system of the country with budget transparency score of 41/100 in the Open Budget Survey (OBS-2019).”

For details: <http://freedomforum.org.np/experts-call-for-reforms-in-budget-openness-and-participation-for-accountable-spending-of-public-resources-2/>

c) Review of National Statistics Bill through Open data perspective

FF advocates for easy availability of the data of public concern at all three levels of the

government. It is also directly linked with the constitutionally guaranteed citizen's right to information.

With this view, FF reviewed the bill formulated to amend and integrate the laws related to National Statistics. The bill is still under consideration at the parliament. The review is also submitted to the Legislative Management Committee of National Assembly.

To read the policy brief, please click here: <http://freedomforum.org.np/download/policy-brief-of-statistics-bills-review/?wpdmdl=4659&refresh=61a9e8648bb211638525028>

5) Audit Accountability Initiative and Public Finance Management:

The initiative started in partnership with Office of Auditor General with an aim to monitor the performance of local consumer groups and local level in the development projects at the local levels.



a. Journalists' training on Audit accountability

Freedom Forum and Office of the Auditor General (OAG) hosted 'Journalists' Training on Audit Accountability'. The training workshop was hosted with the collaborative support from the SEJON and with financial assistance of International Budget Partnership (IBP) on July 28. A total of 21 (7 Female & 14 Male) economic journalists were present along with three officials from the Office of Auditor General in observer capacity in the workshop while Hari Bahadur Thapa and Taranath Dahal were trainers for the workshop. For details: <http://freedomforum.org.np/civil-society-organizations-media-are-part-of-audit-accountability-eco-system/>

b. Fellowship program to journalists' reporting on economic issues

Freedom Forum awarded fellowship to seven journalists as part of audit accountability initiative to raise the issues of Users' Groups at the sub-national level with focus on audit reports of the OAG, Nepal.

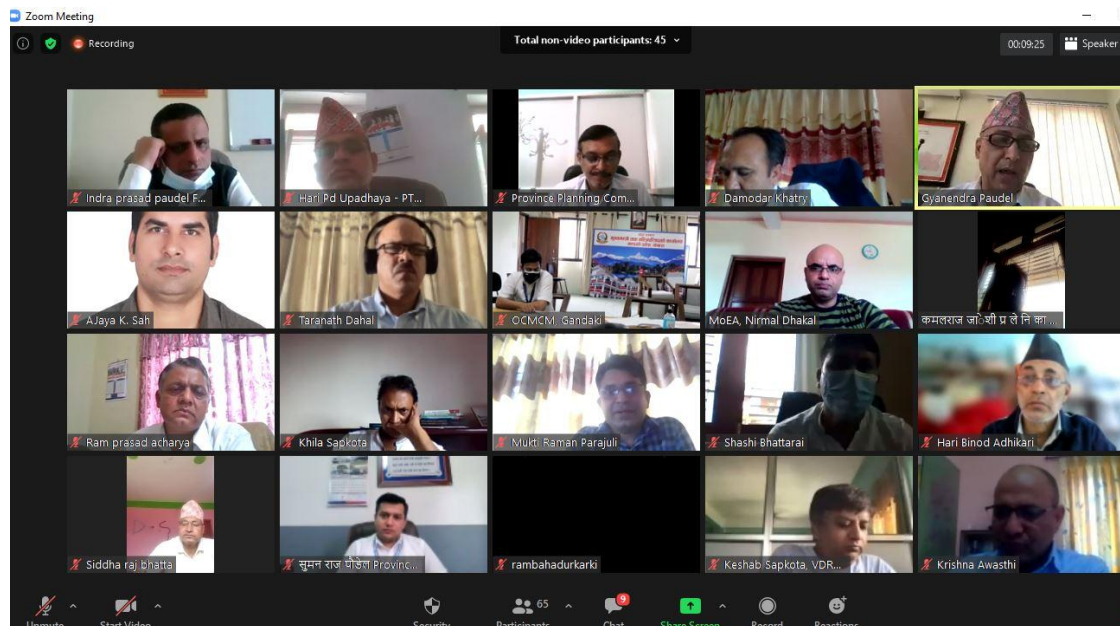
The fellowship program was further aimed at improving communication on audit recommendations, catalyzing relationships among various oversight actors including civil society groups, media, and legislators. A total of 14 stories including two articles were

published in various platforms.

For details: <http://freedomforum.org.np/journalists-report-corruption-at-local-level-with-fellowship/>

c) Stakeholders' consulted to draw up national strategy of citizen engagement in PFM

In order to elicit inputs from diverse stakeholders, including government, CSOs, media and individual experts/champions on the strategic areas and entry points of citizen engagement in public financial management (PFM) in Nepal, Freedom Forum in collaboration with the Public Expenditure and Financial Accountability (PEFA) Secretariat organized consultations at all three tiers of the government.



FF conducted the consultations for verification with key stakeholder participants where detailed discussions of findings, recommendations and conclusions were presented and the proposed CE Strategy was reviewed by key stakeholders. The virtual consultations were hosted as part of the review of the current situation of citizen engagement in PFM and develop a comprehensive Strategy for CE in the PFM system in Nepal that will guide the process of mainstreaming citizen engagement throughout the budget process for all tiers of the government.

For details: <http://freedomforum.org.np/national-strategy-of-citizen-engagement-in-pfm/>

Additional:

1. Freedom Chautary podcasts: Podcast has been a popular medium these days to stay updated on the concurrent issues. FF has been producing various podcasts based on its concerned themes as right to information, freedom of expression and democratic rights in both Nepali and



English versions.

FF released 20 different episodes of podcasts this year.

To listen to the podcasts, please click here:

<http://freedomforum.org.np/podcast/>

2. Annual Press Freedom Report:

FF releases annual press freedom report at the end of every year featuring cases of press freedom violations during the year, comparative analysis on the basis of data and the current trends describing the status of press freedom in Nepal.

This year's report states- although the number of press freedom violation is declined slightly, the atmosphere for press freedom and citizens' right to free expression and information did not improve.

For full report:

<http://freedomforum.org.np/download/annual-press-freedom-report-2020/?wpdmdl=4628&refresh=61a9e8648c7f31638525028>



3. Newsletters:

As its core activity, the newsletter- Free Expression- is published every three months. The newsletter covers updates on the thematic issues FF has been working on. Total four

issues of newsletter were published this year. All the issues are published on the official website of Freedom Forum accessible through this link:

<http://freedomforum.org.np/publications/newsletters/>

4. Publications:

The year was highly affected with the COVID 19 pandemic where FF's activities were also affected at large. Due to this, the reports, booklets and newsletters published this year were in digital format and disseminated through FF's official website.

<http://freedomforum.org.np/publications/>



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