RESEARCH BRIEF

Institutional Assessment of Rights-based Advocacy in the Western Tarai

Advocacy has become a buzzword for most agencies involved in development. In Nepal, growing numbers of Non Government Organizations (NGOs) with a higher priority to policy influencing and advocacy work at all levels (local, provincial and national). The usual assumption is for NGOs to emphasize the need for advocacy and to intricately link it with capacity and network building, evidence-based research, connections with micro and macro social movements and, through these, to contribute to the strengthening of social contract between the state and the citizens. However, insufficient attention is paid to institutional arrangements of connecting research to advocacy. This research brief explores the rights-based advocacy (RBA) in Western Tarai/ Madhes (Kapilvastu, Nawalparasi and Rupandehi districts), and shows how local-level advocacy research for the creation of democratic spaces from below is largely ignored. Such ignorance hinders associational groups from emerging at the local level, and inhibits micro issues from connecting with macro issues.

In the last few decades, Nepal has witnessed a series of conflicts— including Maoist insurgency (1996–2006) and three Madhes uprisings (2007, 2008 and 2015)—that have led to the creation of new institutional arrangements for inclusive democracy and decentralization. The promulgation of a new constitution in September 2015 saw violent protests, human rights abuses and communal tensions in various parts of the Madhes. The legitimacy of the constitution has been questioned on many grounds. While Province number Two's demands that were raised in Madhes uprisings were partially met, similar demands in the western side of Madhes have been rejected.[1] A deep sense of defeat therefore becomes evident in conversations with rights-based activists and politicians in

[1] The ethnic Tharu movement that demanded a separate Tharuhat province was strong in these districts. The movement wanted Kailali and Kanchanpur districts of the erstwhile Far Western Development Region to be included in the proposed Tharuhat

the Western Tarai. Normalcy in everyday politics is hard to find among particularly Madhesis and Tharus despite the fact that the "post-conflict" phase that started from 2006 ended with technical implementation of the constitution, followed by elections to local, provincial and central governments.

In such a scenario, what is the institutional landscape in which rights-based activists are performing? Do they have knowledge and resources at their disposal and the research capacity to speak on their own behalf for enhancing critical engagements in the Western Tarai in terms of peace building, promoting human rights and enhancing social justice? In the past, we have observed, particularly in the three Madhes uprisings, a sudden violent outpour of grievances upon which there is rarely any preparedness and often lack of democratic means to deal with these moments in conciliatory ways. These are the crucial questions upon which this research brief is premised.[2]

The first step for implementing the project was primarily based on the institutional assessment (IA) of rights-based NGOs and academia. The idea of IA is not to use a one-size-fits-all method. The institutions' capacities vary widely.[3] IA was done primarily to scout for RBA researchers in the Western Tarai from multiple institutional

landscapes such as academia, NGOs and public intellectuals/journalism.[4] The detailed modalities were not restricted to some rigid methodology during the field work but were kept open ended. Given the socio-political and institutional constraints in the Western Tarai, the task of defining the institutional landscape prior to conducting an IA faced two challenges.[5] The first was the challenge of expanding the idea of IA broadly viewed in terms of "institutional ethnography"[6] to rights-based advocacy research itself.[7] Such ethnography covers a wide canvas and is rarely planned out fully in advance to unpack multiple standpoints. With whom and how to conduct assessment is only discovered step by step.

In this research brief, the experiences of thirteen individual researchers inducted in a cohort that hail from various institutional landscapes served as an experiential data for advocacy research. The brief focuses on expanding the knowledge base for rights-based advocacy without any strict indicators because "there can be no specific blueprint for conducting institutional evaluations nor for knowing ahead of time all of the issues that

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province whereas the Akhanda Sudur Paschim (Far West) supporters clamored for the "undivided" Far West.

[2] The research for this brief was undertaken by Martin Chautari in collaboration with Madhes Human Rights Home (MAHURI-Home), Kapilvastu, as a part of "Enhancing Capacity of Rights-based Advocates" project supported by the National Endowment for Democracy, US.

[3] Morgan, Peter and Taschereau Suzanne. 1996. Capacity and Institutional Assessment: Frameworks, Methods and Tools for Analysis. Prepared for Canada International Development Agency Policy Branch. Canadian International Development Agency, Quebec. Available at http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/downl oad?doi=10.1.1.119.7536&rep=rep1& type=pdf; accessed May 12, 2019.

[4] The institutional assessment of the Western Tarai was conducted in collaboration with MAHURI-Home. Narratives of selected researchers were taken during training programs at Taulihawa, Kapilvastu.

[5] "Socio-political and institutional constraints" refer broadly to ailment of the individuals (activists), civil society, NGOs, and public intellectuals' capacity to make informed interventions that could make public institutions more democratic and accountable. See Appadurai, Arjun. 2006. The Right to Research. *Globalisation, Societies and Education* 4(2): 167–177.

[6] Smith, Dorothy E., ed. 2006. *Institutional Ethnography as Practice*. Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield.

[7] The term "advocacy" has to be understood in relation to the network among civil society, academia, state, I/NGOs, unions and intellectuals exchanging information among them either formally or informally. For details, see Keck, Margaret and Kathryn Sikkink. 2014. *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

bear on institutional functioning."[8] Second, what does the idea of institution constitute in terms of rights-based advocacy? There are two ways to look at it. First, the definition of institution is popularly known as "the rule of the game in a society."[9] However, there is rarely any agreement (or agreed principles) on what the rules are for an ideal institution: particularly, rules are often different for different set of people/organization in rights-based advocacy. It is highly contextual depending on the range of social relations embedded in the institution. Second, "institutions are socially constructed, complex systems, neither the means nor the ends of the evaluation process can be fully known prior to implementation."[10] Moreover, if I/NGOs are considered to be one of the key institutions for RBA, then it is also to be noted that the impact of their advocacy will be highly tenuous. Evaluating advocacy tends to have multiple objectives, and often due to a lack of baseline data and the relatively intangible and long-term nature of impacts, it is difficult to forecast, at the outset, the indicators that might be suitable. It is also unlikely to acknowledge directly how advocacy leads to policy changes and as a result of what kind of pressure groups.[11]

This research brief undertakes the task of exploring the diversity of institutions of Western Tarai from multiple individuals' standpoints/sites. Broadly, the institutions can be categorized as (a) academia; (b) rights-based advocacy groups (primarily, NGOs); and (c) public intellectuals/journalism. It explores all three institutional locations to have a symbiotic and contributory role in terms of advocacy research. However, of note, IA cannot be mapped out in entirety in a given period, so it intends to briefly cover wider socio-economic, cultural and political aspects of individual RBA researchers who have considerable experiences in advocacy/activism.

Data collection took place from December 2017 with numerous visits to Western Tarai. First, IA was primarily conducted to scout out RBA researchers/individuals from multiple institutional landscapes with snowball sampling technique. Over three dozen individuals were contacted. Second, the researchers were pre-screened and subsequently invited (22 individuals) for research-based training and presentations on diverse topics. Third, the thirteen individuals selected from all three institutional landscapes immersed in numerous training, writing and mentorship activities at Martin Chautari, Kathmandu and at MAHURI-Home, Kapilvastu. As mentioned earlier, RBA cannot have a baseline, is relatively intangible, and its long-term impacts and indicators are difficult to pinpoint. Given these conditions, these data are based on unstructured interactions with the thirteen individuals from academia, NGOs and public journalism from Western Tarai. This brief argues for "advocacy research" as a sustained, routinized, cumulative and collective practice emerging out of all three institutional landscapes that produce outcomes in terms of hybrid processes instead of water-tight compartments. The conversations focused on locating embedded issues of RBA research. Supplementary documents such as annual reports of various organizations, Central Bureau of Statistics (CBS), data accessed (through RTIs) from Social Welfare Council (SWC) and

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[8] Lusthaus, Charles, Garry Anderson and Elaine Murphy. 1995. *Institutional Assessment: A Framework for Strengthening Organizational Capacity for IDRC's Research Partners*. Ottawa: International Development Research Centre (IDRC), p. 6.

[9] See North, Douglass C. 1990. *Institutions, Institutional Change and Economic Performance: Political Economy of Institutions and Decisions*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

[10] See Lusthaus, Charles, Garry Anderson and Elaine Murphy. 1995. *Institutional Assessment: A Framework for Strengthening Organizational Capacity for IDRC's Research Partners*. Ottawa: IDRC, p. 6.

[11] Hudson, Allan. 2002. Advocacy by UK-based Development NGOs. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* 31(3): 402–418.

other secondary sources were used to assess the research capacity of RBA in Western Tarai.

Before we unpack the institutional landscape of RBA, what RBA means for activists and their tools of activism need to be explored. Activists advocate for issues, rights and needs of a particular group or a community. It is assumed that they know what rights are being encroached, by the state or otherwise. Moreover, they articulate everyday experiences of injustices on the people and seek support, validation and legitimacy for their actions. Given this, two things follow: (a) they know (or assume to know) what rights are not being respected, for which they feel strongly; (b) they innovate responses to address particular concerns where activism is necessary.[12] Now, if we try to understand RBA in the Western Tarai, there is a gap between individual and larger attempt to advocacy. For instance, how does an activist understand RBA at individual level or reflect upon it from his/her standpoint vis-à-vis the social realities of others? At times, it manifests in the form of radical outpour at the emotional level, but mostly they remain cocooned in narrow socio-political walls of local issues and are not able to connect to the broader level. This research brief is arranged in three parts to collect the insights from academia, NGOs and public intellectuals/journalism. The concluding remarks will summarize the three parts of the research brief with some policy highlights.

Insights from Academia

From the RBA perspective, the academia in the Western Tarai seems least inspiring. If research in humanities and social science (HSS)[13] is taken as a proxy[14] for advocacy research, then the scenario is mired due to regional inequality in accessing higher education. For instance, HSS-related master's degree program is not available at all in Kapilvastu, while there are only twenty students enrolled in Nawalparasi and 526 students in Rupandehi. Almost two-thirds of them are from Butwal Multiple Campus (BMC) and Bhairahawa Campus (BC). Compared to the total population in each district, student enrollment numbers for the HSS are minuscule in the Western Tarai.

The pool of advocacy researchers from academia is extremely small in the Western Tarai. For instance, in HSS, the master's degree program in BC and BMC include only four courses: Nepali, English, Economics and Sociology/Anthropology. Compared to the number of students, there is an overwhelming presence of faculty[15] while classrooms are empty in some courses, especially in bachelor's degree programs. In 2014/2015, there were 127 and 394 students enrolled in bachelor's level program from HSS stream in BC and BMC, respectively. The faculty to student ratio was 1:4 and 1:6.[16] The similar ratio for the master's program would be even narrower.

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[12] Harney, Peter. 2013. Fundamentals of a Rights-based Approach to Advocacy. Available at www.edmundriceinternational.org/?page_id=2682; accessed March 18, 2018.

[13] In Bhairahawa Campus (BC), the following HSS courses are offered: MA in Nepali, Sociology and Anthropology; BA in Nepali, English, Political Science, Economics, History, Culture, Population studies, Sociology and Anthropology. Similarly, in Butwal Multiple Campus (BMC), the following HSS courses are offered: MA in English, Nepali, Economics and Sociology/Anthropology; BA in Nepali, English, History, Geography, Mathematics, Political Science, Rural Development, Sociology, Economics and Population studies.

[14] Nussbaum, Martha C. 2010. *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

[15] In BC, there are thirty-two teaching staff (17 permanent, 3 contract, 12 part-time) and in BMC, there are sixty-eight teaching staff (54 permanent, 9 contract, 5 part-time). For BC, the data extracted from BC. 2075 v.s. *Kshitij: Bhairahawa Campus Golden Jubilee Report, 2075.* Rupandehi: Bhairahawa. For BMC, the data accessed from unpublished campus sources.

[16] Data extracted from University Grant Commission (UGC). 2016. *Education Management Information System: Report on Higher Education 2014/15.* Bhaktapur: UGC.

But we also need to ask whether the academia has the necessary capacity to take up activism/advocacy in their research. Are they motivated towards advocacy research? The individuals' motivation for academia and for advocacy research is low. Their everyday life is a rush to take classes in different campuses for almost twelve hours a day to support their livelihood. This hardly leaves them any time for research. Although they express their interest in research, they can barely articulate their research queries.

The first group of faculties is occupied in teaching but is not committed to social science research. There is no incentive for them to get engaged in research. A BC faculty said:

Many faculties are either permanent or part-time who have no research trainings beyond completing master's degree. If you are a permanent faculty, you are better off with the job security. However, there are barely any research capacity enhancement programs for the faculty. If you are a permanent faculty with a PhD, the campus provides Rs. 40,000 as an incentive. If a faculty publishes article in the campus journal, they get Rs. 2,000 as remuneration, but nothing if they publish outside the campus journal. This provision however no longer exists, citing financial constraints by campus authority. Research is difficult for part-time teachers, and they focus on teaching, earning Rs. 360 per class for teaching at bachelor's level and Rs. 600 per class for teaching at master's level.[17]

Asked if there are any research incentives for faculty members, he said: "If a permanent faculty can get the leave for studying MPhil/PhD, that in itself can be considered a great achievement." Those who are surviving in academia are mostly concerned with their livelihood, and they barely get time to take up advocacy research.

A second group of college faculty is active in social movements in their individual capacity. However, various socio-political and institutional constraints make their efforts limited to the micro level. While the first group does not inspire optimism on the RBA research issues that are discussed below, the second group is inspiring, albeit in a limited manner.

The colleges in the Western Tarai are focused on teaching; RBA research is either too weak or entirely missing. While scouting for researchers, we extended a request to faculties from HSS in BMC and BC, Rupandehi. They agreed initially, but while following up, they were reluctant, citing the unavailability of time among others reasons. In most cases, the difference between NGO activists/journalists and academia was striking not only in terms of identifying issues that require advocacy but also in factual articulation of local issues. In addition, there are larger structural issues such as academia being delinked with research, advocacy research in particular, with some individual exceptions. A journalist and activist from Nawalparasi responded, "There is hardly any contribution from academia in any social movement."[18] The literacy rate of the Western Tarai is below the national average. Particularly, in Nawalparasi and Kapilvastu, education attainment to postgraduate level is about half the national average.[19] The benchmark of skilled human resources is low. Thus, colleges barely

[17] Personal communication, May 06, 2019.

[18] Personal Communication, May 15, 2019.

[19] Data compiled from national census 2011 for the population aged five years and above by educational attainment (level passed). Barely 1% completes the master's level nationally; only 0.64% in Tarai and 0.63% in the Western Tarai; district-wise, 0.46% in Kapilvastu, 0.47% in Nawalparasi, and 0.84% in Rupandehi. For bachelor's level, district-wise completion rates are 1.6%, 1.63% and 2.88% respectively.

attract talented individuals, with most individuals filling out as part-time faculty.

If we take libraries as one of the indicators of adequate research capacity and as access to knowledge resources, Mahabir Library in Butwal, one of the oldest public libraries in the region, is almost nonfunctional, despite having a considerable collection, and its land is rented out to a private school. The libraries of BMC and BC are accessed by students only for textbooks. Moreover, none of these libraries are cataloged. One research student of BMC in the HSS stream said, "Despite having a rich collection in the reference section (Nepal Studies) at BMC, it is barely accessible in the campus library."[20] These libraries are mostly a place to read newspapers. Given that some libraries have land of their own, they are able to sustain. For instance, Pashupati Pratap Library in Taulihawa, Kapilvastu is a popular library of the area. Retired civil servants and other literary enthusiasts maintain the library and have conducted occasional discussion programs within the library premises. The former Rupandehi district president of the Federation of Nepali Journalists said, "When I took over the [president's] position, I initiated a library/ documentation unit in our office. The library was meant mostly for the journalists and the collection was limited to newspapers. However, I did not find any journalist taking interest in the library or carrying out any research using the library resources."[21]

The dilapidated state of academia is reflective of the area to which it belongs. If knowledge is empowerment and investment in knowledge infrastructures—such as libraries, research and writing—strengthens everyday culture or enhances democratic skills, the contrary is true for the Western Tarai. One journalist from Rupandehi said, "When reading was restricted [in the past], people were more into reading and debating political issues, whereas [these days] when there is no such restriction, reading/debating culture has vanished."[22]

Insights from NGOs

The weak academic infrastructure thus has an adverse impact on the research capacity of local NGOs for RBA. Whenever a vacancy is announced by an NGO, there is hardly any qualified candidate applying from around the region. An activist from Kapilvastu having a considerable experience in the Western Tarai said, "Although it is necessary for locally embedded NGOs to work with locally educated and experienced candidates, such candidates are grossly absent. For any vacancy, we see that all applicants are outsiders. They are not only diverged from local reality but also do not understand local languages."[23] Another activist working in an INGO's Rupandehi office shared his experiences:

> In NGO/INGO works, even comma and full stops are decided at the top. Rarely can local people and community use or intervene with their creativity. They expect the local folks to be ready whenever donor, contractors, or consultants visit them. It is as if they are givers and local folks are waiting for something to pour out of their hands.[24]

He added, "It has become funding-led program instead of program-led funding." It further accentuates the knowledge gap where the local

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[20] He added, "Neither the students are serious nor the faculties take research seriously. However, there are some faculties affiliated to teachers' unions who occasionally publish academic or semi-academic journals but advocate their political causes in these journals." (Personal communication, May 02, 2019.) The published knowledge resources are extremely difficult to access: one has to contact the authors themselves to access copies of what they have published.

[21] Personal communication, May 15, 2019.

[22] Personal communication, May 03, 2019

[23] Personal communication, May 05, 2019.

[24] Personal communication, May 03, 2019.

NGOs/activists are mere spectators while decisions are made at the top to follow things on the ground by local researchers. For this reason, he concluded that, "to make a supply side [I/NGOs who fund the projects] accountable, it is necessary that the demand side be empowered so that locally based RBAs not only supply the research data but also enhance the research capacity to analyze and interpret by themselves."

NGO activists in the Western Tarai narrated that there were hardly any concentrated efforts for advocacy research. Given that there are so many I/NGOs in Nepal, why is advocacy research not visible at the local level? Take for instance, the data accessed from SWC that shows glaring gaps and extremely centralized functioning. Out of about 47,000 NGOs registered at SWC, there are at least 335 NGOs in Kapilvastu, 680 in Nawalparasi and 527 in Rupandehi.[25] Initially, our plan was to list out NGOs which were selected by SWC for monitoring and evaluation in the respective districts. As per the SWC rules, NGO projects with funding of less than two million rupees (20 lakhs) are to be monitored through the respective District Coordination Committees, and projects above that amount are monitored directly by the SWC.[26] The data extracted from SWC for fiscal years (FYs) 2072/2073 v.s. and 2073/2074 v.s. of all the NGOs that went through monitoring and evaluation process shows that not a single project from the Western Tarai was included. It suggests that no NGO from the three districts had any project worth more than two million rupees— at least not for the above two FYs. Moreover, for FY 2072/2073 v.s., out of 100 projects under SWC evaluation, 92 projects were led by NGOs based in Kathmandu and Lalitpur districts;

for FY 2073/2074 v.s., out of 155 projects, 143 projects were of the NGOs based in Kathmandu and Lalitpur. This shows how centralized the governance of I/NGOs has been in Nepal.

It is extremely difficult to know how many NGOs are functional in the Western Tarai. One way to know this is through renewal processes obtained from respective districts or its records with the SWC if outside funding is secured for NGO activities. However, due to the paucity of such data, a list of NGOs for the Western Tarai was compiled from the annual report of NGO Federation. In consultation with MAHURI-Home, select NGOs in the three districts were visited. The capacity of most NGOs to conduct RBA was found to be very limited. A female activist, responding to questions on RBA in Kapilvastu said,

> I never knew about research-based advocacy. Although we run advocacy program, we are activists who work with individuals. Only lately are we realizing that our daily advocacy activities have to be linked with research and writing. It will not only spread the message faster but also connect the local level to provincial and federal level.[27]

She added, "Many NGOs do not realize that the research—even a small part of academic research—is important, and that we have already been doing research in terms of collecting information, relevant data and field experiences." Further, she said:

> Many times, other persons take our ideas, concepts and data and develop proposals out of them. We do not get chance to participate. Our experience is: we collect data, conduct piloting, field test, case studies, baseline, etc. When the final report is presented, it

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[25] Compiled from a list of SWC-registered NGOs.

[26] Data for projects worth 20 lakhs in a year were difficult to access due to lack of appropriate updated databases compiled district-wise at SWC. However, it is safe to assume that projects worth less than 20 lakhs will have limited scope for RBA research.

[27] Personal communication, May 05, 2019.

is something else and we get surprised. It is written by someone who has no expertise in the area and ignores some crucial concerns. We might not know how to write, but *we know how research should look like.*

Most NGOs in the area share similar views. They feel that if opportunities are provided, local NGOs can be meaningfully involved in different phases of advocacy research.

Insights from Public Journalism

For simplicity, we take the term "public intellectual" to refer to people who have some form of social, cultural and political legitimacy derived from their ability to learn from the ongoing public learning potentials.[28] Compared to other public intellectuals in Province Five, such as literary writers and other professional organizations and cooperative, journalists are better equipped for critical civic engagements through media or various kinds of public forums.[29] Hence, public journalism is taken as a proxy to public intellectuals—journalists as potential members—engaging in rights-based advocacy/research.

A journalist from Rupandehi said, "During the political changes—for instance, of 2046 v.s. and 2062/2063 v.s.—there was lots of respect for the civil society/public intellectuals here. It is now very weak because political issues have become stagnant."[30] He added:

There were various rights-based issues raised by the political parties which then initiated various debates/discourses—henceforth, it led to an increase in the number of the new print media—in the society, which has now dwindled because the same political parties are now in the government and the issues of the periphery are much under-toned. Worse, when independent media takes political sides, the utterance of right-based issues gets meager to the extent that the civil society feels desolate.[31]

There are possibly two ways to interpret the learning potentials of journalists and the challenges they face in doing advocacy research. First is related to how a journalist perceives advocacy research. Second is why journalists at the local level think that what they have been doing on the ground is not enough to communicate the issues effectively to the outside world. For instance, a journalist from Rupandehi—who is also an activist known for reporting human rights violations/abuses during the Madhes agitation in 2015—responded to the query about the reporting on the ground and connecting larger patterns of human rights abuses through advocacy research:

As a human rights activist, I have been documenting human rights violation cases for over a decade, but I never thought of writing detailed, long-piece research- or evidence-based articles of the stories that I have myself documented and followed.

[28] Abdi, Ali A. 2016. The Location of the Public Intellectual: Historical and Contemporary Analyses. In *Assembling and Governing the Higher Education Institution: Democracy, Social Justice and Leadership in Global Higher Education.* L. Shultz and M. Viczko, eds., pp.113–130. London: Springer.

[29] For more on Nepal's civil society, see Tamang, Seira. 2002. Civilizing Civil Society: Donors and Democratic Space. *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 7(2): 309–353.

[30] Personal communication, May 15, 2019.

[31] The total number of newspapers registered in the three districts is 78—of which 69 are registered in Rupandehi alone. There are five newspapers registered in Nawalparasi and four in Kapilvastu. But not all the registered newspapers are in operation; some are published regularly, others only occasionally. According to the Annual Report of Press Council Nepal for 2073/2074 v.s., only nine papers (of which five are dailies) out of the 69 registered in Rupandehi are regularly published. Out of the 752 online news portals registered in Nepal, at least ten are from the three districts.

When I decided to write an article, I faced many challenges. I wanted the reader to read my text and see the *real picture* of human rights abuses the way I have seen there on the ground.[32]

This leads to the second point mentioned above where he further added:

I also consider documentation as a part of research and we have made subsequent follow-ups of the various cases in terms of how they were being tackled in the court of law and the implementation of due legal practices/processes by police force, etc. I am quite known in Rupandehi, so if I report something then people in my district will take it as a truth. However, for the outside readers I need to produce more concrete evidences and I cannot take them for granted. Thus, the pictures that I see on the ground to communicate in writing is indeed a challenge.

Here, the second point also demonstrates the anxiety of a journalist—despite considerable experiences as a journalist/activist in rights-based issues—in carrying out advocacy research either due to lack of capacity to aspire for research or maybe due to denial of opportunity to acquire necessary training, skills and mentoring in different research phases.

Journalists highlighted their experiences of advocacy research—doing follow-up reports. For instance, in response to the query if journalists conduct advocacy research or not, a journalist from Rupandehi said:

On any incident (political, historical, etc.), if any journalist can follow up, then s/he can do a very good advocacy research. They

can write books out of those experiences. However, unfortunately, many journalists neither do follow up nor keep archive of their own work and of others related to the story. Once we keep doing these things, it will help to identify the patterns and it can be a long piece of research backed up with evidences. There are no such people in Rupandehi to the best of my knowledge. Not to mention a few individual exceptions.[33]

Another journalist from Nawalparasi narrated the follow-up story he did on road accidents, that were occurring on a regular basis on the 100 km stretch of the East-West highway in Nawalparasi:

I did a short reporting on road accidents in Nawalparasi district. I got curious and I started to follow up and collect data from traffic police. I began collecting pictures, and data regularly. It turned out that I had a lot of information and I wrote a detailed report on why there are so many accidents on the highway in Nawalparasi.[34]

Journalists can therefore self-train and conduct "mini research" and get engaged in RBA. Further, external agencies could provide advocacy research trainings that will help the journalist bring out long evidence-based research out of their accumulated experiences, if they follow up on their own reported stories.

Concluding Remarks
The research brief has provided an overview of RBA in the institutional landscape of Nepal's Western Tarai. RBA is much talked about in the development world, but RBA research has been in short supply in Nepal. For instance, due to lack of routinized practices of RBA research, local

[32] Personal communication, May 15, 2019.

[33] Personal communication, May 15, 2019.
[34] Personal communication, May 15, 2019.

NGOs find it difficult to recall their past advocacy activities, lack proper documentation, and do not make use of their accumulated experiences and learning in widening the democratic space. Given the three institutional landscapes discussed above, the take away are: (a) the academia may respond to RBA research, but their position seems tenuous in the Western Tarai advocacy realm; (b) NGO activists are best positioned to advocacy, but socio-political and institutional constraints force them to ignore independent RBA research and they fail to connect micro issues to macro causes and conditions; and (c) public intellectuals/journalists embedded in more dense networks of association with other civil society groups and with practical experiences on the ground are best positioned for RBA, but they have not been able to do it adequately.

The existing disconnections of locally embedded rights-based advocates force us to reflect on why the institutions for RBA are dilapidated at the local level. This is reflected in the compiled list of NGOs that went through monitoring and evaluation process under SWC, which shows that over ninety percent of projects are controlled by NGOs located in Kathmandu Valley. Networking and linking the three institutional landscapes (academia, NGOs and public intellectuals/ journalism) would help to explore new ways of building research capacity at the local level. More and more independent research from the combination of diverse institutional landscapes will be necessary for elementary action-oriented research rather than merely operating top-down projects.

From the discussions above, the key policy lessons can be summarized in three ways. First, the symbiotic and contributory links between academia, NGOs and public journalism is a necessary condition for advocacy research at the local level to draw legitimacy and for meaningful enhancement of capacity for rights-based advocacy. Second, the lack of use of research in advocacy would further spiral downwards the impact that any advocacy aims to achieve or to assess an impact for connecting research to policy. Third, it is necessary for donor agencies at the project sites to support learning across the diverge range of institutional landscapes. It encourages reflection and adaptive work practices in enhancing the abilities to voice, debate, contest, and oppose through research and publication (i.e., knowledge production from grassroots individuals, or "barefoot research"[35]) by locally embedded advocates themselves. This is especially important in the face of democratic challenges to "speak truth to power; make truth powerful and make the powerful truthful" from margins.[36]

[35] Dreze, Jean. 2002. On Research and Action. *Economic and Political Weekly* 37(9): 817–819.

[36] A famous quote by South African poet Jeremy Cronin on democracy. See, Chandra, Atul. 2005. It's time for people to get empowered. Available at https://timesofindia. indiatimes.com/city/lucknow/Its-time-for-people-to-get-empowered/articleshow/1326247.cms; accessed June 20, 2019.

Martin Chautari (MC) began as an informal discussion group in Kathmandu in 1991, allowing development professionals and academics to meet every two weeks to share insights and experiences. In 1995, the name 'Martin Chautari' was adopted after the late Martin Hoftun, one of the founders of the original discussion group. After being managed by the Centre for Social Research and Development for six years, in 2002 MC became registered as a separate non-government organization in Kathmandu.

Since its inception, MC's core objective has been to enhance the quality of public dialogue and the public sphere in Nepal. Started at a time in which Nepal had little, if any, culture of informed public discussion, MC is now nationally known for its discussions which are held two times a week. Chautari also conducts research focused on governance and democracy, media, education, health and livelihoods with cross-cutting themes of gender and social inclusion. A rigorous mentoring program of young researchers is in-built into MC's work.

Till date MC has published ninety-four books. MC is also the editorial home of the journals *Samaj Adhyayan* [formerly *Media Adhyayan*, established in 2006]*,* and *Studies in Nepali History and Society* [SINHAS, published by Mandala Book Point since 1996]. Since 2006, MC has opened its research library and media documentation center to the public. The library's holdings total more than 22,000 books.

All five components—the discussions, research, mentoring, publications and library—feed into each other and form an intrinsic part of MC's primary objective: strengthening the social contract between the state and citizens and expanding and making inclusive the public sphere by promoting informed dialogues and analytically rigorous research.

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