

Civic Space Situation in Nepal

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Submitted to :



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Methodology and Relevancy of Study

Preparation of this paper is based on the study of the current laws and policies and the experiences of NFN and its members. The opinions and the issues expressed, and deliberations of the thematic workshops during the conferences and meetings organized by NFN in Nepal. Also primary data collected collected by the survey 75 NGOs and interaction with representatives of 150 CSOs, organizations, five government agencies. In this context, this document is the basis the present condition and explore the scope of reform of government policy and practices so as to contribute to reform of this sector through advocacy. This study reflects common understanding and demands of NGOs and civil society organizations as a whole.

Civic Space Situation and Issues of Reform in Nepal

1. Country Context

After the Constitution of Nepal 2015, Nepal has been established as a Federal Democratic Republic country and federalism has become institutionalized. Under Article 56 of the Constitution, a three-tier political structure has been established at the federal, province and local levels. After the federal structure the first election of three tier governments was held in 2017. During the five-year tenure of the first elected people's representatives, time was spent in drafting laws. Currently, the second local and national level election of Nepal has been held in May 2022. The next task of the newly elected people's representatives is to take the lead in fulfilling aspiration of people however, the practice of the past has been frustrating the democratic practices in Nepal and shrinking democratic and civic spaces.

According to this study and data collected by the secondary sources, the scope of democratic and civic space in Nepal has been narrowed and shrinking and laws have been enacted by the government to curb civil society. Similarly, many incidents of human rights violations, corruption, crime and bribery have been reported. Public service and government services are also cumbersome and time consuming, thus the reasons corruption is rampant. Due to such various incidents, the slogan of peace, tranquility, prosperous Nepal - happy Nepali has not been successful.

In current scenario, In the 2022 Global Hunger Index, Nepal ranks 81st out of the 121 countries with sufficient data to calculate 2022 GHI scores. With a score of 19.1, Nepal has a level of hunger that is moderate. This shows a comparatively higher rate of hunger issues in Nepal, according to Global Hunger Index. As per the report of Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), 17.4 percent of Nepalese are under the poverty line. And the Nepal GDP is projected to trend around 30.90 USD Billion and GDP per capita is projected around 920.00 USD in 2022, according to our econometric models. Nepal recorded a Government Debt to GDP of 36.29 percent of the country's Gross Domestic Product in 2021.

Those figures represent the condition of nation where, two in ten people in Nepal lives below the national poverty line and below 2.5 USD incomes per day. People that live under the poverty line do not have enough money to meet their basic needs like food, clothing and shelter. Those who live in mountainous, more rural areas are the most likely to suffer from poverty and hunger that affects the country. In 2019 around 4.8 percent of Nepal's

population was undernourished. In those conditions, there are many barriers and difficulties to reach the target of Sustainable Development Goal as well in Nepal.

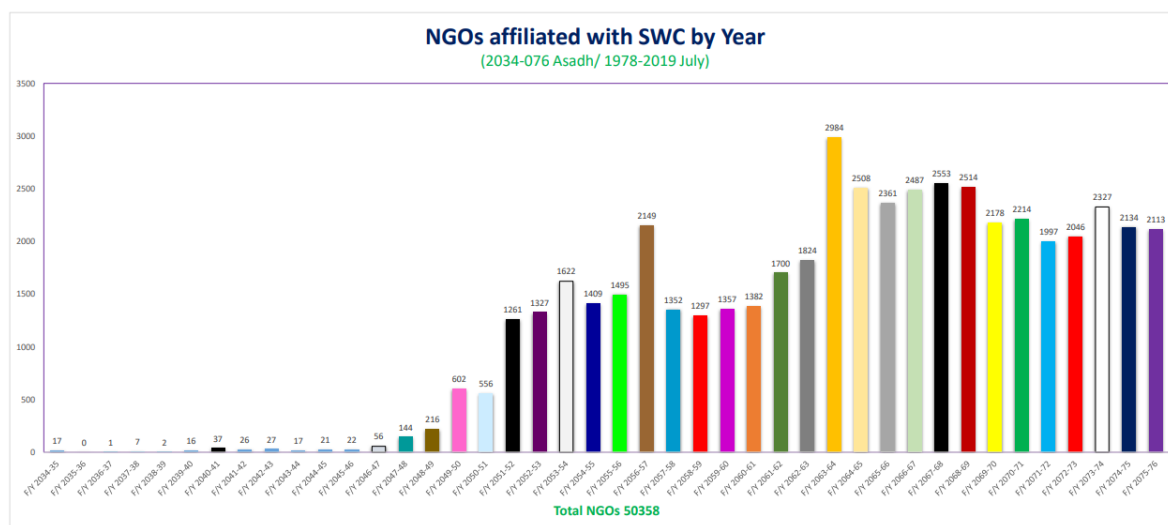
6. Brief history of NGO in Nepal

The welfare and charitable social activities carried out locally in Nepal are known as Dhikur, Parva and Guthi as today's non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Traditionally in Nepali society local people together as been seen practicing social activities like small Guthi, Mahaguthi, irrigation practice, community shelters and so on. Meanwhile, towards the end of the Rana regime, when Chandra Shamsheer Rana was the Prime Minister on 1927 Kamdhenu a spinning wheel Maha Guthi was established. It is believed that the development of non-governmental organizations in Nepal started after the Guthi started domestic and cottage industries through involving men and women at the local level. After the huge earthquake in 1934 the Earthquake rescue team and team of service attendant association from royal institution were established for rescue at that time. Later, it made a deep impression on people about how a social organizations can serve the people in need. In 1926 there are facts that social activist Tulsimehar Shrestha started a social campaign and institutionalized a social activist through the loud propaganda organization. After that, in 1947, the government established a charity dispensary and started serving the needy which is also known as the pillar of today's non-governmental social welfare organizations.

Looking at the different history of non-governmental organizations in Nepal, in the year of 1960 during the time of the first elected Prime Minister of Nepal, Bisheshwor Prasad Koirala, the government tried to make non-governmental organizations by issuing organization registration number. It showed as if the government has started the effort, but before the particular year, it ended in the year of 1961 where democracy was ended and cruel ruler was established, but the interest of the people towards non-governmental organization was still there. At that time, while pleasing the king, charities such as the Red Cross, Tuberculosis Prevention and Leprosy Prevention continued to exist.

In the organization of that time, there was a kind of compulsion that the royal family should be in the leading positions and the organization should be run according to their wishes. Later, then autocratic Panchayat rulers realized the need for a charity organization and established the Social Services National Coordinating Council in the year 1977. It was established on the advice of the Panchayat for King Birendra to support the government organizations to improve social services and to gather international support.

After restoration of democracy in 1990 sudden increased new organizations were registered. Currently, if we look at the numbers of social institutions, there are more than 50000 NGOs registered as per SWC data, however NFN members are only 6700 NGOs and actively working NGOs are 3000 as well as only 700 NGOs are receiving project grant. The table shows the NGOs registered under the SWC.



3. CSOs Roles in Nepal

Civil society organizations (CSOs) can be understood as voluntary institutions / or organizations that are formed by the citizens without having a purpose of gaining political power or earning profit and sharing dividends. This definition includes formally or informally organized civil society, citizens' groups, user groups, associations, organizations, federations, non-governmental organizations, and organizations of professionals.

CSOs are considered inseparable parts of democracy. Such organizations are formed and operated under fundamental rights of citizens to form associations. It is not only that citizens choose their representatives by periodic elections but also participate in decision making and governance individually and collectively. This is the interpretation and understanding of modern democracy.

Since 2015, Nepal is in the course of implementing federalism under new Constitution. On the other hand, impact of the COVID 19 pandemic has created new challenges in the operational activities of CSOs. These have led to necessity of policy and practical reforms related to CSOs. Moreover, there are some serious issues unaddressed for a long time. NFN has been to launching policy advocacy, in collaboration with CSO networks, at the federal, provincial and local levels keeping this discussion, the purpose of which is to create conducive environment for the operation of CSOs. Here is highlighted the the two major contribution of CSOs of Nepal.

3.1 Devastating Gorkha Earthquake in 2015

In the aftermath of the devastating Gorkha Earthquake in 2015, thousands of NGOs, CBOs and CSOs came together to support the affected families for relief, rehabilitation and in the later stage for reconstruction. In fact, NGOs work with the families and communities and are often the first responders to disasters but their importance tends to be overshadowed at other times. With this realization, NGO Federation of Nepal (NFN) initiated a collection of some representative cases that show the involvement of NGOs helping families emerge from the 2015 earthquake. This collection has only 29 case studies and do not reflect the true scale of the contribution and engagement but these cases definitively provide a glimpse or a window to have look at how NGOs' small initiatives have been helpful in bringing changes in the lives of the people affected by the earthquake disaster.

Table 2 NGOs' contribution to the recovery of the earthquake impacts in 14 worst-hit districts

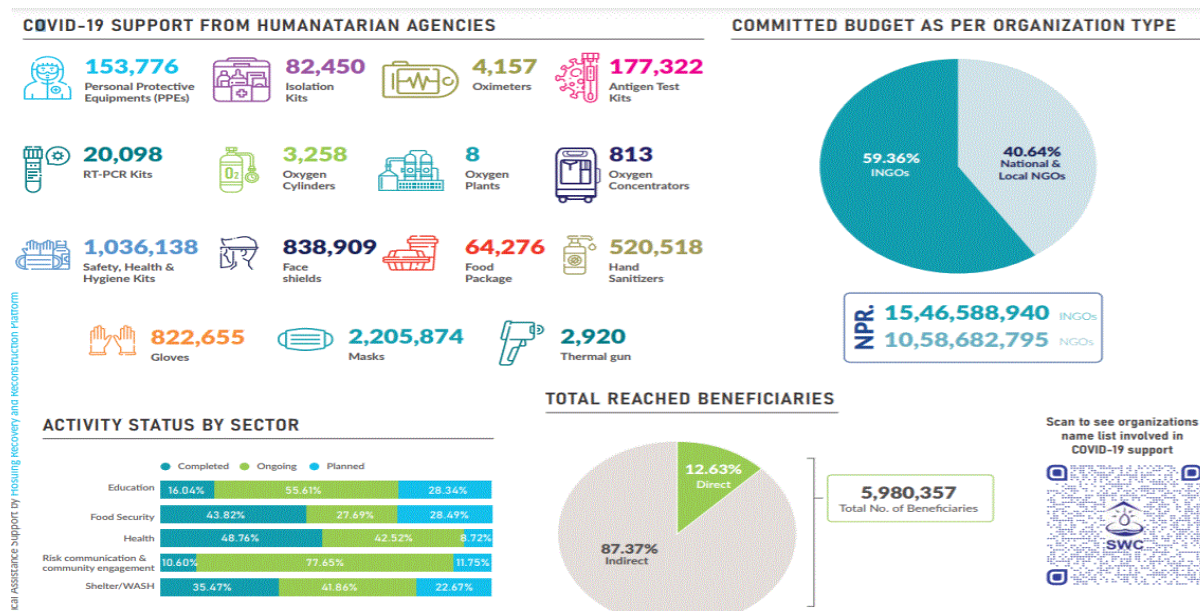
Category	Amount	Percentage	Category	Amount	Percentage
WASH	1,248,002,153	18.29%	Reconstruction	1,152,190,693	16.89%
Miscellaneous	707,230,212	10.36%	Protection	670,509,992	9.83%
Food security	617,270,877	9.05%	Health	472,390,644	6.92%
Rehabilitation	395,154,586	5.79%	Shelter management	388,855,629	5.70%
Education	362,833,092	5.32%	Livelihood upliftment	362,678,476	5.32%
Nutrition	204,113,860	2.99%	Logistics	196,318,238	2.88%
Communication	43,253,877	0.63%	Cash Support	2,697,276	0.04%
Grand Total			6,823,499,609.13		

Source: Questionnaire Survey 2021

6.2. Contribution of CSOs during COVID-19 Pandemic

Nepalese CSOs contributed approximately USD 30 million during the first wave of covid outbreaks. Over 40,000 volunteers contributed voluntarily during the pandemic. Similarly,

approximately 50,000 paid staff were involved in response and recovery during the first wave of COVID-19.



7. Civic Space Situation in Nepal

7.1 General context

The Constitution of Nepal has prescribed that every citizen of the country shall have the freedom to assemble and form unions and associations and that no other laws and/or acts shall restrict them from doing so. The Government of Nepal has also tried to facilitate/regulate the presence of civil society through various laws. The Social Welfare Act, 1992 and the Local Government Operation Act, 2017 are two major legal instruments that recognize the role and importance of civil society in governance processes in Nepal. The Social Welfare Act, 1992 in particular, entails the engagement of welfare-oriented non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in carrying out social welfare and developmental activities for the overall betterment of individuals and communities, specifically the underserved. The Act also envisages a separate body called the Social Welfare Council for the purpose of facilitating the work of organisations involved in social welfare activities in Nepal. The LGOA, 2017 requires local government authorities to involve and create an environment for CSOs, community-based organisations (CBOs), and other NGOs, cooperatives, consumers and the private sector in the planning and implementation of development activities and activities affecting service delivery processes. Likewise, the Good Governance (Management and Operation) Act, 2008, too, requires public bodies to involve and consult all stakeholders, including civil society and the general public, in planning, implementation and decision-making processes related to matters of public interest. Clause 29 of the act has even spelt out the provision of public hearings for the purpose of transparency, fair and lawful

concerns. Freedom of Association (FoA) and Freedom of Expression (FoE) are considered two key facets of the democratic way of life and for broader participation of citizens in public affairs and decision-making processes.

Instead of a single legal framework, there are several laws and policies that govern the registration, management, operation and monitoring of CSOs and NGOs in Nepal.

The legal and policy challenges of civil society and organizations are wide-ranging. The laws made in the hierarchical structure in line with the federal structure of the Government of Nepal are contradictory and inconsistent. In particular, the province government has made laws on the basis of different articles of the constitution while drafting laws related to organizations. The provisions of the Local Government Operation Act, which the local government has used as a basis for drafting the Association Act, are inconsistent and have not been specified. Although the federal laws are thematically independent, different acts have made double provisions for doing the same thing.

There are different provisions regarding the basis of organization classification, program details and report. Regarding the registration of an organization, there is a provision to register an organization once in a state for a period of 5 years. And if the organization is not renewed for 3 years, it will be revoked. These provisions are self-contradictory and confusing.

Although Nepal's civil society and organizations are considered to be practically and legally non-profit and charitable, the civil societies faced many challenges in the name of renewal, PAN and VAT, as well as legal complications.

Due to the VAT and Tax related law the behavior is not civil society friendly today so as per study and discussion with CSOs the major obstacles of CSOs are on VAT and Tax, organization renewal, shrinking funding sources and property handling.

7.2 CSO-Related Legal Background and Concern

In principle, a full commitment is expressed in relation to the right to form an organization and assemble peacefully in Nepal. Nepal has accessed United Nations International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, Articles 21 and 22 of which guarantee the freedom of peaceful assembly and to be organized. Likewise, Article 20 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights also protects the right to form an organization and right to peaceful assembly. The Constitution of Nepal 2015 has guaranteed right to association and peaceful assembly to an extent of limitation as a fundamental entitlement under Article 17.

CSOs are registered and operate under and in accordance with Associations Registration Act 2034 BS (1977), National Guidance Act 2018 BS (1961), the Companies Act 2063 BS (2006) and Social Welfare Council Act 2049 BS (1992). Organizations registered under Associations Registration Act 2034 and National Guidance Act 2018 are perceived as non-governmental organizations whereas the institutions operated under Section 166 of the Companies Act 2063 are viewed as non-profit making companies. The institutions of these both types are considered as CSOs. Similarly, the subject-based Users Groups under Forest Act, Cooperative Act and Local Government Operation Act are also considered to be CSOs.

7.3 Operational Situation and Expectations

A historical observation of NGOs in Nepal shows that they were initiated with a view of social welfare and their actions have till now been guided by the same thought and concept. The preamble of Associations Registration Act 1977 which has given the basis for registering organizations in largest number in Nepal indicates the same objective of establishing Social Welfare Council. Therefore, general understanding and expectation from NGOs is shaped accordingly. Helping people in emergencies, delivering service to the beneficiaries even in the absence of government, and assisting poor and vulnerable people are understood as the roles of CSOs by the people at large and same is expected. NGOs and CSOs have made remarkable contributions for restoration of civil rights, justice and democracy. In People's Movement of April 2006, representatives and front-runners of CSOs played an influential and leading role for the restoration of democracy. Such contributions stand out as CSOs' contributions. If the purpose of the National Guidance Act 2018 is observed, it seems more political. The organizations registered under this Act are intended to be mobilized for implementing the then political system (Panchayat regime) to the local level. Farmers', women's, youths' organizations were run under this Act. Presently, professional organizations are functioning under this Act. Organizations including Federation of Nepali Journalists, NGO Federation of Nepal, Nepal Bar

Association, Association of Community Broadcasters Nepal are in operation having their registration under this Act.

The companies registered under the Section 166 of the Companies Act 2063 are named as companies, but they cannot distribute their profit though they can earn profit. Though the foundations registered under this Act undertake profit making activities, such companies often in the names of individuals are considered of functioning for social purpose. There is confusion among public whether or not companies be the called CSOs though they do not distribute profit to the owners. Nonetheless, they are still considered as CSOs because of their purpose and as entities not sharing their profit.

All of the types of these CSOs have contributed to advocacy and governance acting in a right-based approach. However, many people perceive NGOs or CSOs only as partners of the government in service delivery and development.

7.5 Internal Control System of NGOs in Nepal

Internal Control System of the NGOs Credibility of NGOs depends on their effectiveness and accountability. Practice of institutional good governance is prerequisite for improvement of effectiveness of NGOs. NGOs need to practice internal control system to improve their governance and management, and to minimize fiduciary risks and conflict of interest. Modern management system demands evidence based operational practices. Organizations become strong when they have written documents to regulate their organizations and they need to develop basic policies and guidelines to improve internal control practices. This study results show that many policies and plans are in place and NGOs have started to introduce innovative ideas such as digital governance as well. They are helping to enhance knowledge and skills within NGOs. So, NGOs require strong and workable internal control system.

7.6 Self Regulation Policies of NGOs

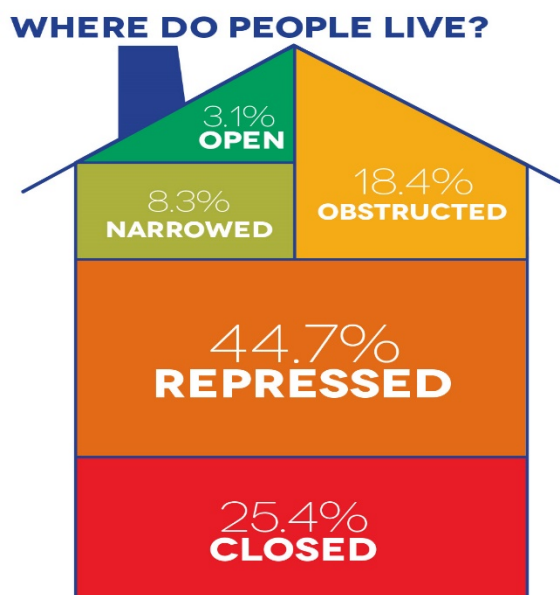
NGOs are engaged in human rights, inclusive approach and capacity building to address the social challenges emerging in changing context. They are adapting new technologies to improve their organizational efficiencies. But, their works should be evidence based and result based. Presence and adoption of organizational' policies, guidelines and code of

conduct lead to improve in internal control practices in any organization. NGO Federation of Nepal has been focusing its activities to improve self-regulating policies and guidelines of its members. The survey has assessed the availability of operational policies, guidelines and directives in NGOs. During survey it was found that NGOs have developed around 15 policies and guidelines. According to the survey NGOs are drafting policies and practicing them based on nature of their organizations and conditions of the funding agencies even in the usual context. Somehow policies are developed by many organizations, for instance administrative and finance policies. Survey data showed NGOs are most likely to develop operation manual, financial policy, and administrative policy. But, old and more projects handling NGOs have more policies, directives and project based guidelines in comparison to the newly started NGOs. Some NGOs are improving their policies as per the direction of their donors or to fulfill the conditions induced by their donors. But, small and community based NGOs, who are not receiving funds from outer sources; they may not have more self-regulatory policies. So, existence and enforcement of self-regulation policies, regulation and directives are contributing to improve internal control practices in NGOs.

7.8. Obstructed situation according to CIVICUS Monitor

The CIVICUS categorized countries into open, narrowed, obstructed, repressed and closed on the basis of the state of civil freedom existing in a country. The CIVICUS Monitor continued to document restrictions and attacks on civic freedoms across the Asia Pacific region. As most governments lifted controls in relation to the pandemic, efforts to stifle dissent and crackdown on civil society and social movements remained prevalent and escalated in some countries.

Among the most common violations were the passing and use of restrictive laws to criminalize activists and critics. In several countries these laws were used to prosecute human rights defenders and keep them behind bars for long periods.



BASED ON WORLD BANK POPULATION DATA 2020

Another widespread trend across the region was the disruption of protests calling for political or economic reforms, with the authorities often detaining protesters and using excessive force. The authorities also harassed activists and protesters, including by hauling them in for questioning, detaining them, intimidating their families and imposing travel bans, in addition to digital attacks.

While concluding that civil freedom in the country is facing an increasing crackdown as in most other Asian countries, CIVICUS has rated Nepal's civic space as 'obstructed'.

The CIVICUS Monitor report gave Nepal 46 of 100 points to keep in the obstructed (41-60) category. The report states that Nepal saw a number of attacks against press freedom and police crackdown against peaceful protests. The report states that the use of excessive force and firearms by the police were documented in the year 2022.

Nepal's rank in terms of civic space freedom, however, remains better than all other South Asian countries except Bhutan, which scored 59.

Among other South Asian countries, only Sri Lanka (41) has made it to the oppressed category whereas India (31), Pakistan (30) and Bangladesh (27) are put in the restricted category. Afghanistan (13) is in the closed category as is China (12) in the Asia Pacific region.

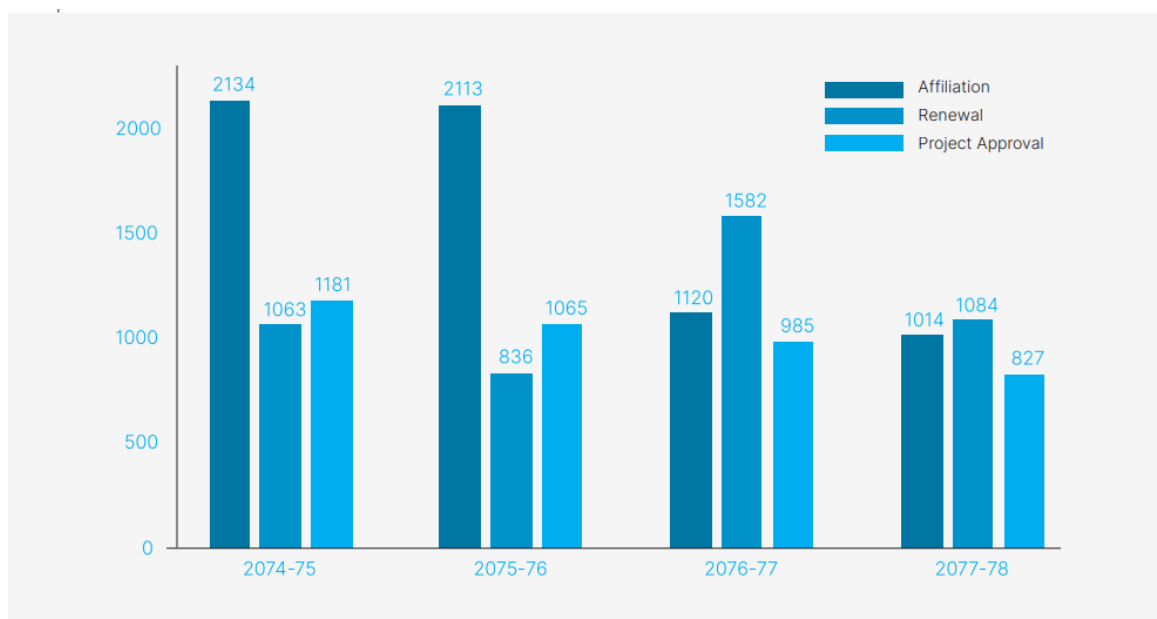
In the Asia region, there is civic space regression with an increase in countries in the closed category from four to seven. China, Laos, North Korea and Vietnam, remaining in this category, are joined by Afghanistan, Hong Kong and Myanmar.

Eight countries are rated as repressed – Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, India, Pakistan, the Philippines, Singapore and Thailand – and seven are in the obstructed category: Bhutan, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Maldives, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Timor-Leste. Civic space in Japan, Mongolia and South Korea is rated as narrowed, with Taiwan remaining the only country rated as open.

7.8 Impact COVID-19 on CSOs in Nepal

During COVID 19 pandemic time some NGOs faced the registration and renewal issues. Most of the CSOs in Nepal are registered and renewed at the district administration office. However, there is no centralized database to understand the exact number of annual registrations and renewals. Hence, the data from SWC can be considered a proxy to assess

the level of impact on organization registration and renewal. Affiliation data can be used as a proxy of annual new registration. COVID-19 had a significant impact on the affiliation of new organizations in the fiscal year 2076-2077. The annual affiliation number for the prior two years was 2134 and 2113, respectively. However, during the last fiscal year, the number plummeted by 89 percent to 1120 only. Similarly, there was an 8 percent decline in the number of new project approval. However, the last fiscal year saw a 47 percent growth in the number of renewals. The increase in number might be because of the efforts from SWC to get the CSOs renewed.



Source: Social Welfare Council (2021d); Author generated chart.

The number of renewals started plummeting down starting April of 2020. The nationwide lockdown posed a significant challenge for the organizations to continue with the renewal of their organization. From April to July of 2019, a total of 186 organizations were renewed. However, the number declined by 2.26 times during the same time frame in 2020. The government stringency index of Nepal was 96.3 in April and 92.59 during May. The high score indicates the strictest measures in place. Only two organizations renewed in April and only one organization in May 2020.

9. Major Concerns and Recommendations

9.1 Need of a New Law

After promulgation of new constitution and adoption of federalism, legal ambiguities have emerged in relation to the governance of NGOs and CSOs. Though the Associations Registration Act is in effect as a federal law, Provinces have adopted and enforced separate acts of this kind at province levels. Section 11 of Local Government Operation Act 2018 has authorized Local Governments for registration and renewal of organizations. Current anomalies add to the previously identified issues such as need for one door reporting policy, and separate registration, operation, renewal and audit system for NGOs which do not take foreign aid. In this context, a separate umbrella Act should be formulated at federal level through consultations with stakeholders as well as with provincial and local governments.

9.2 Need of More Effective Council

Social Welfare Council is subjected to political interference. The SWC is involved more in monitoring and regulating foreign aid than coordinating CSOs. It is not functioning as an independent legal entity. It seems that its functions and operations are under the shadow of Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens. In such circumstances, it is necessary either to restructure SWC as a more powerful entity or to constitute a new CSO Council as an independent and dedicated entity to coordinate CSOs. Whatever options are chosen there is a need to establish and align such institutions with federal structure. Such restructured council should collaborate effectively with international non-governmental organizations.

9.3. Social Entrepreneurship and Management of Financial Resources

The organizations registered under Associations Registration Act and National Guidance Act are restricted from generating any profit. Therefore, their financial resources are limited to donations, foreign aid, membership fee and contributions by the members. Based on such foreign funding, NGOs are blamed as dollar business. It is necessary to amend the legal provisions of NGOs/CSOs, allowing these organizations as profit-making but profit-not-sharing profit entities as is the case for non-profit companies established under Section 166 of the Companies Act. This will be helpful to organizations to become more innovative and manage internal sources properly; which will be helpful for their financial sustainability. Additionally, there should be provision allowing CSOs to open saving account in banks and receive interest for the deposit.

9.4. Identification of New Financial Sources for Economic Sustainability

In Nepal, practice of philanthropic donation is rare for social cause and CSOs have no access to such donations even if they exist. Private sector spends significant amount under corporate social responsibility (CSR) but they do not collaborate with CSOs. Governments at different levels also fund significant amount to different organizations but such funding go to the organizations, foundations or agencies attributed to the names of political leaders. It is necessary to make provisions that private sector spend at least 50 percent of their CSR collaboratively with CSOs. Likewise, all governments should provision funding through CSOs in a transparent and systematic way. This would be helpful not only to mobilize resources but also contribute to the sustainability of CSOs.

9.5. Review of VAT Ceiling for Social Work Collaboration

If CSOs intend to collaborate with the government on social work, they are compelled to get enrolled as VAT taxpayers. Rule 19 of Procurement Regulations 2072 has made it mandatory for government agencies to purchase goods and services of the price above 20 thousand rupees from only entities registered as VAT. NGOs and CSOs are offered tax-exemption certificates. Even if existing policies are reviewed allowing CSOs and NGOs to make profit from service but not to distribute profit as dividend, they should still be provided tax-exemption. Government's Procurement Regulations require amendment providing that the amount expended for social work in collaboration with CSOs/NGOs would not need VAT invoice. Moreover, the auditing practice that fixes taxes to the balance fund under a project assuming it as income requires revision.

9.6 Need of Coordination among Governments

After implementation of federal structure of the government, regulation and operation of organizations has become more complicated due to weak coordination between and among the federal, provincial and local governments. Provincial and local governments are seeking their roles in governing NGOs/CSOs. However, due to the lack of coordination between and among them, there are anomalies in terms of prioritizing, approval, implementation and reporting of projects. This has caused numerous hurdles to be faced by CSOs/NGOs. Local governments expect social development projects but the federal government's Ministry of Women, Children and Senior Citizens and Social Welfare Council direct to design projects investing at least 60 percent budget to infrastructure development. Therefore, to address such problems associated with coordination deficits, it is essential that new federal

legislation must ensure a new structure of SWC or a mechanism that acts effectively to maintain coordination.

9.7 Ensuring Opportunity to Collaborate and Contribute

CSOs/NGOs can take and fulfill the role in policy feedback and design and implementation of projects. They have skills and experience of planning and implementing developmental projects. However, the governments lack a system of exploiting their skills and competencies for formulating and implementing public plans and projects focusing on social development. There is neither a practice nor a mechanism that ensures civil society participation in public planning and implementation processes. United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Open Government Partnership (OGP) recommend the concept of effective development and good governance in partnership and collaboration with CSOs. Nepali governments have lacked to take CSOs/NGOs as partners for developmental governance. Therefore, the governments should begin and promote a culture sharing information timely on policy, project and budget process and seek constructive inputs from citizens and their institutions like CSOs and collaborate with CSOs/NGOs in development plan cycles from formulation to implementation to evaluation processes of development projects. There is a need of practice by governments to publish the draft policies for public discourse and inputs.

10. Conclusion:

CSOs have played a great role in socio-economic transformation of Nepal but the state system has not adequately realized this fact yet and recognition thereof. Legal and procedural hurdles exist in operations of the NGOs and CSOs which are registered as per the fundamental freedom of association. The complexities and hurdles added in courses of registration/accreditation, renewal, project implementation approval explicitly indicate that there is lack of full respect of the fundamental entitlements of the citizens to form organizations and associations. To bring the derailment into track, there is need of ensuring and providing compatible law, policy and mechanism by the state so as to resolve the above stated issues.

CSOs/NGOs have contributed a lot in human rights advocacy, social justice, service delivery, awareness raising and governance but their resources are dependent to foreign aid; so they

lack resource sustainability. Therefore, it is essential for them to promote of mobilization of internal resources.

In adherence to the national laws and internationally established principles, state should give full attention and address the issues to establish and functionalize a system with legal provisions, administrative simplification, financial management with an approach of collaboration and facilitation to promote a transparent and effective self-governance of CSOs/NGOs. Likewise, CSOs/NGOs also have to contribute effectively as per the need and national priorities while improving their institutional governance.

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Based on primary data of interviews of CSOs in Nepal
and secondary sources

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