

Local Actors' Capacity Strengthening Needs in NEPAL



Photo by Shiva Hari Gyawali

Introduction

In line with the Asia Religious and Ethnic Freedom (REF) program's learning agenda, this brief aims to provide valuable insights into the institutional and staff capacity needs, strengths, and challenges faced by local partners and international actors in the context of promoting religious and ethnic freedoms in the Asia region. This learning brief focuses on answering learning questions to enhance our understanding of the capacity building needs and strengths of local partners. By analyzing their experiences, the Asia REF team aims to identify information gaps, technical capacity needs, and the factors that hinder or facilitate effective work in promoting religious freedom. This knowledge will guide the team in developing targeted interventions and strategies to strengthen the capacity of local Asia REF partners to promote religious and ethnic freedoms in Asia.

The data was collected with the support of the local organization Samari Utthan Sewa during the Local REF perspectives workshop in Nepal on September 3 and 5, 2023. In total, 22 representatives from various organizations, such as CSOs, academia, legal service providers, and journalists, participated in the consultation workshop. Altogether, 36 percent of the participants were female, while 64 percent were male. The discussion focused on the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) local CSOs face in implementing internationally-funded religious freedom projects, as well as their assessment of the benefits and limitations of cooperation with donor organizations. Delving into the strengths and weaknesses within their respective organizations, the analysis aimed to uncover the underlying factors that influence their engagement in their respective fields. The analysis draws upon the diverse perspectives and experiences of civil society members, offering valuable insights that can shape the future direction of their organizations.

Institutional & Staff Capacity of CSOs in Nepal

Strengths

- Contextual and local knowledge of CSOs with years of experience and a proven track record on effective implementation of freedom of religion or belief (FORB), interfaith, and anti-caste campaigns.
- Religious and ethnic minorities historically marginalized in Nepal have been raising their voices since the popular movement that was at its peak when the country chose the multiparty political system in 1990. Their awareness campaigns launched since then and various efforts to take a critical look at the political economy of religion and ethnicity, and thereby their marginalization, contributed to expanding the knowledge base and experiences for launching anti-discriminatory campaigns.
- CSOs have established a good working relationship with communities through community-based networks, leading to community ownership of the issues.
- Having longer experience and commitment to their issues close to them, many CSOs have a dedicated staff base. CSOs have also practiced good governance principles, including the formation of boards; hence, the board members of the CSOs are also committed to engaging in FORB issues.

- Positive reputation and relationships with governments, donors, and networks. Particularly since Nepal became a federal state, the CSOs are complementing the Local Governments by launching various programs including livelihood support, skill development, savings, and credit service, and so on. This has allowed the CSOs to gain a positive reputation and thereby a positive relationship with the governments and donors and within the CSO network.
- Effective teamwork and coordination between the board and management with clear division of roles and responsibilities.
- Policies and guidelines for program operation. Many CSOs have also developed their own policies and guidelines as part of being accountable to the stakeholders and the donors.

Weaknesses

- Lack of trained human resources on proposal writing, monitoring, and evaluation and thematic knowledge on FORB and caste issues. Though the CSOs are getting some funding support from the Government and the international donors, they have yet to develop the capacity of human resources in writing strong proposals and developing strong monitoring and evaluation systems to communicate results effectively to the donors and other stakeholders.
- Less focus on systematic communications, documentation, and dissemination of results. The CSOs are still struggling to effectively coordinate and communicate their experiences and learning to influence donors and policymakers.
- Lack of strategic approach and skills to program/project development from a sustainable development goal (SDG) and human rights-based approach. As SDG and human rights-based approaches to development are fairly recent, CSOs need increased understanding, skills, and operational approaches to ensure these two forms of guidance are applied.
- All CSOs are dependent on limited funding received from donors/INGOs. This prevents them from expanding their area of interventions with an integrated approach.
- Limited income generation activities are more focused on subsistence livelihood rather than local entrepreneurship development or sustainable livelihood.
- Focus on soft-based activities and limited income generation programs. Most CSOs are focusing on awareness programs, training, and advocacy. However, the beneficiaries in the communities demand more hard-based activities and income generation programs.
- Limited capacity for advocacy and networking in the region and globally. Though the CSOs are trying to advocate and network in the region and globally, they still lack the know-how and skills for doing so.
- Lack of collective platform for CSOs working on ethno-religious and caste issues. There are few collective platforms of CSOs working on ethno-religious and caste issues. Due to the ideological division among the CSOs and the competing funding base, it is yet to come forward.

Opportunities

- Presence of local governments with resources and willingness to collaborate with CSOs. Local Governments are considered the closest government entity for the community people, who are also empathetic to the issue of religious and ethnic freedoms.
- Opportunity to develop co-created projects and mobilize resources from private actors (banks, CSR funding, crowd-funding) and collaborate with them to contribute to achieve SDGs. Some of the large private sector organizations have become open to collaborating with the CSOs as part of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR).
- There are National and sub-national policies, rules and regulations related to human rights (i.e. ICCPR ratified on 14 May 1991) and socioeconomic empowerment of marginalized groups that can be used as a basis for the implementation of REF projects.
- Collaboration, capacity building, and cross-learning opportunities with like minded organizations.
- High trust and support of local communities to promote social harmony, interfaith collaboration, and peace.

Threats/Challenges/Risks

- Political influence promoting religious intolerance and politicization of minority religious, ethnic, and caste-based agendas and a potential threat of diverting away from the genuine causes. Politics tend to serve the majority, as there is motivation for securing the popular votes, limiting their ability to be liberal to other religions and ethnicities.
- As there are still dominant religious groups in the control of government structures, they tend to support only the dominant religious groups.
- Increasing radical religious nationalism. Because of the historical marginalization and comparatively open political system in place, the radical politicization of religious identity is emerging. The neighboring country India has a very dominant influence to Nepali politics, and the local political actors are emulating the Hindu religious nationalism.
- Shrinking space for CSOs due to increased legal requirements and reduced global funding. The legal requirements to govern the CSOs are set by the Social Welfare Council (SWC) and not separated from the Hindu-dominant national politics.

NGO & Donor/INGOs Cooperation

Strengths

- Available technical and financial resources (funding, HR, and skills) for donor agencies.
- Structured, organized, and well-visioned outcomes and abilities in implementing programs effectively.
- Effective program management including monitoring and evaluation, communication, fundraising, and commitment to promote the human rights of ethno-religious minorities and REF.

- Commitment to achieve SDGs and governmental policies and plans.
- Commitment to address the development gaps of government and local actors.
- Good reputation and relationship with the governments and CSOs.
- Donors and INGOs working globally have a very good contingent of qualified human resources and exposure in the subject matter they are engaged with.
- Having access to regional and global networks of relevant issues, donors and INGOs have a strong advocacy network. Such strengths can be utilized while working on FORB in Nepal.

Weaknesses

- Limited organizations (i.e. INGOs) working on religious freedom. There are only a few organizations working on FORB/REF. Due to complex religious demography and domination of particular religious groups in bureaucracy, there is limited space for INGOs to implement REF projects.
- Lack of understanding of the local context and compliance with government policies, which may not meet the community needs. Being external actors, donors/INGOs often lack understanding of the local context. They also tend not to follow the government procedures and policies either out of their ignorance or external influence, which then contradicts the community needs.
- Lack of long-term and sufficient funding for administrative and capacity development of local CSO staff. Most of the donors/INGOs in Nepal have a very projectized approach to their support, thus a longer-term impact is difficult to achieve. This also affects the results and capacity strengthening of the local CSOs.
- Communication hierarchy gap between local communities and INGOs. The donors/INGOs tend to be city-based, but the communities are far away in the hinterlands. In such a context, the local CSOs are the only medium to be a bridge between donors/INGOs and the community. The CSOs perceive that there is a communication hierarchy and gap, as most of the communication on behalf of the community is done by the CSOs with the donors/INGOs.
- Less influence to challenge the traditional attitude of government agencies. Often the donors/INGOs are perceived as agents of Western politics and religion by the government agencies, which makes it difficult to challenge the traditional attitude of the government agencies, particularly in the case of REF. Furthermore, INGOs can only get registered and become functional by fulfilling the government requirements, limiting their ability to change any restrictive operating frameworks.
- Domination of particular gender, caste, and religious groups in the INGOs. Despite some efforts in place, there is still domination of particular gender, caste, and religious groups working for donors/INGOs in Nepal. Lack of representation of minority groups in such organizations often leads to funding support or programming remaining in the familiar areas, as support for FORB may lead to certain kinds of challenges.

Opportunities

- Liberal democratic environment of Nepal. Nepal has become a federal and secular state with a very progressive constitution in place that highlights various fundamental rights, including the right to religion. This context has paved ways for donors/INGOs to work in the field of REF.
- Favorable national policies and plans for INGOs. Likewise, Nepal has developed several policies and plans, such as the Foreign Aid Policy and the procedures for registration and functioning of donors/INGOs, that help them to become effectively functional by complying with those policies.
- CSOs' trust and strong community networks of CSOs. Donors/INGOs have gained trust from the CSOs, and such CSOs have strong community networks that present an opportunity for donors/INGOs to design and implement various programs that ensure the rights of the religious and ethnic minorities in Nepal.

Threats/Challenges/Risks

- Dominance narratives on FORB, negative reputations, and negative attitudes towards working with foreign entities is called "Dollar Agent". Because of rising 'religious nationalism' utilized by political groups to capture state power by being popular in the name of majority religion, negative narratives are being formulated against the donors/INGOs, as they are accused of promoting disharmony in society by raising issues faced by minority ethno-religious groups.
- Accusation and stigma from political parties against INGOs and difficulties in implementing sensitive projects. The majority political parties often accuse donors/INGOs of being extended arms of the 'expansionists' and holding the 'colonial' mentality. These accusations cause stigma toward the donors/INGOs working in Nepal, even if they are not associated with their domestic politics. In such situations, INGOs can also easily be labeled as taking the side of either party of the polarized community.
- Prolonged bureaucratic process and slow action of the SWC. Though there are policies in place for program and project approvals, in many instances fulfilling the process takes a long time. The SWC needs to coordinate with various relevant Ministries, and it sometimes takes more than 6 months to hold a project approval committee meeting.
- Negative attitudes towards INGOs and CSOs, as well as the rise of religious nationalism, pose a threat to the workers and activists who are engaged in the field of REF.

Conclusion

In the discussion, CSOs demonstrated a strong intention to implement the programs related to REF; however, they face various challenges such as limited funding, security concerns, political instability, and lack of coordination among stakeholders. In addition, 67 percent of CSO representatives said that their organization has never organized capacity building training for employees or board members on FORB. Thus, there is a gap in comprehending FORB, with CSOs primarily focusing on themes of interfaith harmony and tolerance. While religious freedom is commonly approached from the standpoint of religious minorities (e.g. Buddhist, Christian, Muslim, Bahai, etc.), it is also a pertinent issue among caste minorities and the LGBTQI+ community. To bridge this gap, it is imperative to generate knowledge through media outlets and opinion leaders who serve as effective conduits for knowledge transfer.

Likewise, the CSOs also identified gaps and opportunities for international organizations and donors working in Nepal. The government's development initiatives in areas including health, education, disaster management, climate change adaptation, food security, livelihood, small infrastructures, etc. are acknowledged by participants. The participants talked about how the funds that I/NGOs bring support to uplift the rights and lives of Nepali communities. They also have concerns regarding the work of the Social Welfare Council, which is operated under the Social Welfare Act (2049 BS) and the SWC's biases against approving FORB related activities. In terms of future donor/INGOs cooperation, local CSOs highlighted the importance of enhancing the participation and representation of local actors in decision-making processes, providing flexible and longer-term funding, supporting strengthening the monitoring and evaluation system including other capacities like writing reports and funding proposals, and conducting advocacy including network building.

Recommendations

Below are recommendations for donors to consider and contribute to strengthening the capacity of local NGOs and support their efforts to promote religious freedom in Asia.

Enhance local expertise. Encourage the recruitment of local experts and professionals who possess a deep understanding of the local context. This strategic approach will enable donors and INGOs to develop a clearer picture of the context, ensuring culturally sensitive and meaningful design of interventions.

Adopt locally-grounded models. Promote collaboration between donors/INGOs and local partners in adopting locally-grounded models for co-creating interventions. Prioritize a comprehensive and inclusive process that involves local stakeholders, steering away from ready-made and imposed project ideas.

Commit to long-term engagement. Recognize the long-term and process-oriented nature of FORB initiatives. Move beyond one-off project funding or implementation by engaging in longer-term strategic partnerships with an increased portfolio in Nepal, fostering sustainable and visible changes.

Facilitate knowledge transfer. Design capacity enhancement programs that involve co-working with experienced individuals, creating an effective platform for meaningful knowledge and skill transfer. Consider placing Nepali CSO staff responsible for key areas in successful programs within their respective regions or home countries for a reasonable period, akin to apprenticeship or traineeship models.

Foster inclusive dialogue platforms. Establish inclusive dialogue platforms that extend beyond interfaith harmony to encompass discussions on caste-related and LGBTQI+ issues within the context of religious freedom. Encourage active participation of CSOs in these forums to broaden perspectives and understanding.

Support capacity strengthening. Assist local actors, particularly CSOs, in building essential capacities such as fundraising, proposal writing, advocacy, and networking. Facilitate the development of M&E systems within CSOs through targeted capacity enhancement programs.

Develop targeted educational initiatives. Create specialized educational programs, curricula, and resources to address the capacity gap in understanding FORB. These initiatives, such as workshops, training sessions, and informational campaigns, should be tailored for CSOs, emphasizing the broader aspects of religious freedom.

Collaborate with media and opinion leaders. Form strategic partnerships with media outlets and opinion leaders to amplify the discourse on religious freedom. Engage them in creating and disseminating content that addresses the multifaceted nature of FORB, including intersections with caste issues and LGBTQI+ rights. This collaborative effort can contribute to shaping public opinion and fostering a more comprehensive understanding of religious freedom.

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