

Using data for positive change:

Profile #2



Data Use by Civil Society

Empowering citizens to monitor local development projects and use evidence as a lever for change.

Sarala Maharjan talks to Open Nepal about how the Campaign for Human Rights and Social Transformation (CAHURAST) has empowered citizens to monitor public programmes. She explains that through information gathering and sharing of data, citizens are not only able to monitor the allocation of public resources but are also able to track the progress of local development projects.

In Nepal, a lack of comprehensive and reliable data means that it is hard to determine the exact amount of aid and government money lost due to mismanagement, corruption or fraud. It is suspected, however, that the loss of funds earmarked for development projects is significant, and that the impact of this on development outcomes ultimately means that citizens lose out. In order to ensure that the funds go where they should, there is a need for both greater levels of information sharing amongst all stakeholders, and for citizens to be empowered to use that information in order to demand greater accountability from those stakeholders.



Sarala Maharjan

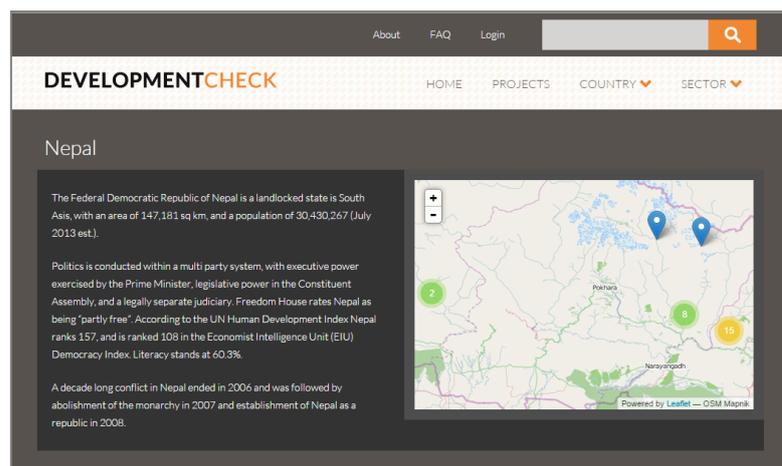
In Nepal the Campaign for Human Rights and Social Transformation (CAHURAST) has been working to address this balance, focusing on empowering citizens with information, skills and tools to advocate for fair and effective resource allocation and expenditure on development projects. It also engages with government and other key stakeholders to improve infrastructure and public services for citizens, and to encourage an open and accountable society. Sarala Maharjan is a Project Coordinator at CAHURAST. She works to build the capacity of citizens to use the information available to them to monitor development projects in their communities. She believes that **“local people are the ones most vulnerable to injustice and inequality, so strengthening their capacity to use information and speak against misconducts is an important way to set up grounds for social change”**.

Since 2010, CAHURAST has been working with [Integrity Action](#) to empower citizens to monitor local service delivery and infrastructure projects, and to work collaboratively with local government. It is through the provision of feedback from citizens to key stakeholders that communities can ensure that they receive their entitlements. CAHURAST works with Citizen Concern Groups comprising local journalists, advocates and members of ‘Aama Samuha’ (women’s welfare groups). With these groups CAHURAST first raises awareness amongst the members of their rights and entitlements. **“Sometimes people do not have any information to tell them what they are entitled to, and they do not know that they have a right to ask”** according to Sarala. For example, when CAHURAST worked with local women in the villages of the Dhading District they found that

many women were not aware that 10% of the Village Development Committee budget should have been allocated to women's projects – an entitlement which, as a result, often did not reach its intended beneficiaries. CAHURAST worked with these women, helping them to access the budget documentation needed to trace the government funds, and analyse the information to determine what they were owed¹.

As well as raising awareness of the aid and government funding targeted for recipient groups and localities, CAHURAST builds the capacity of local people to monitor and evaluate the projects that are being implemented with this funding and compare against what has been allocated. Working with Integrity Action, CAHURAST has trained 90 'community monitors' selected from the Citizen Concern Groups in three districts of Nepal – Dhading, Gorkha and Pyuthan. The training includes teaching the monitors how to access information to which they are entitled, as well as how to analyse project documents. Nepal's Right to Information Act, for example, entitles citizens to gain access to local government budgets. According to Sarala, **"We find we need to first improve monitors' understanding of budgetary and financial terms; this is essential in helping them to analyse the information in budget documents and public contracts"**. In addition the training teaches the monitors how to conduct site visits to gather their own data and compare the project reality to the documents. They also collect data through surveys and interviews and take suitable photos to verify the findings. The training also develops the monitors' ability to use the information they have gathered to engage with local government and private contractors and attempt to resolve any discovered problems.

CAHURAST's work on increasing citizens' access to and use of information is, in most cases, related to infrastructure development projects. According to Sarala, **"the quality of infrastructure development projects is often compromised because of lack of information sharing. This means there cannot be proper project oversight and this can lead to corruption"**. To facilitate the efforts of the community monitors to record infrastructure information, CAHURAST is increasingly using technology. DevelopmentCheck is a user-driven, solutions-oriented online tool for citizen feedback on development projects. It provides a bottom-up assessment in three key areas: access to information, community engagement and project effectiveness. Community monitors submit their findings using the website or a mobile electronic device. Before this, Sarala found that the information she received from the monitors was not always accurate and consistent, so in order to ensure it was complete and meaningful she often had to follow up directly with the community monitors. **"When I received information from the monitors through email, I checked whether the information was adequate and correct. If there were any information gaps, I talked to monitors on the phone to get additional facts. And if I couldn't communicate easily, I visited them to speak in person"**. With DevelopmentCheck now in place, Sarala anticipates that she will receive complete and accurate information, and that this will reduce the amount of time she spends on contacting monitors to get additional information. **"With the help of DevelopmentCheck monitors are able to send us real time updates by entering information in a structured questionnaire that directly feeds responses into an integrated system"**. Sarala explains that, as well as entering data collected from site visits to projects, the monitors can upload project documents such as contracts and bills to help keep tab of project progress and share this information to help improve transparency of the project progress and accountability of the project implementers. With this



DevelopmentCheck

kind of tool to collect and share information Sarala believes that monitors – with support from CAHURAST – will be able to carry out comprehensive monitoring and can more effectively assess whether community members are receiving the benefits that they are being promised.

It is Sarala’s job to collate the project progress information collected from the monitors. DevelopmentCheck allows her to consolidate information on a number of projects at the same time. This timely update of information helps her to keep track of the progress of each project and more promptly identify opportunities for corrective actions. Sarala finds that, despite the data coming in from the community monitors, she sometimes experiences challenges in matching up the data from the ground with official data from the local government. The government information is not always as detailed, disaggregated and comprehensive as she would like, and she is not always able to join it up. In Sarala’s experience, **“if the District Development Committee budget data on things like infrastructure development was more categorical and provided both project-specific and beneficiary-specific budget information, it would be easier to compare with the data coming in from the monitors”**. This would enable her to oversee whether or not the targeted community is reaping benefits from the project and help with CAHURASTs efforts to hold the local government to account.

Sarala uses the data generated about development projects to produce progress reports aimed both at informing key project stakeholders about the implementation of the project, and at providing a channel for the transfer of beneficiary feedback information. The reports give the stakeholders the necessary information for them to know whether they need to take any corrective action to ensure the project is delivered effectively and problems are fixed. It also acts as a way to encourage greater transparency from the stakeholders themselves. The reports aim to build a strong evidence base of data and monitoring information to support national and international advocacy efforts to improve the effectiveness of development projects.

One report produced by CAHURAST highlighted a discrepancy between the budget allocated to a road improvement project in the Gorkha district and the amount actually disbursed. It was revealed that out of the total budget (NPR 449,475) only half (NPR 223,000) was disbursed by the District Development Committee. In general, when the budget is allocated for any project the relevant District Development Committee withholds 20% of the overall budget as a contingency fund, however in this case the size of the budget deficiency had stalled the project. In response the members of the local community had volunteered hours of construction work to reduce the project cost by NPR 142,475 and contributed a further NPR 84,000 from their personal funds to hire a bulldozerⁱⁱ. The under-disbursement of public funds in this project was detected when monitors trained by CAHURAST accessed budget information documents from the District Development Committee and compared them with the project documentation from the private company undertaking the road construction. The report arising from this increased pressure on the local government body to rectify the situation, and the local community members were reimbursed their personal funds.

Sarala believes that, as a result of such monitoring work, local government bodies such as District Development Committees and Village Development Committees will be more cautious when managing public funds in future. **“Government officials are more aware than ever of the fact that their conduct is exposed to public scrutiny, and that citizens now have the power to check and balance their actions”**. The empowerment of the community to find, access and use information is critical to ensuring that there is fair and effective allocation and spending of funds in development and infrastructure projects. Sarala believes that **“For a tree to stand tall and remain undeterred, it needs to be strong at its roots”**.

ⁱ http://www.integrityaction.org/sites/www.integrityaction.org/files/case-studies/CAHURAST_SewingProject.pdf

ⁱⁱ <http://www.integrityaction.org/case-study/citizens-nepal-drive-change-improved-roads-networks>