Advocating Policy Concerns:

Communication Strategies of NGOs

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ABSTRACT

The Advocacy NGOs in Nepal tend to downplay the significance of strategic communication in their advocacy initiatives. Since NGOs operate in a policy environment characterized by a host of interest groups and a web of complex and changing power dynamics, it necessitates a planned communication strategy on the part of the Advocacy NGOs to better engage with the policy makers/decision makers and the stakeholders at large. Based on this premise, the paper begins with the exploration of the complementary relationship between advocacy and communication by reviewing relevant literature. By studying the advocacy communication practices of the women's rights NGOs and the transitional justice NGOs in different parts of the country, the paper explains and analyses the state and the nature of communication planning and practices of the NGOs in Nepal. Concomitantly, the paper also attempts to explain the reasons behind the existing nature of the practices. The study shows how, despite the lackadaisical attitude of the NGOs to the whole notion of communication strategy, different communication tools and techniques do figure prominently albeit non-strategically in the advocacy initiatives launched by the Advocacy NGOs. In light of the findings and the analysis, the paper ends with a number of recommendations that may help the NGOs to improve their advocacy outcomes by focusing more on communication strategies.

Introduction

In the last ten years or so, the Nepalese polity has witnessed unprecedented changes. The successful uprising led by the political parties against the direct rule of King Gyanendra Shah in 2006 ushered in a wave of radical changes in the country. The 1990 Constitution of Nepal was replaced by the Interim Constitution of 2007 and two Constituent Assemblies[1] have been formed to date to deliver a democratic and inclusive federal constitution. The abolition of monarchy in Nepal and the country being declared a republic and a secular state were results of addressing the demands of the people at the end of the ten year long Maoist conflict. These changes were aimed at addressing the existing inequalities in the country by safeguarding inclusion, justice and improving the lives of the citizens through economic growth.

It can be argued that these changes are representative of the democratic aspirations of the Nepalese people. These changes have also had a direct impact on the policy making sphere. Under any democratic framework, the state makes public policies in co-ordination with a range of actors, by addressing varied interests. As a result of the aforementioned changes, the policy making sphere has therefore expanded in the country, making it accessible to different interest groups. In the present context of Nepal, the Constituent Assembly which also doubles as a parliament is the highest policy making body and the cabinet takes the leading role in the designing of the policies.[2] However, the National Planning Commission, ministries, local government institutions, political parties, non-governmental organizations, academic institutions and the mass media also have a significant stake in the policy process.[3] Similarly, various interest groups also have entered the policy making domain with a crucial stake in the policy process.

Ian Gordon, Janet Lewis and Ken Young describe two models of the policy process: the rational model and the political model.[4] According to the rational model, the policy process is seen as being controlled and technical following a step by step approach from problem identification, formulation to implementation and evaluation. The potential conflicts between the interest groups in these different stages are acknowledged, but are assumed inconsequential and are not seen as detrimental to the stability of the process and outcomes. In contrast, the political model takes into account the interests and influence and concerns of all the individual actors involved in the various stages of policy making. It considers policy making as a political activity which is fraught with conflict of interests. And therefore, the outcomes of the policy process are a result of intense bargaining and negotiation between the different actors.

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[1] The first Constituent Assembly was dissolved in 2012 and the existing one was elected in 2013 to finish the incomplete task of constitution writing.
[2] Ghimire 2003
[3] Ibid
[4] Gordon et al 1993

The policy making process in Nepal, like in many democratic states elsewhere, is close to the political model. As the country is currently going through a transitional phase, various interest groups and professional groups feel that the time is right for pushing forward their issues before the new constitution is carved in stone. Against this background, Advocacy NGOs in Nepal have been working towards defending and promoting their specific concerns and interest.

Advocacy NGOs work towards influencing change in an existing policy or practice. In order to achieve their goals, an effective communication system is essential. The communication of vital information is considered instrumental irrespective of - whether it is evidence to support their stance on a particular issue, or whether it is an engagement with their primary target audience, usually the policy makers and decision makers. The fact that policy makers and decision makers are bombarded with numerous competing messages from different interest groups, strategic communication becomes indispensable on the part of Advocacy NGOs, if they are to draw attention towards their policy concerns. Strategic communication is purposeful, planned and directed towards a particular audience and this paper aims to assess the nature and types of communication practices employed by NGOs in Nepal and how they serve the purpose of advocacy. Before dwelling on the aspects of communication at length, it may be helpful to understand the notion of NGOs in the context of Nepal.

Locating NGOs in the Nepalese Context

While voluntary organizations have existed in Nepal since time immemorial, NGOs have only really come to the forefront after the reinstatement of multi-party democracy in 1990. Post-1990, NGOs have been representing the voices and issues of the marginalized and disadvantaged sections of the population. National policy documents, the Local Self-Governance Act 1999 and the Good Governance Act 2007, among others, have recognized the legitimacy and the role of NGOs as partners in development.[5] It is however very difficult to define an NGO given the varied nature of organizations that come under this category ranging from a rickshaw pullers' associations to religious associations.[6]

Despite the lack of an exact definition that encompasses the broad variety, an NGO may be understood as a legally registered, not-for-profit, voluntary, service-oriented and non-partisan organization. NGOs can also be referred to as Civil Society Organizations. At present, advocacy initiatives have increasingly come to be identified with NGOs. NGOs employ a range of advocacy strategies and tools to put pressure on policy-makers/decision-makers to effect desired change in a particular policy area. NGOs are well placed to launch advocacy campaigns as they have extensive networks in their areas, are cognizant of the local issues and share close relationships, making it possible for them to mobilize the locals for their advocacy activities.

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[5] Uprety 2011
[6] Ghimire 2003

The opening up of democratic space since the 1990 and the increasing levels of interactions between the NGO sector and the government has resulted in the expansion of the role of NGOs in areas which were once closed off to them. NGOs are now often invited by the state to take part in policy discussions and negotiate policy options. They are also represented in different governmental committees and structures and other advisory bodies linked to national and local affairs.

Advocacy and communication strategy

Advocacy refers to a range of activities that are aimed to influence change in a policy or practice. In every advocacy initiative, there is a party that demands change and a party that resists it. Therefore, communication is central to advocacy because it delivers messages of advocacy from the demand side to the decision-making side and vice-versa. However, communication for advocacy is often taken for granted and is not given the serious thought and consideration it requires to be truly effective.

While advocacy as a concept may be understood differently by different actors, the method of negation can be used to understand what advocacy doesn't mean. Advocacy is not information, communication or education.[7] What advocacy aims to do is essentially deliver specific messages to influence a specific audience in order to achieve desired changes in a policy or practice and ideally, advocacy is supported by a robust communication strategy.[8]

If the success of an advocacy strategy depends on the in-depth knowledge of the power structures, networks and decision-making processes[9], the success of a communication strategy requires clarity in communication objectives, audience, language and content.[10] It is therefore apparent that just as advocacy strategy is important, communication of the advocacy strategy holds equal significance.

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[7] Mehra 2007
[8] Coulby 2010
[9] ICPA 2002
[10] Coulby 2010

There is a significant difference between strategically planned communication and unplanned communication as outlined in the table below:

Table 1: Differences between strategic planning and non-strategic planning in communication

No Strategic Planning	Strategic Planning
• **Focuses on deciding the medium before the message**	• Targets, audience and message is clarified before deciding on the medium that disseminates the message
• **Creative people conceive the idea without taking into consideration the desired outcomes**	• Creative people plan to achieve desired outcomes
• **Content and message are secondary to the medium and often cannot answer the 'why' and 'what' questions**	• Focuses on audience, message and content
	• Medium is considered as a tool to achieve set objectives

Source: Hesselink, F.J. et al. 2007

Any strategically planned communication results in better advocacy outcomes compared to communication practices done on an ad-hoc basis. Strategic planning of communication is oriented towards achieving certain objectives by following a certain course of action while taking the position of the target audience and its characteristics into consideration, previous to delivering any kind of advocacy messages. Non-strategic communication, however, doesn't pay heed to the various factors that shape a policy environment it is trying to influence and therefore, the communication can often turn out to be superficial.

From the close study of Gandhi's Salt Satyagraha movement, Suchitra gleans six prerequisites for a successful communication strategy:[11]

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[11] Suchitra 2010

- A communication strategy should be chalked out keeping the audience in mind so that they can relate to the message being communicated. Otherwise, they won't feel any motivation to internalize the message and make changes in their behaviors.
- Communicators need to have a good understanding of the people's issues, their priorities and lifestyle. A thorough first hand study of the target audience is a must.
- Communicators should be able to simplify the messages so that they can be understood by all. Wherever necessary, symbols should be used and reinterpreted to make the abstract and modern concepts discernible.
- The message being communicated should be credible to the audience. Therefore, the source of message should be able to inspire confidence among the people. Credible sources vary with different audiences.
- Effective communication cannot take place without human and material resources. These resources need to be built up from scratch.
- A communication strategy cannot be a fixed formula. It may not be replicated with success in the future as people's priorities change with time and context. A communication strategy should be drawn in the light of the prevailing conditions in which people are situated.

Linking policy advocacy with communication

If advocacy is a catch-all term that basically means a range of activities that are aimed at influencing change, policy advocacy is a form of advocacy that particularly raises the policy concerns so as to exert influence at the policy making level for the materialization of the desired change. The policy concerns stem from the experiences of specific groups of people or the general public at large. Ideally, research plays an important role in policy advocacy. Policy advocacy is also understood as research that culminates in the advocacy of a policy or a group of policies as valued by researchers.[12] However, in the context of this paper, the terms 'advocacy' and 'policy advocacy' have been used interchangeably.

Policy advocacy is not limited to the communication of research to policy makers only. Policy advocacy can also be used to challenge the existing policies and appeal to the public opinion and opponents of the existing policies. Policy advocacy is characterized by activities like rallying support to legitimizing policy issues, extending and mobilizing the support base and presenting and negotiating policy options. Policy advocacy may be divided into three categories in terms of its objectives: policy formulation - in the case of a policy vacuum; policy reform - in the case of problems in the existing policies and policy implementation - in the case of an implementation gap. [13]

Therefore, the essence of policy advocacy is to communicate to the policy makers and the relevant interest groups that what you stand for is legitimate and your demands are based on

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[12] Gordon and et al 1993
[13] Subedi 2008

substantial evidence. Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman argue that individuals develop their preferences based on the way information is packaged and presented.[14] They decide to go for an option that is clear and coherent over ambiguous ones regardless of the benefits or harms. Decision makers, they argue, often do not complicate the decision making process by evaluating options meticulously rather their decision making is more often than not informed by their previous choices or acts, characteristics, habits and norms. If we are to concur with this argument then the communication of messages become crucial and therefore needs to be strategically planned and executed considering the environment and the various actors.

Similary, Saul Aslinsky places a high premium on the art of communication, which according to him, is the most important quality necessary to an advocate or an organizer responsible for community mobilization. He argues that no amount of knowledge and ideas possessed by the advocates would be of any value unless it is communicated effectively and successfully to the recipients. According to him, an organizer should be someone who can relate to the experience of the people at the grass-root level as the common people tend to make meaning out of their own experiences and do not think about what lies beyond their experience. Mass mobilization, according to him, takes time to build up but relentless and uncompromising agitation can give way to desired changes. He defines politics as power relations. To operate successfully in the midst of such power relations, the advocates need to communicate using the language of morality. The importance of the choice of words and the tone of language is therefore of utmost importance in communication practices.[15]

George M. Beal and Joe M. Bohlen split up the communication of ideas into four successive stages: awareness stage, interest stage, evaluation stage, trial stage and adoption stage.[16] In the awareness stage, an individual becomes conscious of the new ideas that can possibly be emulated. In the second stage i.e. the interest stage, the individual yearns for more information about the ideas in terms of what they signify, how they work, and what their potentialities might be. In the subsequent evaluation stage, the individual weighs the ideas and thinks whether they apply to him or not. The individual then tests the ideas in the trial stage on a small-scale basis in such a way that even if the ideas were to fail, no substantial loss would be incurred. Finally, in the adoption stage, the individual now satisfied by the results of the trial stage decides to adopt the ideas on a larger scale. Advocates who see value in this theory can build their communication strategy around the four step model.

Communication cannot take place without an appropriate medium or communication tools and techniques. Mass media continues to be the most powerful communication medium because of its extensive reach. According to Ruud Koopmans, authorities are more likely to respond to the

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[14] Tversky and Kahneman 2007
[15] Aslinsky 1971
[16] Beal and Bohlen 1957

social movements covered by the media.[17] He argues that social movements or demands that do not receive media coverage can be perceived as non-existent in the eyes of the authorities and in the eyes of the common people, thereby, making it difficult to rally support around those issues. His argument leads us to accept that media acts as a platform for interactions to take place between authorities and the advocates of social and political issues.

As the communication of information regarding an advocacy issue is meant for influencing policy makers and decision makers, it is important to understand the policy making process so that the communication techniques can be strategically used for better outcomes. John Kingdon talks about the importance of 'policy windows' in policy making.[18] A policy window is a period of time or a window of opportunity for advocates to get the desired change in a policy. Policy windows can open at the time of administration change, elections or during the time of social and political crisis. He identifies three crucial factors that can create a policy window: problems, policies and politics. When problems are identified by the advocates and policy options are formulated accompanied by a change in the political scenario, the opening of the policy window is instigated. The convergence of these three distinct factors can lead to desired policy change. In order to affect a policy change, the advocates need to take advantage of the policy window by tactically communicating the problem as being legitimate and urgent. The proposed solutions of the problem identified have to appear logical, feasible and need to appeal to the common values of the policy makers. The advocates, therefore, should have the required knowledge, credibility, reputation, the time and nurtured relationships that can be leveraged by using their communication skills to push for their demands in order to achieve success.

Research Problem and Research Questions

As noted earlier, communication is an indispensible part of all advocacy pursuits initiated by NGOs. Though all Advocacy NGOs in Nepal employ a repertoire of communication tools and techniques, the execution of the communication practices do not necessarily follow a coherent pattern aimed at meeting some predetermined objectives. Rather, communication takes place on an ad-hoc manner. It can be argued that the incoherence in communication practices of the NGOs might seriously circumscribe the advocacy outcomes in many ways.

Though 'advocacy' and 'communication' are complementary to each other, it is the former that receives more impetus and importance while the role of the latter is often underestimated. The attention received by the role and concept of advocacy has resulted in a vast plethora of research and study whereas the role of communication strategy and its importance to advocacy remains somewhat understudied in Nepal's context. Therefore, the study of communication strategies employed by Advocacy NGOs in Nepal will be helpful in shedding light on how communication figures in the advocacy initiatives of NGOs.

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[17] Koopmans 2004
[18] Kingdon 2003

This study therefore aims to answer the following research questions:

- What are the considerations taken into account during the planning of communication strategies adopted by NGOs in Nepal?
- What are the common tools and techniques used by the NGOs for advocacy?
- What are the existing gaps in the communication practices of the NGOs?

Methodology

In the context of this paper, the NGOs in Nepal have been split into two groups: national-level NGOs that are based in Kathmandu and do most of their work from the capital and local-level NGOs that are based outside of Kathmandu. Both types of NGOs have been carrying out advocacy work in their independent capacity as well as in collaboration with each other. National-level NGOs are better at attracting attention to their advocacy initiatives as they often have better access to resources and to the media. But there is negligible information about the advocacy activities that happen at the local-level. Therefore, in order to gain a deeper understanding of the communication practices prevalent in local-level NGOs, the research involved visiting Advocacy NGOs working at the local level in ten districts across the five development regions of the country.

As noted earlier, NGOs are of diverse nature with diverse interests. Harka Gurung referred to them as 'an amorphous mass with divergent philosophy, scope and research.'[19] NGOs can be technocratic in nature where a group of professionals work on an issue that falls within their expertise or it can be a loose association of individuals who form an interest group based on their shared social or political demands regarding a specific issue. Considering this diversity in the type of NGOs and their relative influence on public policy making, NGOs were carefully selected to include those formed by professionals as well as NGOs that are closer in nature to interest groups as well as those that are a combination of both.

To further narrow down the scope of the research, the research has focused only on those NGOs that have carried out advocacy work in the area of women's rights and transitional justice. Women in Nepal have continuously been subjected to discrimination, injustice and deprivation in different spheres of life. This condition was further exacerbated during the decade-long civil war in the country. The end of the civil war and the political change in 2006 set the country into a new direction creating opportunities for advocacy around women's rights. Subsequently, the transitional justice issue has taken the centre-stage since the end of the civil war. NGOs working on these issues have launched advocacy programs in different parts of the country. Therefore, studying NGOs that are actively trying to take advantage of the policy window that has opened up as a result of the radical political and social changes in Nepal would be revealing of the communication practices employed by them.

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[19] Quoted in Ghimire 2003

From each development region, two NGOs from two different districts were selected using purposive sampling. Furthermore, the two NGOs sampled in each development region have been working on women's rights and transitional justice respectively. Therefore, out of the ten NGOs sampled in the five development regions, five have been working in the advocacy of women's rights whereas the other five have been working in the advocacy of transitional justice.

Figure 1: Sampling procedure
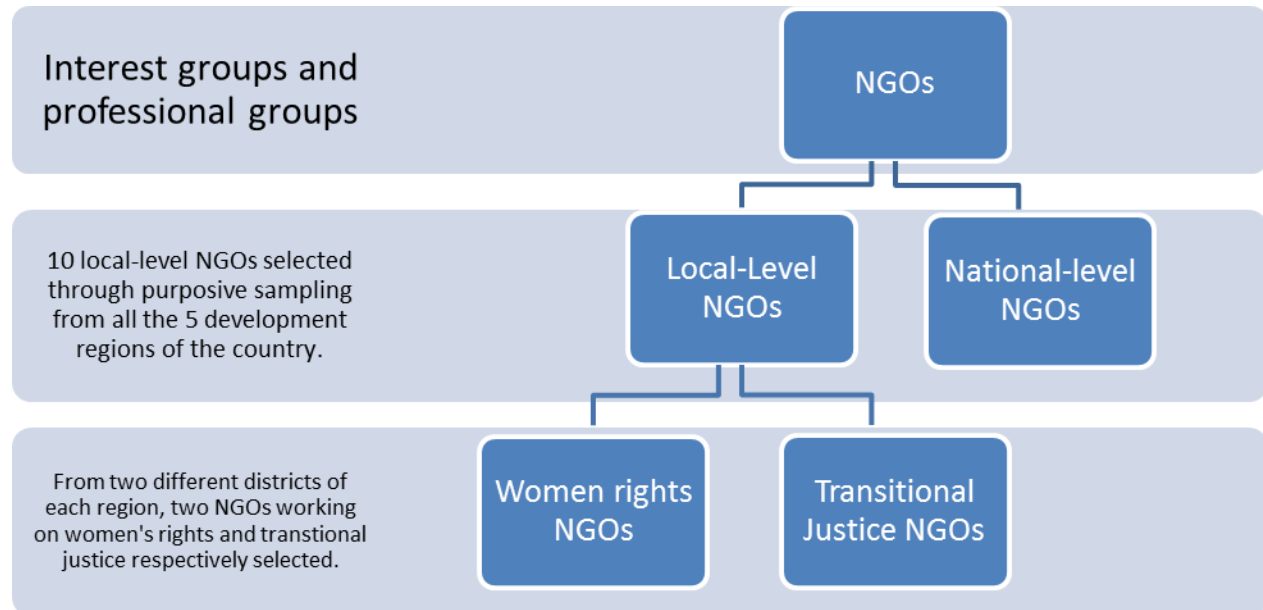
The primary method of information collection was done by conducting interviews with the incumbent chairpersons of the organizations mentioned above. In instances where a chairperson was unavailable, a top-level and relevant representative of the NGO was interviewed. The information collected from the interviews was also cross-checked for accuracy with reports and other publications produced by the organizations; these worked as the secondary source of data. The analysis of the content from the interviews and the document review work together to provide a better understanding of the existing communication practices and the gaps that have been identified.

Table 2: List of Sample NGOs

S.No.	NGOs	Districts	Development region	Advocacy issue
1.	Awaz Nepal	Sunsari	Eastern	WOMEN'S RIGHTS
2.	Ama Milan Kendra	Baglung	Western	
3.	Mahila Upakar Manch	Banke	Mid-Western	
4.	Women Skill Creation Centre (WOSCC)	Makwanpur	Central	
5.	Women Progress Centre	Kanchanpur	Far Western	
6.	Dalit Feminist Uplift Organization	Bardiya	Mid-Western	TRANSITIONAL JUSTICE
7.	FAYA Nepal	Kailali	Far Western	
8.	Jana Jagriti Youth Club	Bara	Central	
9.	Kopila Nepal	Kaski	Western	
10.	Women, Peace, Research and Development Centre (WPRDC)	Morang	Eastern	

Figure 2. Sources of Information

Primary Source of information: Interviews

Secondary Source of information: Documents of NGOs/literature review
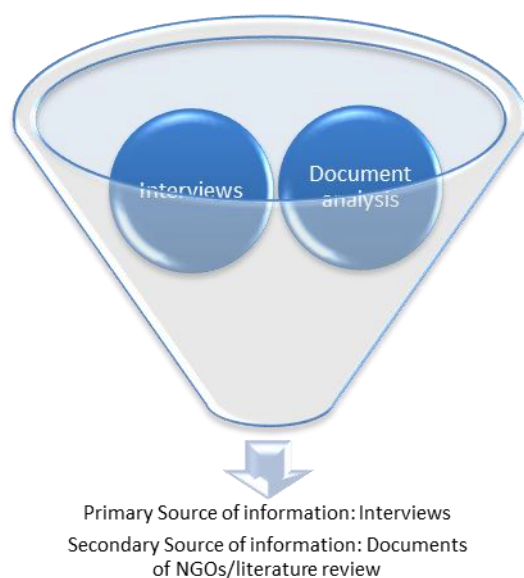
Findings

The Dynamics of National-level and Local-level NGOs

Despite the current pursuit of a federalist model for the country, at present, Nepal is still run by a centralized government from the capital and the fact that there haven't been any local elections since 2002 further exacerbates the situation. The lack of accountability in matters of governance is still a major issue despite the political changes of 2006. As far as the local polls are concerned, it has been deferred indefinitely as the political parties are still divided over whether they should take place before or after the constitution is promulgated. Parties like NC and CPN-UML are in favor of the polls whereas the UCPN(M) and Madhesh-based parties are against the idea of the local polls being conducted before the promulgation of the statute arguing that it is a ploy to subvert the demands for federalism.[20] The concept of federalism has proven to be the major bone of contention among the political parties, prolonging the transitional period with no sign of an immediate breakthrough.

With no elected representatives in the local bodies, the local NGOs have somewhat taken up the role of engaging with the local citizens over their concerns and issues that affect them. They have also bridged the gap between the local people and the representatives of the state institutions by working on collective issues and advocating for changes in public policy and for increased accountability. As the constitution making process is still underway, the policy process in Nepal is amenable to all sorts of claims, counter-claims and demands from a range of political and social actors. The NGOs are also part of such policy contestations. The policy advocacy work that NGOs have done on women's rights and transitional justice under the prevailing circumstances has gained both significance as well as relevance as both the issues are widely debated and crucial to the stability and development of the country.

Women right's NGOs work in several areas like the protection and promotion of women's rights, gender equity and gender equality and justice. On the other hand, NGOs working on transitional justice have focused on areas such as the rehabilitation of the conflict victims, relief and aid for the conflict victims and the documentation of conflict victims and their issues.

The policy advocacy done by the women's rights NGOs and the transitional justice NGOs have been both on a national and local level. It should be noted that local NGOs and national-level NGOs have a varying degree of access to material and human resources as well as the policy-making domain. They both have their own strengths and limitations. For instance, the national-level NGOs have a better access to mainstream media which is instrumental in opinion making in the country whereas the local NGOs have to rely on local media which is limited to a relatively small area. However, the local NGOs have established a better network of contacts in

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[20] Republica 2014

their regions as a result of their grass-root presence. They have a closer relationship with the local populace that can be advantageous when mobilizing support behind a certain issue. And with the help of the network of other local NGOs, they can run their activities in several adjoining districts with the collaboration and co-operation of different local-level NGOs. By doing so, they attempt to influence the local politics and the local administration and thereby, the policy process.

There is a convergence of issues raised by the national level NGOs and those raised by the local level NGOs. However, when it comes to taking the lead on advocacy, it is often the national level NGOs who are better positioned to do so. They have a better access to the corridors of power, the mainstream media as well as donor funding. The local NGOs may also work directly with international donors but they often work with national-level NGOs that pass down the funding from international agencies to launch programs of common interests at the grass-root level. The local NGOs, on their part, promote the national issues at the local level while attempting to mainstream their local issues at the national level with varying level of success. It could be said that the national-level NGOs and the local NGOs largely share a reciprocal relationship.

1. **Conceptualization of Advocacy and Communication**

During the course of the research, it became evident that local NGOs do not formally lay down their communication objectives. However, the advocacy objectives are categorically outlined in their advocacy planning.

> "Whenever we have an advocacy program to launch, we sit for meetings in the office. We prepare our advocacy strategy through extensive discussions where we outline our advocacy objectives among other things. We do stakeholder analysis and *keep in mind* how to communicate with different stakeholders."[21]

The quote above is indicative of the general tendency of the NGOs to lay more emphasis on advocacy objectives, while communication is something that is pushed to the side and is not given as much attention as it deserves. Communication practices do not appear to be planned. They figure on an ad-hoc basis. It can also be argued that local-level NGOs perceive communication to be just a natural action that does not require any planning. The absence of strategically planned communication may also be understood better in light of their different understanding of the term 'advocacy'.

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[21] Chairperson of a women's rights NGO, interview by Binit Gurung, 16th September 2014

"When I heard that the conflict victims were languishing in pain due to lack of medical help, I phoned the CDO and did *advocacy*. Later, I reached his office and again, did *advocacy*."[22]

It is apparent that the local NGO workers are often comfortable using the English term 'advocacy' while speaking but tend to understand it as 'communication', 'plea' or 'pressure' depending on the context.

2. Identification and selection of target audience and stakeholders

Target audience may be understood as groups of people who are identified to receive certain messages to achieve certain objectives. Stakeholders, on the other hand, are individuals and institutions who have an interest in the issues being advocated. Stakeholders could be part of the target audience but not all stakeholders are the target audience. An audience can be grouped and the process of differentiating the audience into categories based on similarities is called audience segmentation.[23] Target audience can be segmented into two groups: primary audience and secondary audience. The primary audience is made up of policy makers or decision makers who are authorized to effect change whereas the secondary audience is comprised of groups and individuals who can influence the opinion and decision of the primary audience. Target audience is subject to change with advocacy issue.

Figure 3. Audience segmentation into primary and secondary audiences

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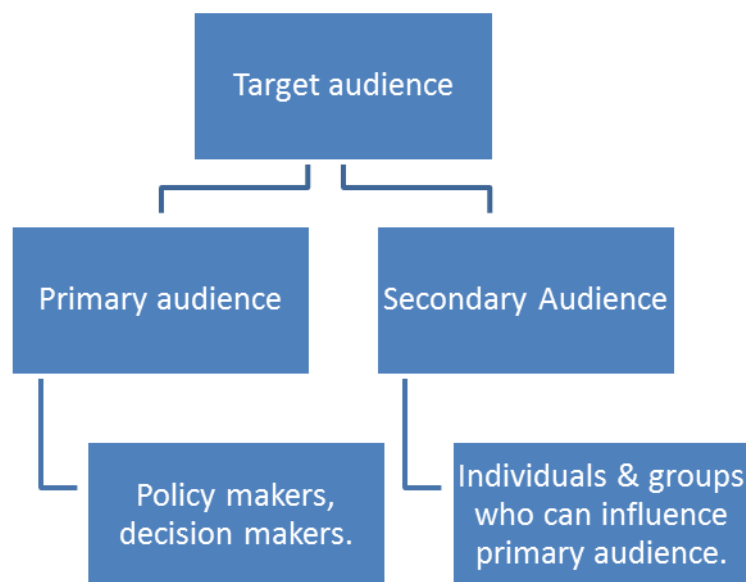
[22] Representative of a transitional justice NGO, interview by Binit Gurung, 14th September 2014
[23] Hesselink et al 2007

Stakeholder analysis is a common practice in NGOs but the analysis of the target audience prior to communication activities is not an established practice. Though there is no practice of mapping the primary audience and secondary audience for the purpose of communicating advocacy messages, the local NGOs however do identify their target groups in relation to their advocacy issues before communicating with them.

Table 3: Target audiences identified by the NGOs working on Women's Rights

PRIMARY	SECONDARY
• Law Makers/Parliamentarians • Political Parties • Local State Bodies	• Women • General public • Civil society • Social groups • Media

Table 4: Target audiences identified by the NGOs working on Transitional Justice

PRIMARY	SECONDARY
• Government • Political Parties • Law Makers/Parliamentarians • Local State Bodies	• Conflict victims • Media • Civil society • General public • Conflict-affected groups • Marginalized communities • Social groups

3. **Practice of message preparation**

The messages directed at the primary audience are prepared with the intent of drawing attention towards specific issues seeking their immediate intervention. Such messages are expressed through formal letters written in Nepali. Evidence-based message preparation is not a common practice. However, there is an element of creativity in the NGOs' communication efforts directed at the secondary audience. The messages are graphically illustrated whenever necessary to make

them appealing and accessible. Such messages are written in simple Nepali and have the intent to alert and inform the secondary audience. These messages are delivered by using a number of communication tools, techniques and mediums.

4.   Communication tools and techniques

The choice of specific communication tools and techniques to communicate specific messages depends upon a number of factors like objectives, characteristics of the target audience, the nature of messages and the feasibility of the means of communication. In general, the following communication tools and techniques are employed by the local NGOs:

▪   **Inter-personal communication**

Interpersonal meetings between policy makers/decision makers and the representatives of the NGOs are a common practice. This type of communication also takes place while reaching out to the secondary target audience and the stake holders. Such meetings are facilitated by organizing programs like conferences, workshops, seminars as well as training and interaction programs. Another way of communicating with the primary audience is by visiting the offices of the concerned authorities to register protests, submit memorandums or petitions.

Table 5: Different communication tools and techniques used for different segments of the audience

PRIMARY AUDIENCE		SECONDARY AUDIENCE
• Office Visit • Conference • Seminar • Training • Interactions		• Workshop • Conference • Seminar • Training • Interactions

▪   **Use of media**

The local media works as an important medium for communication tactics employed by local NGOs. Even though the local NGOs work closely with the local media, they often have to pay an 'allowance' to the journalists to ensure that their activities and events are covered.

"If we don't pay the 'allowance' to the journalists, our events and
activities do not find space in the media coverage."[24]

Radio is the most used means of communication at the local level because of its reach across the most remote parts of the country. Moreover, it's a verbal and relatively cheap medium for mass communication which is ideal to appeal to to illiterate men and women. The local level NGOs air jingles aimed at raising awareness on the radio. Programs like talk-shows about various aspects of transitional justice and women rights are also aired on the radio. Local newspapers are also used by the NGOs followed by some presence in TV which is a distant third in terms of usage. Some NGOs do publish features in the local dailies but the use of online media is virtually non-existent.

Table 6: Level and Purposes of use of available media

Availability of Media	Level of use[25]	Used for
Radio	High	- Talk shows - Jingles - News - Public notices - Advertisements
Newspaper	Moderate	- News - Public Notices - Advertisements - Articles
TV	Low	- News - Talk shows
Online	Negligible	E-mail/Internet

- **Telecommunication**

Telephone is the most used communication means at the local level. The local NGOs have telephone/cell phone numbers of officials from junior-level government personnel all the way to the Chief District Officer. They are often contacted as and when needed to seek assistance, to register protests and in most cases, to extend invitation to their events. Telephone is used to arrange meetings among stakeholders, coalition partners and target groups. The local NGOs also use text messaging or SMS to disseminate information to a large group of people.

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[24] Representative of a women's rights NGO, interview by Binit Gurung (15th October 2014)

[25] Level of use has been defined by four parameters: 'high', 'moderate', 'less' and 'negligible'. 'High' refers to the use of the available media extensively as it has no equally effective or better alternative. 'Moderate' refers to the substantial use of the available media but it is largely considered a secondary choice. 'Low' refers to a minimum use and is a tertiary choice for the NGOs. Finally, 'negligible' refers to almost no use of the available media for most NGOs with some exceptions.

▪ **Other Tools and Techniques**

Issuing press releases by Advocacy NGOs are also common in practice. When working on issues of common interests, the NGOs issue joint press releases to the media in order to draw the attention of the concerned authorities and register their protest in public. Emails are not used for the purpose of communication. Rather, letters are still a popular method for communication. Letters are often sent to the relevant stakeholders, policy makers and other interest groups. A short letter printed in Nepali is the common format. Letters are often followed up by phone calls especially when they are sent to someone with influence on a policy making level.

> "Letters are community endorsed means of communication and lend formality to our communication practice. When we communicate through letters, then they take us seriously. Otherwise, a mere phone call or any oral communication is often overlooked. Phone calls, however, lend much needed informality to our communication practice. So letters are often followed by phone calls. We have realized that sending of letters alone doesn't work. We have to remind them in person. Only then, they feel obliged to attend our program."[26]

This communication practice is common among all local-level NGOs regardless of the region. In this way, the formality and informality of communication is maintained, while following the popular practices of the community.

Figure 4. Use of letters followed by phone calls as a common communication practice to strike a balance between formality and informality

LETTERS

PHONE CALLS

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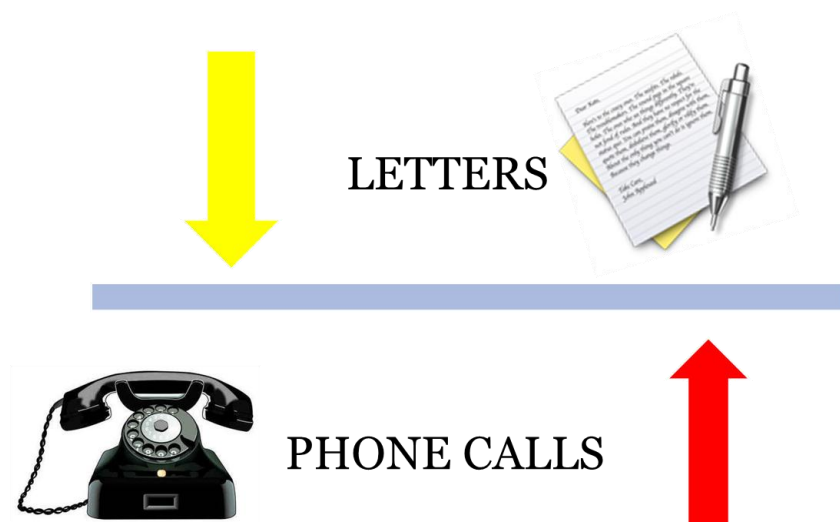
[26] Chairperson of a women's rights NGO, interview by Binit Gurung (15th October 2014)

NGOs working with large number of people across a number of VDCs often communicate to the people at the grass-root level through intermediaries. These intermediaries are created in the form of committees or groups in villages that represent the target groups in those areas. These intermediary structures facilitate a two-way communication and save the NGOs time, money and resources. Apart from that, the local NGOs employ a range of other creative techniques of communication particularly when trying to attract the attention of the secondary audience. For instance, they organize street dramas and cultural programs to create awareness. National and international day celebrations marking specific issues such as International Women's Day, is widely practiced by the NGOs. Such celebrations are organized to create visibility and to express solidarity to a cause. Rallies are organized with placards emblazoned with slogans. Posters and hoarding boards with graphically illustrated short messages are put up in different places.

Figure 5. Communication through intermediaries

5. **Localized networked advocacy communication**

> "We hardly run an advocacy program by ourselves. We go through
> our network. We try to reconcile our interests with the interests of the
> other stakeholders and launch our advocacy in co-ordination with
> them supporting one another."[27]

The local NGOs are adaptive and have a strong presence in their respective areas. They share both formal and informal relationships with the interest groups, officials of the local state bodies and the local population. It is therefore of no surprise that their advocacy communication

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[27] Representative from a transitional justice NGO, interview by Binit Gurung (16th September 2014)

practices and strategy is localized in nature. The NGOs have membership in networks which are basically an alliance of like-minded organizations. Such networks prove useful when sharing information, resources, providing assistance and working in co-ordination with member organizations that have shared interests. NGOs that run advocacy projects in several districts make use of local media extensively and also engage with the local state bodies of different districts with the help of the networks that they are affiliated with. For instance, if an NGO from one district is to conduct a program in another district, it makes use of this network and co-ordinates with the organizations based in the host district.

6. Absence of information sharing system

Most local NGOs do not have a website. Even if they do, they are either not functional or not updated regularly. There is virtually no practice of reaching out to the target groups through the online platform. A few of them regularly publish magazines, bulletins, booklets and newspapers in Nepali language. These publications however do not enjoy a wide circulation. They are mostly distributed by hand during events organized by the NGOs. The annual reports are usually released at a public event by inviting an individual with influence in the policy making process as chief guest. Most of the publications of the NGOs are project-specific and they compile the activities and outcomes of the organizations in relation to the projects. Such reports are sent to donors and other offices as stipulated in the project contracts. However, such information is not shared with the target groups on a regular basis. A raft of such project-specific publications is gathering dust in the offices of the NGOs which could otherwise be uploaded on to the online platform and be made accessible to a larger audience.

7. Raising policy concerns

It is generally the case that the advocacy initiatives of local NGOs are not informed by specific studies or research. However, some NGOs maintain an extensive documentation of local incidents, violation of human rights and so on which they use to inform their advocacy activities. All local-level NGOs exert pressure on the local state institutions and local actors and focus their advocacy work mostly on the issues of 'policy implementation gap' and 'policy reform' rather than 'policy formulation'.

▪ **Policy Advocacy done by NGOs working on women's rights**

The women's rights NGOs at the local-level are found to have worked in three aspects of policy advocacy: policy formulation, policy reform and policy implementation. They have advocated for the formulation of a policy that would institute a 'fast track court' to expedite the process of justice delivery for women. NGOs working on women's rights have also demanded reform in the existing citizenship law and the law against rape, both of which, they believe, are discriminatory against women. These NGOs have also called for social and political inclusion of women to fill the gender gap in all areas of life caused by the ingrained patriarchal structure of the Nepalese

society. Besides, the women's rights NGOs are often involved in putting pressure on the government authorities to implement national act and UN resolutions related to women such as Domestic Violence Act 2066 and UNSCRs 1325 and 1820.

Figure 6. Policy Advocacy of the NGOs working on women's rights
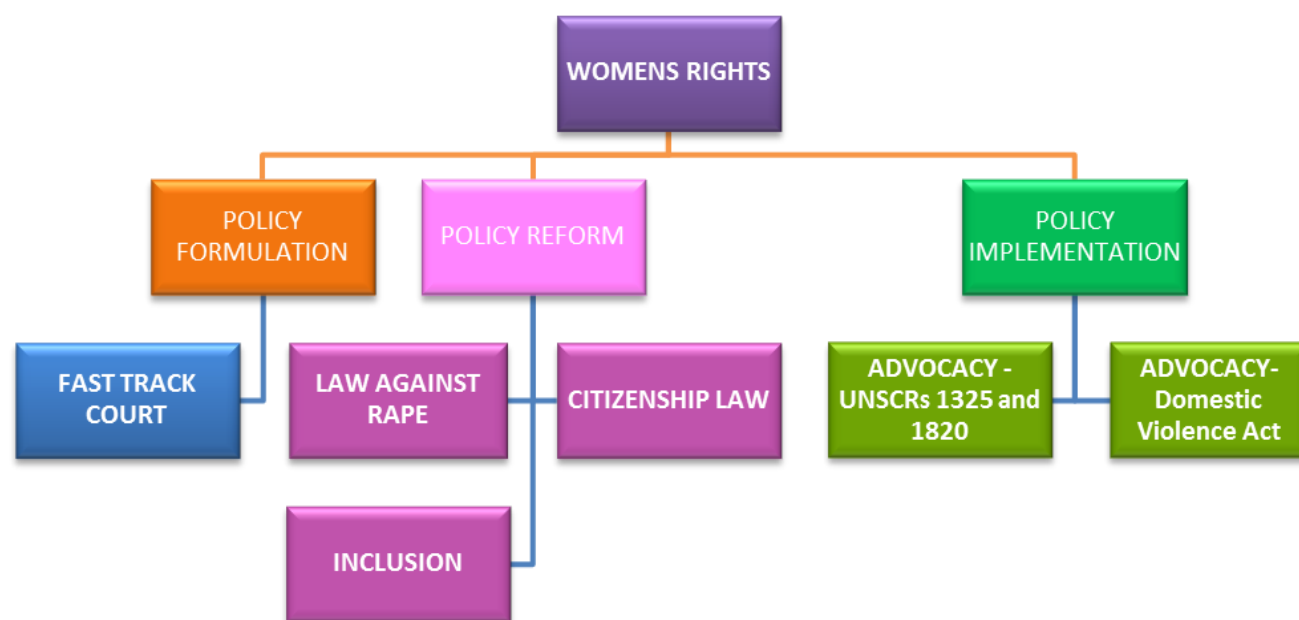
Policy Formulation
- Fast track court on women's cases

Policy Reform
- Amendment in existing law against rape.
- Change in discriminatory Nepali citizenship law against women.
- Social and political inclusion of women

Policy Implementation
- Advocacy on the implementation of UNSCRs 1325 and 1820
- Advocacy on the proper enforcement of Domestic Violence Act, 2066 (2009)

▪ **Policy advocacy done by NGOs working on transitional justice**

The local NGOs advocating for transitional justice have limited scope compared to the women's rights NGOs but there are still some crucial areas that they are working on. On 10 February 2015, the government finally formed the long overdue Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) but the local NGOs had been pressing for this outcome for a while. Another key advocacy

issue on the part of the NGOs is the amendment of the TRC Act itself in order to make it victim-centric. They have also advocated for an inclusive TRC mechanism so that no victims of conflict is left out from the processes of TRC. The local NGOs, through their advocacy works, have largely helped to mainstream the debate of transitional justice at the local level.

Figure 7. Policy advocacy of NGOs working on transitional justice
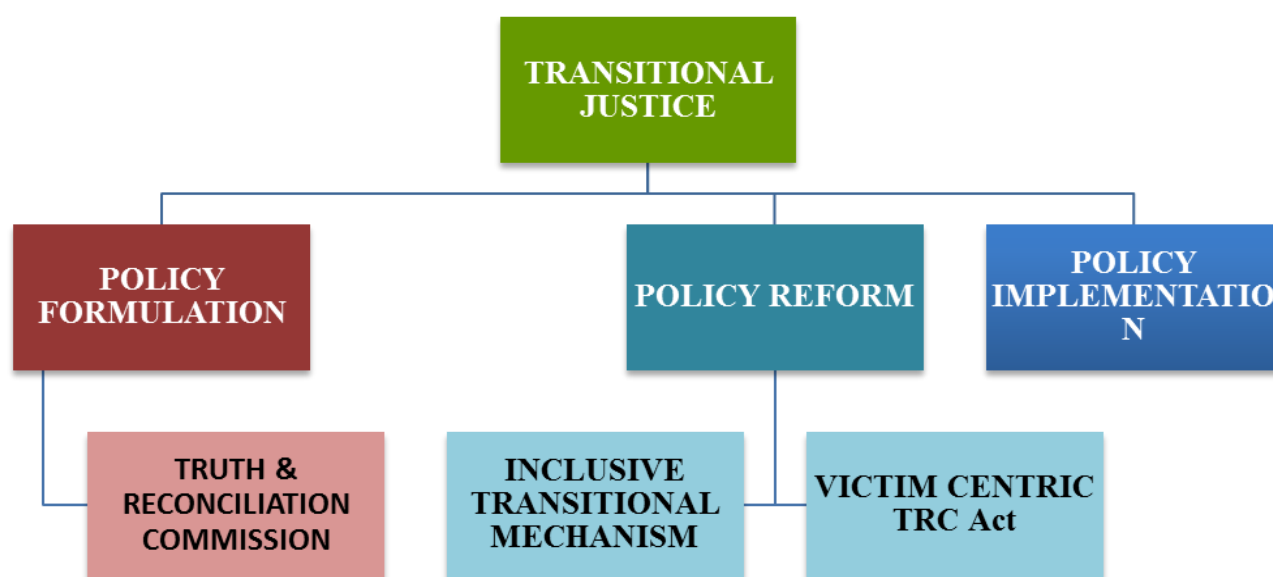
Policy Formulation
- Formation of Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)

Policy reform
- Inclusive Transitional Justice mechanism
- Victim-centric TRC Act

8. Advocacy Strategies

An advocacy strategy is a planned approach of advocacy which comprises of the strategic combination of advocacy and communication tools and techniques with an aim to achieve some pre-determined goals and objectives. An Advocacy NGO may employ different advocacy strategies in accordance with its goals and objectives. The local NGOs across the country make use of different advocacy strategies to influence the policy-making/decision-making process. However, no NGO confines itself to a single advocacy strategy rather it employs a number of advocacy strategies at the same time to better its advocacy outcomes.

As noted earlier, communication is of fundamental importance to advocacy. The advocacy strategies employed by the local NGOs cannot be executed without the appropriate use of

communication tools and techniques to deliver messages to the target audience. Each advocacy strategy necessitates the use of a corresponding set of communication tools and techniques. While some communication tools and techniques are repetitively used in all advocacy strategies, others are exclusive to one or two advocacy strategies. The success of an advocacy strategy largely hinges on the appropriate selection and efficient use of the available communication tools and techniques.

The advocacy strategies and the corresponding communication tools and techniques used by the local NGOs across the country advocating for women's rights and transitional justice are described below:

- **Constituency Building Strategy**

Constituency building is a core strategy that works alongside other strategies simultaneously. This strategy is about organizing and mobilizing interest groups to achieve a certain outcome. For that, NGOs often form intermediary structures to reach out to different groups of people in the community as well as making use of mass media. All local level NGOs have strong constituencies in the regions they work in. NGOs form groups at the district and village levels and work through them. They even proudly claim that outsiders cannot work in their local area by bypassing them due to their strong local networks.

> "In the recent past, we have even refused working with a few donors because they didn't listen to our concerns. It is us who work so hard, mobilize our resources and use our contacts. We challenge such donors to come and work in our area without us. They simply don't have the social base needed to execute their projects."[28]

- **Co-operation/Collaboration Strategy**

This is a popular strategy of advocacy adopted by local-level NGOs. The various stakeholders with common interests collaborate and co-operate to launch advocacy by sharing information and resources among themselves. The NGOs tap into their wide networks to identify target groups, seek technical assistance and make joint advocacy efforts to render their efforts effective. Periodic meetings of the organizations affiliated to a particular network are organized to review their works and plan the future course of action.

> "When the issue to be advocated is serious and needs greater pressure on authorities, we never work alone. We telephone the organizations in the network and sit for meeting to discuss possible collaboration."29

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[28] Executive director of a women's rights NGO, interview by Binit Gurung (10th October 2014)
[29] Executive director of a women's rights NGO, interview by Binit Gurung (19th September 2014)

- **Persuasion Strategy**

Another popular advocacy strategy adopted by the local NGOs is using relevant information, medium and constructing key messages to persuade the target audience into supporting their demands for a change in existing policy or practice. The strategy often involves the use of mass media to influence public opinion and policy makers.

> "Our strategy depends on our target groups. If we want to persuade common folks who are not educated, we use mediums like radio to convey our messages. We engage the local state bodies and political parties through interaction and panel discussion programs."30

- **Education Strategy**

This strategy involves educating and raising critical consciousness among the interest groups and people at large. Making people aware of the state of affairs, existing policies and socio-political issues help individuals and interest groups to make sense of the prevailing policy environment and thus, can prove to be the first step towards effective mobilization. The NGOs aim to educate the people at large through a range of events and communication techniques. According to the executive officer of an NGO,

> "Education and awareness can curb social evils considerably but such education strategy has to be planned and executed carefully. For instance, educating women about their rights and their need to resist violence and discrimination at home would be of no use if their male counterparts were not educated concomitantly. Taking this into account, we once came up with an awareness program on domestic violence inviting both husband and wife of each household living in the area. The program was really successful as indicated by the overwhelming participation and the feedback we received."31

- **Litigation Strategy**

Litigation strategy has been mostly used by the NGOs working on women's rights. Cases of property dispute, gender-based violence and other domestic issues where women are subjected to injustice are often dealt with through litigation. The NGOs sometimes mediate between the victims and the alleged perpetrators in case of a minor dispute or misunderstanding. In more serious cases, the NGOs provide the victims with legal consultation and even take cases to court if necessary. However, this strategy is not applicable to transitional justice where the court refuses to entertain cases of conflict arguing that they are to be dealt with by the TRC mechanism. The chairman of an NGO working in the area of transitional justice said,

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30 Chairman of a women's rights NGO, interview by Binit Gurung (13th October 2014)
31 Executive director of a women's rights NGO, interview by Binit Gurung (19th September 2014)

"The victims of conflict are the real losers in this protracted transition. The state has long been indifferent to their suffering. The issue of 'justice' has been endlessly put in the backburner just in the name of TRC."32

- **Confrontation Strategy**

A confrontational strategy is aimed at challenging the existing policy or practice by pointing out its flaws and negative implications and thereby exerting greater pressure to effect the desired change. Confrontational strategy is relatively aggressive in which the advocates conduct the following activities:[33]

- Demonstration
- Rallies
- Sit-in protest
- Gherao
- Strikes
- Street march
- Civil disobedience

The use of posters, placards and banners with key protest messages are common. There is a general belief that the concerned authorities do not pay heed to the issues raised by the advocates unless some confrontational methods are employed. The same is the case with the mainstream media which tends to overlook issues raised by the advocates unless the advocacy strategy used is confrontational in nature. Confrontational strategy can be both violent and non-violent. The local NGOs however refrain from using violence as part of their confrontational strategy. However, the NGOs do admit that the government and other interest groups are not as responsive to non-violent methods. Women working for women's rights NGOs are often accused of disrupting the patriarchal social order by 'provoking' other women. These women advocates sometimes feel threatened, and they feel unsafe to walk around in the evening on their own as indicated by the chairperson of a women's rights NGO below.

"While handling a rape case of a minor, I once received a phone call from an influential and renowned politician asking me to drop the case. I however persisted risking my safety. My children often tell me not to walk alone in the evening fearing that others might attack me. I too share the same fear. However, this has not dissuaded me from working for women's rights and gender justice."34

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[32] Chairperson of a transitional justice NGO, interview by Binit Gurung (11th October 2014)
[33] Shilpakar 2012
[34] Chairperson of a women's rights NGO, interview by Binit Gurung (16th September 2014)

Table 7: Advocacy Strategies, their purposes and the Communication tools and techniques used

ADVOCACY STRATEGY	PURPOSE	COMMUNICATION TOOLS/TECHNIQUES
Constituency building strategy	• Building support base, Organizing and Mobilizing interest groups/stakeholders	• Mass media and Formation of intermediary structures
Cooperation & Collaboration strategy	• Working together with like-minded groups and stakeholders	• Meetings and Phone calls/Letters
Persuasion strategy	• Convincing the policy makers and stakeholders about some policy alternatives	• Mass media, Office visit, Seminar, Conference and Panel discussion
Education strategy	• Raising awareness on certain issues	• Mass media, Awareness campaigns, Street drama and Meetings
Litigation strategy	• Seeking justice through legal procedures	• Letters, Phone calls and Meetings
Confrontation strategy	• Pressurizing policy makers/decision makers	• Posters, Placards and Banners

Table 8: NGOs advocating for Women's Rights: key policy work, audience and communication methods

Policy Advocacy	Advocacy Strategies	Primary Target Audience	Secondary Target Audience	Communication Tools and Techniques
Policy Formulation Fast track court on women's cases **Policy Reform** Amendment in existing rape law Change in discriminatory Nepali Citizenship Law against Women Social and Political Inclusion of Women **Policy Implementation** Advocacy on Implementation of UNSCRs 1325 and 1820 Advocacy on enforcement of Domestic Violence Act	• Constituency Building • Persuasion • Education • Confrontational • Litigation	• Central Government • Local State Bodies • Law Makers/Parliamentarians • Political Parties	• Women • Civil society • Media • Social groups • General public	• Direct meeting (Seminar, Conference, Workshop, Office visit) • Media (Radio, Print Media, TV) • Telecommunication (Phone calls, SMS) • Letters, Press releases, etc. • Intermediaries: Formation of women's committees and groups

Table 9. NGOs advocating for Transitional Justice: key policy work, audience and communication methods

Policy Advocacy	Advocacy Strategies	Primary Target Audience	Secondary Target Audience	Communication Tools and Techniques
Policy Formulation Formation of Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) **Policy Reform** Inclusive transitional justice mechanism Victim-centric TRC	• Confrontational • Constituency Building • Co-operation/ Collaboration • Persuasion	• Central Government • Local State Bodies • Law Makers/Parliamentarians • Political Parties	• Civil Society organizations • Conflict Affected People and Victims • Media • Social Groups • General Public	• Direct Meetings (cultural events, seminars, conferences, office visits) • Media (Radio, Print Media) • Telecommunication (Phone Calls, SMS) • Letters, Press Releases, etc. • Intermediaries: Formation of groups and committees of Conflict Victims

Analysis

1. Constraints of informing Policy Advocacy

The conceptual understanding of 'advocacy' and 'communication' is somewhat different at the local level as opposed to how they are understood at the national level. The communication practices of the NGOs are clearly shaped by their perception of the terms 'advocacy' and 'communication'. The loose understanding of the term 'advocacy' renders their communication planning and practices incoherent because the term 'advocacy' subsumes the act of 'communication' in their understanding. Consequently, communication is taken for granted as it is perceived to be an inherent part of advocacy. This understanding clearly comes in the way of a planned communication strategy that could improve the overall advocacy outcomes.

Similarly, there exists a lack of research culture which informs policy advocacy among the NGOs. Instead, they rely on extensive documentation of the incidences of human rights violations and other local events in their respective areas. These documents are often used to back up their advocacy initiatives. Such advocacy initiatives are effective particularly in case of pressuring the authorities into implementation of policies to protect rights, to demand justice and to hold them accountable to the people. This is one of the reasons why the policy advocacy launched by the local NGOs tends to gravitate towards implementation and reform aspects more than the aspect of policy formulation. The lack of skilled and able policy specialists at the local level is also a major contributing factor.

2. Interrelationship between the state structure, the local media and the local NGOs

The process of devising a communication strategy plan, the nature of the strategy itself and the overall characteristics of the local NGOs are more or less the same across the regions covered by this research. This could be because of the similar socio-political, cultural and economic contexts under which they all operate, thanks to the centralization of the state in Kathmandu which has in turn led to the centralization of public administration, education, health services and mainstream media. Remarkably, the centralization of mainstream media in the capital has resulted in the inadequate national coverage of issues that exist in the periphery. The local media covers the local affairs but they don't enjoy a wide dissemination which limits their presence in the national discourse. Rather, it appears that the national discourse around these issues is often absorbed and reinforced by the local media.

As local NGOs operate at the periphery with limited access to infrastructure and resources, they have to work with their existing resources and grapple with the local challenges in their own way. The availability of communication mediums and other resources is the same for all local NGOs regardless of their location. Furthermore, the local NGOs use similar communication tools and techniques and nothing is found to be unique to a particular NGO in a particular region. Even the culture of paying allowance to the local journalists is not exclusive to one or two NGOs but is uniformly present across the country.

Given the low pay scale for the journalists working at the local level, the 'allowance' paid by the NGOs is an opportunity for the journalists to make some extra money on the side. Apparently, this culture is now so deep-rooted that the failure to pay allowance often leads to journalists snubbing the activities and issues championed by the NGO. NGOs themselves have contributed to the institutionalization of this practice over the years by luring the local journalists with monetary incentives to attend their meetings and programs in return for media coverage. It is now an entrenched practice at the local level and perhaps, a difficult one to do away with.

3. Advocacy communication practices vis-à-vis advocacy issues

Transitional justice is a relatively new issue that is fraught with conflict of interests whereas women's rights issues have over the years gained more traction and have become a national priority because of the increasing awareness and education around the issues. Therefore, it is of no surprise that the NGOs advocating for women's rights have established much better communication structures in their respective work areas as compared to NGOs advocating for transitional justice.

As the conflict-era cases are to be dealt by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, NGOs working in the area of transitional justice are restricted to work within the limitations of the existing framework. Their policy advocacy therefore is more oriented towards policy reform. On the other hand, there is no such restriction in the area of women's rights advocacy. For instance, the litigation strategy which is widely used in the women's rights advocacy is not workable whatsoever in the case of transitional justice. Such limitations restrict the communication practices of the NGOs working in the area of transitional justice.

The communication capacity of the NGOs is also dependent on the financial state of the NGOs. For instance, the women's rights NGOs enjoy a certain degree of self-sufficiency. Most of them have been raising money locally through a range of entrepreneurial activities like running saving and credit institutions, leasing out properties to raise revenue, charging membership fees etc. In contrast, advocacy work on transitional justice is mostly project-led. In absence of donor money, advocacy for transitional justice is often disrupted by the lack of funds. Consequently, ad hoc communication pervades NGOs working for transitional justice more than the women's rights NGOs.

4. The role of local media in the advocacy strategies

The local NGOs employ a gamut of advocacy strategies to articulate their interests and thereby influence the policy process. To that end, they attempt to influence the local state bodies in particular as the local NGOs have no access to the national state institutions and the key policy makers, thanks to the centralized structure of the state.

The use of local media remains significant for all advocacy strategies. The advocacy strategies such as constituency building, education and persuasion use the local media strategically. While employing such strategies, the NGOs essentially pay the local media to

run their programs and broadcast their messages. The other advocacy strategies however may not require a strategic use of local media.

Be that as it may, the confrontational strategy of the NGOs however finds coverage in the local media. The activities like sit-ins, gherao, rallies, etc., are of considerable interest to the local media. In a way, it could be said that the intensity of confrontation determines the extent of coverage in the local media. This nevertheless is not a feature exclusive to the local media. This is true of the national mainstream media as well, that responds more actively to any initiatives that are confrontational in nature.

The interest of the media sector in the confrontational activities is reflective of the nature of our polity. It is often the case that the government remains indifferent to peaceful protests or a less aggressive nature of advocacy works. Only when some substantial pressure is applied, does the government react positively. This is perhaps why there are so many shutdowns in the country as the protestors across the country find no other way to make the government responsive towards their issues. Though the local NGOs do not resort to shutdowns as part of their advocacy work, they have however found the confrontational strategy as an effective way to articulate their interests and influence the state actors. Besides, the popularity and apparent effectiveness of the confrontational strategy may be explained by the fact no other advocacy strategies have been able to deliver immediate results at the local level.

5. **Towards a post-transitional communication practice**

As Nepal is going through a prolonged transition, the uncertainty of this period has led to the weakening of the rule of law and governance. NGOs have therefore gained recognition for their role in service delivery and are considered to be partners in development by the state. As the state often coordinates and collaborates with the local level NGOs, it is only natural that the NGOs enjoy a certain level of access to the state institutions.

Phone calls and letters remain popular as communication tools while reaching out to the primary audience. Besides, the NGOs often make office visits to see the concerned authorities, (for instance, the Chief District Officer), to brief them on the issue at hand, submit memorandums, to register protest or to extend invitation to their events. Events like interaction programs, seminars and training among others are organized to engage with the policy makers.

The excessive reliance on phone calls and other events to reach out to the primary audience may not be as effective as they are now, once the constitution is promulgated. The constitution might lead to the creation of a more structured and formal environment that requires a more planned approach as opposed to informal visits to government offices as a result of nurtured relationships.

The adoption of a federal structure would be a major departure from the existing state structure and would result in the creation of a new policy environment. Currently, the local state bodies are not autonomous and are sub-ordinate to the national state bodies. Federalism would largely localize policy making at the state level and therefore, the advocacy outcomes

could be better at the local level. It is therefore necessary on the part of NGOs to be prepared for operating and raising policy concerns in post-transitional Nepal by improving and systematizing the current communication practices to adapt to the emergent policy environment.

Conclusion

The essence of every advocacy initiative is to deliver messages to the target group in order to influence their policy decisions regarding the advocacy issue. In this respect, a communication strategy is highly desirable in advocating policy concerns to the policy makers/decision makers. Though, communication strategy as such is virtually absent in the advocacy done by the local NGOs, a semblance of a communication strategy is however present which seems to be inherent in their advocacy initiatives.

Communication planning in the NGOs happens non-strategically within the paradigm of advocacy strategy. Practices that characterize the communication planning of local NGOs involve identification of target audience, preparation of messages and selection of communication tools and techniques. As these practices are devoid of strategic considerations, the extent of their influence on policy makers is therefore subject to question. Their communication practice is also localized in nature meaning that their advocacy programs are limited to just a few districts, targeting the local stakeholders and the local state bodies. There is a serious dearth of a proper information sharing system that can help local NGOs to reach out to the relevant stakeholders outside of their local remit and enable their issues to be visible on a national level.

The NGOs nevertheless take a realistic approach to their advocacy as evidenced by their flexible understanding of the term 'advocacy' depending on the context. The major strength of the local NGOs is their network and their reach at the grass-root level. Because of this merit, the NGOs have a great rapport with the secondary target groups which they can easily mobilize for their advocacy work. They themselves form or aid in the formation of groups and committees at the village and district levels and through these intermediary structures, they communicate with a large number of the secondary target groups. On the other hand, the lack of research culture that informs policy advocacy is a major limitation for the local NGOs.

In the absence of in-depth policy expertise and a strong communication strategy, the local NGOs are unable to directly influence the policy making process by floating policy alternatives. The policy concerns raised by the local NGOs are limited to the areas of 'policy reform' and 'policy implementation'. These NGOs employ a range of advocacy strategies to raise policy concerns but it is the confrontational strategy that helps them to draw the attention of the authorities and the media. This indicates that the decision makers habitually do not like to engage with the social actors unless pressurized to do so and the practice of policy advocacy at the local level is still in its nascent stage.

All the local NGOs are exposed to similar constraints. They operate under similar socio-cultural, economic and political climate. This is perhaps why they exhibit similar features. They use similar communication tools and techniques. They have the same strengths and limitations. However, NGOs working on women's rights, regardless of the region, have stronger communication channels whereas the NGOs working on transitional justice in all the regions do not have established communication practices yet. This is because the women's rights issues have been visible for much longer whereas transitional justice is a relatively new issue that emerged following the end of decade-long conflict in 2006. However, as the country is going through a political transition, different groups see it as an opportune time to raise their concerns in an organized way.

The advocacy of the local NGOs is constrained by the existing structure of the country which is heavily centralized in Kathmandu in all respects. Post-transition, under the model of federalism, the policy making process would be undoubtedly systematic and relatively open. Under a new democratic federal framework, there would also be a greater need to engage with the population and address their concerns. This would be an opportunity for the NGOs to achieve better advocacy outcomes at the state level where most of the policy making for the federal unit would take place. It is therefore indispensable for the NGOs to have a robust communication strategy to raise policy concerns under changed political scenario which would require the strengthening of its institutional capacities.

Recommendations

Based on the research findings and analysis, following recommendations are made to the Advocacy NGOs working at the local level to improve their advocacy outcomes:

❖ **Planned Communication Strategy**

Despite various understandings of 'advocacy' at the local level, if the NGOs were to plan their communication practices strategically, they would be able to influence the policy making process more effectively. A communication strategy allows an NGO to promote its cause and set agendas rather than just respond to the external environment.[35] It also ensures that the resources of the organization are efficiently and effectively used.[36] A good communication strategy entails determining communication objectives, identification of the target audience, crafting creative advocacy messages, apt use of communication tools, techniques and mechanisms to monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of communication practices so that further improvements can be made. The local NGOs would be better off if they allocated a certain amount of budget to develop and implement a communication strategy.

It should be noted that mere allocation of budget is not adequate for the successful implementation of a communication strategy. In addition to the allocation of sufficient

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[35] Coulby 2010
[36] Ibid

budget, the NGOs need to improve internal communication mechanism. NGOs at the local level do not have trained human resources particularly in the area of organizational communication. The strengthening of the internal communication system within an organization would ultimately strengthen their external communication. This way, the communication practices would be coherent as each staff would have an idea about the basic direction of the advocacy communication strategy of the organization and thereby, would be in a position to contribute to the external communication in their own way. For instance, the NGO staff members may informally communicate about the issue being advocated by the organization to their respective friends, family members and social circle irrespective of their position in the organization. This would indirectly help the NGO towards realizing their communication objectives.

❖ **Evidence-based Policy Advocacy**

Evidence-based advocacy is grounded on information and data.[37] Evidence cannot persuade on its own.[38] It is the advocates who are responsible to use the evidence creatively in their communication for persuasion.[39] The use of evidence ensures that the policy demands made by the NGOs are realistic, representative, explain the genesis of the problem, justify the necessity for change, viability of policy options and increase credibility of the advocacy.[40] There are various types of evidence – qualitative and quantitative, national and international.[41] There are however certain challenges to evidence-based advocacy at the local level. Firstly, there is virtually no practice of 'evidence-based thinking' among the stakeholders or very little appreciation of the fact that evidence is important for influencing the decision making process. Secondly, there appears to be a lack of local policy entrepreneurs or individuals with enough knowledge and expertise in the policy making arena. These constraints call for a wiser use of available resources and necessitate the focus required on capacity building.

As the local NGOs have strong ties with the local people, the stakeholders and the local state bodies, they should build upon this strength to collect data from different sources to strengthen their policy demands and integrate them into their communication messages to influence the decision making process. The evidence should be translated into messages coherently and strategically to suit different audiences and apt communication channels should be used to deliver such messages. The local NGOs should work on building their capacity to collect, process and analyze evidence that is relevant to the policy makers and decision makers. The NGOs should align their policy advocacy to the decision making process to improve their advocacy outcomes.

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[37] Unicef 2009

[38] Ibid

[39] Ibid

[40] Ibid

[41] Ibid

❖ **Establish Information Sharing System**

The power of information is such that it helps people help themselves like the proverbial 'fishing-pole-rather-than-fish' sort of a way.[42] Information itself is an essential tool that people need to ensure accountability and transparency on the part of government.[43] Sharing information with policy makers is an important part of advocacy communication but information should be readily available for everyone, especially the stakeholders.

Communication, however, is not just about information but it is also about creating mass awareness, facilitating public dialogues, contributing to evidence-based advocacy, fostering shared understanding among people so as to bring about social change.[44] As a part of advocacy is concerned with generating and disseminating information, the advocates need to be able to manage information with caution and creativity. The information could be in the form of publications like magazines, books and reports.

The NGOs need to work out an information sharing system, not necessarily in the form of a resource center, but by making strategic use of communication channels and reaching out to as many people as possible. The use of online platform could be a good place to start. Online presence transcends borders and therefore can help the organization to relay information to people across the country and beyond. For that purpose, use of websites, social networking sites, etc. may come in handy.

The NGOs do not require a large sum of money to maintain an information sharing system. The wise use of available resources at their disposal might be enough. Simple training in organizational management, archiving information and computer/internet skills would enable the NGO officials to skillfully handle the information collected and archived by the organization. The publications of the NGOs need to be kept systematically so that they can be made readily available to the information seekers and for the internal use of the NGOs in the future. This system should also be responsible for strategic distribution and dissemination of information and messages to the target audiences.

❖ **Use of languages other than Nepali**

NGOs should consider building their capacity to work in the local languages. The use of local languages is limited to the interpersonal communication only. While, it may be enough to prepare messages in Nepali when reaching out to the primary audience, it may not be sufficient and as effective, which is often the case, when reaching out to the local population that speaks in their local language or dialect. Therefore, when trying to target the local population with a relevant message, the NGOs should use the local language.

Likewise, documentation in English language would enable the NGOs to better communicate with international community and like-minded individuals and groups for solidarity in

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[42] Hovlang 2005
[43] Ibid
[44] Ibid

common cause. Nevertheless, there are certain challenges associated with the use of English and local languages by the NGOs at the local level.

The use of English would help them to seek for resources from potential donors and the use of local languages would help them in building and expanding their constituency. Evidently, the use of English language and the local languages are complementary to one another. The NGOs therefore, need to be able to use these languages in their communication initiatives for better advocacy outcomes and organizational growth.

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