Working Paper

Local Perspectives, Global Goals: Reflections from Citizen-led Assessments on Responsive Local Governance in Improving Learning Outcomes in Nepal

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Abstract

This paper explores questions arising from a reflection after the Annual Status of Education Report Nepal implementation of the citizen-led assessments to measure learning outcomes in partnership with local governments. Collating the observations, field notes alongside notes from conversations with local officials and citizens, it examines several questions to be considered in the implementation of learning assessments in decentralized contexts. In 2015, in response to a long instability, Nepal became a federal state with a number of powers devolved to elected local governments including the provision of basic education. To a greater or lesser degree, a similar devolution is found in federalized and decentralized countries across the global south - Kenya, Pakistan, Nigeria and India are a few examples.

In this paper I highlight three major issues. First, this paper explores the connection between local and global. We all know that the global educational agenda has been consolidated with input from national governments and international experts. Meanwhile the responsibility of meeting these goals - including budgetary power and oversight mechanisms - rests with local authorities. This raises an important question: are these local communities permitted to contest global goals and prioritize local demand, such as privileging English medium instruction over instruction in mother tongues?

Second, this paper also explores the motivations of local governments in undertaking citizen-led assessments in decentralized context. These motivations are multifaceted and extend beyond a narrow focus on learning. I explore several factors that the local government noted as interesting to them, from the idea of skilling local youth and gathering comprehensive data to looking for opportunities for visibility at micro level. This understanding can assist in designing programs that will sustain the engagement of local government.

Finally, This paper explores ways to leverage assessors as a means of ensuring accountability. I note several challenges observed with this approach and reflect on additional mechanisms that may be necessary to encourage active citizen assessors to become agents for accountability.

Keywords: Citizen-led Assessment, Education Governance, Local Perspectives on SDG4, Civic-engagement and Accountability in Education, ASER in Nepal

1. Introduction

A review of literature around citizen-led assessments and other participatory monitoring practices indicated that they are seen as important accountability mechanisms. Across the world, large proportions of children are not acquiring foundational reading and numeracy skills, even after spending several years in school (UNESCO 2013, 2015). Despite its increasing visibility, this enormous global problem of 'learning poverty' (World Bank, 2019) has not received adequate attention in educational policy and practice. For example, foundational skills are rarely part of national, regional, or international large-scale assessments, which usually test students' understanding of content taught in their current grade or stage.

Against this backdrop, citizen-led assessments (CLAs) offer a model not only for generating evidence on children's foundational reading and numeracy, but also for connecting assessment results to remedial action on the ground. Marguerite Clarke (2015) argues citizen-led assessment is a tool to act as a force for bottom-up accountability and such action that should result in improved education quality and learning. The CLA model is based on four main guiding principles:

(i)   CLAs use oral assessments, conducted one-on-one with each child, since this is commonly accepted to be the most suitable method of assessing foundational reading and numeracy skills (UIS, 2016; Nag, 2017).

(ii)   CLAs are conducted in households in order to ensure inclusion of all children regardless of enrolment status, type of school, or school attendance on the day of the assessment.

(iii) CLAs assess foundational reading and numeracy skills among school-aged children (typically 5 to 16 years old). The highest level assessed is the country's curriculum expectations for Grades 2 or 3, regardless of the child's age or grade.

(iv)   CLAs use tools that are quick and simple to administer and understand, which helps facilitate engagement of a wide cross-section of people, such as parents and community members as well as teachers and policy makers

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (2017) suggests citizens should be placed at the forefront of any democracy assessment process, as they best understand their local dynamics, culture, history and priorities. Thus, the "State of Democracy" assessment frameworks developed and administered by the institute place citizens at the forefront of the assessment process, with the aim of supporting home-grown policy initiatives and internally driven reform agendas. This approach is based on the belief that citizens themselves are the best assessors of their own democracy. According to Eberhardt, Hill and Plaut (2015), "citizen-led assessments of student learning, joins the global focus on learning with the recent rise in information-based accountability interventions designed to secure quality public service delivery for the poor". They further argue that such accountability initiatives are based on the premise that service delivery so often fails the poor because of information asymmetries between citizens, policymakers, and governments or other service providers. So, the accountability aspect of the assessment systems seek to reduce such information asymmetries, providing citizens with the information and tools necessary to hold relevant stakeholders accountable.

Bottom up democracy is of particular interest and concern to a recently decentralized post-conflict country like Nepal. The Maoist insurgency (1996-2006), which aimed to end the horizontal inequality and imbalanced development, was ended with the signing of the peace accord in 2006. The restoration of democracy and the change of regime in the country also unleashed some energies that have not run their course. Some of Nepal's many ethnic and minority groups (over 100 are noted in the census 2011) have long felt marginalized. These groups have been calling for inclusion in mainstream politics. Most of the issues they raised were linked to provisions of the peace agreements and constitution writing process. The government's efforts to manage diverse dissident groups by means of dialogue and agreements led to the promulgation of a new constitution, which was a significant milestone in the peace process, and was only achieved in 2015 (Timalsina, 2017:70). Inequality, poverty, and imbalanced development were three major concerns the new political regime promised to address. State restructuring, power devolution and decentralization were the first political response through the constitution.

The adoption of Nepal's new constitution transformed the country from Hindu unitary monarchy to secular federal democratic republic. In 2017, after a successful completion of all the three rounds of elections the constitution mandates: Local, Provincial and National, now the country is in the process of implementing the new constitution. Thus, 753 new local governments have received several important powers, including regulating education up to 12th grade, health care, raising revenue through land taxes and budgetary powers. Local governments have significant responsibilities that will impact the lives of millions of Nepali citizens.

Education, in particular, constitutes approximately 1 in every 10 rupees that that local government spends. According to the National Campaign for Education Nepal, the government of Nepal spent 134 billion Nepali rupees in the education sector out of the total 1315 billion Nepali rupees national budget in fiscal year 2018-19 (National Campaign for Education Nepal, 2018). Thus, it is impossible to speak of better governance without speaking of better education. In the last 20 years the number of children going to school has increased, 72.61% in 2000 to 96.33% in 2016 (UNESCO Institute of Statistics, 2016). This is an important success but what are children learning in school?

Anyone who has spent time in a classroom knows that simply attending school does not result in learning. Thus, it is important to know first what type of decision-making process has been adopted by a newly established local government to improve the learning outcomes. Thus, I started focusing on how these newly established local governments will decide what policies their constituencies need specifically in the education sector. In the year 2016, Annual Status of Education Report Nepal piloted a district wide citizen-led assessment in Parsa district. Similarly, in the year 2017, it piloted another citizen-led assessment in a local government constituency in Kathmandu, i.e. Budanilkantha Municipality.

Rather than discussing the findings from those 2 citizen-led assessments, the main focus of this paper is to reflect on major three questions:

-       How are the local implementing authorities connected with the global goals set in the international platforms?

-        What are the motivations to local governments to adopt ASER like citizen-led assessment tools?

-       What are the ways to leverage the young citizen assessors as a means of ensuring accountability at local level in decentralized context?

2. **Methodology**

In 2016 and 2017 I was part of two citizen led assessments in two linguistically, geographically and ethnically diverse areas in Nepal. In conducting these pilots, I set out to examine if Citizen Led Assessments in foundation literacy and numeracy could be effective tools to assist local governments in tracking their progress towards the SDG goals. Furthermore, I was also interested in the mechanism of a citizen led assessment itself. The mobilization of citizens to create bottom-up accountability and improve public service delivery seemed like the need of the moment in a recently decentralized and federated Nepal.

In 2016, a team led by me mobilized 65 young volunteers to gather data from 30 rural villages of Parsa district. In 2017, a similar team mobilized 193 young volunteers to gather data from 119 schools and 3820 households in 13 wards of Budanilkantha local government unit in suburbs of Kathmandu, Nepal. Methodologically, both the citizen-led assessments from 2016 and 2017 followed quantitative learning assessments influenced by the Annual Status of Education Report (ASER) Survey model. The findings reported in this article stem from qualitative methodological tools: semi-structured interviews, observation notes, field notes and conversation notes. I used the qualitative methods as the supplementary tools which were a part of quantitative citizen-led assessments.

I interviewed local political leaders, major decision-makers including elected representatives in the local governments, young citizen assessors of the surveys, and civil society members. I interviewed 37 respondents during the 2016 citizen-led assessment in Parsa district and 26 respondents during the 2017 citizen-led assessments in Budanilkantha Municipality. In addition to insights gained from these semi-structured interviews, I participated in the entire cycle (designing, data-collection, data analysis, reporting and dissemination) of both the assessment process. Several participant observations notes and informal conversation notes were produced. I have used a narrative analysis method where the codes were generated from the primary data (semi-structured interviews, observation notes, field notes and conversation notes) and analyzed the available information by establishing several themes, sub-themes, and categories.

The first section has introduced the background context and objective of the paper. This section briefly discussed the methodology used for this research. We highlight three major issues in following sections:

i.   The connection between global agendas and local practices.

ii.   The motivations of local governments in undertaking citizen-led assessment.

iii.   Ways to leverage assessors as a means of ensuring accountability

The last section concludes the paper with authors' remarks.

3.   The Connection between Global Agendas and Local Practices

Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) 2030 Indicator 4.1 reads, "by 2030, ensure that all girls and boys complete free, equitable and quality primary and secondary education leading to relevant and effective learning outcomes (United Nations Statistics Division, 2017:4). Further at the indicator level, the SDG indicator 4.1.1 reads, "proportion of children and young people (a) in grades 2/3; (b) at the end of primary; and (c) at the end of lower secondary achieving at least a minimum proficiency level in (i) reading and (ii) mathematics, by sex" (United Nations Statistics Division, 2017:5).

The global indicator framework for Sustainable Development Goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda was first developed by the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators (IAEG-SDGs). Then, the global indicator framework was agreed upon at the 48th session of the United Nations Statistical Commission held in March 2017, and adopted by the General Assembly on 6 July 2017 (United Nations Statistics Division, 2017). In most international stages including the UN system, the nation-states are key players, and central governments play a vital role in setting the agendas. With input from international experts a secondary factor. Meanwhile the responsibility of meeting these goals - including budgetary power and oversight mechanisms - rests with local authorities in a decentralized and federalized system. In the context of Nepal, the local governments who deliver the services at the local level, be it in rural or urban settings, reported they had little to no input in the development of such agendas. It is important to note this may reflect a situation unique to Nepal as local governments were not directly run by elected officials until 2017.

One important disconnect between the global and local is in the access to data. Contrasting the honorable education minister Giriraj Mani Pokharel's statement - "In the last 30 years' the Government of Nepal has made tremendous gains in education. Our primary enrollment rate is now over 95% ensuring that most children are going to school. A significant investment in educational infrastructure has also resulted in schools that are more comfortable and suitable for learning then they were previously. These achievements deserve to be recognized and celebrated" (Based on the conversation with authors in May 2019 at the Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, Nepal)- with that of mayors, who reported they were unaware of overall enrollment and out-of-school numbers in their executive area highlights this disconnect. While central government education minister has data collected by the Ministry of Education through a school-based data annually which are self-reported by schools. The data was inaccessible to local governments.

The Education Review Office (ERO), a part of the Ministry of Education, has been conducting various forms of educational assessments including National Assessment of Student Achievement (NASA) at various Grades of school education. The Education Review Office provides assessment frameworks, performance audit of educational institutions, and carries out Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) (Education Review Office, 2017:4). United Nations agencies specifically UNICEF and UNESCO have also conducted occasional learning assessments in Nepal. The common features of all these existing learning assessments are: i) school and grade based, ii) mostly 'pen and paper' written test, iii) in classroom set-up.

When I was conducting the field works, local governments gave data on the numbers of teachers, students, attendance, enrollments registers, physical infrastructures, and results of written examinations of certain grades. This indicates that some kinds of data related to SDG 4 are available at national and local level. But it is almost impossible to measure the quality education as the SDG 4.1.1 indicator states. More than that, the local government expressed their difficulty to access even the national dataset on education inputs and also signals the difficulty level to compare the locally available data with national standards. The measurement and tracking the global indicators remain almost impossible in the existing scenario.

Let's take another example from the global agenda. The importance of the mother tongue education is recognized globally. Asia Multilingual Education Working Group (2017: 2) argues "Since SDG 4 is so foundational to the other Sustainable Development Goals, without mother tongue-based multilingual education the other 16 goals will remain unachievable". Similarly, the thematic indicator SDG 4.5.18 aims to measure the percentage of students in primary education whose first or home language is the language of instruction (Asia Multilingual Education Working Group, 2017: 4).

The international agendas have influenced the national laws too. Mother tongue education was also one of key agenda in the global education indicators in the Millennium Development Goals 2015. The most of Nepali national laws and policies are influenced by such international agendas. The Constitution of Nepal 2015, Part 3 Article 31(5) states that "every Nepalese community residing in Nepal shall have the right to get education in its mother tongue and, for that purpose, to open and operate schools and educational institutes, in accordance with law" (Ministry of Law, Justice and Parliamentary Affairs, 2015). Both the international and national tone seems cohesive but the ground realities do not fit in as well.

In 2016, out of 30 rural villages I reached during the citizen-led assessment, 6 mayors reported an interest in converting their Nepali medium government funded schools into English medium. As most of the private schools in Nepal are already using English as a medium of instruction, there is often an assumption in the public's mind that English medium schools are better. This desire expressed by the mayors is particularly interesting in that the majority of people in Parsa district do not speak the national language (i.e. Nepali) and the region has a strong tradition of ethnolinguistic activism.

By the year 2017, most of the government funded schools in Budanilkantha Municipality started teaching in English medium. All the elected representatives and respondents I interviewed in 2017 field work gave favorable responses to support the English language as a medium of instruction and textbooks. This municipality presents an interesting political and ethnolinguistic contrast to the Parsa, as it is much closer to the capital, has a significant majority of people that report Nepali as their mother tongue, with a small minority that speak either Nepal Bhasa or Tamang.

In both the years, when I asked the local leadership teams, "What do you need in your communities?", most of the time respondents asked us to support their children in speaking English better. When I put similar questions to the young citizen assessors of both assessments of 2016 and 2017, all these young assessors were also prioritizing English medium instruction over the mother-tongue education for the generation after them. This finding is in many ways very surprising. The international and national education goals are supportive to mother-tongue education at least for primary schooling. Both our survey locations, in particularly Parsa, have ethnolinguistic minorities with a strong tradition of identity-based activism. Given that one of the public demands and political fault lines of the last 20 years in Nepal has been around the recognition of ethnic identities, it was expected that there would be some ground level demand for mother tongue education.

Coming at the same problem from another angle, I had anticipated there may be a pocket of demand for learning in the national language (i.e. Nepali). The incentives for a Nepali language education can also be found in the examination system, where exams conducted at the 8th and 10 grade levels are conducted in Nepali (as well as English). And even the 12th grade exams can be written in Nepali even though the questions are in English. Furthermore, an often-repeated complaint among linguistic minority groups in Nepal is that they are disadvantaged by having to take exams for entrance into the civil service and other state bodies in their second language i.e. Nepali.

Despite various favorable conditions - policy, exams, political movements - that seem like they might increase the demand of either mother tongue or Nepali, I found a strong consensus among the local leaders, youths and stakeholders in support of English medium instruction. When authors expressed their curiosity with the locals, almost all respondents opined that English will widen the career opportunities and skills of their children. They felt that an English medium instruction "created better opportunities for the future". One senior local politician and stalwart of a School Management Community said "I could not go far in politics because I don't speak any English. I teach my children their mother tongue at home. Let them learn English at school". Regardless of whether these perceptions are accurate or ill-informed, this raises an important question. Are these local communities permitted to contest global goals and prioritize local demand, such as privileging English medium instruction over instruction in mother tongues or the national language?

4. The Motivations of Local Stakeholders in Undertaking Citizen-led Assessments

"Citizen-led assessments (CLAs) emerged in India in 2005 as a way to raise awareness and advocacy around low learning levels, and to act as a force for bottom-up accountability and action that would improve education quality and learning" (Clarke, 2015). Globally every year, almost 55 thousands

of volunteers administer simple reading and math tests to the children in households. Though the assessments are designed, administered and reported by citizen volunteers, the role of local governments can be found in different levels. At a minimum, the local government is involved in authorizing and allowing the assessments to be administered in their electorate. At the maximum level of engagement, the local government might allocate budget for the assessment, help in recruiting citizen volunteers, take part in designing the assessment modality, monitor the assessment administration in their constituency, facilitate the findings disseminations and inform their policies from the evidence generated through the assessments.

The local stakeholders, parents, teachers, civil society organizations and other local organizations can be stakeholders, consumers and supporters of the citizen-led assessments, whereas the local government is the core pillar as it is also local policy makers. The ownership from the local government can lead to the evidence based decision making at the local level.

In the case of Nepal, two models of local government engaged were piloted. In the 2016 Parsa pilot local governments were involved only in approving the project. In the 2017 Budhanilkantha pilot the local government was deeply involved: by offering matching funds, helping recruit local volunteers and with elected local officials even volunteering for monitoring duties. In both pilots I used citizen-led assessment methods to design research, recruit data enumerators, gather the required information and disseminate the findings. The role of local young citizens was at the core of all the process.

The Annual Status of Education Report Nepal (ASER Nepal) partnership model is based on a bottom-up approach. This approach engages socially active local youth in urban educational hubs to work with local governments to assess children's foundational learning levels, advocate for education, and use the findings to make improvements in education. As such, the ASER Nepal partnership model serves two major purposes:

(i)   mobilizing and upskilling local youth through the training to conduct the assessment in the municipality
(ii)   gaining data on children's foundational learning levels in English, Nepali, and numeracy for education planning and improvement.

The responsibilities in this partnership model are shared between the local government, the youth assessors, and the ASER team. The local government provides the funding for the assessment and helps recruit local youth who implement the assessments in the municipality. The ASER team designs the assessment and survey tools, trains the young assessors, manages and analyses the data, and prepares the report on the assessment findings. The findings are then shared and discussed with the local government to be used for education planning and improvement. The ASER Nepal partnership in the Budanilkantha Municipality was initiated in 2017. The newly elected mayor, Uddav Kharel, had learned about the ASER Nepal pilot in 2016 from a young member of his secretariat staff. This staff member had been a volunteer teacher at a rural school where ASER Nepal training had been conducted. Inspired by the young staff member's experience, the mayor decided

to meet the ASER Nepal team to learn more about the assessment and how it is implemented in the households. Soon after the mayor's visit, the Municipality agreed to work together to conduct ASER assessment in Budanilkantha.

Thus, I had the opportunity to explore different motivations of local governments in undertaking citizen led assessments. These motivations are multifaceted and extend beyond a narrow focus on learning. I found that almost all the local elected representatives were not aware of the idea of citizen-led learning assessment to begin with. They are familiar with the idea of mobilizing the youths for social campaigns but saw data collection and assessment as the work of non-governmental organizations and the central government. Some municipalities reported that they had commissioned surveys to develop "local profiles", "local need assessments', and "evaluate the community development projects". The promising finding is that all the respondents who are locally elected representatives said that they had promised to engage youths for social change as part of their election manifesto and campaign promises.

The ability to fulfill campaign promises, to skill local youth and to engage in patronage were three critical motivations for lots of local governments. Two rural mayors indicated in private conversations that they did not find the idea of learning assessments and generating evidence particularly interesting. But what they found appealed about citizen-led assessments because it allowed them to recruit young people from their electorates and pay them allowances.

At the same time, the ward chairs and mayor of Budanilkantha Municipality indicated an interest in and concern about the data generated. As a former school teacher the Mayor was keenly interested to see how well students would perform on the assessment. While many local leaders in the municipality prioritized the youth engagement piece. It was evident that many of them were keen to look at and use the evidence generated. As a suburb of Kathmandu, with several highly regarded schools, a generally better educated citizenry and substantive revenue generating abilities, Budhanilkantha Municipality likely has greater freedom of action on its education budget and thus indicated greater interest in the findings.

Several elected representatives, in the local governments I worked in, also said that they liked the idea of skilling local youths on the data gathering and reporting process. They noted that many non-governmental organizations were working in their communities, and these organizations often conducted research and surveys. Most of times, outsiders got the opportunities as the local youths were not competent enough to become the data enumerators and field supervisors. So, these local leaders found citizen-led assessments as an opportunity to train their local youths and prepare for future opportunities.

This sentiment was most directly expressed by an older local leader who said "Many people come and do surveys but I don't know why it matters. I will see if your information is useful in a place like ours. But there are always outsiders, usually from the cities, coming to do this work in our locality. I will support you, because our own young people must learn this skill. Maybe it will put something in their pockets in the future."

I explored several factors that the local government noted as interesting to them, from the idea of skilling local youth and gathering comprehensive data to looking for opportunities for visibility. Mobilizing their young voters is the main motivation rather than gathering comprehensive data on learning for the local political leaders. Even though the learning assessment data is not considered the main motivating factor among the locally elected leaders, there are multifaceted motivating factors for them. This understanding can assist in designing programs like citizen-led assessment that will sustain the engagement of local government.

5. Ways to Leverage Assessors as a Means of Ensuring Accountability

What are the ways to leverage citizen assessors as a means of ensuring accountability in education and other public service delivery? I felt this question was important to include as part of the study. If citizen-led approaches truly increase accountability and help citizens engage from evidence to action, they have a greatly increased value and should be prioritized.

In reflection upon the citizen-led models adopted in Nepal in the years 2016 and 2017, I felt there is insufficient evidence in their field notes and other data to reach thoughtful conclusions on the matter. This is largely due to the nature of the pilots, which did not provide sufficient time to engage in a sustainable way with citizen assessors. Nonetheless, certain interesting points can be observed in the data.

To implement the ASER Nepal partnership model in Budanilkantha, the municipality identified 200 volunteers between the age of 18 and 26 who were interested in social work. The ASER Nepal team recruited and trained the 200 youths over a period of five days in implementing the assessment. As part of this training, the local youth were upskilled – they could undertake the household sampling in the municipality, implement the learning assessment in the households, and carry out basic reporting skills. They were instructed how to compile the assessment data in a table, interpret the findings, and give feedback to the parents. At the end of the training, 156 youth were selected as assessors, based on a practice and written test about the assessment process. The selected assessors visited a random sample of 300 households in each ward. In each selected household, all children aged 5–16 were assessed one by one in English, Nepali, and numeracy. The assessors also collected important background information at the household level, such as the child's schooling status, family wealth, and parental education. With the household survey, the assessors also collected information about the birth registration of all children in the household aged 0–3 years, pre-primary enrollment status of all children aged 4–5 years, and if household members of 16+ years are accessing social services. The assessors visited all schools of the municipality to gather information about infrastructure available in the schools, such as classrooms, toilets, computers, and educational materials; management issues like existence of a school management committee, school improvement plan, and teachers' appointments with students; enrollment and actual attendance of students; water, sanitation, and hygiene facilities; and internet, electricity, and other facilities necessary for a modern education. Implementing the assessment in their neighborhoods enabled the young assessors to engage with the participating families about the importance of foundational skills and learning. To monitor the Budanilkantha ASER, a number of socially active youth from local

universities from all around Nepal were also recruited. The monitors were trained over the course of a month, a few weeks before ASER began. The monitors ensured the households were selected as indicated in the sampling frame. They also checked and verified that the learning assessment was implemented following the ASER Nepal guidelines and that the data was recorded appropriately in the data collection forms.

Using the Findings

The findings of the Budanilkantha ASER on children's learning levels in English, Nepali, and numeracy, and the resulting policy recommendations, were presented to the mayor's office in the ASER Budanilkantha report (ASER Nepal, 2018). The mayor's office also invited the ASER Nepal team to convey the major findings at a meeting of the executive council of the municipality, the highest policy-making body at the local government. Following this meeting, the education subcommittee of the executive council called for a municipalitylevel meeting of headmasters to discuss implications of the ASER findings. In response, the municipality considered the policy recommendations from the ASER report in the budget planning process for the fiscal year 2019–20, and several new policies were adopted that were directly linked to the ASER findings. The major findings of the ASER Budanilkantha report, resulting policy recommendations, and examples for respective policy response are summarized below. Overall, the assessed learning levels of children aged 8–16 in English, Nepali, and numeracy were low in Budanilkantha. About 40% of them could not read the Nepali story with fluency, about 25% could not read the paragraph in English, and about 30% could not perform a Grade 2 level division problem. Students attending government schools in Budanilkantha performed significantly lower than on average in English literacy. However, low learning levels were observed in students attending both government and private schools. The ASER report therefore recommended all types of schools (government, trust, and private schools) be considered in the efforts to systematically improve learning outcomes (ASER Nepal, 2018). Possible measures were discussed with stakeholders in several meetings of the municipality's education wing. As for the age group of 12–24 year olds surveyed in the household survey, only about 1% responded that they have had access to formal vocational or skill development training in the municipality. The ASER report therefore recommended the improvement of access to relevant vocational and skill development programs for the local community (ASER Nepal, 2018). The municipality has since taken steps towards establishing a specialized vocational school. Another important indicator collected with the household survey was children's school enrollment: 99% of schoolage children (including preschool) in the Budanilkantha Municipality reported as enrolled in either preschool or school. An analysis of background characteristics collected with the ASER survey did not reveal any discernible pattern in out-ofschool children that could inform specific measures to help encourage the remaining 1% to attend school (ASER Nepal, 2018). It was therefore recommended that measures be taken at the ward level; for example, as part of the annual school admission campaign of the Nepal Government. Ward chairs and members are state representatives and have the detailed local knowledge that may be required to help bring out-ofschool children back to school. For example, ward members may be able to identify children who are otherwise hard to reach, such as children from temporary shelters, or children from seasonal migrant families who come to

Budanilkantha from rural areas of Nepal in search of work. As a response, in the campaign year 2019, the local leaders and school stakeholders of Budanilkantha visited all the neighborhoods of the municipality to ensure that all children were enrolled in schools. In addition to enrollment, student attendance is another important indicator to ensure learning. During the time of data collection, only 74% of students were observed in attendance in government schools, as compared to 92% in schools overall (ASER Nepal, 2018). It was therefore recommended that school management practices in government schools include effective measures to ensure school attendance. Such measures could include, for example, regular meetings with parents, and home visits to encourage attendance. In terms of school infrastructure, government schools reached average levels on many measures such as the use of chalkboards, electric resources in classrooms, and libraries. On some infrastructural measures, such as having usable toilets, sufficient classrooms, and access to filtered drinking water, government schools performed better than the average. This reflects an investment by both the state and civil society in school infrastructure over the past decade. Yet, government schools underperformed on the management and upkeep of this infrastructure. For example, while government schools had more early-grade-friendly hand-washing points (95% in government schools versus 83% in all schools with earlygrade students), they also reported more hand-washing points without soap (53% in government versus 37% in all schools with early-grade students) (ASER Nepal, 2018). It was therefore recommended that in addition to infrastructure investment, a focus should be on improved management of school infrastructure and greater accountability to keep infrastructure well maintained. As a response, these issues were extensively discussed in the regular monthly meetings of head teachers at the municipality level.

Most of the respondents - political leadership, community based social organizations and the youth themselves - thought the involvement of the local youths in understanding local problems was the strongest part of the citizen-led assessment model. Local youths who were interviewed by us often reported that they were energized to solve local issues after conducting the assessment. One citizen assessor from the 2016 Parsa pilot asked one of us, "Dai (older brother), I was shocked that the children who live in a house I pass everyday on my way to college can't even recognize the letters of the alphabet. I thought everyone who went to school could do that. How is this possible? What can I do about it?"

Similarly, many local communities based social organizations expressed interest in utilizing the youth for future endeavors but noted that they would need to create and fund programs that align with the citizen-led assessments before they could find mechanisms to engage them. A well known and well run local college, which supported it's students in participating in the pilots, explicitly asked what kind of community service programs could be conducted as a continuing intervention.

However the structure of the pilots and citizen-led assessments in general do not provide opportunities to engage these interests, nor to track if these promising impulses were acted on. This is the most prominent of the several challenges I note with this approach. That while citizen-led assessments are clearly effective at generating interest and creating motivation it is difficult to track and attribute how much "real action" is triggered by it. There remains a clear need to reflect on and

trial additional mechanisms that may be necessary to encourage active citizen assessors to become active agents for accountability.

Another promising line of inquiry that I wish to note is that in decentralized systems, youth can become triggers for local governments adopting citizen-led assessment. The 2017 Budhanilkantha pilot, for example, had significant local government buy in due to the internal advocacy of a member of the mayoral staff in his mid-twenties. A chance encounter - the staff member was a volunteer at a community school at which one of us provided a training module - resulted in an invitation to pitch citizen-led assessment to the Municipal leadership. Similarly, over the last year, I continue to receive inquiries from citizen assessors that have started working for local governments or moved back home after completing their studies. In Nepal, which has very small local government units, where educated youth can often earn the trust or ears of under-resourced local governments, engaging youth that have come to urban areas to study may be an interesting mechanism to increase citizen participation in local governments while strengthening their human resource capacity.

The assessment has a two-dimensional process that allows the local citizen volunteers to understand the situation in learning and quality of education, and further it allows the inclusive dialogue and debate among local stakeholders. Any members of the public with an interest or stake in improving learning of the children can initiate the assessment process, mobilize resources for it and use the assessment framework. These initiators can range from academics, local council members, government officials, media and civil society organizations to local politicians, local activists and members of minority groups.

6.   Conclusion

Citizen-led assessments show preliminary promise as a multifaceted tool that can address a range of challenges in a decentralized political system. Our findings indicate that the central government has data often inaccessible to local governments. So, tracking and measuring the global indicators at local level is not effective in the Nepali context. The local bodies are the implementers at the ground and the access to data is one important disconnect between the global and local. Citizen led assessments can be a cheap and effective way to bridge this gap.

Our findings indicate that the motivations of local governments in conducting citizen-led assessments show that they are also multifaceted and extend beyond a narrow focus on learning. Local government noted several factors as interesting to them, from the idea of skilling local youth and gathering comprehensive data to looking for opportunities for political visibility. Mobilizing and skilling their young voters clearly outweighs gathering data as a motivator for the local political leaders. This understanding can assist in designing programs like citizen-led assessment that will sustain the engagement of local government.

The motivation to implement the ASER Nepal partnership model is multifaceted. This was noted by the ASER team in conversations with the mayor of Budanilkantha and other local leaders. The mayor, for example, saw the ASER model primarily as a way to fulfil a campaign pledge he had

made to provide local youth with real-world skills that would increase their employability. The approach of assessing children in the home also provided an opportunity for the mayor to reach and demonstrate to voters that his government was taking action to improve education. Another important factor for the municipality was the local relevance of the ASER approach. As an experienced local leader said, "Many people from outside come and do surveys but I don't know why it matters in our locality. I will support you, because our own young people must learn this skill of learning assessment. Maybe it will put something in their pockets in the future." This statement demonstrates the success of the ASER Nepal partnership model against the two goals of mobilizing and upskilling local youth, and collecting data on local children's learning levels in their homes in order to engage with and improve education in the municipality. The introduction of new education policies at the local government level, based on the ASER findings, show further proof of the success of the ASER partnership model. Highlighting the politically expedient opportunities of the partnership model, including local relevance and ownership – that is, mobilizing and upskilling local youth to implement the assessment under the patronage of the local government; generating large-scale awareness for issues of education in the community; gathering evidence on local children's learning levels to develop strategies, policies, and processes to improve learning – has been important to gain buy-in for undertaking ASER in Budanilkantha. As a result, the idea of leveraging citizen volunteers to work on local issues was later internalized by the municipality. A few months after the ASER implementation, the municipality started Yuwanilkhanta, a program that recruited youth to assist the local government on myriad tasks ranging from environmental issues to higher education. The program, inspired by the observations of the ASER partnership process, was led by the staff member of the mayor's secretariat who initially advocated for ASER. In addition, several of the ASER Budanilkantha quality monitors approached the mayors of their municipalities with proposals to conduct ASER. An important observation and learning from the ASER Nepal partnership model was the missed opportunity to create sustained engagement of the local youth with local families, schools, and municipal stakeholders about the findings on children's learning levels and resulting recommendations to improve education. Many youth assessors were highly motivated to continue working on improving the learning of children when they observed the low learning levels. One assessor said to an ASER trainer, "I was shocked that the children who live in a house I pass every day on my way to college can't even recognize the letters of the alphabet. I thought everyone who went to school could do that. How is this possible? What can I do about it?" For the ASER team to keep the youth assessors engaged to respond to the findings at local government levels for an extended period of time was not a tenable solution. However, this sustained engagement would be necessary to foster accountability at the grassroots level, in addition to government ownership. Therefore, future implementations of the partnership model should develop a communications and engagement strategy from the outset. This could include, for example, another local partner or NGO with a focus on continued advocacy at both government and grassroots levels to leverage the young assessors' role and enable engagement beyond the assessment to improve education at all levels. Most recently this has been realized in the ASER Nepal implementation in Tulsipur Municipality of Lumbini Province (PAL Network, 2021). In Tulsipur, a local partner (a civil society group of local youths) from the same municipality designed and conducted the assessment, with support from the ASER Nepal team at GalliGalli (Tulsipur Submetropolitan City,

2021). Altogether, the positive experiences of the municipal level ASER in Budanilkantha have led to the conclusion that the ASER Nepal partnership model is a successful strategy to tackle education issues at both the local government and grassroots levels. In the Nepali context, socially active youth and young people who study in the capital have credibility in their local neighborhoods, and hence can make a difference. At the same time, local governments are responsible for education policy, and have the power to initiate interventions to improve education.

Finally, in asking if citizen-led assessments do result in increased citizen scrutiny and thus increased accountability I found our evidence to be insufficient to answer the question. I found that citizen-led assessments are clearly effective at generating interest and creating motivation in social issues, however I was not able to track citizen assessors for long enough to attribute how much "real action" is triggered by it.

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