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Pani Chautari as a Tool for Evidence - Informed Policy and Practice: Experiences from Dhulikhel

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SUMMARY

There is limited practice of using evidences and dialogue among the related stakeholders while formulating policy in Nepal. This chapter examines the dynamic interface of science, policy and practice for inclusive and sustainable water management by bringing insights from Pani Chautari in Dhulikhel. Pani Chautari is a complete cycle of a policy process that brings water related stakeholders into a single platform, engage with them to generate knowledge and deliberate for informed decision making. This chapter is based on the insights of the authors and researchers from SIAS engaged in facilitating Pani Chautari. In the chapter, we document the emergence, process and outcomes of Pani Chautari series in Dhulikhel. Our analysis revealed that Pani Chautari has contributed in expanding the deliberative space and has positively impacted the policy learning culture of water stakeholders. Specifically, it has promoted innovation and practices of evidence based policy making for water management. It has further fostered collaboration among key stakeholders and contributed to further institutionalize up and downstream relations in Dhulikhel. Pani Chautari is not an alternative model of governing water but the engagement of researchers, community and government representatives have created an innovative model of involving users and stakeholders in planning and policymaking. This integration of research into policy process can be exemplary to other local government bodies.

1. INTRODUCTION

The federalization in Nepal has strengthened the local governance with greater level of authorities and responsibilities including the mandate to craft policies at the local level. The newly formed Palikas (municipalities) are grappling with the challenges to formulate needed polices and legislations in order to perform the development and administrative functions. As the newly constituted Palikas have limited experience and expertise on policy making, they often rely on hired experts or follow the departmental guidelines. Due to such limitations, the concept of 'evidence informed policy making' can sound farfetched to most of the palikas. Nevertheless, during our work, we came across some Palikas with visionary leadership, taking nascent steps towards evidence based policy and practices by collaborating with researchers. This chapter is the documentation of one such collaboration- where we worked with Dhulikhel municipality on science-policy-pracitce interface. In this chapter, we document the experiences of Dhulikhel municipality on science-policy-practice interface. The municipality collaborated with Southasia Institute of Advanced Studies (SIAS) for organizing *Pani Chautari* as a platform for dialogue among researchers, policy makers and practitioners which helped in some policy and practical solutions to tackle the issue of urban water management.

Scholars highlight the importance of the interface among scientists, policymakers and citizens as a key for evidence-based public policy making (Ojha et al., 2019; Shrestha and Mahjabeen, 2011). While scientists provide a comprehensive analysis and generate evidence to inform policy processes, citizens can bring practical experiences and local knowledge to inform policy decisions. Since a policy is a contract for collective action among citizens (Ojha et al., 2012), citizens' insights and reflections are highly important for its effectiveness (Figueiredo Nascimento et al., 2016). The evidence based policy making provides greater emphasis on policy process rather than merely on the outcomes (Dente, 2011) and it helps crafting policies that address the everyday problems of citizen (Bartel and Bricknell, 2016). The importance of evidence based policy making in informing policy process (Sutcliffe and Court, 2005; Davies, 1999) is demonstrated through its features that integrates

experience, judgement and expertise with best available external evidence from systematic research.

Deliberation among multiple stakeholders characterized by conflicting interest and rationalities is key to evidence based policy making. The collaborative evidence based policy making brings in the participatory domain, taking into consideration the diverse range of voices and views leading to a greater acceptance. Collaborative, participatory and inclusive policy making thus ensures greater equity (Bartel and Bricknell, 2016) and for water-related decision-making, raises awareness about risks and related costs, and reduces the potential for conflicts over water (Akhmouch and Clavreul, 2016). In the situation of uncertainty and crisis, disjoint efforts in policy governance cannot resolve and address the complex sustainable water usage, quality and water supplies diversification (Head, 2010).

However, public policymaking in developing countries like Nepal rarely benefits from evidence and dialogue among policymakers, experts and citizens (Dhimal et al., 2016). Resultantly, the public policies often are not effective in addressing the problems that citizens face. Ojha et al. (2012) maintain, the resource management sector such as forestry suffers from this problem where public policymaking is dominated by techno-bureaucratic forces i.e. technical knowledge and bureaucratic authority. Drawing lessons from these centralized policymaking practices, this chapter documents an innovative attempt of evidence-informed policymaking at the municipal level. Taking the case of *Pani Chautari* – a cycle of evidence informed policy process, this paper shares the experiences and insights from Dhulikhel municipality which can be beneficial for municipalities across the country and the policy process across scales.

This chapter is largely based on the experiences and insights of the authors along with other researchers from SIAS who have been actively engaged in facilitating *Pani Chautari* in Dhulikhel and other towns such as Dharan, Bidur and Diktel. Though we primarily focus on the six *Pani Chautari* series conducted between November 2016 to February 2020 in Dhulikhel, we also bring insights from our

engagement in other municipalities. We brought the insights from the rich discussions and reflections among researchers and municipal actors through out the process of evolution of *Pani Chautari*. The current form of *Pani Chautari* evolved through the process of iteration among researchers and municipal authorities. We also conducted interviews with eight key actors involved in the *Pani Chautari* and municipal government representatives focusing on their perception on *Pani Chautari* and its contribution in linking science to policy for sustainable water management in the towns.

In the following section, we elaborate the idea of *Pani Chautari* and the process through which it evolved to its present form. Following this, we discuss the key outcomes of the series of *Pani Chautari* towards contribution in developing and implementing sustainable solutions for urban water security through evidence-based planning at the municipality. We conclude the chapter by drawing key insights for policy making to other Palikas. We argue that the dialogue among major stakeholders informed by research based evidence helps towards achieving policy effeciencies to address the day-to day problems of people.

2. *PANI CHAUTARI*

2.1. What is it ?

Pani Chautari is a complete cycle of a policy process towards fostering evidence informed dialogue and critical policy engagement, aimed at addressing city level water-related issues. It helps to identify water-related issues, generate credible knowledge, facilitate to formulate specific policy and then translate that policy into practices to resolve the issue. *Pani Chautari* not only aims to provide a platform to diverse actors for informed dialogue but it also helps strengthening the capacity of city-level water stakeholders and enhance partnership towards ensuring water security. Its specific objectives include:

- To identify the water related issues/problems that people are facing in their daily life

- To generate or consolidate evidence through research or focused diagnostic studies that help to inform the poliy process

- To provide an opportunity for city stakeholders to interact with the research team and learn from the work of the researchers

- To provide space for reflection and capacity building among city level stakeholders who can champion the water management at local level

- To develop policy responses or technical innovation that help cities to address water problems in the face of rapid urbanization and climate change using research

Beyond its specific objectives, *Pani Chautari* broadly promotes the culture of co-learning and co-creating knowledge among the diverse stakeholders through research and engagement.

2.2. How has it evolved ?

The idea of *Pani Chautari* initially emerged as a discussion platform among the key actors during a stakeholder consultation program organized to identify water related issues in Dhulikhel. Prior to that, there were very limited multi-stakeholder discussions on water related issues. Realizing from these multi-stakeholder discussions, water managers and the users from Dhulikhel initially proposed an idea of promoting a stakeholder forum on a regular basis. Their initial expectations were to conduct a series of discussions on ongoing issues of water management such as equitable distribution, institutional transformation, inclusive decision making and tariff fixation. SIAS, being engaged in action research on urban water management in Dhulikhel nurtured this idea to promote evidence based discussions and contribute to the policy process. A series of bilateral and collective discussions among the water managers, municipal authorities and SIAS researchers were conducted over last five years.

In the beginning, two discussion events were held in Dhulikhel where SIAS researchers shared findings based on their three years of research on water security in Dhulikhel. These discussions

focused on generic water management issues but highlighted the need for sustainable and long-term solutions for water management in the town. The evidence generated from the research by SIAS provided the stakeholders with an understanding of the impact of changing climate and rapid urbanization on water management in the town. They further benefitted from the presentation of some eco-friendly and cost effective solutions for water management in these discussions which has further established the importance of such dialogues. These initial discussions helped to refine the methodological processes and coin the name for the series as '*Pani Chautari*'. Method and process of *Pani Chautari* has been further refined and made comprehensive which we will elaborate in the following sections.

Participants representing municipality, community-based water user committees and private sector highly appreciated the idea of this dialogue as they perceived the series of this event could promote learning culture on diverse aspects of water management and create synergy among the researchers, policymakers, and practitioners. They further perceived that the regular dialogue can bring water stakeholders together into a common platform to discuss the issues related to the water security. From the initial discussions, a broader modality of *Pani Chautari* was agreed, however, adequate flexibility in terms of issues to discuss, number and types of participants, process and frequency were kept open so that it could be customized as per the requirement.
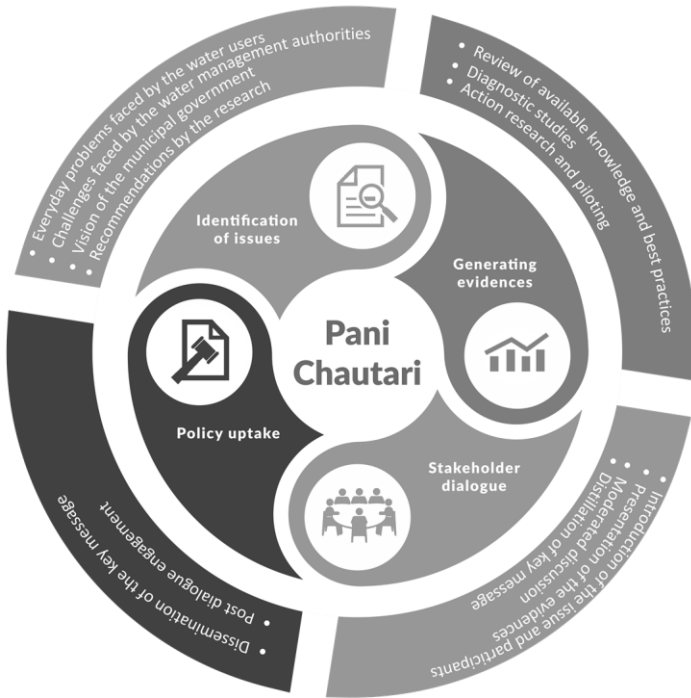
The following series of *Pani Chautari* in Dhulikhel were more rigorous in terms of methodology, outputs of the event and its linkages to the municipal policy. By that time, the presence of elected representatives further helped to identify issue, facilitate discussion events and take them forward towards the policies and programs. Key issues identified for dialogue included groundwater recharge and revive drying springs, the role of the private sector on water management, issues of women in water management and up-stream and down-stream linkages for water management. These issues were identified based on the requirement of municipality and consultation among facilitating team of SIAS and the municipal government representatives. Following table shows the detail accounts of last four series of *Pani Chautari* held in Dhulikhel.

Table 1
Pani Chautari Details

Identified issues	Evidence generated	Participants in the dialogue	Outcomes of Pani Chautari
Decreasing volume of water in the local spring	Formative study on the potentials of ground water recharge in Dhulikhel	Newly elected municipal representatives and members of Dhulikhel Drinking Water and Sanitation Users Committee (DDWSUC)	Decision to pilot recharge ponds, increased budget to revive the existing ponds, promotion of new ponds
Limited private sector enagement on urban water management	Review of best practices and documentation of experiences from enterprenuers on water management	Kavre Hotel Association, Dhulikhel Chamber of Commerce and Industries, DDWSUC, larger water users, hotels, homestay managers, small and medium enterprises (SMEs), party palace, schools and university	Subsidy to rainwater harvesting, promotion of recycle and reuse of water in industries, contribution of industries to water source conservation
Women's issues and voices are ignored in water related decision making	Review of national and Dhulikhel specific water management policies, brief consultation with women members and analysis of data from prior studies by SIAS	Elected municipal women members, women members of DDWSUC, Division Drinking Water Office, District Forest Office (DFO), Kathmandu University and Nepal Forum for Environmental Journalists (NEFEJ)	Priority to women issues in water management
Up and downstream relation for water management further detriorated	Consolidation of research and insights from two previous water related research projects by SIAS in Dhulikhel	Government organizations, water user committees, local government, representatives from upstream	After long time people came together into a single platform to discuss on contested issues, proposal of

3. *PANI CHAUTARI* PROCESS

Steps in *Pani Chautari* process are determined based on the experience of organizing these events in Dhulikhel and Dharan. SIAS's earlier experiences of hosting stakeholder dialogues also helped to refine the process.

Figure 1. Process of *Pani Chautari*

As shown in Figure 1, the identification of the issues, generating evidence, stakeholder dialogues, and post-dialogue engagements and communication for policy uptake are four key steps of *Pani Chautari*. Multiple stakeholders including representatives from the municipality, government organizations, water user committees, private sectors, excluded community, commercial users are directly engaged throughout the process.

3.1. Identification of issues

The *Pani Chautari* process starts with the identification of day to day water related problems that need to be resolved. City specific issues also come from the long term vision of the municipality and elected municipal governments. As per the experiences from Dhulikhel, while most of the issues were proposed by stakeholders, some of them were suggested by the researchers as well. For instance, the issues of 'private sector engagement on urban water management' emerged during a study of SIAS and later taken to the wider discussion through *Pani Chautari* series. Similarly, the issues for third series in Dhulikhel 'decreasing volume of water in the local spring' was initially raised by the Dhulikhel DDWSUC and later on discussed in the *Pani Chautari.*

3.2. Generating evidences

This step of *Pani Chautari* require collecting or generating evidences to inform the dialogue and policy process. Researchers either review the literatures and best practices on the identified issues or conduct quick and focused studies, or both where in possible. Evidences can also be generated from ongoing and past researches and through the lessons and observations from the experimentation and field testing of some of the tools and technologies. In case of Dhulikhel, the evidences were generated mostly from the ongoing studies. In a particular case, a collective field visit to another village by expert and stakeholders was organized. The visit helped to collect hands on experiences on ground water recharge to replicate in Dhulikhel and revive the drying springs. The insight from this field visit was complemented by the scientific research reviewed by the researchers which was presented among the stakeholders during *Pani Chautari* event. Similarly, for the latest series on 'up and down stream relations', we presented data and insights from our earlier research. In this stage, researchers are more active than the stakeholders as they undertake research for evidence and prepare the presentation in more vernacularized language.

3.3. Stakeholder dialogue

This is the most important step of *Pani Chautari* where a comprehensive presentation of evidences guide the dialogue among multiple stakeholders. They rigorously discuss on the multiple aspects of the pre-identified issue taking presentation as the reference and the discussion is carefully moderated and synthesized in an action oriented key conclusion. This event is well prepared in terms of identifying participants, making the presentation in local language, setting the key questions for discussion and facilitation. In general, the modality of all the stakeholder dialogue events in Dhulikhel were similar. However, we used visual materials in some of the events to make the discussion more engaging. In some cases external presenters were invited to share their experiences in the related issues. The carefully moderated discussion provided space to raise their voices. Despite many considerations for inclusivity, there could be instances of 'participatory exclusion' because of the power differentials within different stakeholder (Bhattarai et al., 2020). Often people from marginalized groups (women) were found less vocal therefore, a gender specific dialogue was organized to provide women and other marginalities conducive space to raise their concern. The event is recorded with the consent of the participants and documented in the form of a report.

3.4. Policy uptake

The outcomes of the *Pani Chautari* events are well documented and disseminated through different medias. In most of the cases in Dhulikhel, the journalists participating in the discussion published news in the local and national media. In other cases, press releases were jointly issued by the municipality and SIAS. The researchers also wrote blogs and opinion articles capturing the key messages of the discussion. After this dialogue, researchers engage with the respective stakeholders and the municipal authorities to further facilitate the policy uptake of the discussion. As per our experiences, this engagement includes – post event meeting with Mayor and the senior staffs, informal meeting and communication with the related stakeholders, individual discussions with selected beneficiaries of the policy etc. The post event informal discussion is vital to prioritize the issue at hand and discuss multiple policy options with the municipal policy makers.

4. CHALLENGES OF *PANI CHAUTARI* PROCESS

The idea of *Pani Chautari* evolved organically from the collaboration between SIAS researchers and the stakeholders from Dhulikhel, and took its present shape with iterative discussions. Initially, the challenge was to form a common understanding on what *Pani Chautari* meant among stakeholders and researchers as both the groups come from vastly different epistemic background. While the researchers were more interested on testing innovative method to generate distinct insights and contribute to the wider literature through by documenting and analysing the process, municipal authorities had expectation on generating direct impact to their policy and practices. It took quite a bit of efforts and deliberation among researchers and stakeholders to provide the shape to the *Pani Chautari* process. Similarly, the municipal priorities fall on physical development rather than the institutional solutions. Hence, initially, it took some effort for convincing the stakeholders including municipality to be a part of *Pani Chautari* process as they were not convinced that simply discussion would lead to positive changes in water governance.

The cycle of *Pani Chautari* faced additional challenges while dealing with contested issues, such as upstream -downstream relations. Identifying issue specific participants, bringing them into this process and requesting for their voluntary contributions have been quite challenging. Also strictly maintaining neutrality by researchers and moderator during the discussion on contested issues is not an easy task. Another challenge we faced in this process specifically during stakeholder dialogue phase, was retaining the busy stakeholders for the full duration of the event. Mainly after the local government election, elected municipal representatives were extremely busy on establishing new federal system hence they had limited time to allocate to the specific deliberations. This has sometimes affected on drawing conclusion of dialogue and ways forward. Further, translating evidence generated by research into vernacular language is also challenging. Additionally, the highly technical and sophisticated solutions against the issues are beyond the capacity of municipality. Hence, making solutions simple, easier and cost effective requires greater efforts.

5. *PANI CHAUTARI* OUTCOMES

The series of *Pani Chautari* conducted in Dhulikhel has contributed to different aspects of water management in the town. Each cycle has contributed either to the municipal planning and policy process or to initiate new approaches and activities for efficient water management. Several technical and institutional solutions for the water related problems have emerged. Some of these solutions are being implemented by the municipal leadership. In this section, we provide a brief overview of the contribution of *Pani Chautari* in water security of Dhulikhel.

5.1. Internalization of evidence based policy making among municipal authorities

The municipality has started appreciating the practices of using data, evidence and cases in the municipal policy processes. The practices of evidence informed dialogue followed by policy making through *Pani Chautari* series have led to the realization in municipality regarding the value of evidence in policy making. For instance, our experimentation of recharge ponds to revive small springs in Dhulikhel has generated good evidence which has been useful for its upscaling policy. With this, the municipality has increasingly expanded its interest on research and critical insights in water management even on other aspects of municipal development. For example, the Mayor and his team are requesting researchers for conducting assessment of ground water condition in the town. The municipality is also promoting research often with its own resources to generate knowledge for policy making. This clearly reveals that Dhulikhel has appreciated the value of evidence in policy making process through research and engagement.

5.2. Promoting innovation in water management

The Municipality and water users have started using efficient and cost effective technologies for water management. Larger water users in the town have been benefited from the *Pani Chaiutari* series which made them aware of rainwater harvesting and its technical and financial aspects, gray water recycling and reuse. With this, the

municipality has provisioned subsidies to the users who install rainwater harvesting system and the hotels and industries to recycle and reuse water. Similarly, the larger water users (eg. Banquet and catering services) are now exploring efficient water management technologies in their businesses (Shrestha et al., 2019).

Similarly, Dhulikhel municipality started piloting recharge ponds and contour trenches to revive drying springs. The municipality, water user committees and experts from SIAS collaborated to pilot this activity in the nearby forest in the catchment where ten springs are tapped to supply water to the town. The monthly data of spring measurement from April 2017 till May 2020 showed that the series of recharge ponds and contour trenches have gradually contributed towards the increase in volume of water in the local springs.[1] Details of these ponds and their contribution to recharge the ground water are explained in chapter 9 of this book by Shrestha et al., 2021 and also available at Devkota et al. (2019). These results have encouraged the municipality to upscale and outscale these activities to the wider area of the town.

5.3. Fostering collaboration with key stakeholders

Pani Chautari series brought multiple stakeholders together to discuss the water related issues. In addition, the collaboration among stakeholders from forestry, irrigation, soil conservation and private sectors have been strengthened. One of the forest officer shared, "this sort of collaboration has contributed to avoid duplication in activities and create synergies between environment conservation works of municipality and District Forest Office." Similarly, the private sectors like hotels, industries and Small and Micro Enterprises (SMEs) in Dhulikhel have started collaborating with municipality for efficient water management and watershed conservation. Their joint declaration to contribute to the water management of the town from fourth *Pani Chautari* series clearly reveals that *Pani Chautari* has contributed to bring private sector and the local government into a single platform. In this declaration, while the municipality expressed its commitment on up-taking

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1. The forest is the source areas where more than 10 small springs are being tapped into the water supply system of the town

research into policy and providing subsidies to the industries, Hotel Association and Chamber of Commerce were committed to invest on water-efficient technologies to run their businesses and contribute to the sustainability of water sources.

5.4. Facilitating up and downstream relations for sustainable water management

Pani Chautari is contributing to take the prolonged contestation between Dhulikhel and Bhumedanda (the upstream community) from where Dhulikhel brings water to the logical end. *Pani Chautari* brought together the key stakeholders of both communities together to discuss and resolve the ongoing contestation. A collaborative environment was created in the forum wherein the upstream community and decision-making authorities expressed their commitment on conserving the water sources while the downstream authorities promised to continue support to upstream users in the best possible ways. One of the institutional mechanisms proposed in the forum was forming a 'Water Council'. The idea of the Water Council was proposed as a formally authorized as well as institutionally and technically capable and socially inclusive institution. Water Council is conceived to help facilitate amicable relations between people from source and supply region and sustainably manage the water sources.

5.5. Providing an opportunity of co-learning and capacity building

Pani Chautari series has contributed to co-learning and co-creation of knowledge with regular engagement among researchers, policymakers and municipal stakeholders. It has also enhanced the researchers' learnings from stakeholders experiences of water management by gaining in-depth information and knowledge on emerging water-related issues. The research team reflected on the approaches of *Pani Chautari* mainly on the methodological effectiveness, engagement strategy with participants, visual data presentation, gathering selected stakeholders into specific series, identifying action points based on discussion and raising awareness through sharing the best practices from other cities. Overall, our

reflection revealed that the participation of concerned stakeholders and municipal authority in the common platform has facilitated co-learning.

More importantly, the series of engagement with water managers, stakeholders and users have contributed on enhancing their capacities on water management. The series of visual presentations with illustrations and infographs from local data sets and sharing of best practices from global experiences during the discussion event have encouraged local water champions to engage in the issues.

6. CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we documented the emergence, process and outcomes of *Pani Chautari* series as a tool to foster evidence based policy. Drawing the insights from *Pani Chautari* series, the chapter stressed that the research and stakeholder dialogue can help enhance effectiveness of policy and practice. The importance of evidence on local level policymaking has been sufficiently realized and taken into the practices in Dhulikhel municipality. Dhulikhel municipality has appreciated the importance of research into policy process. This can be an important lesson to other local government bodies.

The locally elected representatives have remarked on the importance and the benefit of *Pani Chautari* series including the deliberation among stakeholders. Besides, the assurance of continuation of *Pani Chautari* through the Municipality's policy and programs clearly shows that the series has now been institutionalized into the municipal system. However, it is yet to see how the series advances independently with the municipality as the driver. While looking after the initial outcomes, it has been somehow successful to create positive impact in five specific aspects mentioned in the earlier section.

Pani Chautari is neither an alternative model of governing water nor a panacea to resolve all problems but the engagement of researchers, community and government representatives have created an innovative model of involving users and stakeholders in

planning and policymaking. The reflective dialogues among them support to develop locally appropriate strategies on managing water stresses. This has contributed towards strengthening capacity of city level water champions, enhance collaborations and foster innovations. Though this initiative was piloted in the urban water sector in some towns, the procedural approach, overall insights, and lessons are highly useful to wider sectors and across different levels. The series of *Pani Chautari* held in Dhulikhel revealed that it has become a complete cycle of policy process that provides opportunities for several water stakeholders to get new insights, put views regarding their agendas, openly discuss and contest with the arguments and explore the solutions collectively. Overall, *Pani Chautari* has contributed on expanding the deliberative space at the municipal level and has positively contributed towards the policy learning culture among water stakeholders.

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