

EXPLORING STAKEHOLDERS' EXPERIENCES OF PARTICIPATION IN  
SOCIAL AUDIT: A CASE STUDY APPROACH

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## DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this dissertation has not been submitted for candidature for any other degree.

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to all those who engage in the betterment of community schools.

## ABSTRACT

An abstract of the dissertation of *Pranav Bhattarai* for the Degree of *Master of Philosophy in Education (Development Studies)* presented at School of Education, Kathmandu University on 16 September, 2020.

Title: *Exploring Stakeholders' Experiences of Participation in Social Audit: A Case Study Approach*

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A qualitative research design with a study approach was employed to explore stakeholders' experiences in the social audit process. Existing literature, policies and guidelines on social audit have narrowly defined its concept and significance on participation of the key stakeholders in the process. The research has identified layers of influence that worked as negatively as barriers or positively as enablers for participation in the social audit process. The School's culture of organizing social audits regularly enabled the participatory process. A positive relationship was observed between institutional culture of participation and stakeholder's motivation to take part in the social audit process.

However, a poorly designed social audit process was a barrier. Gaps were identified in setting basic rules and protocols of the social audit process. Inadequate prior communication, sensitization and information sharing among stakeholders as part of the basic protocols of the institutional design process have negatively affected the

participation. Thus, the poor institutional design process of social audit worked as a barrier to meaningful and constructive participation of parents and students.

Another key barrier to equal participation was identified as knowledge asymmetry among stakeholders. Research participants felt that knowledge asymmetry affected their chances of participation in the social audit process on equal footing. According to Challies et al. (2017), participation and engagement in any context lead to better-informed decisions only when there is a wider range of information inputs and knowledge exchange among stakeholders in the process.

Resource asymmetry (unequal socio-economic) performed the role of a barrier to equal participation of a certain group of stakeholders in the social audit process. The context of resource asymmetry and unequal power relations generated by it has been a strong barrier for parents and students. My findings indicate that when stakeholders don't belong to symmetrical socio-economic backgrounds, it tends to create unequal power relations among them. Prevalence of such unequal socio-economic status disempowered a group of participants from actively participating and engaging in the process while significantly leveraging the other group. The overall findings, thus, confirm to the Theory of Participation by Challies et al., which claims that the overall participation and the experiences of participants are either influenced by institutional participatory culture or the design process of social audit, knowledge asymmetry and socio-economic context.

Based on the findings discussed above, some conclusions are inferred. Physical participation of stakeholders was ensured but with no collaboration and consultation among them. This indicates a phenomenon of a ritualized form of participation devoid of consultation and two-way exchange of ideas and thoughts. Arnstein (1969) calls this type

of participation a kind of ‘manipulation’ by power holders who invite participants only for listening and to fulfil the functions of rubberstamping members in the committee.

Social audit is a civic engagement tool that serves as a forum where teachers, parents, school management committee can discuss issues collaboratively to find solutions to school problems. However, this potentiality has remained largely untapped because of a ritualized form of stakeholders’ participation in the social audit. From the findings, it can be inferred that ritualized practice of social audit has limited active and meaningful participation of stakeholders. Similarly, findings also reinforce a strong connection between resource asymmetry (socio-economic status) of participants, which has limited two-way collaboration with inactive participation, which attest to the reality that if there are significant power/resource imbalances between stakeholders (Ansell and Gash, 2008), important stakeholders cannot participate in a meaningful way.

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Pranav Bhattarai, Degree Candidate

## ABBREVIATIONS

ACORAB	Association of Community Radio Broadcasters Nepal
AIN	Association of International NGOs in Nepal
CSO	Civil Society Organization
EU	European Union
HoD	Head of Department
KUSOED	Kthmandu University School of Education
MoE	Ministry of Education
MoLD	Ministry of Local Development
MPhil	Master of Philosophy
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
PTA	Parent Teacher Association
SA	Social Accountability
SAC	Social Audit Committee
SMC	School Management Committee
SSDP	School Sector Development Plan
SSRP	School Sector Reform Plan
UNDP	United Nations Development Program

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

In this chapter, I have articulated my research agenda of social audit on why this topic drew my attention. I commence with a brief anecdote that generated some interest inside me to dive deeper into the issue from stakeholders' experiences of participation. This passion ultimately germinated into a full-blown research agenda for my academic pursuit. I have problematized the social audit issue explaining why this topic needs to be further explored and substantiated. Also, I have discussed why this problem carries significance for academic pursuit. I have located myself around the issue because of my interest with the explicit intersection with my professional life.

#### **Genesis of Research Agenda**

My professional career started in 2001 as a journalist with an English newspaper, *Space Times Today*. During my brief stint with the newspaper until February 2003, I closely followed and produced numerous news and articles on governance and accountability in the education sector, with community schools in particular. While producing different news and feature articles on education and governance, my professional interest in these two issues was further enhanced. My passion for governance and education did not stop even after I left the newspaper in February 2003 and joined a non-governmental organization (NGO). The NGO I worked with had been working to strengthen governance in the education sector with a particular focus on community schools. The NGO focused especially on implementing different social accountability tools like social audits, public hearings, and community score cards,

among others. Type of work I was engaged in through the NGO perfectly married with my passion for digging deeper into the issues of governance in Nepal's community schools. While implementing different governance and accountability projects during my career in NGO sector, I had to conduct various training on social accountability (SA) tools to develop people's capacity. It was to hold office bearers to improve governance and accountability issues in the education sector.

On 10 September 2017, I was facilitating a training session on SA tools in Achham district. There were 25 participants in the training that explicitly focused on Public Hearing, Public audits and Social Audit. When I was facilitating a session on social audit's potential role in promoting the participation of stakeholders for collaborative governance in community schools, one of my trainee participants raised a few interesting questions. The participant asked me how effectively social audit has engaged different stakeholders in the process. How do stakeholders experience their participation in the process? Do all the participants equally contribute to the discussion? I found these questions very pertinent, but I was not in a position to properly answer these queries. These were some of the aspects of the social audit I never even considered investigating as a development professional. For the first time, these questions planted seeds of interest inside me for the need to explore experiences of stakeholders' participation in the social audit process.

Do parents, teachers, students and other stakeholders meaningfully participate in the process? Do stakeholders participate actively on equal footing? What encourages them to participate? What are the incentives? Do all stakeholders have equal grounds to influence decisions? Are all their voices get heard in the process? These different



questions continued to haunt me because participation was key to the social audit process. Local participation was very necessary for a successful social audit. So, rural poor, women and other marginalized groups of the rural community were supposed to actively participate in the process (Dwivedi & Singh, 2010).

The passion for exploring the practice of social audit from a participation perspective continued to be alive within me. Thus, I started thinking of social audit as one of the probable issues for academic pursuit. I thought that this would be one of the best topics for MPhil dissertation on the one hand, and on the other, it would allow me the opportunity to fulfill my interest in commissioning a study on how social audit serves as a platform where different stakeholders come together and actively participate and equally engage in the process. This is how the agenda for my research was incubated and made mature for this academic study.

### **Rationale of Study**

The government of Nepal adopted laws and policies to increase stakeholders' participation in community schools by transferring school management to the communities in the early 2000s. The purpose of such policy and legal decisions was to enhance stakeholders' participation and engagement in the management of schools. The policy of handing over the management of schools to communities aims at increasing the participation of communities. Its interest was to enhance ownership of schools by the community (Kharel, 2017). Representing parents and other stakeholders in School Management Committees (SMCs) was one of the ways to enhance participation and community ownership to improve educational governance.

According to World Bank (2001), local participation could be improved through legal provisions for school governance with empowered SMCs and other means. Other means include legal provision for Social Audit where stakeholders (parents, teachers, students) come together and discuss various aspects of administrative and financial performance of community schools. Though some gaps exist in the implementation of social audits, community schools are implementing social audits with limited technical capacity (Gautam, 2011). Though scanty studies on the implementation of social audits in community schools are available, there is still a shortage of academic research and studies on exploring dimensions such as the participation of stakeholders in the social audit process. The School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP) 2009–2015 states that social audit is a mechanism through which SMCs report to parents and stakeholders on school performance and local governments in compliance with regulatory requirements, including social inclusion, financial and social audit. But inadequate research studies on social audit as a mechanism where stakeholders participate and influence decisions have made it imperative for researchers to analyze the effectiveness of stakeholders' participation in the social audit process.

Therefore, the rationale behind conducting this study is grounded on the fact that there is inadequate literature on stakeholders' participation in the social audit. How do stakeholders participate in the process? What (dis)encourages stakeholders' participation? These questions on participation should be understood in a local context. Thus, the institutional context and power dynamics also influence stakeholders' participation in the process. But, these areas and aspects of participation in the social audit have not been

explored and studied. Therefore, the findings have attempted to explore experiences of stakeholders' participation in the process with regard to context and power relations.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Very few studies have been carried out to explore the participation of stakeholders in social audits in community schools of Nepal. A study (WB, 2012) mentions that social audit practices are more ritual than reality in engaging stakeholders. Why are social audits getting ritualized? Are they getting rituals just because participants don't actively participate in the process? What are other dimensions that really limit the chances of active participation? What are the barriers or enablers that limit participation in a ritual practice? Does the participants' socio-economic status ever influence the effectiveness of the social audit? Is the institutional design process of social audit conducive to the participation of stakeholders on equal footing? How do unequal power relations among stakeholders influence their active participation in the process? Does participants' knowledge of social audit and resource asymmetries have any role in (dis)encouraging active participation? Is social audit engaging stakeholders on an equal basis? How do stakeholders experience their participation in the process? How has different socioeconomic and institutional design processes influenced social audit participation? What is the role of power dynamics in shaping stakeholders' experiences of participation in the process? These many unanswered questions and issues on social audit drew my attention to the study.

Different research on social audit practices indicates gaps between implementation and social audit guidelines. There are gaps between the Social Audit Guidelines (DoE, 2008) and their implementation (Gautam, 2011). These gaps exist due

to differences in understanding of social audits and their guidelines (ibid.). Such implementation gaps have raised questions about social audit practice in community schools. Why do such gaps and discrepancies exist at the implementation level? Is it because of a lack of technical capacity by Social Audit Committee (SAC) members? Or is it due to a lack of an effective monitoring mechanism? Is the government's monitoring mechanism ineffective in ensuring proper implementation of social audit guidelines? Many such questions and issues remain yet to be dug out.

Despite many questions and issues that require academic pursuit, there has not been adequate research to explore the participation of stakeholders in the social audit. Thus, it will be insightful to dig out some of these dimensions of social audit practice from participation perspective. In this context, where many questions mentioned above and issues on social audit require scholarly study, my research has attempted to explore the understanding and experiences of my research participants on participation in the social audit process that have been proposed as research questions in the following section.

### **Purpose of Study**

My research aims to explore how stakeholders (parents, ward chairperson, student, teacher and SAC coordinator) experience their participation in the social audit process in the community school.

### **Research Questions**

I have proposed two research questions to fulfill the purpose of my study.

- a. How do stakeholders feel about their participation in the social audit process?

- b. How do power dynamics influence stakeholders' participation in the social audit process?

### **Significance of Study**

This research will have significance at professional, academic, and policy levels. Professionally, since I have been working on strengthening governance in the education sector for more than a decade, the research will bring up issues for harmonizing common understanding among stakeholders on social audit as a tool to promote participation. Furthermore, my attempt to explore how stakeholders (parents, teacher, ward chair, student, SAC coordinator) participate in social audit will add value to existing social audit practice as a mechanism to improve school governance and ownership through active participation of stakeholders. This will help development practitioners and community schools to internalize and scale up social audit as a public space for improving school governance in a participatory way.

My research will also be academically significant because it will open the door to further academic research on social audit from a participation perspective. Since there are no academic studies on a social audit from the perspective of stakeholders' participation in the process, this study will be a stepping stone for more exhaustive studies on the topic. Through the research, the issue of the social audit will be mainstreamed into academic discourse and studies.

Besides its academic value, the research will also have some policy-level significance since it explores how social audit engages stakeholders and their experiences get influenced by context and power dynamics. My research will serve as a policy resource document for community schools to reflect on socio-economic and institutional

contexts that influence stakeholders' participation in the process. Such reflection will help identify issues for policy reform and advocacy to promote stakeholders' better and effective participation in the social audit event.

In addition to policy level significance, innovation derived from the participants' Experience is that participation in the social audit process is a multi-dimensional concept. Participation needs to be defined as going beyond physicality. The physical presence of participants should not be understood and defined as an end in itself, it should be considered as a medium for more robust and active participation. This can only be ensured by managing different unequal socio-economic conditions, information asymmetry and unequal power dynamics among participants of social audit, including institutional context where participation take place.

### **Delimitation of the Study**

This research has looked at participatory culture and the institutional design process of social audit under the institutional context. Other aspects have not been considered. Similarly, power dynamics and unequal power relations emanate from different dimensions, such as ethnicity, culture, and education, among others. But this study has considered the participants' information/knowledge and socio-economic conditions in the discussion of power dynamics. Information and knowledge have been used interchangeably. Thus, the research has delimited the discussion of institutional context and power dynamics to explore my research participants' experiences of participation in the social audit.

## CHAPTER II

### REVIEW OF LITERATURE

A review of literature is an important part of the research. Thus, the literature review in this chapter, both published and unpublished on issues of social audit and participation, helped me identify gaps in the literature that could be filled with the findings from the research project (Frank, 2017). Literature review started when the idea of this research topic incubated in my mind and matured my understanding, passing through different phases of the research process, fieldwork, analyzing the data, meaning making and finalization period. The process that went through these phases was a reiterative, learning and unlearning undertaking. During the literature review, I learned many aspects of the topic I had never pondered over initially. The process helped me gather evidence to consolidate my claim. I reviewed various literature, which I have put into five subthemes (i) Social Audit: Understanding and Purpose (ii) Social Audit and Its Evolution (iii) Social Audit: Policy and Practice (iv) Social Audit and Social Accountability: Connecting the Thread (v) Participation: Understanding Theoretical Grounds.

#### **Social Audit: Understanding and Purpose**

Social Audit is a process in which details of resources, both financial and non-financial, used by public agencies for development initiatives are shared with the people, often through a public platform (Dwivedi & Singh, 2010). So, the social audit has been understood and practiced as a platform where citizens can assess the use of resources and

the quality of public services being delivered by a public entity to ensure accountability, transparency and effectiveness in resource management and public service delivery. Over the years, the social audit has been practiced globally as a tool for a systemic evaluation of an institution or a public service agency in the participation of concerned beneficiaries. Social audit is intended to analyze every risk factor. It gives recommendations for possible means for their mitigation (Nikonova & Sucharev, 2002). Besides the systemic assessment of an institution, social audit as a mechanism is more concerned with the social contribution or impact of activities of an agency.

Thus, in addition to ensuring accountability and transparency in organizational functioning, it also lays emphasis on the assessment of social impact. A study (EU, 2010) has linked social audit to a systematic evaluation of the enterprise's social impact against certain standards and expectations. Similarly, Guidelines on Social Audit (Ministry of Local Development [MoLD], 2011) defines social audit as an assessment, analysis and evaluation work of contribution of entire socio-economic development of the plan, policy, program, project implementation and service delivery. Social Audit Implementation Guidelines (Association of Community Radio Broadcasters Nepal [ACORAB], 2013) further explain the concept of social audit as a process to examine, assess and analyze all the activities and performances of a service delivery agency.

The purpose of social Audit as a process determines the extent to which the implementation of a given plan, policy, program, or project has contributed to overall socio-economic development with the direct involvement and participation of a wide range of stakeholders. Social audit as a social accountability tool also provides an opportunity for stakeholders and citizens to provide input and feedback on the quality of



services for further improvement. Guidelines for Social Audit (Association of International INGOs in Nepal [AIN], 2010) defines social audit as a feedback mechanism for receiving inputs from stakeholders. Such sharing of input, feedback and information provides a basis for any social development organization to improve its organizational performance and meeting the needs and interests of stakeholders in participatory and collaborative way.

### **Social Audit and Its Evolution**

The evolution and practice of social audit, go back to the 1970s. Public enterprises and companies in European countries and the United States were under pressure to respond to demands from consumers and environmental movements. Corporations started responding to demands by implementing several approaches to actively involve stakeholders and communities in decision-making. Companies realized that their engagement with key stakeholders would help them better understand impact and needs, and improve products and services that would bring in more profits and productivity (UNDP, 2009).

As many countries transitioned to the democratic system in the 1980s, civil society organizations (CSOs) were offered spaces to engage and participate in right-based campaigns and movements in human rights, gender equality, and accountability. Participation became hallmarks of newly established democratic governance. During this period, the concept and practice of social audit entered to public domain from the private sector in response to new emerging democratic governance and citizen oversight of government actions in newly established democracies. As countries continued to consolidate democratic governance in the 1990s and 2000s by regularizing periodic and

more transparent electoral processes, social audits gained additional attention as concerns over the quality of democratic governance increased (Berthin, 2011).

Over the years, conceptual understanding and practice of social audit as an accountability mechanism has also extended to reducing malpractices and mitigating corrupt practices in public services agencies. According to Berthin (2011), social audit practice has been understood widely as a feature of democratic governance and a strategy for combating corruption and malpractices, enhancing transparency and accountability. Understanding and implementing social audit as a way to promote citizen participation and transparency has been on the rise globally. The contemporary definitions for social audit globally tend to promote the understanding that social audit is an instrument for public accountability and transparency (Peicheva, Miteva & Harizanova, 2017).

According to Neupane (2011), social accountability tools such as social audits, among others, can impact public services and increase efficiency and effectiveness. This can occur, for example, by empowering citizens to demand accountability and rights and raising awareness of providers' responsibilities. Different research shows that social audit as a social accountability tool can improve institutional performance channeling input from the beneficiaries through citizen participation in decisions that affect them. , The key to the social audit process, is active and mutual participation of stakeholders (ibid).

### **Social Audit – Policy and Practices**

In Nepal's context, a social audit started gaining momentum with initiatives from civil society organizations years after democratic restorations in the early 1990s. The practice of social audit entered the government sector formally in late 2000. This initiative was formally institutionalized during 2008 in the education sector, with the

Department of Education enacting social audit directives for schools (DoE, 2008). The social audit directives were amended in 2014. The health sector started practicing social audit by formulating the Manual on Guiding Social Audit of Ama Program (DoHS) in 2009. Similarly, the practice of social audit was extended to the local governance and development sector of Nepal with the formulation of Social Audit Guidelines (MoLD, 2011). These social audit directives that came into being in the education, health and local development sector have a primary objective of assessment of services by engaging concerned stakeholders to promote transparency and accountability. Though I have briefly discussed social audit directives and initiatives issued over the years in different sectors, I would only focus on the discussion of social audit directives in the education sector.

Review of existing directives and guidelines issued by the government of Nepal on social audit spell out how they need to be conducted. However, there is no adequate definition of social audit as a concept, its significance and its ultimate contribution. To an extent, the purpose of social auditing has been tied to promoting accountability and good governance in community schools. School Sector Development Plan (SSDP), 2016-2023 (MoE, 2016) touches on this dimension of audit linking with accountability. It aims to improve the quality of education in community schools by conducting annual reviews of schools' operations and management standards through performance audits to ensure accountability.

In addition, social audit guidelines framed by different development actors have tried to define social audit, its concept, and its objectives in a more explicit way than the government guidelines. Social audit guidelines (AIN, 2010) have defined a social audit as

a process where stakeholders jointly analyze, review and provide feedback on the effectiveness, efficiency, and relevancy of programs, activities, and resources of an organization. It is a way of understanding, measuring, reporting, and ultimately improving the organization's social, ethical, environmental, financial and managerial performance by engaging the organization's stakeholders. Similarly, social audit guidelines (ACORAB, 2013) define social audit as a platform for disseminating and disclosing information to stakeholders about implemented work related to decisions, income and expenditure in the context of social benefit, utility and concerns of people and thereby to collect feedback, reactions and the way out suggested by the stakeholders. A review of existing guidelines and literature indicates that social audit guidelines made available by non-state agencies are more explicit and comprehensive in defining what it is and how it contributes to a shared understanding of the issues and problems and finding solutions jointly.

The Education Regulations (MoE, 2016) provisions that each community school should conduct a social audit annually. A seven-member committee comprising the chair of the Parent Teacher Association as a coordinator of the Social Audit Committee (SAC) is fully responsible for organizing social audits. The preamble of the social audit guidelines clearly states that the need for an annual review and assessment of overall school performance has been realized with the engagement of stakeholders in the process of generating ownership and making school activities accountable and transparent with efficient use of resources to ensure the quality of education. Social audit guidelines (DoE, 2008) envision that one of the objectives of social audit is to engage stakeholders and to promote accountability and transparency in the operation of community schools.

However, the question of how effective social audit has been in engaging stakeholders in the process is yet to be explored. This is the gap in existing literature.

Research by Regmi (2017) highlights the opportunity and potentiality of social audit to actively engage stakeholders to improve school governance and management by making SMC, head teachers, teachers and parents accountable. It is a tool to review and monitor school performance in a participatory way. Also, it is a mechanism of accountability to improve the teaching-learning environment in community schools (ibid). The School Sector Reform Plan (SSRP) 2009–2015 also envisions that a social audit is a mechanism through which SMCs will report to parents on school performance and to local governments in compliance with regulatory requirements. According to Gautam (2011), the implementation of social audits has been carried out in community schools but with some rituality and formality. Some issues and challenges still surround the implementation of social audits in community schools. The study attempted to explore how social audit is being implemented, existing gaps, and challenges.

### **Social Audit and Social Accountability: Connecting the Thread**

The social audit has been designed to fulfill different purposes. Social accountability is an approach that creates opportunities among stakeholders for dialogue and discussion on some topic and finds the solutions to the issues they face. When faced with distrust toward service-providing agencies over the quality, accountability, and transparency issues, citizens and service providers mutually engage in discussions to improve the quality of services. Social Accountability encompasses various actions and mechanisms, participatory budgeting, public expenditure tracking, social audits, citizen charters, and so forth (Aiyar, Posani, Patnaik & Devasher, 2009).

Social accountability tools provide such opportunities or platforms for citizens, service providers, or government officials to participate in the process actively and find solutions.

Social accountability mechanisms create opportunities for informed, constructive dialogue and negotiation between citizens and government. It identifies mutually agreed-upon solutions, thus contributing to better public service delivery or performance of a public institution (McNeil & Malena, 2010). Active participation of citizens and government officials in the process of discussion is an important dimension of the social accountability approach. Besides active participation of stakeholders in the process, the social accountability mechanism also creates platforms for informed and constructive discussions.

New and emerging social accountability practices significantly enhance citizens' ability to move toward engagement with bureaucrats and politicians in a more informed, organized, constructive, and systematic manner, thus building more productive relations and increasing the chances of effecting positive change (ibid). , The social accountability approach, has been accepted by government agencies and development agencies globally because of its opportunity to channelize citizen voices as feedback to improve service quality in a participatory way. Social accountability as a mechanism consists of multiple efforts/actions by individual citizens and communities, often working in collaboration with each other, employing multiple instruments that focus on citizen 'voice' as the principal tool for participation (Jayal, 2008).

Social audit is one of the social accountability tools. Many other tools are being used across the globe to hold the government and service providers responsive to

people's needs. Over the past decade, various social accountability tools—such as participatory budgeting, independent budget analysis, participatory monitoring of public expenditures, and citizen evaluation of public services—have been developed and tested in countries (McNeil & Malena, 2010). Another important role of stakeholders in social accountability practice is to create citizen voices to check on the service providers and public agencies. In these platforms, the citizens' role emphasizes empowering citizens as a countervailing power to have a more direct voice in the formulation of actions and policies that affect them (Posani & Aiyar, 2009). As McGee and Gaventa (2010) state, participation of citizens in social accountability mechanisms enhance the quality outcomes, improving the effectiveness of development initiatives and widening the roles of citizens in the processes with increased institutional responsiveness and improved public services.

Social accountability tools serve as a short route for citizen power to provide feedback and inputs to the service providers. How social audits, including many other social accountability tools, have served this purpose is still a question not adequately explored. 'Short-route' feedback mechanisms for service delivery include tools such as citizen report cards, community score cards, public hearings, and public audits (Ackerman, 2005; Davis, 2004; Deichmann & Lall, 2007; Deininger & Mpuga, 2005; Paul, 2006). These tools also serve as opportunities for promoting open government through active citizen participation. This necessitates safe and direct avenues for citizens to be heard and demand an environment that enables participatory approaches to listen and respond to each other (Wittemyer, Bailur, Anand, Park & Gigler, 2010).

According to Fox (2014), social accountability tools try to improve institutional performance by bolstering citizen participation and public agencies' responsiveness. In practice, the concept includes a wide range of institutional innovations that enhance and integrate citizen voice into institutional decision-making by building citizen power through mutual participation. A review of various literature on social accountability as a concept and a tool has empathized active citizen participation, facilitating citizen voices, citizen power and institutional responsiveness.

### **Participation: Understanding Theoretical Grounds**

Participation is an umbrella term that describes the activities by which people's concerns, needs, interests, and values are incorporated into decisions and actions on public matters and issues (Nabatchi, 2012; Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014; Roberts, 2008). This definition tries to unpack participation as a way and a process for citizens to claim their stake in discussions with their concerns, needs and interests heard and responded to on issues of public interest and matters. To encourage and facilitate the participation of citizens in any process, participation infrastructure (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015) is a prerequisite. Participation infrastructure can be defined as the laws, processes, institutions, and associations that support regular opportunities for people to connect, solve problems, make decisions, and celebrate community (ibid). Using various forms of participation infrastructure, citizens can satisfy their participation needs and influence public decisions and resolve them amicably. But Nabatchi & Leighninger strongly argue for the robustness and sustainability of such participation. For any participation, activities to take place and for participation to have lasting impacts and benefits, it must be sustained by a robust participation infrastructure.



Going a step further, some authors (Nabatchi & Amsler, 2014) define participation as direct and indirect. They argue that a direct form of participation is the best because it encourages stakeholders and citizens to get personally involved and actively engaged in the process of providing input, making decisions and solving problems. In indirect forms of participation, citizens try to influence or affect decisions through their representatives. The use of participatory tools like social audit is designed to serve as a direct form of participation where citizens and stakeholders discuss jointly and try to influence decisions (Regmi, 2017). Even within the form of direct participation, authors have tried to classify them into different categories. Direct participation can happen in many ways and occur in many different contexts. Over the last two decades, direct participation has coalesced into three main forms—thick, thin, and conventional—each of which encompasses a wide variety of processes and activities that share common features (Sifry, 2014; Zuckerman, 2013).

Thick participation enables large numbers of people to work in groups to learn, decide and act. It is the most meaningful and powerful of the three forms of direct participation but also the most intensive and time-consuming. Thick participation encourages people to work out what they think and want to do in conversation with other participants. Other elements of thick participation in any event or process also include how many people participate and whether the people are diverse or similar in terms of socio-demographic characteristics and political background (Nabatchi & Leighninger, 2015). Thick participation is also a more deliberative discussion. It is also a thoughtful, open, and accessible discussion about information, views, experiences, and ideas during which people seek to make a decision or judgment based on facts, data, values, emotions,

and other less technical considerations (Gastil & Levine, 2005; Bohman, 1998; Dryzek, 2000; Gutmann & Thompson, 2004; Habermas, 1984).

Thin participation activates people as individuals rather than in groups, whereas conventional participation is the most common form of direct participation. It is entrenched in most of our public institutions and often required by law. Most of the meetings or hearings held by public bodies such as schools, boards, commissions, city councils, and government entities fall into the category of conventional participation (ibid). Participation has been understood and practiced in the different sector, including social audits in various forms and modes. Participation of parents and students in the social audit of community schools has been more ritual with token representation (Regmi, 2016). Token representation can be linked with the conventional mode of participation. Implementing social audit in a more ritual manner to meet the legal and policy requirements has limited opportunities for interactive and deliberative discussion among participants (Timalsina, 2015). This literature regarding participation in social audit in Nepal's context scantily sheds light on the rituality and formality of social audit practice as a key reason for limited opportunities for interactive and deliberative participation. Thus, literature review provided grounds for me to ponder a question- is the rituality of social audit practice only a reason for passive and inactive participation? Are other dimensions limiting or influencing stakeholders' participation in the social audit process? A case from Nicaragua presented by Selmira, Kristen, Anne, Alejandro and Roberto (2016) states effective participation of women, including stakeholders, strengthens community governance. However, poor governance and cultural barriers cold

be the major bottlenecks to the effective participation of women and stakeholders in community development.

According to Agrawal (2001), the participation of citizens and people in every development sector, including community initiatives and forestry, is often guaranteed by different legal frameworks and policies. Agrawal (2001) argues that there are different typologies of participation that are in practice in one way or the other in the development sector. First, citizens as members of a community group or committee don't participate in planned activities as their participation is nominal. The second typology is passive participation because they participate in an activity but don't voice their thoughts or perspectives. The third typology is called consultative participation in which the authority or agencies solicit their input/thoughts, but it does not ensure that their voices are adequately heard while making decisions. Agrawal (2001) argues that other typologies include active and empowered participation. Active participation explicitly involves participants' contribution to the decision-making process, while empowered participation has the potential to influence decisions or the process of decision making.

Studies at the international level show that power and resource imbalance (asymmetry) among stakeholders also significantly affect the incentives of citizens or groups to participate in the process (Gunton & Day, 2003; Imperial, 2005). Gray (1989) argues that power differences among stakeholders also influence stakeholders' willingness to come to the table. Powerful participants can control participation processes-both intentionally and unintentionally. Their control can considerably curtail other participants' influence and exclude groups (Lasker & Guidry, 2008). Thus, a review of various literature showed that without equal opportunity among participants, many

participation platforms turn into discussions, with some people getting more powerful and dominant. Resource and knowledge asymmetry among stakeholders even create an uneven playing field among themselves. I did not find enough studies on how context and power dynamics (resource and knowledge asymmetry) have influenced stakeholders' participation in the social audit process.

Browsing through the literature, I came across inadequate studies on the participation of stakeholders in the social audit process. How social audit has engaged stakeholders for collaboration among themselves is yet an unexplored dimension requiring academic pursuit. My empirical review indicated that there are few studies and research on the implementation of social audit but no separate and compressive study on how stakeholders participate in the process. This reality confirmed a complete lack of literature on how social audit has been participatory in engaging different stakeholders. This gap in the existing literature has substantiated my attempt to conduct this research.

### **My Theoretical Lens**

I have not used any theoretical framework but have used theory as a referent in my research. Theory as referent has been used to make meaning out of information collected from the research participants. Theoretical referents helped me look at the phenomenon of how social audit has engaged stakeholders and how different layers influence have shaped experiences of participation. Theoretical referents differ from frameworks in terms of the relationship between the researcher and the theories used in the research (Luitel, 2009).

'Stakeholders' experiences of participation in the social audit of community school' is a central theme of my research. For these, I have looked at the

participation of stakeholders in the social audit process from the context and power dynamics. Context includes participatory culture and institutional design process. The organization's participatory culture, the former experience of engagement and the inclusive and participatory institutional design process of the social audit itself acts as enabler or barrier for stakeholders' participation in the process. Thus, the premise of the theory of participation is that unequal resources and knowledge among participants create uneven power relations. This asymmetrical power relation created by resources and knowledge reduces opportunities for equal and active participation by all stakeholders. Asymmetries in power relations give some participants more privilege while some feel less empowered for constructive and meaningful participation.

I employed a theory of participation (Challies et al., 2017) to analyze stakeholder's participation from the context and power dynamics prevailing when the social audit took place. The theory argues that institutional contexts of participatory culture and the design process of social audit significantly influence how stakeholders engage and participate in any interaction or discussion affecting the outcomes. According to participation theory, the effectiveness of participation is influenced by unequal power dynamics among stakeholders because of knowledge and resource asymmetry. Asymmetrical power relation discourages some participants. It gives more power to some stakeholders creating an uneven playing field. Thus, the theory of participation contends that any prevailing asymmetrical power relations among stakeholders and the local context in which participation takes place significantly influence the mode of participation. Since my research has explored experiences of

stakeholders' participation in the social audit process, findings have been theorized with the theory of participation from the lens of the institutional context of participatory culture and design process of social audit and power dynamics resulting from knowledge and resource asymmetries among participants creating unequal power relations among them.

### **Chapter Summary**

I carried out the literature review in this chapter under five categories, namely social audit: understanding and purpose, social audit and its evolution, social audit: policy and practice, social audit and social accountability: connecting the thread, and understanding participation. The review of relevant literature in this section provided me the opportunity to understand how efforts were made to study of social audit and citizen participation, policies on social audit as a participatory tool, its concept and pertinent issues surrounding its practice. Existing policy and guidelines on social audit have narrowly defined its concept and significance with the participation of the key stakeholders in the process. Some studies on social audit have been carried out but I found a complete absence of literature on social audit as a tool on how it has promoted participation and engaged stakeholders in the process. The lack of literature on the experiences of participants in the social audit process, holds true in the context of Nepal and at the international level as well. Regarding theoretical perspective, I have employed a Theory of Participation by Challies et al.(2017).

## CHAPTER III

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

#### **Preparation of My Proposal**

Preparation of my proposal began when I was in Third Semester. I preferred to do qualitative research after a series of discussions with my course facilitator. I chose a qualitative research design because I wanted to focus on understanding the nature of the research problem rather than on the number of observed characteristics (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). My research questions and problem demanded it be an exploratory qualitative study because qualitative research generally assumes that social reality is a human creation and qualitative researchers interpret and contextualize meanings from people's beliefs and practices (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Thus, I adopted a qualitative research design with the case study as a strategy of inquiry. It gave an in-depth examination of individuals, organizations, or processes that seek further theoretical understanding and practical knowledge of some phenomenon for an in-depth understanding of people's insight into the mind, attitude, experiences and opinions (Vallery, 2011).

#### **Philosophical Worldview of the Study**

The philosophical worldview (paradigm) guides our way of looking at the phenomenon under study. A worldview is a basic belief set that guides action (Guba, 1990 as cited in Creswell, 2009). Social constructivism (often combined with interpretivism, Mertens, 1998) is a worldview that has guided my research. This worldview assumes that individuals seek understanding of the world in which they live

and work. Individuals develop subjective meanings of their experiences-meanings directed toward a certain object or things. These meanings are multiple and varied (Creswell, 2009). My research intended to explore the experiences of stakeholders' participation in the social audit process and how different contexts and power relations shaped their experiences. Therefore, for this research study, I chose the interpretive or social constructivist paradigm to explore the experiences of research participants because an interpretive worldview allows me to examine what the participants have to say about their experiences of participation in social audit (Thanh & Thanh, 2015).

The interpretive paradigm is concerned primarily with generating context-based understanding of people's thoughts, beliefs, values and associated social actions (Taylor, Taylor & Luitel, 2012). Interpretivists prefer qualitative research with case studies, interviews and observations. After all, those methods are better ways of understanding how humans interpret the world around them (Willis, 2007). Since the purpose of my study was also to explore how context and power dynamics influence stakeholders' experiences of engagement in the social audit process, I preferred to interpretivism with the case study as a strategy of inquiry to explore an in-depth understanding of socioeconomic, cultural and institutional context and different power asymmetries among stakeholders through the unstructured questionnaire as the most appropriate tool. Information collection is more in-depth and intensive and results in rich insights and perspectives than those delivered through a more formal and structured method (Sondhi and Chawla, 2016).

An interpretive paradigm is a systematic analysis of socially constructed meaning and action through the detailed observation of the people in natural settings to arrive at



understandings and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social worlds (Neuman, 2015). Therefore, I applied an interpretive paradigm to explore how stakeholders create meanings of their experiences in the social audit process in the light of the context and power dynamics. Since experiences of engagement of stakeholders in the social audit process can have multiple dimensions of influence, it demands more of a subjective exploration. As an interpretivist I interacted with participants and spent many hours with them in the field. According to Newman and Mayers (2007), these techniques require that researchers spend many hours in personal contact with those being studied to understand how they create meaning in everyday life.

My positionality guides philosophical assumptions in my research to look at the nature of reality (ontology) and how I gain that knowledge (epistemology) in the process of conducting my research. The ontological and epistemological perspectives of the researcher are the keys when deciding which research design to use (Bryman, 2008). For me, realities manifest through multiple social constructions and prevail due to various human interpretations, experiences, values and knowledge. For me, the reality is relative and context-specific. Therefore, I believe that my research participants hold experiences and interpretations of social audit practice which are socially and experientially based on local and specific forms (Guba, 1990 as cited in Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). Thus, my ontological position is that the nature of reality is multiple, subjective and relative, which is created and recreated through interaction with each other and their environment (Bryman, 2008). Ontology is a fundamental nature of reality and is concerned with the issue of what exists. Ontology deals with reality and what is out there. (Vanson, 2014). Newman (2015) states that ontology is an area of philosophy that asks what reality is and

what the fundamental categories of reality are. To these references, my ontological assumption is that stakeholders experience their participation and engagement in the social audit process shaped by socioeconomic and institutional contexts, including unequal power relations among them. Hence, their socioeconomic and institutional contexts influence individual participants' experiences of participation in the process. Knowing that reality is subjective and multiple, I chose interpretivist paradigm because interpretivism values subjectivity (Willis, 2007).

Epistemology is how we know the world or the social reality we live in. Thus, I followed Merriam and Stake (Yanzan, 2015) to guide my epistemological positionality. Renowned case study methodologist Merriam (2016) states that reality is not an objective entity. There are multiple interpretations of reality. According to Stake (2010), qualitative case study researchers, as gatherers and interpreters of interpretations, require reporting their rendition or construction of the constructed reality or knowledge they gather through their investigation. The world does not exist independently of our knowledge of it (Scotland, 2012). Thus, my epistemology is that stakeholders' experiences of participation are shaped and conditioned by socio-economic, cultural and institutional contexts and power relations among them, which are subjective and thus exploratory.

Axiology deals with the nature of value and captures the value question of what is intrinsically worthwhile (Sandouk, 2015). Thus, axiology is that I cannot be value-free because this research study was carried out with some attitudes, expectations and aspirations.

### **Strategy of Inquiry**

I have used a case study as a strategy of inquiry. It is field-based research for a single unit of analysis of a case. As Gerring (2004) states, case study research is an intensive study of a single unit to understand a larger class of (similar) units observed at a single point in time or over some delimited period. In most cases, a case study method selects a small geographical area or a very limited number of individuals, a group, an institution, and an event as the study subjects (Pant, 2016). Case study research is practiced inquiry that focuses on describing, understanding, predicting and controlling the individual (Woodside, 2010). During the case study inquiry, deciding the number of cases is also important. One individual, unit, or institution is possible for the case study (Kruger, 1988, as cited in Njie&Asimiran, 2014). The case study methodology is a preferred strategy when “how” and “why” questions are posed (Yin, 1994a). According to Yin, “how” and “why” questions deal with operational links needing to be traced over time rather than mere frequencies or incidence. Since I carried out this research with “how” questions, the case study methodology enabled me to explore deeper and have new insights into different dimensions of participation and stakeholders’ engagement in the social audit process. It is not, I believe, easily covered by other methods. Hence, the nature of my research questions being descriptive justifies adopting a case study methodology to gain a firsthand understanding of stakeholders’ participation in the social audit process of a community school. A community school was selected as a single unit of analysis in which members of the social audit committee served as cases in my study.

As Baskarada (2014) states, case studies are particularly well-suited for extensive and in-depth descriptions of complex social phenomena. The depth of analysis is one of

the primary virtues of the case study method (Gerring, 2004). To understand research participant's experiences deeply, I conducted discussions and meetings in line with the themes of guiding questions. The discussions were held with parents, students and other members of the Social Audit Committee who had first-hand experiences of participating and being engaged in the social audit process. Employing a case study approach not only enabled me to explore my research problem in its entirety but also provided me the opportunity to understand, explain and describe my research problem. The case study provides an opportunity for the researcher to gain a deep holistic view of the research problem. It may facilitate describing, understanding and explaining a research problem or situation (Baxter & Jack, 2008, Tellies, 1997).

During the research process, I collected information through multiple sources such as discussions with stakeholders, research documents and a review of empirical studies on the topic. The use of multiple data sources (data triangulation) has mostly been advocated as a way of increasing the internal validity of the study to answer research questions appropriately (Obeng, 2015). I used multiple sources to gather information with the help of discussions, document reviews and guiding themes for discussion with the participants. In the case study approach, data come largely from documentation, archival records, interviews, direct observations, participant observation and physical artifacts (Yin, 1994b). Though multiple sources and methods can be used for collecting data and analysis (Stake, 1995a), interviews and observations are the preferred and dominant data collection methods in case study research (Green, Camilli, & Elmore, 2006). I have used vignettes for storytelling to illustrate aspects of the case and reinforce descriptions to convey the findings (Stake, 1995b). I chose a community school as a single unit of

analysis to explore experiences of multiple individual cases of parents, students, coordinator of SAC, teacher who served as members of SAC and had experiences participating in the social audit process.

Stake (1995) differentiates between intrinsic, instrumental, and collective case studies. An intrinsic case study, according to Stake, only aims at acquiring a better understanding of the case of interest or subject. Instrumental case studies provide insights into an issue or a particular situation for a deeper understanding of the phenomenon under study. Collective case studies comprise of several instrumental case studies. I have employed an instrumental case study because this research method enabled me to explore how stakeholders' participation in the social audit process is influenced by different contextual factors and uneven power relations among them.

### **School and Selection of Participants**

For my research, I chose a community school (pseudonym used) in Kathmandu for some reasons. The first reason is that the school I selected in Kathmandu was the best because the school had a history of organizing social audits continuously over the last three years. Secondly, the school invited and engaged stakeholders in every social audit process, complying with existing social audit guidelines. Third, I could spend more time in the field as I was based in Kathmandu. Therefore, the history of organizing social audits for three consecutive years with the participation of stakeholders was also a strong reason for me to select this community school in Kathmandu. Hence, in the study, I used a purposive or purposeful selection of research participants (Yin, 2014) for the qualitative data. Thus, I believe, the school I chose would provide me with the best research participants as individual cases for the study.

For the selection of participants, I had multiple meetings with the head teacher at the school. During meetings, I briefed him about my purpose in selecting the school and provided him a letter from Kathmandu University for carrying out the research. The head teacher was so supportive and helpful. He introduced me to the coordinator of SAC. I explained the intent of my research and the type of participants I was desperately searching for so that they could answer my research questions. The coordinator of SAC helped me select the right participants who provided insights into the case I was researching. The research participants I interviewed were the coordinator of the SAC, ward chairperson, parents, students and teachers who had experience participating in the audit process. I chose them as individual cases because they served as members in the SAC. The names of research participants mentioned in the study are the pseudonyms.

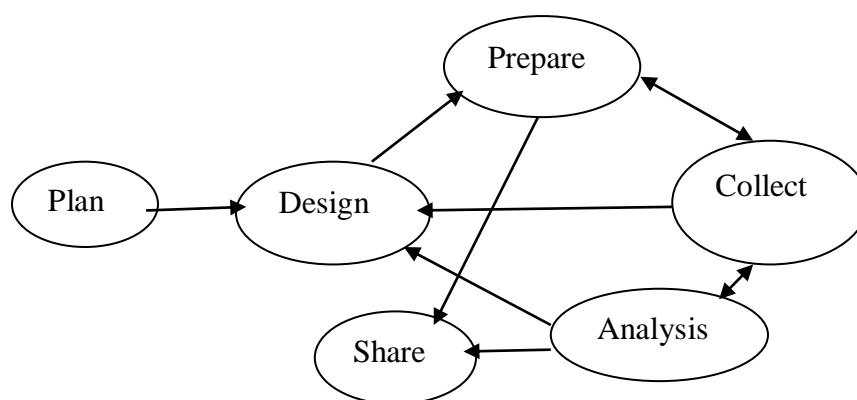
### **Stages of Information Collection**

Purposive case selection gave me confidence and the ability to collect the most relevant data and information (Edmonds & Kennedy, 2012). This was a purposive selection of research participants because I wanted participants who had first-hand experiences of engaging themselves in the social audit process. Once I identified research participants jointly with the coordinator of SAC, I started informal meetings and discussions with them to build a good rapport so that they could answer my questions openly and candidly.

Initially, I planned to conduct an interview with each participant in a day. But during data collection, I had to conduct three rounds of interviews with each participant and four rounds of interviews with two participants (parents), who took more time than expected to open up and share their experiences and impressions frankly. Guiding

questions I had framed in consultation with my thesis supervisor were seminal threads during interviews and discussions with them. In a nutshell, I employed a six-stage case study process (Yin, 2009) of planning, designing, preparing for the field, collecting information, analyzing and finally sharing the finding and enriching it by integrating additional guidelines from the wider methodological literature (Baskarada, 2014).

Figure 1. Case Study Process



Adopted: Yin (2009)

### **Planning**

Clearly defining the research problem is the most important step in the entire research project (Baskarada, 2014). Thus, I kept revising my research questions many times to ensure that there were not discrepancies between the case study method and research questions. One of the key points during the planning stage is to ensure that no mismatch exists between the research questions and the case study method (GAO, 1990). The planning stage focuses on identifying the research questions and other rationales for doing a case study, deciding to use the case study method (compared with other methods), and understanding its strengths and limitations (Yin, 2009). To ensure that my research questions perfectly matched the methodology, I discussed my research questions and the methodology with professors and peers at the university. I revised it many times

with their input and feedback. Therefore, during this stage, I ensured that my research questions properly fit into the case study method and research purpose.

### **Designing**

According to Yin, the design state should focus on defining the unit of analysis and the likely cases to be studied, developing theory/propositions and identifying issues underlying the anticipated study, and identifying the case study design (single, multiple, holistic, embedded). During this stage, I defined my unit of analysis. Though single unit, my cases are multiple because I interviewed six different stakeholders of a community school. Unit of analysis is what the case is-for example, an event, a process, an individual, a group, or an organization (GAO, 1990). A community school was a unit of analysis during my study and different participants in the social audit process were my cases. I ensured that my research design properly links research questions to the research conclusions through the steps undertaken during data collection and analysis. The design phase helped me maintain a careful balance between knowing more about less and less about more (Gerring, 2024). I paid extra attention to finalizing guiding questions to make sure that they help me dig out more about what is less known and explore less about what is already known about experiences of participation in the social audit process.

### **Preparing for field**

During this stage, , as a researcher, I made myself sufficiently familiar with the study domain to understand the main concepts and theoretical/methodological issues relevant to the study. I focused on developing my skills as a case study researcher, developing a case study protocol, conducting a pilot case, and gaining relevant approvals (Yin, 2009, as cited in Baskarada, 2014). During this preparation phase, I also



reconfirmed why the case study was being done, what evidence was being sought, what empirical variations could be anticipated and what constituted supportive or contrary evidence. Guiding questions were contextualized through interviews with a participant from another school to assess whether these questions were relevant and adequate to gather the right information from my research participants. The contextualizing approach helped me identify any relevant issues in the case study design and endeavor to address any such issues before starting the information collection stage. Contextualization of guiding questions helped me revise information collection plans concerning both the content of data and the procedures to be followed. Testing guiding questions through a preliminary interview was like a “dress rehearsal” that showed the productivity of the interview and its proximal length (Kotzampopoulou, 2015). I tested guiding questions with a participant in the field initially. This helped me foresee if my guiding questions would be enough to capture the information that my research questions wanted. With inputs from the field, I revisited some interview questions to make them more specific and context-specific. It also gave me an idea of how long the interview would ideally go in the field.

### **Collecting Information**

During this stage, I collected relevant data from multiple sources and interviews, and reviewed documents and archival records. As Yin states, this stage involved following the case study protocol, using multiple sources of evidence, creating a case study database, and maintaining a chain of evidence. To facilitate interviews (semi-structured), I used guiding and probing questions based on my research questions. Semi-structured or focused interviews (Dane, 2010) allowed my research participants to be

flexible in coming up with their perspectives. According to Daymon and Holloway (2002), semi-structured interviews can be more flexible and allow the researcher to understand better the perspective of the interviewees understand the view of the interviewees. Using semi-structured interviews and discussions allowed me to refocus the questions or prompt for more detailed information if something interesting emerged during the information collection stage. I also recorded their interviews with consent from the participants and field notes, which helped me transcribe text, capturing everything that was discussed. I properly stored audio recordings and transcriptions and revisited those times and again during the coding, categorizing and thematizing process to make sure that everything discussed was properly captured.

### **Analysis and Sharing**

According to Yin, analysis of collected information relies on theoretical propositions and other strategies. It considers and employs analytic techniques, explores rival explanations, and displays data (facts) apart from interpretations. Indeed, qualitative analysis has been described as the most difficult and the least codified part of the case study process (Eisenhardt, 1989). During analysis, I extracted abstract concepts from each unity of analysis and linked these concepts to the theoretical foundations of a theory of participation (Challies et al., 2017). As Perry (1998) states, prior theory should guide the entire data analysis process that consists of examining, categorizing, tabulating, or otherwise recombining evidence to draw empirically based conclusions (Yin, 2009). According to Marriam, the analysis stage is a process of making sense of data which consists of consolidating, reducing and interpreting what was said and what the researcher has seen and read. I transcribed collected information, coded, categorized, and

thematized later. On the basis of this, I made interpretations connecting them with a theory of participation. I also followed Stake's perspective of categorical aggregation of information analysis leading to natural generalization and correlating the findings with the theory.

During the sharing stage, as Yin (2009) suggests, I defined my audience, composed textual and visual materials, displayed enough evidence for a reader to reach my conclusions and reviewed and re-wrote until done well. I shared my first draft with my university supervisor and also submitted the second draft incorporating comments received on the first draft. I was also sensitive to drawbacks such as potential overgeneralization, inadequate interpretation, unintegrated narrative, and results not adequately related to research questions while sharing with the academia.

### **Ethical Consideration**

Ethical standard is very important in research. All of us consider ourselves ethical, not perfect perhaps, but more ethical than most of humanity (Babbie, 1983 as cited in Berg, 2007). Thus, as a researcher, I took care of ethical issues in every research phase. Voluntary consent was sought from the participant before interviews were conducted. I explained the purpose of my research and their participation in the process. I treated my research participants respectfully and told them they could withdraw their participation from the research process anytime.

### **Confidentiality**

Before conducting interviews, I ensured that their identity and confidentiality would be kept confidential because the researcher, as a human instrument, should always respect others' privacy (Gonzalez, 2000). During the research process, I also paid proper attention to gender, cultural diversity and social norms and values to maintain harmony in

society. Since academic writing is also an ethical process, all discussion points, checklist, questionnaire and other relevant documents were finalized in line with academic integrity and ethics (Robson & Resser, 2002). During meaning-making, I analysed the information carefully to avoid misinterpretations and false information. I was so deeply engaged with my participants in the field that I could properly analyse, interpret and make meaning out of every piece of data I saw, heard and gathered. With due respect to the policies and research guidelines of Kathmandu University, I was extra cautious to my research participants' gender, cultural, ethnic and religious diversity and sensitivities.

### **Credibility**

Every researcher should maintain integrity in the research process. Credibility and trustworthiness are considered to qualify any research as an academic undertaking. Thus, ensuring credibility is one of the important factors in establishing trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba as cited in Shenton, 2004). Efforts were made to maintain credibility in every step of this research process. To ensure credibility right from the start, I shared my guiding questions with professors at the university and incorporated their feedback and comments. In addition to interviews with the participants, I also reviewed archival records and physical artifacts (Green, Camilli, and Elmore, 2006) to generate rich data and information. I also studied many relevant journal articles, research books and online materials to broaden my understanding of the topic. I spent a long time in the field to build rapport with participants so that I was able to generate rich information. Such prolonged engagement in the field provided an opportunity to me as a qualitative researcher to be self-immersed in the participant's worldview (Bitsch, 2005). My self-immersion into participants' worldviews allowed me to understand the context and

minimize the possibility of distorted information because of my presence as a researcher in the field.

Credibility in qualitative research comes from thick description (Tracy, 2010). I provided a thick description through in-depth illustration that explicates culturally situated meanings (Geertz, 1973) and abundant concrete detail (Bochner, 2000). I have articulated every detail of my field experience and interaction with my participants to make my analysis and description rich, concrete and abundant. To generate a thick description, I have captured the voices, feelings, actions and meanings (Ponterotto, 2006) of interactions and discussions with my participants. After the first draft, I debriefed my research participants about the findings to make sure that there were no distortions and false information. This debriefing helped me correct some information and enrich my data by adding more that was not taken care of.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter details the research methodology and justifies why I chose the case study methodology. I adopted Merriam and Stake's case study methodology with an interpretative research paradigm. Semi-structured interviews and discussions with my research participants were this study's key information sources. In addition to interviews, I also reviewed reports of social audits, observed the social audit process, and various other reference materials (published and unpublished) on the topics that were relevant to me. I employed a six-step case study process of Yin with details from preparation to sharing research findings with intended audiences. Also, discussions on ethical standards were mentioned in this chapter.

## CHAPTER-IV

### PARTICIPANTS' EXPERIENCES: WEAVING NARATIVES FROM THE FIELD

In this chapter, I have introduced my research participants. They are all from one community school where they served as members of the Social Audit Committee and have experience taking part in the social audit process. I have used pseudo names for my participants to maintain privacy and confidentiality. The findings presented here are based on in-depth interviews, discussions, observations and document reviews on the social audit. This chapter details how their experiences of participation in the social audit process are influenced by context and power dynamics among various stakeholders.

#### **Information is Power: A Case of SAC Coordinator**

Ram Hari Paudel, a chair of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) of Saraswati Higher Secondary School located in Budanilkantha municipality, is also designated as ex officio coordinator of the social audit committee of the school since 2017. His two children study in the same school in grades eight and nine. He has completed a bachelor's degree in management from Tribhuvan University and works in a noodles manufacturing company as a sales supervisor. He was born and brought up in the suburbs of Kathmandu and possesses a penchant for social work and services. Often in his free time, he loves doing some social work in the community. He reflects that maybe because of his volunteering nature, SMC nominated him as chair of PTA and SAC's coordinator. He claimed, "*ma dherai sakriye chu, maan ma lageko kura bhhana daraudina, ali ali samajik kam pani garchu, tin barsa dekhisamajik parikshan samiti ko samyojak chu*" (I

am active locally, don't hesitate to say whatever I feel. I also engage in some social works. I am working as coordinator of SAC for the last three years). He shared that a social audit is being organized by the school every year, complying with the government guidelines by inviting all the parents and stakeholders. He reflected on stakeholders' participation in the process, saying, "*samajik parikshanpratibedan sarbajanik garne belama sabai lai bolauchau tara thorai abhibhabak haru matrai aaunu huncha*" (we invite all the parents when we publicize social audit report but only a few of them come in the program). Review of Social Audit reports of the last three years also demonstrates around 60 participants ( out of 335 total students) on average participated in the social audit process.

He spoke so fluently during interviews that I found it difficult to note down. I had to ask him to pause and speak slowly. Speaking slowly after my request, he made a claim that the low presence and participation of parents and stakeholders in the meeting was also due to their own priority of ensuring livelihood through daily work. He argued that the majority of the parents are from a low socioeconomic background whose livelihood depends on the daily work they do. Many parents are daily wage earners. Participation in meetings, including social audit events at school and taking part in the discussion is a matter of least priority for them. He argued, "*samajik parikshan samiti ma bhayeka parents haru pani nityamit baithak ma aunuhuna, sir hamro kam ma janu parcha bhanu huncha*" (even parents serving as a member of the social audit committee also don't participate in meetings regularly, they often say they have to go to work).

He candidly reflected that the school did not have a culture of organizing social audits and engaging stakeholders in the process before 2017. He sounded vocal in saying

that social audits used to be more ritual than just preparing a report. The school has now tried to move beyond rituality and formality in organizing the event. He shared, “*ma samyojak bhaye pachi karyabidi le bhane anusar karyakram garne ra sarokarwala haru lai bolaune gareka chau*” (After I became the coordinator of SAC, I started conducting social audit as per the guidelines and inviting the stakeholders in the process). There was no culture of participation in social audits three years back. Still, though not to the expected level, the number of stakeholders participating in social audit report discussion events has been increasing yearly. The social audit reports show full compliance with the existing social audit guidelines with number of participants increasing slowly.

For him, the growing number of participants indicates the stakeholders’ growing familiarity with social audit and culture of participation. The increasing participation trend, though gradually, has made him more optimistic about positive outcomes in the future. He further said, “*pratek barsa karyakram garne ra sabai sarokarwala haru lai niyमित bolauye parampara lai nirantarata dine ho bhaye samajik parikchan lai ajhai prabhakari and sahabhagitamulak banauna sakincha*” (if we continue organizing social audit every year and invite stakeholders regularly, we can make it more effective and participatory).

He further argued that part of the problem in full and active participation of stakeholders in the social audit process also lies in the school’s collective inability to make stakeholders understand why the social audit is important and how it can benefit them. He added, “*samajik parikshanma sahabhagi bhayera afna kura haru rakhna sakincha, bidhalayaka dherai bisayama sunna ra prasna garna payincha bhanera pani sikauna jaruri cha*” (There is also a need to teach people that they can put their opinions



and even raise questions on school-related issues and learn many things by participating in social audit). His experiences of having conducted the social audit for the last three years showed that social audit should not be taken just as an activity and added burden. Observation of the social audit process also indicated that many of the participants especially students and parents remained passive and only listened to what was shared in the event by the school authorities. Inadequate knowledge and lack of access to information about issues in school made them more passive in the process rendering them to more spectator's role.

He further explained that to make the social audit more interactive and fruitful, from the beginning, we should be careful in making a selection of stakeholders on who should be included in the committee and ensure their participation in the report disclosure event. He shared that once the date for the report-sharing event is finalized, the responsibility is up to the school management to send invitations or inform the stakeholders of the program. His experience shows that the school doesn't have a culture to follow up with the invitees to ensure most of them participate in the program. He further argued that inadequate preparation on the part of the school had been one of the reasons for their difficulty in making sure that all the stakeholders actively participate in the process and contribute to discussions for the betterment of the school.

### **Political Influenc: A Case of Ward Chair**

Ramesh Dahal is a local politician elected as chairperson of the municipal ward office where the school is located. So, he has served as ex officio member of the SAC since he was elected to ward office in 2017. Since he was elected as chair of the ward office through local elections in June 2017, he has been participating in the social audit

and different SAC meetings of the school as an ex officio member of the committee. He confided during our discussion that he has been very vocal and critical of the issues in the school for their improvement. He assigned his critical nature to his leftist political ideology, decade-long active political background, and his commitment to improving things in the community schools of his ward.

His engagement and participation in school affairs have been more intense because the new constitution has devolved the education sector up to the secondary level to the jurisdiction of local government. He explained, “*naya sambidhan ra kanun le pani hami jasta jana nirbachit pratinidhi ko bidhyalaya byabasthapan, anugaman lagayet ka bisayama sakriya bhumika khojeko cha*” (new constitution and law has demanded active role of elected representative like us in school management and monitoring). In my query about how he has experienced participation of stakeholders in SAC committee meetings and social audit events, he argued.

*“In terms of number, very few of them participate. Sometimes only three or four of us participate in SAC meetings. Sometimes parent members ask us to call SAC meetings either in the morning or evening because they go to work in the daytime. We speak and put our opinions in SAC meetings very frankly, but student and parent representatives hardly speak and give opinions. I think maybe due to their lack of information and knowledge about social audit and other school issues; they remain silent most of the time”.*

He also shared that they encourage other committee members to talk and express their thoughts during SAC meetings. “Despite our encouragements, they hardly speak and talk. They only listen to what we say and discuss in SAC meetings and in report

sharing program of social audit.” He recalled what other parent representatives said when he once encouraged them to talk and actively participate in meetings, “*hajur haru lai dherai thaha cha school ko barema, hamilai thaha chaina, ke bolne ra*” (sir you know more about issues in school, we hardly know anything so what to speak). Observation of the SAC meetings and report sharing event demonstrated that parents and student representatives did not speak much. They patiently listened to what others spoke and shared. During observation of social audit event, I also found ward chair, teachers, SMC members most active in terms of sharing and exchanging their ideas openly compared to parents and students. Political influence of ward chair and teachers was more evident and stronger during discussions in SAC meetings and report sharing event.

He further argued that many parents who send their kids to the community school in his ward are destitute with miserable socio-economic status. For them, hand-to-mouth is a big problem; if they spend one day in school, they might not have money to feed their children in the evening. Most of the parents work as laborers and wage earners on construction sites, so even public holidays don’t matter to them, he shared. He recalled a day last year when he requested the parents of the SAC committee to compulsory participation in a social audit report sharing event. They said, “*sir mata kam ma janu parcha, ekdin kam ma gayena bhane, balbacha lai palna garu hunchaand dainik kharcha byabasthapan garna garo huncha*” (sir I have to go to work, if I miss one day’s work, it is difficult to feed our children and maintain daily expenses).

He further reflected on the nature of the participation of stakeholders in social audit events. Some participants, especially schoolteachers and even some parents who are educated and comparatively well-to-do, try to dominate the discussion. His experiences

over the last three years showed that a small group of stakeholders become more dominant during meetings and discussions while a significant chunk of stakeholders only listen and become passive participants. He shared last year's social audit process where more than 80 people participated but only six or seven spoke and actively participated. Those who spoke were comparatively more educated and socially influential persons. He further reflected, "*samajik, arthik and saichik hisabale tulanatmak rupma ramro abastha bhayeka abhibhabak haruko sakriyeta and sahabhagita maile ramro payeko chu*" (I have felt that parents coming of comparatively better socio-economic and educational background do actively participate and contribute to the discussion than others). Observing social audit process and some of the SAC meetings explicitly demonstrated that teachers, ward chair and stakeholders coming from good socio-economic background dominated the discussions by actively participating and contributing to the discussion.

He further argued that mere physical presence or participation of parents and stakeholders should not only be counted or measured as participation in the true sense. We must create a situation or empower, educate and inform them in such a way that they should be in a position to critically discuss and raise issues during such meetings and discussions. When stakeholders taking part in social audits find themselves confident enough to talk and discuss equally, that is what we may be longing for. So, to me, he added, active participation of stakeholders in social audit is lacking and this is where we have to adequately inform and sensitize them for informed and active participation in the days ahead. Document reviews (social audit reports) and observation of the social audit event and SAC meetings clearly indicated the lack of active participation of parents, students and other stakeholders with a domination of a small group of stakeholders.

### **Unequal Power Relations: A Case of Teacher Representative in SAC**

Deepak Bhujel has been teaching English at the secondary and lower secondary level. Since he is a teacher representative on the SAC committee, he is one of the potential research participants for me. He was teaching at a school in Dolakha before he got transferred to a school in Kathmandu ten years ago. On participation of stakeholders in the social audit process, he said that participation of parents and other stakeholders in the process had been very ritual and more of a formality to an extent. His opinion was that they invited different representatives in SAC meetings as per the law's requirements. To an extent, physical presence has been ensured but active participation and discussion among participants don't take place substantively.

He argued that existing hierarchical social structure and unequal power relations have been created by education, financial status, social position and ethnicity, among others. According to Batliwala (1994), different degrees of power is sustained and perpetuated in society through social divisions such as gender, age, caste, class, ethnicity, and race and through institutions such as the family, religion, education, and law. He added, "*hamro skulma padne sabai bidhyartha ka abhibhabak haru garib ra bipana barga ka chan ra uniharu samajik parikshan jasto karyakram ma bolna ra sahabhagi huna dhak manchan*" (Parents of our school are very poor and are from disadvantaged communities, and they hesitate to speak and actively take part in programs like social audit). Review of social audit reports and observation of the social audit event showed that physical presence of stakeholders was ensured. In the social audit reports, only few questions especially raised by teachers, ward chair, SMC members were mentioned. This

also indicates that other stakeholders (parents and students) did not contribute to the discussion actively.

Recalling his past experiences, he shared an incident. Last year, when he asked parent and student representatives to speak up, one of the participants explicitly stated, “What to speak in front of people like you who are more knowledgeable”. He analyzed the part of the issue behind their hesitation and a kind of inferiority they demonstrated is also due to unequal power relations among participants. His observation was that the socio-economic status of the participants had been one of the most important driving forces behind (dis)encouraging active participation and engagement of stakeholders in the social audit process. He further argued, “*garib abhibhabak haru afno dainiki kasari chalaune bhanne kurama badhi kendrit rahanchan ra samajik parikshan ma sahabhagita hune bisaya uniharuko prathamikata mai pardaina*” (poor parents have a problem of daily livelihood so the issue of participating in social audit doesn’t become their priority). Observation of the different SAC meetings and social audit event manifested unequal power relations among stakeholders created by asymmetry in access to information and unequal socio-economic status of participants. Unequal power relations among stakeholders in the social audit event made a group of participants active and stronger while other group of participants especially parents and students remained passive and silent during the discussions.

He shared that the school did not have a participation culture in the past. Previously schools used to conduct a social audit in more like a ritual manner to fulfill legal requirements to avoid possible hassles in an annual budget release. Stakeholders like parents, teachers and students were not engaged and consulted in the process. Simply

a report used to be prepared and submitted. But unlike in the past, now, school has been regularly organizing social audits and even engaging stakeholders in the process. This culture of participation and engaging stakeholders in social audit has made some impression among stakeholders that social audit is a platform for participation and discussion but participation in a real sense is yet to happen. “*Bigat tin barsa dekhi hamile niyamit social audit garchau ra sabai lai bolauchu, pahile bhanda sahabhagita ali ramro bhayeko cha*” (we are regularly organizing social audits for the last three years, invite stakeholders and their participation is improving now).

He also added that until stakeholders fully don't realize the importance and value of social audit, it will be difficult to make their participation interactive. In my question of what other reason could be behind stakeholders' passive participation, he highlighted an important issue of inadequate knowledge and information about social audit among stakeholders. Inadequate information and knowledge among participants also created barriers to actively participating and contributing to the discussion during SAC meetings and report-sharing programs. Stakeholders like us are already familiar and knowledgeable about the social audit in the school. So, we actively participate in the discussion. But, he further argued that others can't participate in an equal manner because they lack relevant information.

In my question about how members are nominated for the social audit committee and how participants are selected for report sharing program, he shared that SMC forms the committee. Members are picked up not from the perspective of who can actively participate, give time, and contribute to the discussion. But it happens ritually. The selection of members in SAC is still ritual and conventional. In a reflective way, he also

argued that systematic representation and selection of participants and stakeholders in both SAC meetings and report sharing program is a more important aspect that is missing.

He shared that the school administration never lists participants who could be more active and beneficial to the program. It has a tradition of inviting them on an ad hoc basis as all stakeholders have the right to participate in the event. *“Kaslai samitima rakhda ra pratibedan sarbjanik karyakram ma bolauda badi sakriya bhumika dekhauna sakne lai chanera bolaune ho bhane sahabhagita ramro huncha”* (participation can be improved only if we choose active people as members in the SAC and those who can contribute to the discussion in report disclosure program). He explicitly added that there is no practice of selecting active and vocal stakeholders in the committee and for the open discussion. The mode of participation and selection of stakeholders, has been conventional, which has limited opportunities for two-way engagement in the social audit process. He further claimed.

*“To promote active participation of all stakeholders in the social audit program and SAC meetings, we have to rethink right from the beginning when we begin nominating members in the SA committee. We should give up ritually inviting people and ensure that at least some active stakeholders participate in the process. For this, we may need to revisit our ad hoc representation style and make it more systematic and structured in terms of representation. Unless we can showcase that social audit offers structured opportunities for two-way engagement, it ends up being the passive and one-way flow of information”.*



### **Listening Without Questions: A Case of Student**

Sharmila Tamang studies in class 10 and serves as a student representative on the social audit committee. She is very hard working and often comes with merit during examinations. She lives with her parents in a two-room flat after her family moved to Kathmandu in 2016. Her family had a small piece of land and a house in Sindhupalchowk. She says that her life was going simply as the village life had to. She was studying with her younger sister in a village in Sindhupalchwok. It is five hour-walk's away from the district headquarters. It was in April 2015 when things took a turn for the worst. It was in 2015 when their house, along with many others, collapsed because of the devastating earthquake. After the earthquake, life in the native village became difficult and her parents decided to move to Kathmandu for a better livelihood and good education for their two daughters. She shared that her parents work as daily-wage laborers to earn a modest living and manage expenses for their education.

It was in 2018 when her English class teacher one day informed her about her selection as a member of one of the committees at the school. She did not know what the committee was all about and what it was for. She also did not ask further about it. She guessed that the committee would talk about matters and issues related to school and their education. One day, after the class, when she was preparing to go home with other friends, her English teacher told her that the committee would be meeting tomorrow at the school where she should participate. The next day, she was asked to participate in the meeting at 2: pm in one of the school rooms. As instructed, she went to the meeting room and saw that other people were also invited. They waited for some time until all invitees came and with a brief introduction, the meeting began with seven or eight people, she

recalled. The meeting discussed different issues of the school, and she attended six or seven meetings that year. Only after a couple of meetings, she knew that the meeting was talking about something called a social audit. Since 2018, she has been serving as a student representative in the committee headed by the chair of the PTA.

She shared her experiences participating in SAC meetings and social audit report sharing event, saying, “*sir harule dherai chalfal garnu huncha meeting ma, ma praya sunerai baschu*” (Teachers discuss issues most of the time in the meeting but I keep listening to them mostly). She pointed out the reason behind not speaking up and not contributing to the discussion in the meeting. It was her lack of knowledge and information about the topic being discussed. “*Bisaya bastu ko barema thaha bhaye ta bolna skinthyo tara hamilai thaha nai hudaina*” (I could speak if I knew about the topic, but I hardly know about it), she said. She has been invited to every meeting but hesitated to talk in front of the teacher and other members. They, she thinks, possess good education and knowledge. “*Samitima woda adyakchya ani aru sir haru pani hunu huncha, uha haru hami bhanda dherai jaanne hununucha, tesaile bolna sankoch lagcha*” (Ward chair including others are in the committee who are more knowledgeable than me so I feel a kind of hesitation to speak in front of them), she recollected her experiences of participation. She is very inquisitive by nature and throws questions during class. She also wanted to ask questions and even provide her thoughts in SAC meetings but her lack of information and knowledge about social audit and other issues in school often discouraged her from speaking on equal footing with others.

She shared that there were more people in the social audit report-sharing program last year than the previous year. According to her experiences, since the school has been

organizing a social audit every year, the trend of people participating in it has been increasing. Still, there are only a few people who contribute to the discussion and actively take part in it. *“Afno bichar rakne ra chafal ma bhag li ne bhanda pani dherai jaso sunne sahabhagi haru huhunucha”* (majority of them listen rather than put their opinions and thoughts in the discussion), she said. The social audit report disclosure program has been a kind of one-way information flow to the participants. Observing the social audit event also gave me an impression that there was one-way information flow which is only a kind of sharing. During one social audit event which lasted for two-hours, less interaction and discussion was observed.

She critically observed that stakeholders come and listen to the information shared by the committee, but it lacks interaction and discussion. *“Karyakram lai antarkriyatmak banaunu parcha jasto lagcha, pratibedan ma sahabhagi haruko sujhab ra bichar pani lina sakiyo bhane ramro huncha jasto lagcha”* (I feel that program should be made interactive, and it will be good to have their inputs and suggestions on the report). There is no proper system for sending separate invitations to all the stakeholders about the program. Students are requested to tell their respective parents about the program. At last year’s social audit event, her parents could not come because they had to go to work. Many parents can’t attend school programs like social audits because they are busy with their work which is more important to their family than the activities that take place in school. She further shared,

*“Last year, I did not participate in SAC meetings twice when the meeting was normally convened after school time. Since I am the eldest daughter, I ought to prepare food and look after my younger sister, for which I have to go home soon*

*after school. My parents are daily wage-earners who work till late in the field and construction sites and come home late. Looking after the household chores is also my responsibility”.*

### **Inequities Vs Shyness: A Case of Parents**

Neema Sherpa is a parent representative in SAC. Her five-member family lives in a three-room house with a tin roof. It is built on land rented from the local owner. Her family grows seasonal vegetables, as one of the livelihood options, on the rented land and sells them to make money. Neema and her husband migrated to Kathmandu in 2006. As a newly married couple, they feared discrimination and social outcasts because of inter-caste marriage in a remote village of Solukhumbu. Her family has lived in the current place for the last six years. Besides her work as a daily wage earner and a part-time farmer, she also serves voluntarily as a parent representative in the SAC and tries to engage herself in school affairs. Her three children study in the same community school where she represents the social audit committee.

She was informed of her selection to the committee through a letter from the school two years back. She did not know what social audit was and her role in the committee. She participated in a couple of SAC meetings but did not understand anything. She said, *“ma ta ke pani boldina thiye, sunerai matra basthe”* (I did not speak anything, only listened). She further shared that the lack of information about issues being discussed made her silent and a shy participant in meetings. *“Ke ko barema kura hudaicha bhanne thaha nabhaye pachi bolna ra afna kura rakhna garho hudo raicha”* (I felt difficult talking and expressing my opinions when there was no information about what was being discussed).

In one of the meetings last year, the SAC coordinator asked her to share what she thought about the school and what should be done to improve things at school. But, she could not speak up. A feeling of hesitation restrained her from speaking up in front of the educated and socially influential persons during meetings and discussions in SAC. She said, “*samitima hune aru sir haru dheri padhe lekheka hunu huncha, uwa haruko agadi karsi bole, dar lagcha*” (other committee members are highly literate and educated, I fear speaking in front of them). She said if she had enough information and knowledge about social audit and other aspects of school, she could also participate in the discussion during the social audit and be in a position to make her active participation.

Neema assigns her inability to participate actively and influence discussions in the social audit process to inadequate knowledge and information about what social audit is and how it will benefit the parents and school at large. She said, “*samajik parikchan le ke faida garch school lai ra hami jasta abhibhabak le kina yesto karyakrm ma bhag linu parcha bhane kurako janakari bhayo bhane hamro sahabagita aja ramro huncha*” (how social audit benefits school and empowering parents like us on why we must participate in the such program will help make the participation fruitful). For Neema, inviting stakeholders to the program would not be enough to make it effective. Review of social audit reports and existing guidelines demonstrates that incentivizing their participation with an empowerment on how the social audit process is beneficial to schools and stakeholders. It is equally important to make social audit participatory and interactive.

Her participation in social audits has been more frequent than in the past. Every year, school organizes at least five to six SAC meetings and a bigreport-sharing program. Neema is getting more familiar with the nature of meetings and participation. But

occasionally, her family's financial condition makes her unable to participate. She said, *"hami kam gare ra jayan palnu parne mache hau, ekdin kam garna najada dherai ghata huncha, sadhai meeting ma jana sakidai na"* (we have to make a living by working days, if we miss a day's work, we lose money so can't participate on a regular basis). Neema and her husband are the only breadwinners in the family. , The absence of a day in work, only aggravates their financial woes and makes their livelihood difficult. She further argued that some members of the committee are well-to-do socially and financially. So, they don't have to bother about their bread and butter. They also can spare enough time for participation. But people like them will have to think twice about attending school meetings and events, even on Saturdays and holidays.

Kanchi Bhujel is another parent representative in SAC. She works as a street vendor selling fruits and vegetables to make a living and manages her two kids' household and education-related expenses. Her two children study in the same school. The eldest son studies in class eight while the youngest child studies in class six. She is the sole breadwinner in the family because her husband, who used to work as a daily wage laborer, suffered a stroke two years back and is partially paralyzed with a physical inability to work. Though he is recuperating slowly, it would take years for complete recovery to be in a position to partake in his wife's sole contribution to ensuring subsistence for the whole family. After he got bedridden, the responsibility of family subsistence solely depended on her. It made their survival even more challenging. As a member in the SAC, she is often invited to participate whenever social audit-related meetings and other discussions occur. She has experience attending some meetings and mega event of social audit where the report is shared and discussed with a larger group of

stakeholders. Observation of the social audit event and some SAC meetings also gave me impression that stakeholders especially parents and students remained shy during the discussions. Though they were much inquisitive about the social audit, they showed shyness and hesitation to speak and contribute to the discussion. Shyness and inactive participation of stakeholders in some way contributed to make the social audit a ritual practice.

She took part in meetings and discussions in the initial days as a SAC member without knowing what social audit was and why her participation mattered. After participating in a couple of meetings and deliberations, she strongly felt that her presence or absence in the discussion would not make any substantial difference. So, she made up her mind to give up attending meetings. She said, “*ma bhayera nabhayera chalfal ma khasi farak hudaina jasto lagyo ani janai choddiye*” (I gave up going to meetings and discussions with a feeling that my presence or absence doesn’t make any difference). In my concern over how such a feeling came up in her mind, she argued that in a couple of meetings, she had no other options then to become a good listener. She did so without understanding completely what was being discussed and how it would benefit her. She said, “*sir haru le chalfal garnu hunthiyo, ma sunera basiranthe kina bhane je bisayama kura hunthiyo ma bujdina thiye*” (teachers and others used to discuss actively. I had only to listen because I hardly grasped what was being discussed).

The other reason behind her decision to avoid participation was her family’s poor financial situation. If she didn’t sell vegetables and fruits even for a day, that would make her four-member family starve. She doesn’t have enough income to maintain food stock even for a few days. She said, “*ekdin kam garena bhane bhok bhokai basnu parch ani*

*kasari hami jasto manche le samaya dina sakchau* (if I did not work for a day, I have to stay hungry and how can people like us spare time for meeting). The foremost priority for Kanchi Bhujel was income and ensuring enough food for her family's survival and other things come only second priority. She further argued that schools should select people who can spare time and even understand issues to have better participation and discussion. She did not know why and on what basis the school administration chose her as a parent representative in SAC. She further argued. *"We don't get anything for participation. This is for free and for social support and volunteerism. So, in my opinion, while selecting people for participation in social audit meetings and discussions, the school should pay attention to who can contribute enough time without worrying about his/her family's financial issues. And only people with some good education and who can understand issues better must be chosen to have more effective participation and interaction in social audit"*.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter introduced the cases of my research participants. Their experiences of participation in the social audit were collected through in-depth interviews, observation of social audit event and SAC meetings, document reviews and discussions from the field. The narratives from research participants indicate how their experiences of participation in the social audit are influenced to varying degrees by the local context and power dynamics in the society.



## CHAPTER-V

### CONTEXT AND POWER DYNAMICS INFLUENCING EXPERIENCES OF PARTICIPATION

Discussion in this chapter highlights four layers of influence on participation created by institutional participatory culture, the institutional design process of social audit, power dynamics created by knowledge/information asymmetry and socio-economic (resource asymmetry) conditions. The discussion in this chapter looks at how these four layers have influenced (negatively or positively) the experiences of participation in the social audit process. With the help of institutional context and power relations, the barriers and enablers for participation have been discussed. This chapter has been guided by my two research questions: "How do stakeholders feel their participation in the social audit process?" and "How do power dynamics influence stakeholders' experiences of participation in social audit process?"

#### **Institutional Participatory Culture: An Enabler for Participation**

The institutional culture of participation, is one of the contexts that have a significant influence on how stakeholders participate in the process. The prevalence of participatory culture at the institutional level fosters enabling environment that significantly shapes positive feelings among stakeholders that their participation is being respected and valued in the process. In-depth interviews with my research participants demonstrated a positive relationship between the institution's culture of participation and stakeholders' inner interest in participating in the process of social audit. Whether it is SAC meetings or the social audit report sharing program, stakeholders' motivation and

participation experiences were substantially influenced by the school's three years of participatory approach towards organizing the social audit.

Research participants explicitly shared that their urge to participate and engage in the process profoundly depended on how the institution motivated and persuaded them by creating a conducive and enabling environment for participation by conducting social audits annually. The enabling environment was strongly tied with the institution's continuous efforts to organize social audits every year by inviting stakeholders and encouraging them to participate in each SAC meeting, including the report-sharing program. Participants unanimously agreed that the school was regularly conducting a social audit for the last three years, invited all stakeholders and even asked them to share their impressions and opinions about the school, its teaching learning environment and other crucial issues. Participants shared this institutional culture of participation as one of the foremost enabling conditions that keeps them motivated to participate in the social audit. It even encourages them to share their opinions.

Research participants said that social audit at the school was just a formality and a ritual practice until three years back. The motive behind organizing a social audit was intended just to meet the policy requirement and not to put the school in a difficult situation by failing to conduct a social audit. Social audit until three years back was more limited to paperwork rather than making it happen in real settings in the presence of stakeholders. Student and parent representatives serving as members in SAC said that they had neither heard nor knew anything about the social audit. They were not aware of its process and its significance three years ago.

Their experiences of having participated in SAC meetings and in social audit events over the last three years made them feel that the participatory culture of social audit commenced by the school was the most praiseworthy initiative. The previous culture of limiting the social audit just to paperwork gave way to participatory social audit culture when a new coordinator to SAC was selected in 2017. , The coordinator of SAC, said, “Unlike the past, I wanted to change things and conduct a social audit in the presence of all stakeholders so that we can really improve things in school”. The initiative to implement social audit as a participatory platform was also pushed forward by a local government representative, a ward office chairperson is representing as a member of the SAC committee. Ramesh Dahal, a ward office representative in SAC, said.

*“Managing and monitoring education up to secondary level is under local government's jurisdiction. So, I discussed with other members to organize social audit publicly in participation of the concerned stakeholders so that it could be used as a platform to discuss and deliberate on school issues for betterment.”*

So, the culture of participation at the school started gaining momentum, with the social audit being organized in the presence of stakeholders for the first time in the school's history. One of the research participants shared that she realized the importance of social audits and felt more interested and motivated to participate in the process when the school began organizing social audits on a regular basis in the presence of parents and other stakeholders. So, the continuation of social audit for the last three years has been instrumental in creating impressions and realizations among stakeholders that they have to participate and contribute to discussions in whatever way they can. Ram Hari Paudel,

coordinator of the SAC says, “school’s initiation of doing a social audit regularly every year has sent a positive message among the stakeholders that social audit is also an important and regular event where their participation and inputs are required.”

Moving beyond the ritual practice of organizing SAC meetings and social audits was a step forward in institutionalizing a culture of participation at the school. Yet the active participation of stakeholders in the process is still in question. It may require years of effort when there will be a situation for all the stakeholders to actively engage in the process. One of my research participants said that the number of stakeholders participating in social audit report dissemination program has been increasing yearly. This is an indication of stakeholders’ growing acquaintance with social audit and the culture of participation. The increasing trend of participation in SAC meetings and social audit report-sharing programs has generated more optimism about the active participation of stakeholders in years to come.

For the last three years, the school has tried to put in place a culture of participation with experiences of engaging the stakeholders in the social audit process. The existence of this institutional participatory culture has been an enabler for stakeholders participating in SAC meetings. Deepak Bhujel, a teacher representative in SAC, said, “we are regularly organizing social audits for the last three years, inviting stakeholders and their participation is improving now compared to each previous year”. He confidently assigns the improving nature and culture of participation in social audit to institutional initiation of organizing social audit in a participatory manner that commenced three years ago. Reflecting on the school’s previous experience of organizing social audits ritually, Deepak Bhujel added, “the school did not have a participation

culture in the past. Previously school used to conduct a social audit in a more ritual manner only to fulfill legal requirements to avoid possible hassles in the annual budget release”.

His critical and candid reflection was an explicit indication that reducing any event or program like the social audit to a mere ritual or formality was detrimental and in a way deprived stakeholders of their right to participate. Previously, the school did not engage and consult stakeholders like parents, teachers and students in neither SAC meetings nor the social audit report dissemination program. Simply a report would be produced and submitted to the higher authority as a part of the administrative requirement without engaging anybody from outside the school. One of the research participants shared.

*“Unlike the past, the school has been regularly organizing social audits and efforts are being made to engage more and more stakeholders in the process. This culture of participation and engaging stakeholders in social audit has made some positive and encouraging realization among us about social audit as an opportunity for participation and deliberation on school-related matters and issues”.*

Neema, one of the research participants, said that her participation in the social audit had been more frequent than in the past. Every year, school organizes at least five to six SAC meetings and a bigreport-sharing program. Because the school has been organizing SAC meetings regularly, participants like Neema have got a chance to get more familiar with the nature of meetings and participation in the process. Yet there is a

long way to go to make their participation active and vibrant in deliberation and expressing opinions on issues being discussed.

, The institutional culture of participation, has enabled the condition for engaging different stakeholders in SAC meetings and report-sharing program report. All research participants unanimously echoed that only inviting stakeholders to the program was not enough to make social audit really effective. Incentivizing their participation with an empowerment on how the social audit process would benefit school and stakeholders alike was equally important for making social audit interactive, participatory and deliberative. Reflections and sharing by my research participants demonstrated a strong correlation between the school's participatory culture and stakeholders' motivation to participate in different phases of social audit from SAC meetings to report dissemination program.

### **Poorly Designed Social Audit Process: A Barrier for Effective Participation**

Inadequately designed and poorly planned processes can be a barrier, whereas better planned and well-thought design process of social audit creates enabling environment. It is an enabler for stakeholders' active engagement and participation. Institutional design refers to the basic protocols and ground rules for participation which are critical for the procedural legitimacy of the process itself (Ansell & Gash, 2008). Interviews and discussions with research participants explicitly highlighted gaps in framing these basic rules and protocols of the social audit process. Ground rules and protocols include proper communication channels, selection of key stakeholders, systematic follow-up, inclusive representation of stakeholders, basic sensitization of why

social audit is being organized, how stakeholders' role matters in the process, and what kind of participation is expected, among others.

One of the basic protocols includes proper communication with the stakeholders. This is required because effective communication helps stakeholders prepare adequately. From there, they will be in a better position to meaningfully participate in the process and reap the benefits of participation. It was found that prior communication to members of SAC and other stakeholders was completely missing. Interviews with student and parent representatives in SAC showed that they did not know why the school selected them as members of the SAC. They were unaware of the objectives of the social audit process and many other dimensions and questions such as; what are the SAC members' basic tasks and responsibilities? Why are they selected and what are they supposed to perform? Sharmila Tamang, one of the research participants, said, "When I participated in the first SAC meeting in 2018, I hardly knew anything being discussed in that meeting. Only after a couple of meetings did I know that the meeting was talking about something called social audit and different school issues". She also did not know why she was selected as a member out of many hundred students in the school.

This underscores an important gap in the design process of the social audit committee. Insufficient communication about the objectives and their expected role as members of the committee was found to have obstructed them from meaningful and constructive participation. Research participants argued that stakeholders need to be adequately sensitized on what is expected of them in the social audit process as part of the basic ground rules to enable them to participate effectively. Setting clear ground rules and process transparency are important design features (Busenberg, 1999) in any

engagement process. Some level of transparency and openness in terms of objectives and communication was deficient during the formation of SAC and the selection of certain members from a wide range of similar stakeholders. Thus, the fundamental question of how transparent and open the design process has been in terms of participant selection and orientating them on basic objectives is a part of the social audit design process. It has drawn the least attention from school authorities and SAC members as well.

The basis for the selection of members and stakeholders in the process is another basic protocol of the design process. The selection of members in the SAC has been found to be more ritual and conventional. Social audit guidelines mention who should be represented in the committee. The school complied with the guidelines in terms of the selection of stakeholders. But it seems without any further thought and planning on whom to select so they can best articulate the issues during discussions. As a parent and student, everybody has a right to be represented in the committee but the school's preparation for making the best choice out of them was not well thought and planned.

Ram Hari Paudel critically argued that inadequate preparation and planning on the part of the school during the selection of members in the committee and report-sharing events had discouraged stakeholders from actively participating in the process. To make the social audit more interactive and fruitful with the active participation of stakeholders, one of the research participants critically highlighted, "from the outset, school administration and SAC should be careful in making the choice of stakeholders on who should be included in the committee on the basis of their activeness. The school has to ensure that key stakeholders compulsorily participate in the report disclosure program".



It was found that once the date for the report sharing event was finalized, the responsibility was up to the school management to send invitations or inform the stakeholders of the program. Schools did not have a system to follow up on the invitees to ensure that most of the invited stakeholders would participate in the program. Lack of a follow-up system and preparation on the part of the school was a reason behind the school's failure to ensure all stakeholders participated in the process and contributed to discussions for the betterment of the school. Even if some stakeholders participate in the report-sharing event, they remain mostly inactive and do not contribute to the discussion.

All research participants argued that inactive and silent participation was largely due to the school's inadequate efforts to empower and sensitize stakeholders on why they should actively participate in the process. Basic sensitization and empowerment of stakeholders on why and how their participation can make a difference in the process is also an important dimension of the institutional design process of social audit. Ramesh Dahal, a ward office representative in SAC, reflected on what kind of participation in social audit is a need of the day and how school should move ahead in days to come.

*“Mere physical presence or participation of parents and stakeholders should not only be counted or measured as participation in the true sense. We must create a situation or empower, educate and inform them in such a way that they should be able to critically discuss and raise issues during such meetings and discussions. When stakeholders taking part in social audit find themselves confident enough to talk and discuss equally, then that is what we may be longing for. Active participation of stakeholders in social audit is lacking and this is where we have to inform and sensitize them for informed participation”.*

As a rule, SMC forms the social audit committee and members are picked not from the perspective of who can actively participate, spare enough time and contribute to the discussion. Suppose some preparation and plan can be made beforehand on who can be the best representative in committee. In that case, it will not only help select vocal stakeholders but also improves the quality of discussion that takes place. One of the research participants argued that the school lacks systematic and inclusive representation of stakeholders in both SAC meetings and report-sharing programs. During the formation of SAC, inclusion has been maintained to an extent but in report dissemination events, only a few women and people from other ethnic and social backgrounds participate. All my research participants said that an inclusive selection of key stakeholders and participants would help make the social audit process more interactive, vibrant and deliberative.

Reflecting on the nature of participation and the school's present modus operandi, Deepak Bhujel said, "school administration never makes any list of participants who could be more active and beneficial to the program but has continued a ritual tradition to invite participants on ad hoc basis as all stakeholders have right to participate in the event". All research participants agreed that participation can be improved only if active people as members in the SAC and those who can contribute to the discussion in report disclosure program are selected purposefully and deliberately.

To make social audit participatory and interactive, the school should institutionalize a well-thought and planned design process for a social audit, right from selecting members in the committee to the inclusive representation of key stakeholders in the report sharing program. But the lack of institutional system and practice at the school

while selecting active and vocal stakeholders in the committee was found to have reduced social audit practice to a mere ritual in terms of active participation and two-way constructive engagement among stakeholders. The mode of participation and selection of stakeholders in the SAC and report-sharing program was conventional. It provided significantly limited opportunities for two-way engagement in the social audit process. According to Nabatchi and Leighninger (2015), conventional participation is the most common form of direct participation because it is entrenched in most of our public institutions. It is often required by law with pre-set agenda concerning who should be represented in the process.

, The inadequate institutional design process of social audit has made social audit practice a ritual activity because of insufficient two-way engagement and passive participation. Some level of physical participation of stakeholders was found to be ensured both in the SAC and report sharing program but it was a kind of conventional participation without much discussion and engagement. Representation of stakeholders must be made strategic based on their relative levels of interest, influence and benefit (Ansell & Gash, 2008) rather than a complete representation of stakeholders in the social audit process. Therefore, the institutional design process of social audit was not properly thought and planned because only a few influential stakeholders actively participated in SAC meetings and in the social audit report sharing program. The majority of the stakeholders were passive, only receiving the information without any input and thoughts.

### **Knowledge Asymmetry: Grounds for Unequal Participation**

Knowledge asymmetry among stakeholders creates a barrier to equal participation. There is a strong negative correlation between knowledge asymmetry among stakeholders and their chances of participation in the social audit process on equal footing. In my participants' case, their knowledge, understanding and information about social audit and other technical issues of the school significantly varied among stakeholders taking part in SAC meetings and the report sharing program. In terms of knowledge and information about the social audit, I found two classes of people in SAC—a group of members like coordinator, ward chairperson, and teacher representative who were more knowledgeable and empowered, and other groups of people comprised student and parent representatives who hardly knew anything about social audit and other technical aspects.

The level of asymmetry in terms of knowledge between these two groups of representatives created unequal power relations among them. These unequal power relations among stakeholders because of the information and knowledge gap were found to have a to negatively influence on the participation of all stakeholders on equal footing. A group of participants felt less empowered and informed about the social audit. Consequently, their participation and engagement in the process became more ritual in terms of sharing inputs and exchanging knowledge equally. Participation and engagement in any context lead to better-informed decisions only when there is a wider range of information inputs and knowledge exchange among stakeholders in the process (Challies et al., 2017).

During SAC meetings, representatives other than the parents and students dominated the discussion. Ramesh Dahal, a ward chairperson and an ex officio member in SAC, comes from a leftist political background and is a very influential and vocal participant. He shared his experiences of participation during SAC meetings. He said, “knowledge and information play a very crucial role in any discussion and interaction. If we have information about the issue being discussed, we can make our presence felt by contributing to the discussion. In each meeting, only two or three members dominate the discussion and contribute much. Others just listen and remain silent.” Apart from SAC meetings, as a ward chairperson, he has been engaging in different school activities, which has allowed him to familiarize himself with different issues in the school. His socio-political background has given him a comparatively better-privileged status on which other stakeholders feel unequal power relations with him. Some parents and student representatives think he is more informed and knows about social audits and other issues. He recalled one parent representative saying in one of the SAC meetings when he encouraged them to speak. “Sir, you know more about issues in the school; we hardly know anything about them, so what to speak”, he recalled.

Stakeholders with good education and socio-economic background feel more empowered and confident than others. Ramesh Dahal’s reflection sheds light on the dimension of unequal power relations in the social audit process. His reflection on the nature of participation of stakeholders in social audit events was that some participants, especially teachers and even some parents who are more educated and comparatively well-to-do, dominate the discussion. Suppose some stakeholders do not have the capacity, organization, status, or resources to participate, or to participate on an equal footing with

other stakeholders. In that case, the collaborative process will be prone to manipulation by stronger actors (Gray, 1989).

His experiences showed that a small group of stakeholders become more dominant during meetings and discussions while a significant chunk of stakeholders only listen and become passive participants. He shared last year's social audit report sharing program where more than 80 people participated but only six or seven spoke and actively participated. For him, inadequate knowledge and information disempower the people and the whole process fails to be participatory in the real sense. The same was the case with parent and student representatives in SAC meetings and the social audit report sharing program. He said.

*“We speak and put our opinions in SAC meetings very frankly, but student and parent representatives hardly speak and give opinions. I think due to lack of information and knowledge about social audit and other issues of the school, they remain silent most of the time.”*

Deepak Bhujel, another research participant, said that the existing hierarchical social structure is another factor that has created different classes of people based on education, financial status, social position, ethnicity and unequal power relations among them. He recalled one of the SAC meetings last year when he asked parent and student representatives to speak up and express their opinions. One participant answered “what to speak in front of people like you who are more educated and respected”. This statement indicates underlying unequal power dynamics among stakeholders representing different strata of the society. The part of the inactive participation in SAC meetings and social audit report sharing program lies in hesitation and a kind of inferiority they have

demonstrated because of unequal power relations between the so-called educated and uneducated class of stakeholders. One of the research participants said.

*Lack of information has created a barrier to participate actively and contribute to the discussion during SAC meetings and report sharing program. Stakeholders like us are already familiar and knowledgeable about social audit and different pertinent issues in the school, so we actively participate in the discussion. Still, others can't do so in an equal manner because they lack relevant information and knowledge agenda under discussion.*

Students and parents, whom I interviewed, shared that they had to limit themselves to the role of mute spectators and silent listeners. The reason behind their silence and passive participation was that they did not have knowledge and information about issues in school and the social audit itself. Lack of access to information was also a cause behind their passive participation. In the case of Sharmila Tamang, a dearth of relevant knowledge and information about the topic being discussed made her unable to speak up and contribute to the discussion in SAC meetings most of the time. She shared her experience, “teachers discussed issues most of the time in meetings, but I kept listening to them mostly”. But she demonstrated confidence that if she knew about the issue sufficiently, she could equally participate and contribute to discussions.

Sharmila Tamang has been invited to every meeting. But, she is often felt hesitant to talk in front of the teacher and other members who, she thinks, possess good education and knowledge. “Ward chairperson including others are in the committee who are more knowledgeable than me, so I feel a kind of hesitation to speak in front of them”, she recollected her experiences. She is inquisitive by nature and throws questions during

class because she is familiar with her subjects and knows well where to probe questions to the teachers. She is also inquisitive with an interest in raising her thoughts in SAC meetings, but her lack of information and knowledge about social audit and other issues in school often discourages her from speaking on equal footing.

Neema Sherpa, a parent representative in SAC, said she was a shy and silent participant all the time. Her shyness and passivity were also her poor knowledge and information about social audit and other educational aspects of the school. In one of the meetings last year, the SAC coordinator asked her to share her thoughts and perspectives on the school, but she could not utter a word. A feeling of hesitation was smoldering inside her that demotivated her from speaking up in front of educated and socially influential persons. She said, “Other committee members are highly literate and educated, I fear speaking in front of them”. Her hesitation and fear were also tied to unequal power relations because some stakeholders came from a better socio-economic class and had sufficient knowledge about issues happening in the school.

Not only in the case of Neema, but other participants also held similar perspectives. My research participants, especially parents and students, shared a common perspective that their incapability to participate and influence discussions in social audit process actively were because of inadequate knowledge and information about what social audit is and how it is going to benefit the parents and school at large. Thus, they commonly emphasized the need to empower the stakeholders like them on what social audit is, why it is important for them to participate and how it will benefit them. So, empowerment and sensitization of certain groups of stakeholders, they shared, was



equally vital to equip them with the required knowledge and information about various dimensions of social audit to enable them to active participation.

It was found that asymmetrical knowledge among stakeholders restricted them from having interaction, discussion and deliberation equally. Knowledgeable stakeholders played a more dominant role during discussions, while others with no information were only recipients. Even during the social audit report sharing program, the participation lacked collaboration and emphasized a one-way flow of information -from officials to citizens- with no channel for feedback and no power for negotiation (Arnstein, 1969). Lack of information and resources disempowers stakeholders with no power for negotiation and makes certain groups of stakeholders complacent with a feeling that they have just participated (ibid). Thus, the lack of equal knowledge and information among stakeholders on social audit and other technical issues of the school disempowered and discouraged them from participating actively in the process.

### **Resource Asymmetry Creates Unequal Power Relations**

There is a strong correlation between participants' resource asymmetry (socio-economic status) and the chances of less meaningful and inactive participation. If there are significant power/resource imbalances between stakeholders, important stakeholders cannot participate in a meaningful way (Ansell and Gash, 2008). Thus, the dimension of resource asymmetry based on socio-economic status and unequal power relations created by it appears more instrumental in exploring and understanding stakeholders' experiences of participation and the barriers they face while engaging in the social audit process.

In the case of Kanchi Bhujel, she could not afford to participate in SAC meetings and report sharing programs because of her family's poor financial status. She is the only

breed winner in her family, with the responsibility of managing the educational expenses of her two kids and ensure livelihood for a four-member family. She took part in meetings and discussions in initial days as a SAC member without knowing what social audit was and why her participation mattered. After participating in a couple of meetings and deliberations, she strongly felt that her presence or absence in the discussion would not make any substantial difference. So, she made up her mind to give up attending meetings. She said, “I gave up going to meetings and discussions with a feeling that my presence or absence doesn’t make any difference”.

She argued that she had no other options in a couple of meetings than becoming a good listener without understanding completely what was being discussed and in what way it was going to benefit her. Kanchi Bhujel had to give up participating in SAC meetings because if she didn’t sell vegetables and fruits even for a day, that would make her four-member family starve. She doesn’t have enough income to maintain food stock even for a few days. She shared, “if I don’t work for a day, I have to stay hungry and how can people like us spare time for meetings”. Thus, the first priority for Kanchi Bhujel was to make an income and ensure that enough food is available for her family’s survival. Other things, such as participation in SAC meetings and other school events were only a second priority. She highlighted that schools should select people who can spare time and even understand issues to have better participation and discussion. She did not know why and on what basis school administration chose her as a parent representative in SAC.

My other research participant Neema Sherpa also faced difficulties participating in SAC meetings and the report sharing program. Though she tries to make her participation more regular, sometimes she can’t make it. The reason behind this is her

family's poor financial resources and status. She said, "we have to make a living by working days, if we miss a day's work, we lose money, so we can't participate in social audit events regularly". Neema and her husband are the only breadwinners in the family, so the absence of a day at work only aggravates their financial woes and makes their livelihood even more difficult. She further argued that some members of the committee are well-to-do socially and financially, so they don't have to bother about their bread and butter, and also can spare enough time for participation. Still, people like us will have to think twice about attending meetings and events at school, even on Saturdays and holidays.

A student representative in SAC shared that during last year's social audit event, her parents could not participate because they had to go to work. She also had experiences of skipping some SAC meetings because of her familial responsibilities. She shared.

*"Last year, I did not participate in SAC meetings twice when the meeting was normally convened after school time. Since I am the eldest daughter, I ought to prepare food and look after my younger sister, for which I have to go home soon after school. My parents are daily wage-earners who work till late in the field and construction sites and come home late. Looking after the household chores is also my responsibility."*

This is not only the case with Sharmila's parents. The majority of parents who send their kids in school are from the low socioeconomic background. Many parents can't attend school programs like social audits because they are busy with their work which is more important to their family than the activities that take place in school.

Deepak Bhujel, one of the research participants, opined that the socio-economic status of the participants had been one of the most important driving forces behind (dis)encouraging active participation and engagement of stakeholders in the social audit process.

Deepak Bhujel critically reflected, “poor parents have a problem of daily livelihood, so the issue of participating in social audit doesn’t become their first priority”. In terms of resources and financial condition, unlike parents and students, other stakeholders in SAC are comparatively better off and socially influential. In the case of Ramesh Dahal, resource asymmetry among stakeholders was disempowering for some, whereas well-to-do stakeholders felt more active and dominant. Power and resource imbalances among stakeholders affect the incentives of groups to participate in the collaborative process (Gunton & Day, 2003). He said, “I have felt that parents of comparatively better socio-economic and educational backgrounds do actively participate and contribute to the discussion than those with poor financial resources and economic status”.

Though the school has put in place a culture of organizing social audits in a participatory manner over the last few years, the engagement and participation of stakeholders, especially parents, despite its gradual increase, was not to the level expected. Ram Hari Poudel, the coordinator of SAC, opined that the reason behind the low presence and participation of parents and stakeholders in the meeting was also due to their priority of ensuring livelihood through daily work. , The majority of the parents, are from low socioeconomic background in the school whose livelihood depends on the daily work they do. Many parents are wage earners and are also not educated. Participation in

meetings, including social audit events at school and taking part in the discussion, was the least priority for them.

Ram Hari Poudel critically reflected, “even parents serving as members in the social audit committee also don’t participate in meetings because they often say they have to go to work”. Thus, in the case of my research participants, it was found that when stakeholders don’t belong to symmetrical socio-economic backgrounds, it creates unequal power relations between them and hence further disempowers a group of participants from actively participating and engaging in the process. Among the research participants, especially parents and student representatives, felt more disempowered to participate in the social audit process than the teacher, coordinator of SAC and ward office chairperson. They are comparatively better off in terms of financial resources and social status.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter discussed how institutional participatory culture, social audit design process, and power dynamics created by knowledge and resource asymmetries had influenced stakeholders’ experiences of participation in the social audit process. The meaning derived from the above discussion on institutional contexts and unequal power relations among stakeholders created by knowledge and resource asymmetries played both as an enabler and as a barrier. The participatory culture adopted by the school was an enabler for stakeholders’ participation. However, the lack of a proper design process of social audit in terms of communication and systematic, inclusive representation of key stakeholders was a barrier to meaningful participation of stakeholders in the process.

The meaning from field stories is that institutional contexts of participatory culture and the social audit design process also helped promote physical participation to

an extent. But, it was more a ritual representation of stakeholders without active participation and two-way collaboration. Similarly, knowledge and resource asymmetry among stakeholders played the role of a barrier for some participants, especially students and parents, while other groups of stakeholders, especially teachers and those with good education and better socio-economic background, were empowered groups with better experiences of active and vocal participation in the social audit process.

The summary is that poor access to information and inadequate knowledge about social audit and other school issues was a major hindrance to active participation. Similar was the case for those coming from poor socioeconomic strata of the society who could not afford to participate in the social audit process because of their livelihood problems. The overall meaning of the discussion above is knowledge and resource asymmetry among participants was a barrier to interactive and consultative participation in different stages of social audit practice.

## CHAPTER-VI

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Chapter five has answered my two research questions. Based on the information collected on my research questions, this chapter now links the previous chapter to find the emerging insights and lays out the discussion connecting it with appropriate literature using my chosen framework of Theory of Participation. Theory of Participation (Challies et al., 2017) presents that the institutional context of participatory culture and design process exerts significant influence on how stakeholders engage and participate in any interaction or discussion affecting the outcomes. Similarly, the theory brings to light that unequal resources and knowledge among participants also create uneven power relations among stakeholders. These unequal power relations created by knowledge and resource asymmetry reduce opportunities for equal and active participation of some stakeholders in the process. Asymmetries in power relations give some more privilege while some participants feel less empowered for constructive and meaningful participation. Challies et al. (2017) suggested that participation is influenced by various contextual factors and power dynamics. An organization's participatory culture, the former experience of engagement and inclusive and participatory institutional design process of any event itself, acts as an enabler or barrier for stakeholders' participation in the process. Participation can't be independent of institutional context and local power dynamics. Using the Theory of Participation as a guiding theoretical instrument, I could highlight how institutional context and power dynamics performed as barriers or

enablers for stakeholders in the social audit process. For the discussion, my research participants have been placed at the center as suggested by the Theory of Participation and their experiences of participation are influenced by context. Also, unequal power dynamics have been analyzed and discussed in this chapter.

### **Emerging Insights**

Institutional participatory culture, design process of social audit, knowledge and resource asymmetry identified by my research has been instrumental in influencing (positively or negatively) the experiences of participation of my research participants. In my case, the school's participatory culture of organizing social audits regularly has been an enabler for the participation of stakeholders. The formation of a social audit committee and the conduct of a social audit report sharing program every year has created a positive impact on the minds of stakeholders. This has been an instance of an enabler for participation. They felt that social audit is a regular part of the business at school that happens every year, where they have to participate and contribute to the discussion. However, there have been some instances of barriers to active participation. Their experiences of actively contributing to the discussion and interaction in various SAC meetings and report-sharing program was found to be constrained and influenced by different other dimensions such as poor design process, lack of systematic selection of participants, socio-economic background, level of knowledge/information, including unequal power relations perpetuated by ethnicity, financial status, education, access to information, among others.

In addition to interviews, document reviews and observation also showed



that the institutional design process of the social audit was a kind of ritual practice. , The selection of members in the SAC and participants in the report sharing program, was made in a ritualized practice. It was conventional, like picking up members and participants as stated in the guidelines and policy. Lack of systematic follow-up on the invitees and no proper communication to participants about the nature of the program was some barriers. Also, stakeholders were not selected from the perspective of who could afford to participate and contribute to the discussion. It performed as a barrier to the active and interactive participation of stakeholders in the process. Parents and student representatives in SAC meetings and also in the report-sharing program was just silent listeners. Also, during my observation of the social audit report sharing event, I found only a few teachers and stakeholders dominant during discussion while the majority of them present were just listening. This was a kind of one-way information flow and lacked collaboration and interactions among stakeholders.

Parent and student research participants shared that their lack of collaboration and active participation in SAC meetings and report dissemination program was due to their lack of knowledge and information about the discussed issues. Due to a lack of access to information and knowledge about social audit and other technical aspects of education and the school, parents and students felt more disempowered and less known to contribute to the discussion actively. Other groups of participants that comprised teachers and other stakeholders like the SAC coordinator, and ward chair appeared more dominant and active during discussions and meetings. Thus, information and knowledge asymmetry among participants of

the social audit was a barrier to the active participation of parents and student representatives. Other stakeholders like the PTA coordinator, teacher representative and ward chairperson felt more confident and active in meetings and discussions because of their long exposure and a comparatively higher level of information and knowledge about social audit and other technical aspects of school. Another reason for parents' silence in meetings was also a fear that if they share their opinion and anything, it might sour their relations with schoolteachers and SAC coordinators, which could have negative implications on their kid's education and behaviors toward them.

Like the asymmetrical level of information and knowledge among participants, resource asymmetry (also referred to as socio-economic status) was a barrier to participation in the process. This was found to have a strong negative influence on students and parent representatives compared to others. In SAC meetings, teachers, coordinators and ward-chairperson came from good socioeconomic backgrounds compared to parents and student representatives. Their poor socio-economic background limited their participation in social audit because they had other pressing priorities for livelihood rather than taking part in social audit and other school affairs. Because of other daily needs and livelihood issues, they had to skip meetings and give up participation. My research participants accepted that poor financial status was detrimental to their participation in the process because they afford to attend meetings and discussions at the cost of their family survival and other priorities. Thus, the asymmetrical financial status and background of stakeholders of social audit perpetuated a kind of unequal power relations among

them, making them unable to participate equally in the process.

### **Further Into My Insights**

The context and unequal power relations identified by the research, have influenced the participatory experiences of stakeholders in the social audit process, from SAC meetings to report-sharing events. This section depicts how these dimensions and layers have influenced the experiences of my research participants by linking them with relevant literature.

#### **Institutional Participatory Culture: A Stimulus for Participation**

The institutional participatory culture and design process of social audit positively impacted the participation of stakeholders in the process. It was found that the school's participatory culture of conducting a social audit on a regular basis was an enabler for the participation of the stakeholders. The formation of a social audit committee and the conduct of a social audit report sharing program every year has created a positive impact on the minds of stakeholders because it provided a forum for them to at least participate in the process. The participatory institutional culture was an enabling factor for participation. My research participants experienced that social audit is a regular part of the business at school that happens every year, where they must participate and contribute to the discussion.

However, their contribution to the discussion during the social audit process was more limited. It lacked a two-way exchange of ideas and information. Sharing of rights and responsibilities and other crucial information with the citizens and stakeholders is the most important step toward legitimate citizen participation in terms of active and meaningful participation (Arnstein, 1969). My research

participants, especially student and parent representatives, shared that they were not informed of their roles and responsibilities in the social audit process, which constrained their engagement and participation more meaningfully. The School's practice of organizing social audits for the last three years in a way made the participants familiar with the process. But, the lack of information sharing and empowering them on their responsibilities equally deprived them of opportunities for active participation in the social audit.

Challies & et al. (2017) state participation of stakeholders in the social audit process is influenced positively by the contextual dimension of the organization's participatory culture. My research participants felt that institutional participatory culture during social audit acted as enablers for stakeholder's participation in different phases of the implementation process. Thus, the participatory culture adopted by the school was an enabler for stakeholders' participation, while the lack of proper design process of social audit in terms of communication and systematic, inclusive representation of key stakeholders was found to be a barrier to ensuring meaningful participation of stakeholders. Institutional contexts of participatory culture and the social audit design process were enabling factors that helped promote physical participation. But, it was more a ritual representation of stakeholders without active participation and two-way collaboration.

### **Ritualized Participation: The Rules of the Game**

The practice of social audit was found to be more of a ritual process in terms of participation. Social audit practice has been found explicitly contravene the provisions of the social audit guidelines from a participation perspective. Research participants shared

that existing social audit guidelines don't incentivize the carrot and stick approach. Devoid of such an incentive structure has encouraged parents and students to be less interested in participating in the social audit process, making participation more ritualized without consultation and two-way exchange of ideas and thoughts. As Arnstein (1969) calls it, a ritual form of participation is a kind of 'manipulation' by power holders who invite participants in the process. They are rubberstamped as committee members who are hardly consulted and heard in the process.

As the research participant, a social audit committee member, a teacher, observed different dimensions of why participation has been ritualized. Lack of technical knowledge on how social audit needs to be conducted was one of the reasons for ritualizing participation, engagement and consultation during the social audit practice in community schools. Their observation shows that school authority and social audit committee members lacked adequate orientation and capacity development on the social audit procedure from citizen participation and collaboration perspectives.

Audit committee members shared that they did not have any training and orientation on the technical aspect of social audit. They have no idea why citizen participation should be active and consultative. The other reason, as a student and parent representative shared, is that lack of knowledge and sensitization on technical and procedural dimensions of social audit created barriers to making the social audit practice participatory, engaging and consultative. According to Arnstein, this kind of participation is a kind of tokenism where social audit guidelines allow the citizens, especially have-nots, to participate in the process and advice but decision-making power remains with the school authorities. Lack of awareness building on the technical aspect of the social audit

committee members contributed to ritualizing the social audit practice. When there is no sufficient technical knowledge among the implementers of accountability tools, implementation of such accountability tools runs the risk of being limited to mere formality or rituality (WB, 2012). Thus, the participation of citizens and stakeholders in the social audit process has run the risk of being ritualized and set game rules.

### **Participation without Mutual Collaboration and Consultation**

Social Audit aims at improving transparency and accountability with the active participation of the key stakeholders by creating bottom-up demand for governance (McNeil & Malena, 2010). Social audit as an accountability tool also has the potential to catalyze collaboration and consultation among stakeholders for improved governance. My research participants shared that their lack of knowledge on the topic and issues about the school discouraged them from the collaborative and consultative approach in the social audit process. Physical participation was ensured to an extent that substantially limited collaboration and consultation among the participants. Participation and engagement in any context lead to better-informed decisions only when there is a wider range of information inputs and knowledge exchange among stakeholders in the process (Challies et al., 2017).

Parent and student representatives as research participants shared that neither social audit was taken and understood as a tool to provide a forum among stakeholders for interaction and collaboration on different issues relating to school affairs, nor was it practiced as a mechanism to further the collaboration for improved governance in the community school. The SAC coordinator did not seem to fully internalize the potential of social audit as a tool to improve governance, accountability, and transparency through a

deliberative and consultative process. My observation of the social audit process also triangulated with the experiences of my research participants, as the majority of the participants remained passive and silent during the process. Parents and students present in the social audit event did not deliberate on the issues. The reason behind non-participation in terms of collaboration and deliberation was a lack of information/knowledge about the different issues of the school and the entire social audit process.

According to Ansell and Gash (2008), a social audit is a tool of collaborative governance because it provides a forum where teachers, parents, and school management committee can discuss issues collaboratively to find solutions to problems in the teaching-learning environment of the school. However, this potential has remained untapped because of ritualized participation of stakeholders in the social audit process. Research participants shared that ritualized practice of social audit has hindered the meaningful participation of stakeholders, especially parents and students, depriving them of engaging in critical discussion on finding a solution to different issues confronting the school regarding school governance and accountability. Collaborative governance theory (ibid.) reiterates that social audit provides opportunities for critical collaboration among the stakeholders. Interviews, document reviews and observations of the process showed that the institutional design process of the social audit was a kind of ritual practice where stakeholders were not selected from the perspective of who could actively contribute to the discussion. The ritual selection of participants was a barrier to the active and interactive participation of stakeholders in the process.

### **Unequal Socio-Economic Status: A Constraint on Participation**

The unequal socio-economic status of participants was a barrier to

participation in the social audit process. Participants, especially student and parent representatives from poor socioeconomic conditions, had to skip social audit meetings and discussions because of their priority for livelihood. Thus, an unequal social-economic status created unequal power relations among social audit participants. Teacher, SAC coordinators and ward chairpersons had a comparatively better socio-economic background than parents and student representatives. Parents and student representatives' poor socioeconomic status somehow limited their participation in the social audit process because they had other pressing priorities for livelihood rather than participating in the social audit. Because of other daily needs and livelihood issues, they had to skip meetings and give up participation. Power and resource imbalances among stakeholders affect the incentives of groups to participate in the collaborative process (Gunton & Day, 2003). My research participants accepted that poor financial status was a barrier to their participation in the process because they failed to attend meetings and discussions. Thus, asymmetrical financial status and background of stakeholders of social audit perpetuated a kind of unequal power relations among them, making them unable to participate equally in the process.

Most parents who send their kids to the community school are from low socio-economic backgrounds. Many parents can't attend school programs like social audits because they are busy with their work which is more important to their family than the activities that take place in school. Deepak Bhujel, the teacher representative in SAC, shared that the socio-economic status of the participants was an important and crucial dimension behind (dis)encouraging active participation and



engagement of stakeholders in the social audit process. Most parents face daily livelihood issues because participating in social audits hardly becomes a priority for them. Regarding resources and financial conditions, unlike parents and students, stakeholders like teachers and SAC coordinators are comparatively better off and socially influential. They can afford to participate in the process with active engagement and contribution. Resource asymmetry among stakeholders was disempowering for some stakeholders. In contrast, economically, better-off stakeholders were found to be more active and dominant during the discussion in various SAC meetings and the social audit process.

Neema Sherpa, a parent representative in SAC, shared that she remained a shy and silent participant all the time. Her shyness and passivity were also her poor knowledge and information about social audits and her poor economic condition. In one of the meetings, she was requested by the SAC coordinator to share her thoughts, but she could not say anything. A feeling of hesitation was smoldering inside her that demotivated her from speaking up in front of socially influential person like the teacher and ward chair. Participants will be much more likely to engage in earnest deliberation when alternatives to it—such as strategic domination or exit from the process altogether—are made less attractive by roughly balanced power (Fung & Wright, 2001). She shared that her hesitation and fear were also tied to unequal power relations because some ward chairs and teachers belonged to a better socio-economic class and were also knowledgeable about issues happening in the school. My research participants, especially parents and students, unanimously shared a common perspective on their incapability to actively participate and

influence discussions in the social audit process because of their unequal power relations due to poor socioeconomic conditions.

The findings discussed above reinforce a negative correlation between participants' resource asymmetry (socio-economic status) and their chances of participating actively in the process. If there are significant power/resource imbalances between stakeholders, important stakeholders cannot participate in a meaningful way (Ansell and Gash, 2008). The dimension of resource asymmetry based on socio-economic status and unequal power relations was detrimental to the active participation of stakeholders in the social audit process.

Themes drawn from the findings above infer the meaning that access and lack of access to information among participants largely affected their participation in the social audit process. Empowered and disempowered groups in terms of their access to information in the different phases of social audit implementation had the risk of turning the whole process into a ritual. Domination by a group of participants with good information and socioeconomic status deprived the other disempowered group of participating in the process on equal footing. This was because of unequal power relations among participants created by unequal socioeconomic status and access to information. With these themes, meaning can be drawn that unequal power relations and dynamics among participants negatively affect the whole participation process. When a larger number of participants become listeners, it turns participation into a ritual form, as Arnstein (1969) states, limiting the two-way exchange of ideas and real collaboration and consultation among participants.

## CHAPTER-VII

### SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

This study has explored overlaying research questions of how stakeholders feel participation in social audit and power dynamics shape their experiences of participation in the process. I have tried to answer how stakeholders' participation is influenced positively or negatively by institutional participatory culture, social audit's design process, unequal power relations generated by knowledge asymmetry and socio-economic conditions. I have identified four layers of influence created by institutional participatory culture, design process of social audit, knowledge/information and resource asymmetry among stakeholders. I have discussed with analysis and insight from stakeholders' experiences of participation in the social audit process and the challenges and difficulties they faced during different stages of the process. This final chapter presents a summary of findings and conclusions derived from the participation experiences of the stakeholders in the social audit. This research further explains the implications of the research that adopted a case study methodology to explore stakeholders' experiences of participation in the social audit.

#### **Encapsulation**

This dissertation has presented a case study of six key stakeholders whose individual experiences of participation in the social audit process have been positively or negatively influenced by contextual factors and power dynamics. The

findings have explicitly reflected that participants with little knowledge/information about school issues and those from poor socio-economic backgrounds were not able to participate in the process as actively as teachers and ward chair who are socio-economically better-off. The findings have also opened up new dimensions of participation on how unequal power relations gives some privilege to a group of participants, making them more confident and empowered to participate while depriving other groups of their capacity to participate on equal footing. I took up this issue of participating in the dissertation's social audit process. I started searching for relevant studies and literature. I did not find any studies on the participation aspect of the social audit. However, scant studies were found on the implementation status of the social audit in community schools of Nepal. This is what and how I got attracted to this issue to further explore.

I stakeholders' participation experiences in the social audit process on the basis of based on how contextual factors of institutional participatory culture and social audit design process, including power dynamics of socio-economic status and knowledge asymmetry, influenced the participatory process in the social audit. With contextual factors and unequal dynamics from the findings, I identified the barriers and enablers for the participation of stakeholders in the social audit process. Regarding my theoretical referent, interpretation of the findings has been undertaken through the lens of a Theory of Participation by Challies et al. (2017).

My research is primarily guided by two research questions which are; (a) How do stakeholders feel their participation in the social audit process? and (b) How do power dynamics influence stakeholders' experiences of participation in the social audit process?

Research participants for this study are members of SAC (two parents, a student, a teacher, a ward chair and a SAC coordinator). I pursued an interpretative paradigm with a case study methodology guided by Marriam and Stake. The main information collection sources were through discussion, semi-structured interviews with research participants, observation, and review of published and unpublished reports and documents.

My research has identified four layers of influence that significantly shaped up stakeholders' experiences of participation in the social audit process. The layers are the institutional context of participatory culture, the institutional context of social audit's design process, unequal power relations created by knowledge asymmetry and unequal socio-economic status of the participants that have influenced (as a barrier or an enabler) the participation experiences of stakeholders in the social audit.

In my case, I found that the school's participatory culture of organizing social audits on a regular basis has influenced the participation positively. It has been an enabler in the social audit process, especially for students and parent representatives. Sharing social audit reports annually amidst a group of people and formulating a social audit committee has generated a positive outlook and perception of stakeholders towards the social audit event and the entire procedure. All research participants unanimously believed that the school's participatory culture and regularity in organizing social audit had been a kind of enabler for encouraging participation. They also unanimously agreed that social audit had been a regular part of the business in their community school that takes place annually as a platform to participate and as an opportunity to contribute to the discussion on school-related

issues.

Rituality of the institutional design process of the social audit was a barrier to the active participation of parents and students. The selection of members in the SAC and the entire social audit process was a ritual practice. In addition to interviews, my observation and review of documents also confirmed the ritualized practice of the social audit process in terms of picking up members for SAC and participants. All research participants agreed that lack of systematic follow-up on the invitees and inadequate communication to participants about the nature of the program was a barrier for stakeholders to actively participate and contribute to the discussion.

Stakeholders were not selected from the perspective of who could afford to participate and contribute to the discussion as a barrier to active and interactive deliberation. Parents and students were mostly silent listeners in SAC meetings and report-sharing programs. My observation of the social audit process confirmed my research participants' experiences. I found that only a few teachers and stakeholders were dominant during discussions while the majority of them present were passive and just listeners. This one-way information flow lacked collaboration and interactions among the stakeholders.

Inadequate knowledge and information about topics being discussed made the participants non-collaborative and inactive during a discussion in SAC meetings and the report dissemination program. Parents and students were more disempowered and less known to actively contribute to the discussion because of a lack of access to information and knowledge about social audit and other aspects of

the school. The other group of participants, the teacher, SAC coordinator and ward chair, said they were dominant and active during discussions and meetings. This was largely due to unequal power relations among stakeholders generated by knowledge asymmetry. It confirms that information and knowledge asymmetry among participants created a barrier to active participation in the process, especially for parents and student representatives. In contrast, stakeholders like the PTA coordinator, teacher representative and ward chairperson appeared more active, dominant and confident in meetings and discussions. They unanimously believed that their high level of confidence resulted from their exposure and a comparatively higher level of information and knowledge about the social audit process and other dimensions of the school. It was also found fear to be another reason behind the silence and inactivity. Parents shared that their meeting silence was also due to a fear that if they shared their opinion and anything, it might strain their relations with the school authority, which could negatively affect their kids' education.

Resource asymmetry (referred to as socio-economic status) among participants was also one of the barriers to stakeholders' active participation in the process. This was found to be a stronger barrier for student and parent representatives' participation compared to others. The teacher, ward chairperson and SAC coordinator came from good socio-economic backgrounds. Parents and student representatives' poor socio-economic background constrained their participation in the social audit process as they had other pressing priorities for livelihood. Participating in the social audit was the least priority for them. My research participants said they were compelled to leave meetings and give up participation

because they work for daily needs and livelihood. They unanimously accepted that their poor financial status was a barrier to participation in the process because they were not in a position to afford to attend such meetings and discussions at the cost of the family's survival and livelihood. To sum up, stakeholders financial insecurity created unequal power relations, which strongly limited their engagement and made them unable to participate equally in the process.

### **Conclusion**

In the social audit process, the research identified four layers of influence that worked negatively as barriers or positively as enablers for participation. The institutional participatory culture enabled parents and students to participate in SAC meetings and the social audit process. The School's culture of organizing social audits on a regular basis created positive feeling and impacts among stakeholders because regularity in conducting social audits provided opportunities for stakeholders to participate in the process, albeit passively or silently. Stakeholders had the impression that it created positive feelings among parents and student participants and that the school authority valued their participation and role in the social audit.

The research found a positive correlation between an institution's culture of participation and stakeholders' motivation to participate in the social audit process. The School's three years of history in organizing social audits positively influenced stakeholders' experiences in the participation process of social audits. Parents and student representatives made a reflection that their urge to engage and participate in the process positively depended on how the school persuaded and



motivated the stakeholders by creating an enabling environment for participation by organizing the social audit for three years. Research participants agreed that the school's culture of conducting social audits every year by inviting stakeholders and asking them to share their perspectives and ideas about the school positively correlated with participation and institutional participatory culture. Thus, the institutional participatory culture as one of the layers was an enabler for stakeholders to take part in the social audit process.

A poorly designed social audit process can be a barrier. In contrast, a better planned and well-thought design process is an enabler for stakeholders' active engagement and participation. Institutional design refers to the basic protocols and ground rules for participation, which are critical for the procedural legitimacy of the process itself. Some gaps in framing these basic rules and protocols of the social audit process were identified. The social audit design process was found not to have taken into account the ground rules and protocols of proper selection of key stakeholders, communication, systematic follow-up, and inclusive representation of stakeholders.

Prior communication to members of SAC and other stakeholders was not adequately made. Parent and student representatives were not informed about why the school selected them as members in the SAC. Lack of sensitization about the objectives of social audit among participants explicitly highlighted the gaps in the design process itself. Inadequate prior communication, sensitization and information sharing among stakeholders as part of the basic protocols of the institutional design process negatively affected the participation. , The poor institutional design process of social audit, is performed as a barrier for parents and students to participate

actively and deliberatively in the process. Stakeholders' sensitization on what is expected from them in the social audit process was an explanatory dimension as a part of setting the basic ground rules for effective and active participation.

Another key barrier to equal participation was knowledge/information asymmetry among stakeholders. A strong negative correlation was found between knowledge asymmetry and stakeholders' chances of participation on equal footing. The level of knowledge/information and understanding about the social audit significantly varied between two groups of participants- one comprising parents and students and the other as SAC coordinator, teacher and ward chairperson. A group of stakeholders like the ward chair, teacher and SAC coordinator were knowledgeable and informed compared to other people- student and parent representatives. This knowledge asymmetry among these two groups of research participants created unequal power relations. A group of participants (parents and students) felt less empowered and less informed about the social audit, limiting their engagement in sharing their ideas, reflections, and opinions on equal footing. According to Challies et al. (2017), participation and engagement in any context lead to better-informed decisions only when there is a wider range of information inputs and knowledge exchange among stakeholders in the process.

Domination of a small group of stakeholders was an apparent phenomenon during meetings and discussions, while the other group remained silent and passive participants. The meaning drawn from this phenomenon is lack of knowledge and information disempowered the participants limiting them to the role of listeners. Inactive participation of a group of stakeholders in social audit meetings was also because of hesitation and a kind of inferiority due to unequal power relations among stakeholders. Students and

parents had to limit themselves to the role of silent listeners due to a lack of information and knowledge about issues being discussed in the social audit. A parent representative often hesitated to share ideas and talk in front of the teacher and other members who, she thought, possessed lots of information, ideas and knowledge.

Resource asymmetry (unequal socio-economic) was a barrier to equal participation of a certain group of stakeholders in the social audit process. If there are significant power/resource imbalances between stakeholders, important stakeholders cannot participate in a meaningful way. The context of resource asymmetry and unequal power relations generated has been a strong barrier for parents and students. At the same time, it has been an enabler for teachers, SAC coordinators and ward chairs to participate in the social audit process.

In the case of parents and students as my research participants, they belonged to low socioeconomic backgrounds whose livelihood depended on menial jobs and daily work. They are wage earners. So, for them, attending SAC meetings, including social audit events at school, was not a priority. Teachers, SAC coordinators and ward chairs who belonged to better socioeconomic status were more comfortable and could afford to participate in the process without worrying about livelihood. My findings explicitly indicate that when stakeholders don't belong to symmetrical socio-economic backgrounds, it tends to create unequal power relations among them. Prevalence of such unequal socio-economic status disempowered a group of participants from actively participating and engaging in the process while significantly leveraging the other group. Parents and student representatives were more reluctant and disempowered to participate in the social audit process than the teacher, coordinator of SAC and ward office

chairperson, who were comparatively better in terms of financial resources and social status.

Barriers and enablers to stakeholders' participation in the social audit process were observed and identified. These range of barriers and enablers have helped identify different dynamics and explanatory factors which were at play to influence the negative or positive overall participation of stakeholders in the social audit process. Those explanatory factors were the four layers of influence created by institutional participatory culture, design process of social audit, knowledge and resource asymmetry among stakeholders, which positively and negatively influenced stakeholders' experiences in the social audit process. The conclusion is that the findings discussed above explicitly demonstrated the conformity with the Theory of Participation by Challies et al., (2017) states that participation and stakeholders' experiences are largely influenced (negatively or positively) by institutional participatory culture, the design process of social audit, knowledge asymmetry and socio-economic context where entire participation process takes place.

### Implications

My research findings have explored the strategies for making active and effective participation of stakeholders in the social audit process. The barriers and enablers have been identified. Therefore, the research has laid out the following future implications:

### **The School Management**

Selection of participants in the social audit process is equally important as it is to organizing the event on a regular basis. It was found that different contexts and power dynamics play an important and crucial role as barriers or enablers for the participation process. While organizing a public event, school management should consider the context and power dynamics so that they can help create an even playing field for all participants to contribute equally to the discussion. While selecting the stakeholders for the social audit process, school management should also consider the socio-economic background of the participants and create an environment where all of them can collaborate and discuss the issues amicably. It is also important for the school management to select participants from the perspective of who can provide time and contribute to the interactions rather than selecting the participants ritually. School management should also consider the fact that collaboration is a very important dimension in the social audit. Therefore, school authorities should create an enabling environment and situation where stakeholders can discuss and make collaborate to resolve issues in the school.

Inadequate sensitization among parents and students about the social audit seems to have made them less interested in participation. I think the lack of awareness among parents and students on why the social audit is important has eroded their interest in participating in the process. A low level of literacy among parents and students, may be one of the reasons that have also made them unable to participate in the process actively. Thus, school management should also sensitize and educate the stakeholders about their roles and responsibilities to make participation effective, active and meaningful.

### **The Policy Makers**

It was found that monitoring and oversight from higher authority were not in place. School management did never feel that they were being monitored by higher authority and any weaknesses in the system could be raised by them. Thus, I found that the lack of monitoring from the higher authority was one of the reasons for the ritual practice of social audit in community schools. The lack of robust monitoring system, has discouraged the social audit committee members from performing a social audit in a participatory process for collaboration. As per the guidelines, social audit should be implemented to collaborate between stakeholders to discuss the issues. So, the policymakers should put in place a robust monitoring system to assess the implementation of social audits and ensure their proper implementation. As periodic monitoring has the potential to ensure proper participation of the stakeholders and effectiveness of social audit practice, policymakers should also create a mechanism to monitor the overall implementation of social audit.

### **The Future Researchers**

The review of the existing literature has shown that there is a lack of studies on the participation of stakeholders in the social audit process. My research has only looked at experiences of participation of stakeholders of a school local in urban areas in the social audit process. Future research can be undertaken to explore the experiences of stakeholders of a school in rural areas who would share their different experiences in the process so that a comparison can be made between the participation experiences of rural and urban stakeholders.

The research has identified enablers and barriers to participation in the social audit process. Future studies can be conducted to identify the impact of these enablers and barriers in other community schools in rural and urban contexts.

### **Final Remarks**

This study has identified different barriers and enablers of participation of stakeholders in social audit process. Equal, effective, and meaningful participation of all stakeholders on equal footing can be ensured if the barriers are properly addressed or mitigated. This research has allowed me to gain an understanding of barriers and enablers for the participation of stakeholders in the social audit process. Through the research, I have deepened my understanding of the research methodology and process and developed my capacity and skills in a qualitative approach for an exploratory study like this. I have enhanced my knowledge, understanding and skills in conducting field research on a personal and professional level. The study has widened my horizons of understanding and perspectives on the dimensions and factors that influence the participation of stakeholders in the social audit process. I will continue to commit myself to disseminating and sharing my findings in a formal and informal settings and context in days ahead.

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## ANNEX-I

### **Guiding Themes for Interview with Student Participants**

Thank you for your acceptance to be a part in this interview. I would like to assure you that all our discussions will remain confidential and your name will not be disclosed, and all responses will be treated with strict confidentiality. Real names will be substituted with pseudonyms.

Demographic information

Date: .....

Interviewee's name: ..... Age: .....

School: Class:

Hometown:

Father's name:

Mother's name:

### **Guiding Themes:**

1. Their education
2. Their schooling
3. Their socio-economic and cultural background of the family
4. Their knowledge of being participated in social audit in previous years
5. How often their school organizes social audit
6. How they got into the Social Audit Committees as members
7. Their knowledge about legal provisions and the importance of social audit

8. Assessment of overall process of social audit
9. As member of SAC, how many times they meet to discuss matters
10. Are they asked for their inputs on the matters being discussed?
11. Their knowledge of social audit and its contribution to the school
12. Any barriers in having active participation in the social audit process
13. Their knowledge of any enablers required for good participation
14. Having little knowledge about the issue makes any difference in participation
15. Social audit as a good platform for participation
16. Do they find adequate time to influence the discussions?
17. Is there anything you would like to say in closing?

Thank you for your time. I feel honored and privileged for this interview.

## ANNEX-II

### **Guiding Themes for In-Depth Interview with Parents as SAC Members**

Thank you for your acceptance to be a part in this interview. I would like to assure you that all our discussions will remain confidential, and your name will not be disclosed, and all responses will be treated with strict confidentiality. Real names will be substituted with pseudonyms

Date: ..... Interviewee's name: .....

Education:..... Occupation: .....

#### **Guiding Themes:**

1. Their socio-economic background
2. Their experiences of having participated in social audit process in previous years
3. How they got into the Social Audit Committees as members
4. Their knowledge about legal provisions of social audit
5. Frequency of SAC meetings
6. Their participation in SAC meetings and their inputs on equal footing
7. Their knowledge of social audit and its contribution to the school
8. Any barriers in having active participation in the social audit process
9. Their knowledge of any enablers for good participation

10. Having little knowledge about the issue makes any difference in participation
11. Their perception on social audit as a good platform for participation
12. Availability of adequate time to influence the discussion
13. Is there anything you would like to say in closing

Thank you for your time. I feel honored and privileged for this interview.



## ANNEX-III

### **Guiding Themes for In-Depth Interview with Teachers and Other SAC Members**

Thank you for your acceptance to be a part in this interview. I would like to assure you that all our discussions will remain confidential, and your name will not be disclosed, and all responses will be treated with strict confidentiality. Real names will be substituted with pseudonyms

Date: ..... Interview venue.....

Interviewee's name: .....

#### **Guiding Themes:**

1. Socio-economic background of participants makes any difference in participation
2. Their experiences of having participated in social audit process in previous years
3. School's pre-history of inclusive and representative participation of stakeholders in social audit process
4. Basis for nominating members in the SAC committee
5. Any basis for structured, systemic representation of stakeholders in social audit process
6. Prevalence of structured opportunities for engagement and participation among stakeholders for their inputs on equal footing
7. Their knowledge about legal provisions of social audit and its importance to the school
8. Unequal power relations among participants. Its impact on the effective participation
9. Any barriers in having active participation of all stakeholders in the social audit process

10. What are the enablers/incentives for good participation?
11. Having little or more knowledge about the issue makes any difference in participation
12. Their perception on social audit as a good platform for participation
13. Availability of adequate time to discuss and influence discussions?
14. Is there anything you would like to say in closing?

Thank you for your time. I feel honored and privileged for this interview.