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Practices of Policy Making and Planning: A Case of Annapurna Rural Municipality in Kaski District

Dr. Girdhari Dahal, Associate Professor

Department of Political Science, Tribhuvan University

Prithvi Narayan Campus, Pokhara, Nepal

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ABSTRACT

This paper makes a brief description and analysis of policy formulation and planning process adopted by the local government of Nepal. The main objective of the paper is to study the exercise of policy making and planning of Annapurna Rural Municipality in Kaski District of Gandaki Province, Nepal. The study is based on telephone interviews and person-to-person interviews with elected representatives of the rural municipality and secondary sources of data. Annapurna Rural Municipality has so far formulated more than 23 policies (acts, rules and regulations) for addressing the interest of its citizens. Of these policies, four are acts, two regulations, nine procedural laws and eight codes of conduct. Moreover, official policy makers have a prominent role in public policy making while the unofficial policymakers have little influence on the public policy making. There is no provision of direct participation of people in the policy formulation process. Also, the local government has not developed a practice of taking assistance from hired experts while formulating public policies that demand technical expertise and knowledge. It is observed that the planning process followed by the rural municipality consists of seven steps: tole level assembly, ward level meeting, assembly of Ward, decisions forwarded to office of rural municipality, recommendation by the executive committee, approval by assembly of rural municipality and implementation by executive bodies like the office of rural municipality, ward office, etc. The results indicated that the rural municipality has, to some extent, guaranteed the participation of its citizens in the planning and implementation activities. However, despite the bottom-up approach of planning being practiced, all people, irrespective of their political orientation, do not have equal opportunity to make their voice being heard to the planning process. However, it lacks inclusiveness.

KEYWORDS: Capacity, connectivity, grass-root democracy, service delivery

INTRODUCTION

Annapurna Rural Municipality is located in Kaski District of Nepal and Dhikurpokhari is its headquarter. It is a rural municipality known as *Gaupalika* in the Nepali language. The major role of rural municipalities is to institutionalize local governance by creating an enabling environment to promote democratic values and public participation in the decision-making process. It is equally responsible for

accelerating social and economic development to enhance the quality of community life (Acharya, 2018). The local government, being the closest unit of government to the people at the grassroots, is expected to play significant roles in providing effective social services (Abdullahi, 2020). The local government is a public institution in a small geographic area, as a city, town, or county, which is the closest and trustworthy organization of the local people (Acharya, 2018). The basic foundation for political leadership is served in the form of training provided by the local government, particularly for those individuals who intend to further prosper their career in national politics (Laski, 1931). Public policy is determined by government institutions, which give policy legitimacy. The government universally and equally applies its policies to all citizens of society and exercises the monopoly of using authority to implement those policies. Its major functions are goods and service delivery to the people as well as promoting social security of the people. It tries to promote the well-being of the people and carry out development activities. At present there are three tiers of governments in Nepal: federal, provincial, and local. According to the constitution of Nepal, there are separate rights and duties specified to these three levels of government. The local government is the closest government to the people at the grassroots. The constitution of Nepal has provisioned twenty-two authorities to local governments. As per those authorities, local governments formulate necessary acts, rules, regulations, laws, bylaws, procedures, etc. for effective governance in their respective areas.

The present executive bodies of the municipalities were elected in 2017 and they have introduced various policies and plans for the social, economic, infrastructural, and cultural development of the municipality. There was a long gap of peoples' representatives in the local government. After twenty years, peoples' representatives have been elected at local levels. In Nepal, the political system has changed from the constitutional monarchy to the republican system of government. Similarly, the unitary system has also been changed to the federal democratic republic. Local governments for the first time in the history of Nepal have got the constitutional rights for law making. Now, the people are sovereign in reality, and they can periodically elect their representatives. Local governments have eased the day to day service delivery assuring good governance. They have identified the needs and problems of the people, and have worked to set agendas, make plans and implement them accordingly to fulfill interests and aspirations of the locals. They have formed various laws, policies, and regulations and have so far evaluated the implications of their policies and plans and the outcome of their three years' tenure. The people are happy being ruled by their representatives.

What kind of practices do the rural municipalities follow while formulating policies and making local level plans? What are the strengths and weaknesses of the practices so far adopted by the rural municipality? What is the status of people's participation in policy formulation and planning process? These questions need to be answered and analyzed critically, so as to assess the practices of policy making and planning being followed by the rural municipalities, which are in the early/initial stage of their establishment.

OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this paper is to explore the practices of public policy making and planning in Annapurna Rural Municipality of Kaski District, Nepal. The paper makes a brief description and analysis of people's participation in public policy making and planning practices being followed by the rural municipality. It further explores the strength and weaknesses of the policy making and planning practices of the rural municipality.

METHODOLOGY

The paper has used primary data collected from the study area, Annapurna Rural Municipality. The primary data were collected through interviews with the Chairman, Vice-Chairman, Chief Executive Officer, nine Ward Chairmen, intellectuals and a few other stakeholders of the study area. There are eleven wards in the rural municipality, and among them, Chairmen of nine wards were selected through a convenient and purposive sampling method. Similarly, the Chairman, Chief Executive Officer and six intellectuals were also selected through a convenient and purposive sampling method. There were altogether seventeen respondents. The researcher requested them and informed them about the objective and implication of the academic study on a telephone conversation. The interviews were taken at a convenient time for the respondents. Among them, fifteen respondents were interviewed on telephone and the Chairman of the rural municipality was visited personally by the researcher, and a two hours-long interview with him was conducted. During the interview, the Chairman highlighted his mission, vision, and objectives for social, economic, infrastructural, touristic, environmental, and cultural development and good governance for rural development. Similarly, an hour long interview with the Vice-Chairman was helpful for the researcher to collect various information and data of the study area. Thus, the primary data were collected from the fieldwork, mostly through telephone and person-to-person interviews. Secondary data were collected from different books, journal articles, reports, etc. This research paper is based on bottom-up approach grounded theory of Strauss & Corbin (1994). The fieldwork was conducted from January 2020 to July 2020.

WHAT IS POLICY?

The term 'policy' refers to a course or principle of action adopted or proposed by an organization or individual in relation to different dimensions of social life of the people. It is mostly used in social, economic, and political sectors (Rijal, 2011). It is needed for the public. It is used by the government for peoples' welfare. It is commonly called a *Niti* such as *Sukra Niti*, *Bidhur Niti*, and *Chanakya Niti*. It is used in all sectors of human life, which is in fact a guiding principle of social life. It is also a system of principle that is a code of conduct of the government for goods and service delivery to the people. There are different actors in the public policy making process. Anderson (1979) has classified the actors in the public policy making process into two groups. They are: official and unofficial policymakers. Formal policy makers are those who occupy formal public positions whereas unofficial policy makers are those who do not possess any formal public positions. Legislators, executives, administrators and judiciary belong to the group of official policy makers whereas interest groups, political parties and individual citizens belong to the group of unofficial policy makers.

The constitution of Nepal is the main basis to formulate public policies in Nepal. The constitution has the provision of directive principles and policies of the state, which is a principal guideline for making public policies in Nepal (The Constitution of Nepal, 2015). Rural development has been one of the prioritizing principal components of Nepal's development policies and plans. For social and economic transformation, rural development efforts in Nepal started in 1956 but its impacts are still unsatisfactory (Kharel, 2019). Rural development is a process of development and change to improve rural social life. It is linked to infrastructural development, commercialization of agriculture, proper utilization and mobilization of resources, food security, creating opportunities, inclusive social development in the rural community and modernization of overall society (Acharya, 2008). Every elected government has a manifesto that the

public relies on for voting. The elected governments are responsible for developing viable policies to address public issues (HAQ, 2015).

The constitution of Nepal has been the principal guiding document to the rural and urban municipalities for policy making and planning for the development and the wellbeing of its people. The constitution has a provision of twenty-two powers as well as concurrent lists of the functions of the local governments (The Constitution of Nepal, 2015). It has delegated rights and authorities to local governments to appoint municipal police, to regulate and monitor cooperatives and FM Radios, to collect local tax, manage local services, to conduct local statistics and record-keeping at local level. Similarly, the constitution has provided local governments the rights and responsibilities for the management of development projects and programs, management of basic and secondary education, and basic health and sanitation, management of local markets, conservation of environment and biodiversity, construction of local, rural and agriculture roads, management of drinking water and irrigation systems, delivery of day-to-day affairs and the assurance of good governance, etc. (The Constitution of Nepal, 2015). Likewise, the Local Government Operation Act, 2017 has provisioned to delegate many powers and functions to local governments. It also has provisions of a local judicial branch led by the Vice-Chairman with two members of the local body for local courts, dispute settlement and mediation, management of local judiciary records, etc. The local governments and ward office executives have been given responsibility for the delivery of various day to day services enlisted in the Citizen Charter 64 (Citizen Charter).

WHAT IS PLANNING?

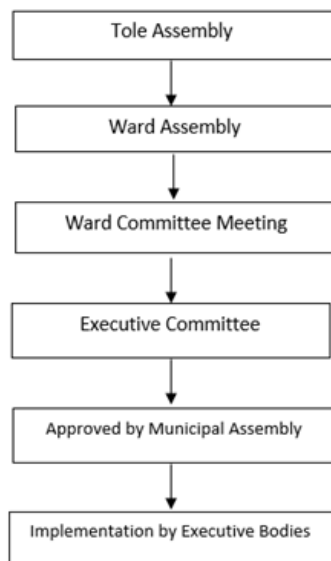
Planning means deciding in advance about what to do, when to do and how to do something. It is an integral part of public affairs. Local government is engaged in different kinds of planning including planning for policy making, planning for carrying out development activities and planning for providing public goods and services to the people. There are two approaches of planning: top-down approach and bottom-up approach. Previously, a popular planning approach in Nepal was a top-down approach. This approach has serious limitations as it was not capable of addressing local needs of the people. The present federal system of government has envisioned a bottom-up approach of planning so that local needs and aspirations can be addressed. Local governments are expected to practice a bottom-up approach of planning for policy making and carrying out development activities.

Annapurna Rural Municipality has begun new planning for the development of its territory with peoples' participation. It has followed constitutional, legal and democratic norms and values for local planning. Local government planning is a process of planning that is concerned with resolving local level problems and issues and fulfilling grassroots dreams, desires, and aspirations of social, economic, infrastructural, environmental, and cultural development. Its priorities include welfare of the people and development of the local area. Local governments have made new structures with peoples' new mandates. People are sovereign and have elected their representatives to rule them so that they could work together for the overall development of their rural municipality (Dahal, 2004). When the election of local government was held in 2017 and a new executive of the rural municipality was elected, the local government tried its best to encourage people for their active participation in development activities. The people and the representatives identified their problems, needs and gave priority to the construction of roads. Management of drinking water, tourism development, good governance, education sector reform, health sector, etc. were other priorities respectively Y. Kunwar (personal communication, January 1, 2020).

All development activities are carried out based on the planning of each and every ward and tole, where peoples' needs and demands are collected in general meetings in peoples' participation, and sent to the ward assembly. The ward committee manages the ward general assembly with peoples' participation and after extensive discussion selects the plans on the basis of priority and urgency, and then sends it to the rural municipality. The rural municipality executive forms various committees for the study and recommendation of those plans recommended by toles, villages, and wards. Those committees study and reorganize the plans and send to the executive, which approves the plans from executive level and recommends the rural municipality assembly for final approval. When the rural municipality assembly approves the plans, they are implemented. This planning process can be depicted in the flow diagram as presented below:

Figure 1

Process of planning in Rural Municipalities



Proper planning and implementation of plans is crucial for the development of rural municipality as well as for welfare of the people. The local government is always responsible for and accountable to the local people by guaranteeing good governance and by carrying out development activities properly S. Gurung, (personal communication, Feb., 2020). The Local Self-Governance (1999) has institutionalized the process of development by enhancing the participation of all the people including communities, indigenous people, down-trodden as well as socially and economically backward groups in bringing out social equality by mobilizing them in development activities and allocating sufficient means or sources for the development of their own region by guaranteeing the balanced and equal distribution of the fruits of development to the all people of the local level (Local Self-governance Act, 1999). The newly elected local government aims to reform the way in which public services are delivered – in health, welfare, housing, employment, education, communities, economic development, policy and community safety, the environment, and beyond (Hand Book Definition, 2008). As local government provides the local people with an opportunity to participate in the

process of planning and decision making, it has an effect on the lives of the people (Shrestha, 1989). Thus, the local government promotes and strengthens local democracy.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Annapurna Rural Municipality has exercised peoples' participation at the planning level, but the people's participation is not significant in the policy making process. Public policy making has been practiced through the formation of various acts, rules, regulations, guidelines, and codes of conduct by the legislative body of the rural municipality. Since the local government was elected by the local people, elected representatives are responsible for formulating necessary laws, acts, policies, regulations, and codes of conduct to fulfill the needs and interests of the people. They have practiced developing plans from the tole assembly, ward committee and assembly, different sub-committees of the municipality. After that, the rural municipality executive recommends them to the rural municipality assembly/municipality legislature. At last, they are approved by the assembly and implemented. Thus, the local government makes policies, plans, and implements them to improve the quality of life of the people by providing better public services.

The rural municipality has made several laws to materialize good governance. The people of the rural area want welfare programs, proper management and better goods and service delivery. In a short period of time, the local government has achieved significant success Y. Kunwar (personal communication, January 1, 2020). The nature of the federal system of Nepal is of a cooperative model. Among the three tiers of governments: the local government is considered as the lowest level of the government. The federal government provides grants, assistance as well as cooperation for the development of the province and local governments. The local government practices the policy-making and planning process at the grassroot level. It is the best way of institutionalizing democracy. The people of Nepal are sovereign and use their sovereign power from the near center of the local government (Dahal, 2015). It is the door to door government (*ghar dailo ko sarkar*). Now, people feel the presence of Singha Durbar at their doorstep. The local government provides different services to the people as the nearest unit of village/city people.

Law Making

Annapurna Rural Municipality has formulated more than twenty-three important laws including acts, rules, regulations, operation guidelines, policies, and codes of conduct (Y. Kuwar, personal communication, July 15, 2020). It has made the Financial Act, 2018; Cooperative Act, 2018; Administrative Procedural Act, 2018; and Final Appropriation Act, 2019-2020. It has made Education Rule and Regulation, 2018; Job Description, 2018; Judicial Procedural, 2018; Natural Resource Protection and Utilization Directives, 2018; Disaster Management 2019; Education Procedure, 2019; Annapurna Relief Distribution Procedure, 2020; Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Procedure, 2020 etc. Similarly, the rural municipality has developed its village profile and five years' periodic plan (2076/77 to 2080). The Infrastructure Implementation Code of Conducts has also been developed. These policies and laws have been made for easy and effective service delivery to the people. The rural municipality has altogether formulated four acts, two regulations, nine procedural laws, eight codes of conduct, etc. in a short period of time after the election held in 2017, K. Adhikari (personal communication, July 20, 2020).

The practice of policy making is a new experience for the local level government. In the past, the central government used to make policies for the local

bodies. Now the local government itself has a constitutional right to make laws, rules and regulations for the local level. The local government can design policies in the areas of jurisdiction that fall under local level as defined by the constitution. It has been helpful to empower locally elected representatives for local-level policy making. The local government has been capable of making policies as per the local need. However, unlike the planning process, there is no provision of people participation in the policy formulation process. There has been a lack of expertise and experience in the policy formulation process as local level government is in the early stage of its maturity.

In the rural municipality, official policy makers are more engaged in public policy making whereas unofficial policy makers have least influence of public policy making. It is argued that the opinion of opposition party leaders is rarely considered while making public policies for the rural municipality. The local government has failed to incorporate the opinions of opposition parties, civil society members and individual people S. Gurung (personal communication, July 20, 2020). Also, the local government has more relied on law making bodies while formulating policies. In some cases, the hired expert's advice and support are expected in understanding technical issues of the public policies. For instance, if the local government is going to fix taxes and fees, then advice from the tax expert is must. However, the local government has not developed a practice of taking assistance from hired experts while formulating public policies. As a result, some of their policies, more often tax and fees related policies, have sought more criticism from the local public.

The local government also serves as a basis for the healthy growth of the national level government. It serves as a training ground for the future leaders of the country. It can be used as an instrument of national integration in a country with a multiplicity of ethnic groups having cultural, linguistic and religious diversities (Shrestha, 1989). The constitution has provided various legislative, executive, and judicial power to local governments. The provision of exclusive and concurrent rights of local governments is a major shift from 'government' to 'governance' and transformation from hierarchic to more network system (Acharya, 2018).

The rural municipality has constructed a ring road and other rural roads to connect the rural municipality center with each ward and other toles S. Gurung (personal communication, June 20, 2020). They have launched many programmes to support farmers to improve agriculture with irrigation systems by making canals in different places, and by encouraging farmers to use modern technology, improved seeds, and by declaring different pocket areas for the participation of farmers. They have constructed ward office buildings for effective service delivery to the people. Similarly, the rural municipality has regulated and monitored the education sector for quality improvement of education. Some schools have started English medium classes C.B. Gurung (personal communication, June 5, 2020). The rural municipality is encouraging peoples' participation in every sector for the development of the study area. The constitution of Nepal has provided power and authority to the local government. Similarly, the Local Government Operation Act, 2017 has interpreted the power and authority of peoples' representatives of the local government. It has explained their power and authority through different rules and regulations as well as working activities.

People's Participation in Planning

The rural municipality has tried to exercise democratic practice at the grassroots level. It has tried to develop leadership at the local level. Therefore, the people participate in the local level planning. There are community/village development committees in each and every ward. These development committees organize and

manage the mass meetings in toles, and conduct group meetings to make plans for the development of the ward. They collect all needed plans with the public interest of the local people. After that, all the selected plans are discussed in mass meetings chaired by the Chairman of the ward C. Adhikari (personal communication, June 3, 2020). Thus, every Ward Chairman with other four members takes part in the discussion in the mass meeting, and then they approve those plans and forward them to the rural municipality assembly for its final approval and decision. Once it is approved by the assembly, plans are implemented.

Although the local government has tried to adopt a bottom-up approach of planning, it is not complete. The bottom-up approach has been practiced but all people, irrespective of their political orientation, do not have equal opportunity to make their voice being listened to in the planning process. It is found that people's participation in the planning process has not been inclusive. Women, Dalit, minority, and marginalized people have no or very little participation in the planning process. Even if they participate in the assembly, they do rarely raise their voice. Even if they raise their voice, there is little chance of their issues being addressed. The assemblies are largely dominated by the male and rural elites S. Gurung (personal communication, July 20, 2020). Rural elites have greater influence in the planning process.

In most cases, people's participation has been for showcase only. The local government wants to show that there has been people's participation in the planning process. It has just been a formality. In practice, people's voices have little influence on the planning process. The planning is made as per the will of the rural elites and executive members of the rural municipality.

Service Delivery

The newly elected local government has better and more effective day to day service delivery than the previous local governments. It is an elected local government at the grassroot level. Because it is peoples' government, it has tried to solve the problems of the people at the local level. It is a miniature government. The local government of the rural municipality has accomplished aforementioned works for the peoples' welfare and the development of the rural municipality. Their first priority area is the production sector- agriculture, livestock, horticulture, and rural industries. The second priority area is upliftment of the human resource through quality education, improvement of the health service, and social security to senior citizens, women, *Dalits*, disabled and backward groups of the society Y. Adhikari (personal communication, July 19, 2020). The third priority sector is infrastructure: construction of a ring road, link roads to connect the rural municipality office with eleven ward offices, and rural roads to connect ward offices with communities, toles and villages, development of rural tourism: homestay, foot track, improvement of Annapurna Trekking (*Padyatra*), clean drinking water, tourism sector improvement, etc. C.B. Gurung (personal communication, June 5, 2020). The fourth priority area is pure drinking water: 90% of households of this rural municipality have got taps at every home. Education is the most important phenomena and basic and secondary schools are now managed by the rural municipality. Another area of priority is the health sector: different health care programs are run to provide basic health facilities to the people; medicine is distributed from health centers. Development of rural electricity; sustainable livelihood through the provision and encouragement of the formation of cooperative societies and other economic groups are also highly prioritized in the rural municipality.

Agriculture is the main occupation of the people in the rural municipality and proper management and development of the agriculture sector by providing new

technology and machinery such as the hand tractor, thrasher, improved seeds and timely availability of fertilizers are some of the concerns of the farmers that should be timely addressed by the municipality for the development of the agriculture sector. Nevertheless, people actively participate in the selection of new plans and good governance. Hence, social, economic, infrastructural, and political sector development activities have been regularly carried out. They have constructed a ring road and many connecting roads, office buildings, drinking water projects, have improved the quality of education and health system, and have guaranteed easy availability of goods and service delivery to the people.

CONCLUSION

The election of 2017 provided a mandate to the people's representatives to rule for five years, which is the most promising way of democratic practice at grassroots level and also the institutionalization of democracy in Nepal. Consequently, the local government is considered as the foundation of democracy. Annapurna Rural Municipality has got legitimacy as a local government which is also called a miniature government. In the process of democratic practice at grassroots level, this municipality has made more than twenty-three laws in the last three years. They include four acts, two rules and regulations, eight procedural laws, four directives and four other rules and regulations for the effective and efficient service delivery to the people. However, there has been no practice of people's participation in the policy making process. Also, the local government has more relied on law making bodies while formulating policies. The local government has not developed a practice of taking assistance from hired experts while formulating public policies that demand technical expertise and knowledge. Despite this limitation, these public policy-making processes are gradually improving local governments and stakeholder's capacity of public policy making. Moreover, official policy makers have a more profound role on public policy making while the unofficial policy makers have little influence on the public policy making.

The rural municipality has practiced a seven step planning process. It consists of tole level assembly, ward level meeting, assembly of ward Committee, decisions forwarded to the office of rural municipality, recommendation by the executive committee, approval by the assembly of the rural municipality and implementation by executive bodies like the office of rural municipality, ward office, etc. Although there is a provision of people's participation in the planning process, it is not as functional as envisioned and described by the theories.

The strong aspect of policy making and planning practices at local level is that the local leaders and representatives are gradually learning and improving self-governance skills and capacities. However, there has been a lack of expertise and experience in the policy formulation and decision making process as local level government is in the early stage of its development and they are not receiving strong support from the professional manpower. Although the bottom-up approach of planning has been practiced, all people, irrespective of their political orientation, do not have equal opportunity to make their voice being listened to in the planning process. It also lacks inclusiveness. The main emphasis of the rural municipality is on local agricultural productions, human resource management and infrastructure development. However, it is not enough. The deficiencies in local governance will have a significant negative effect on development hence local development projects and public services should not be poorly targeted, underfunded, and poorly implemented at the current rate of investment by the government of Nepal. With low levels of development, underdeveloped institutions and weak capacities and services delivery, complications

may transpire in future. Hence, this study recommends a long-term investment and capacity building measures to turn around local good governance, for which fundamental shifts will be required in how support is provided and how social accountability is obtained within a more balanced approach requiring both engaged and informed citizens and government in policy making and planning practices.

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APPENDIX

| Name | Number | Date | Location |
|--------------|---------------|---------------|---|
| Y. Kunwar | Respondent 1 | January 2020 | Chairman, Annapurna Rural Municipality |
| H. B. Gurung | Respondent 2 | June 2, 2020 | Chairman, Ward No. 11 of Annapurna Rural Municipality |
| B. Kuwar | Respondent 3 | June 2, 2020 | Chairman, Ward No. 1 of Annapurna Rural Municipality |
| C. Adhikari | Respondent 4 | June 2, 2020 | Chairman, Ward No. 2 of Annapurna Rural Municipality |
| B. Chetri | Respondent 5 | June 2, 2020 | Chairman, Ward No. 9 of Annapurna Rural Municipality |
| C. B. Gurung | Respondent 6 | June 5, 2020 | Chairman, Ward No. 3 of Annapurna Rural Municipality |
| K. Gurung | Respondent 7 | June 9, 2020 | Chairman, Ward No. 9 of Annapurna Rural Municipality |
| R. Gurung | Respondent 8 | June 9, 2020 | Intellectual |
| G. Chapagain | Respondent 9 | June 9, 2020 | Chairman, Ward No. 7 of Annapurna Rural Municipality |
| S. Sharma | Respondent 10 | June 9, 2020 | Chairman, Ward No. 5 of Annapurna Rural Municipality |
| B. Gurung | Respondent 11 | June 9, 2020 | Chairman, Ward No. 8 of Annapurna Rural Municipality |
| B. B. Gurung | Respondent 12 | June 9, 2020 | Intellectual |
| Y. Adhikari | Respondent 13 | July 18, 2020 | Chief Executive Officer of Annapurna Rural Municipality |
| K. Adhikari | Respondent 14 | July 18, 2020 | Intellectual |
| D. Sharma | Respondent 15 | July 19, 2020 | Intellectual |
| S. Gurung | Respondent 16 | July 20, 2020 | Intellectual |
| S. Gurung | Respondent 17 | July 20, 2020 | Intellectual |