OPINION



Creeping catastrophe

Over 20 percent of Nepalis above 15 suffer from hypertension and we are not doing much to control it.

Globally, the burden of high blood pressure, also called hypertension, is increasing. The same is the case here, as shown by the Nepal Demographic Health Survey-2022. The study found that over 20 percent of Nepalis above the age of 15 suffer from this condition. Untreated hypertension is a significant risk factor for potentially fatal health problems such as cardiovascular diseases (heart disease and stroke) that account for 17.9 million deaths each year. It can also result in chronic kidney disease, dementia, and arrhythmia.

Countries around the world have, by 2030, pledged to cut hypertension rates by 33 percent. For this, several of them have policies to dissuade high intake of salt and saturated fat. Nepal too has increased taxes on the import of junk food and energy drinks; however, even with the increased prices, people are happily gulping them down. Alarmingly, 48 percent of women and 52 percent of men aged 15 and above with hypertension are not even aware they have the disease. This lack of awareness highlights a shortfall in efforts to prevent and control non-communicable diseases (NDCs) like

Reducing incidents of hypertension calls for more than governmental effort. Medical research shows a clear link between cardiovascular diseases and lifestyle choices, stressing the importance of self-care through lifestyle changes. By giving up smoking, reducing stress, exercising, getting regular checkups and consuming nutritious foods, people can greatly improve their health and well-being.

Similarly, governments and health authorities must take steps for hypertension prevention, early detection, and effective diagnosis and control. People must be educated on the risks of high blood pressure, and hypertension screening should be a top priority. In Nepal, where 15.1 percent of the population lives below the poverty line, regular health checkups may not be a feasible option for everyone. The larger trend is still for people to visit hospitals and healthcare centres only when they fall ill. Rather than only rely on occasional health camps, the goal should be to mobilise existing healthcare centres and volunteers for regular screenings at the local level. The same resources can be used to offer guidance on taking medication correctly and adopting a healthy

Although the mid-day meal provided in government schools is commendable, there are still many students who are deprived of high-quality and nutritious food. Private schools should also prioritise offering nutritious meals to their students. Giving young children healthy and nourishing food from an early age reduces their risk of developing hypertension, obesity and other non-communicable diseases. Concomitantly, false advertising of junk foods as nutritious foods must be restricted.

With an increasing focus on communicable diseases, the prevalence of NCDs has risen, resulting in 41 million annual deaths, or 74 percent of all deaths around the world, with 77 percent of deaths related to NCDs occurring in low- and middle-income countries. A 2021 WHO report also revealed that the majority of hypertension patients live in these countries. The situation right now is bad enough. If the state is not serious about controlling NCDs like hypertension even now, it could have a health catastrophe on its hands.

THEIR VIEW

Libraries for children

A single book read in a library may leave a lasting impression on a youngster.

It is locked and dark. Only old books are available. There are probably many school libraries like that. School libraries need to be developed into places where children can gather and encounter memora-

The funds that the central government grants to local governments to purchase books for public elementary and junior high schools are not being fully utilised. A total of \\$22 billion was granted in fiscal 2021, but only ¥12.6 billion was actually used to purchase books. Since the use of the funds is left to the discretion of local governments, it is believed that local governments put higher priority on the enhancement of social welfare programmes and information technology at schools. It is impossible to overlook the fact that funds that should have been allocated for the purchase of books are

being used to pursue other policies. As digitisation advances, society is inundated with a great deal of information. Reading activities are indispensable to acquire the abilities to judge the truth or falsity of information and to use information correctly. School libraries play increasingly important roles as places for inquiry-based learning that fosters the ability to think. Creating a reading environment for children is an investment in the future. The funds should be used for their original purpose, not just for immediate issues. The government may need to consider providing funds in the form of subsidies that can only be used for their

In some schools, old books stating that Germany is divided into East and West are still in place. Books must be sorted into those that should be kept and those that should be replaced. For this purpose, it is important to have school librarians and teachers with librarian certification who have expertise in books. They are expected to play such roles as accurately recommending books to children who come to the library saying, "I want to read an interesting book."

It is not uncommon for school libraries to be closed for many hours because there is no school librarian on duty. School libraries also have a significant function as a place for children to spend time. Librarians may be able to detect unusual behavior in children who have worries. More school librarians and other staff should be assigned to make school libraries places where children can casually

Some schools have carpeted floors, manga comic books and low kotatsu tables equipped with heaters and blankets so that students can stretch their legs and read in comfort. Each municipality and school should make their own such efforts. Earlier this month, the lawmakers leagues for print culture and school libraries jointly adopted a resolution calling for better treatment of school librarians, many of whom are hired on a nonregular basis, and the improvement of books kept at school libraries. It is hoped that they will strengthen their efforts to lobby the central and local governments and lead to reforms.

A single book encountered at a library may be deeply engraved in the mind of a child and have a great impact on their life. All people concerned must share an appreciation of how important that is.

- The Yomiuri Shimbun (Japan)/ANN

Assessing local level budget

|| GRASSROOTS DEMOCRACY ||

Local governments have prioritised education. health, agriculture, livestock and roads.

KHIM LAL DEVKOTA



Nepal's metropolises, sub-metropolises and municipalities are required to present their budgets to their respective assemblies by June 25 every year, according to the provisions of the Local Government Operation Act and Inter-Governmental Fiscal Arrangement Act. These local governments have to provide detailed information about the revenue and expenditure of the previous fiscal year, revised income and expenditure for the current fiscal year, income and expenditure projections, and programmes and projects for the upcoming fiscal year. But 42 local governments have missed the deadline to present their annual financial plans, as per information provided by the local government associations.

Such failures have become a recurring phenomenon at some local levels, but it appears that the concerned authorities are not serious about identifying and addressing the underlying problem. As most representatives come from political parties, they do not show much concern towards this issue. When the budget is not passed on time, it hampers local economic activities, and as a consequence, people are unable to receive services as expected. Local employment and income are significantly affected, ultimately impacting the overall economic growth of the

Challenging task

Addressing all the issues related to the programmes and budgets is a challenging task. Based on six years of implementation experience at the local level, several problems can be pointed out. Despite these challenges, the local governments have presented their



They have allocated funds appropriately, prioritising sectors such as education, health, agriculture, livestock, roads, drinking water, cooperatives and irrigation. Notable transformations have occurred in the physical, social and economic sectors. Small-scale industries and businesses have thrived in both rural and urban areas. For instance, Dharan Municipality has announced the operation of turmeric and soap factories

To address disparity between sons and daughters, the local units have incentivised parents to adopt family planning after the birth of a daughter. They provide insurance in the name of daughters and promote marriages with a 20-year age gap. Such programmes have been initiated at many

Several local levels have implemented higher education programmes for girls and women. To reduce domestic violence, they have distributed liquor cards and decreed that liquor stores must not remain open after 7 pm. They have also provided annual financial support to parents caring for individuals with disabilities, and imposed minimal taxes on factories and businesses operated by disabled persons.

In remote areas, local governments have launched campaigns to distribute social security allowances to households. During the Covid-19 outbreak, they performed exceptionally well in distributing relief by going door to door to ensure citizens' safety.

Local governments have paid special attention to marginalised ethnic communities like Kusunda and Raute.

Scholarships and free education programmes have been provided to their children, including opportunities for higher education. Programmes aimed at improving social and economic conditions, such as eliminating untouchability, providing free education to marginalised Dalit communities, and promoting the concept of one household, one profession, one school, one garden, one pond and one playground have been implemented.

Raksirang Rural Municipality in Makwanpur district has announced gifting homes to people migrating from other areas. This programme marks a significant and ambitious milestone in the history of local governments in

Kathmandu Metropolitan City has earmarked Rs100 million for the operation of a city hospital dedicated to providing healthcare for children. Lalitpur Metropolitan City has carried out a subsidy programme for those purchasing electric vehicles.

Biratnagar Metropolitan City has launched a programme to clean the tyres of public vehicles before they enter the city, prohibited the use of plastic bags, penalised littering, improved roads and operated mobile toilets. Bharatpur Metropolitan City has set a target to attract 200,000 for eign tourists during Bharatpur Visit Year 2024. The city has also started a programme to establish one model school in each ward. It has also consistently provided subsidies to dairy farmers at the rate of Rs3 per litre of milk.

Kathmandu Metropolitan City has the highest budget of Rs25.54 billion while Birgunj has the lowest budget of

Significant improvements have been made in the teaching and learning activities of community schools. To discourage the migration of students from government schools to private English-medium schools, some local governments have implemented English-medium education in community schools. Incentive programmes like scholarships, free uniforms and midday meals have been implemented to encourage students from marginalised communities, including Dalits and indigenous groups, to attend school.

Some local governments have provided free ambulance services for home healthcare services by employing doctors and nurses, establishing vocational training centres in all wards, and introducing services like zero home delivery. Additionally, support has been provided for activities such as preventing loss of fertile land, promoting organic farming, providing vision, supporting farmers through agricultural inputs, and providing subsidies for milk production, vegetable and fruit farming, fish farming, and processing.

Pork barrel funds

Local governments with a low revenue base are facing challenges. More than two-thirds of their revenue come from federal grants. However, the allocation for fiscal equalisation grants has decreased by Rs13 billion compared to the previous year.

The more local governments invest in their revenue sources, the more their fiscal activities will grow. Along with the growth in fiscal activities, there will be changes in the entire economy, including employment generation. It is necessary to take this aspect seriously at the local level.

Just as the federal and provincial budgets allocate funds for constituency infrastructure development programmes, many local levels have allocated significant amounts of money in the names of the mayor, deputy mayor, chairman and deputy chairman. This practice of allocating pork barrel funds existed in the past. But this time, their justification is that if the federal and provincial governments can allocate funds in the name of parliamentarians, they can do the same. This reasoning is flawed because two wrongs do not make a right. A government that is closely connected to the people should set a good example instead of promoting

How do we manage community forests?

Nepal can reduce rural poverty. balance trade and earn foreign currency through sustainable forest management.



Community Nepal's Programme (CFP) has achieved remarkable success in the restoration of forests that had depleted due to overgrazing, firewood collection, livestock forage and timber harvesting. The country nearly doubled its forest cover, reaching 46 percent of its land area in 2016 from 26 percent in 1992.

The International Food Policy Research Institute indicated the dual objectives of CFP as forest conservation and poverty reduction in Nepal. While the programme has made significant strides in forest conservation, it has yet to catch up in reducing poverty primarily due to the oversight of the potential economic benefits of community forests (CFs) during implementation. Consequently, the full potential of CFs and their products has been underutilised.

Furthermore, the dependence of Nepali society on forests has shifted from traditional use to construction materials, furniture and other home appliances. Data from the World Integrated Trade Solution reveals that Nepal imported wood worth approximately \$229,000 in 2019. The United Nations COMTRADE database further suggests that Nepal imported wood-related products amounting to \$75.96 million in 2021. These figures could rise if other wood-based products are account-

In this article, I propose a new policy to address the economic shortfall of CFs and meet the market demand of wood and wood-based products. A newly proposed policy paradigm for CF management also holds great potential for restoring forests, conserving biodiversity and building resilience against climate change. It also aims to reduce Nepal's reliance on imported wood, wood products, support local livelihoods, and strengthen the national economy. This can be achieved through a simple yet highly effective forest management policy intervention involving the perpetual cycle of tree planting or natural regeneration, management, harvesting and replanting. Although a tree cannot grow perpet-

ually, its lifespan can span several hundred years. Trees experience rapid growth and accumulate timber volume during the early stages of their life cycle. However, the trees grow slowly as they age, leading to degradation and death and ultimately decompose as soil organic matter. Forest management aims to accelerate tree growth, allowtrees that can produce high-quality timber. In a separate research, I found that well-managed forests grown for approximately 40 years by selectively harvesting mature trees and leaving a few trees as seed sources can produce 3.5 times more marketable timber than naturally grown forests.

The success of the CFP in Nepal over the last four decades since its beginning in 1978 suggests that community forests possess the potential to produce quality trees and supply timber to the domestic market. However, if mature

cient management, and inadequate returns. Selling timber and wood products from CFs would help recoup these investments, compensate for the higher management costs partially if not wholly, meet timber market demand, and contribute to poverty reductionone of the CFP's goals. Poverty reduction through CF can be particularly regions with limited alternative income sources.

Harvesting trees creates space for new trees to grow, leading to environmental benefits such as carbon sequestration. Newly developed trees capture carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and convert it to woody biomass, which can be harvested as they mature. The conversion of wood into wood products ensures the long-term capturing of atmospheric carbon dioxide, thus, preventing its release into the atmosphere.

This perpetual cycle of opening

article proposes a policy perspective for CF management in Nepal. However, it is not intended as a one-fits-all solution for managing a diverse forest ecosystem in the country. I acknowledge the challenges of forest research, policy formulation, legal frameworks and regulations required to achieve the multiarticle. Nevertheless, globally published research on sustainable forest management for timber production, climate change mitigation, biodiversity conservation and carbon sequestration can serve as a foundation for forest management research in Nepal. The transfer and adaptation of researchbased knowledge to meet the needs of a country are in practice globally.

It is important to clarify that this

Forest management policies implemented outside Nepal may not fully address the country's unique social, economic, environmental and ecological needs. However, Nepal can adapt transferable knowledge, learn from its experiences and further research to meet its needs. Gradual implementation of liberal and sustainable forest management policies, based on research findings, can create opportunities for timber businesses in Nepal.

Modern forest management practices in the US, Australia, and Canada were adapted from European practices. India, for instance, established its national-level criteria and indicators for sustainable forest management policies in 1999 through a workshop involving national and international organisations. India piloted its sustainable forest management initiative in 2000 and has continuously modified its policy to meet its social, economic, environmental and ecological needs. Chinese forest management policies have also changed significantly over the past five decades. More than 80 percent of community-owned collective forests in China have been transferred to individual households, while state-managed forests focus on conservation and discourage exploitation.

The standard practices of planting or naturally regenerating, managing, harvesting and replanting forests are in practice globally, meeting timber and wood product demands. Bigger economies such as the United States and Europe import wood products from Asia and Africa and harvest timber from their planted forests to fulfil market demand. In Nepal's case, harvesting trees from sustainably managed community forests and replanting them can be a viable strategy to fulfil its timber demand, reduce rural poverty, alleviate trade imbalances and preserve foreign currency reserves.

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trees are left unharvested, their growth slows down, and the quality of timber deteriorates. The signs of deterioration are already visible in Nepal's CFs, as evidenced by the decayed and hollow cores in harvested trees. The decline of timber can be prevented by harvesting mature trees while they are still growing and using harvested timber as construction materials, furniture and home appliances. Consequently, CF management policies should prioritise harvesting mature trees and using timber for various wood products rather than allowing trees to decay.

From an economic perspective, timber harvesting would increase the availability of Nepali timber in the revenue of community forests user groups (CFUGs), reduce wood imports and trade deficits and bolster foreign currency reserves. Nepal has invested over 40 years of time, land, capital, cash, and labour in CF management. The CFP engaged over 1.6 million households through more than 14,000

Concerns have been raised on the long-term sustainability of CFs due to high capital and labour costs, ineffi-

space for new trees by harvesting and replanting facilitates rapid carbon sequestration, transforming sequestered carbon into usable wood products and repeating the new carbon sequestration cycle. These practices contribute to establishing sustainable and resilient forests in the face of climate Effective CF management also plays

a vital role in biodiversity conservation and the preservation of endangered biomes. Poor forest management can lead to biodiversity deterioration, further endangering the fragile ecosystems. Forest management extends beyond tree planting, harvesting and replanting-it encompasses systematic research, identification of endangered species, understanding their ecological niches and habitats, their role in the ecosystem, and safeguarding air, water, and wetlands.

Sound forest management policies and practices provide opportunities for systematically harvesting mature trees while ensuring the growth of new trees in harvested areas and protecting resources such as forests, land, water, air, biodiversity, and ecosystem balance.