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Issues and Perspective on the Covid-19 and Nepal: An Introduction

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Asta-Ja Occasional Book Series

COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND NEPAL: ISSUES AND PERSPECTIVES

Edited by

Basu Sharma and Ambika P. Adhikari

Asta-Ja USA

October 2020

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Foreword

As the Covid-19 virus that began in late 2019 in Wuhan, China, has reached 215 countries and territories infecting 32,083,273 people and claiming 981,219 lives globally as of September 23, 2020, we at Asta-Ja extend our heartfelt condolences to the families who have lost their loved ones. We salute doctors and nurses and all individuals in the front lines fighting against this pandemic. We wish safe and healthy life to every individual.

While the first case of Covid-19 in Nepal was reported on January 23, 2020 on a student who had recently returned to Kathmandu from Wuhan, China, the first case of the local transmission in Nepal was reported on April 4, 2020. Despite serious containment measures that were taken by the Nepali government, such as banning international flights, four-month long lockdown, many restrictions on businesses, social distancing, use of masks, and limit on the number of people in a group, over the past several months, the total number of infections in the country, as of September 23, 2020, is 67,804 with 436 deaths. The disease has spread all over Nepal and the infection rate has been increasing. The Covid-19 pandemic declared by the World Health Organization (WHO) on March 11, 2020, shows no sign of abatement as of September 23, 2020.

Realizing the potential catastrophic impacts of Covid-19 pandemic in Nepal, Asta-Ja International Coordination Council (Asta-Ja ICC) organized a Global Virtual Meeting of Asta-Ja ICC members on March 28, 2020, which decided three actions: 1) Establishment of Covid-19 Emergency Funds, 2) Documentation of global pandemic, and 3) Post Covid-19 Resilient Nepal Convention, in relation to Covid-19 pandemic in Nepal. Following the meeting, Asta-Ja USA immediately launched a fundraising campaign for

relief work in Nepal. Through the generous support of Asta-Ja members and supporters, Asta-Ja USA in collaboration with Asta-Ja Research and Development Center, was able to support 175 needy families with relief packages in Kathmandu Valley.

This book comes as an output of the decision taken by Asta-Ja ICC on March 28, 2020. This book is a collection of twelve articles from Asta-Ja members on Covid-19 impacts. These articles are developed by experts in various discipline, such as, engineering, agriculture, environment, geology, economics, businesses, and planning.

I appreciate the work of all contributors, reviewers, and editors of the book, who took the challenge of developing quality research-based articles during this pandemic and within such a short time.

I would like to congratulate the editors of the book, Dr. Basu Sharma and Dr. Ambika P. Adhikari, and reviewers, Dr. Keshav Bhattarai, Dr. Dinesh Gajurel, and Dr. Prasamsa Singh, for such a timely completion of this high-quality publication. Also, thanks are due to Dr. Rosina Poudel, MD, for designing the cover page of this book.

I am sure the findings presented in this book will benefit the policy makers and other stakeholders in the post-Covid-19 developmental planning and implementation programs in Nepal.

We brought this book as a part of Asta-Ja Occasional Book Series rather than a fully peer-reviewed book to make the important research findings available to the readers in a timely manner.

Dr. Durga D. Poudel

Founding President, Asta-Ja USA

Preface and Acknowledgements

When the board members of Asta-Ja USA asked us to compile and prepare a volume as a part of Asta-Ja occasional book series, they also gave us a short time frame to produce the book. It was done so that the volume could reach the readers quick enough to be of value in the rapidly evolving pandemic scenario. Accordingly, the editors provided shorter than usual deadlines to the prospective authors to submit their papers for the compendium. We are thankful that so many authors were able to provide us their valuable papers in a short period of time.

The editors are grateful to Prof. Keshav Bhattarai, Dr. Prasamsa Singh, Prof. Durga D. Poudel and Prof. Dinesh Gajurel for reviewing several papers in this book. The editors greatly appreciate their contribution also in following up with the authors and finalizing the manuscripts for this book. Without their support, this book would not have seen the light of the day.

Prof. Durga D. Poudel not only helped in the review process, but also in reaching out to the potential authors and ensuring the timeliness of their submissions. He continuously provided encouragement and support in this effort.

The editors are grateful to all the contributing authors, who responded to our requests, and in spite of their busy schedules, submitted their papers on time. They prepared the papers in a short period of time, as the editors wanted to publish the book quickly to offer suggestions and advice to the Nepali policy-makers, academics, students and concerned common citizens.

As the information about the Covid-19 pandemic is rapidly emerging, this book was assembled for a timely publication so that interested readers could refer to the ideas in this book. For this reason, the editors treated each article as an

independent paper with its own formatting, structure and style. The reviewers and editors have edited the language of the papers for clarity only.

To provide an overview of the book, the editors have synthesized the main points of each paper in the introductory essay entitled “Issues and Perspective on the Covid-19 and Nepal: An Introduction”.

We owe our heartfelt thanks to the officials and members of Asta-Ja USA for asking us to undertake this task. We also thank them for providing encouragement in our efforts to complete this book on time so that it will have a timely use for the readers.

Editors

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Issues and Perspective on the Covid-19 and Nepal: An Introduction

Basu Sharma and Ambika P. Adhikari

1. Introduction

Asta-Ja is a non-profit organization dedicated to community capacity-building through training, technology transfer, logistic support, policy advocacy, and research and development. Its goal is to develop partnership with research and developmental institutions, governmental agencies, community organizations, universities, and other stakeholders and work collaboratively in agricultural, natural resources, environmental and other research and developmental projects.

This document is a publication of Asta-Ja as a part of its Occasional Paper Series to discuss some key impacts of the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic in Nepal, and propose some policy recommendations to mitigate those impacts. Asta-Ja occasional series publications are designed to discuss contemporary issues related to agriculture, environment, infrastructure and planning that relate to economic development particularly in developing countries.

According to Johns Hopkins University database (2020) on Covid-19, the number of people infected by coronavirus related disease had exceeded 32 million, of which over 980,000 had died as of September 24, 2020. The outbreak is a pandemic, the highest level of health emergency that has spread over 213 countries (WHO, 2020). It is the third exogenous shock of this century after 9/11 and the global financial crisis of 2008. But this shock is different from the earlier ones because it has burdened the world economy by creating supply, demand and policy shocks concurrently. Governments around the world invoked emergency laws and adopted such measures as border controls, stay-at-home orders, social distancing, quarantine, and lockdowns to protect people from the ravages of the virus. While helping to constraint the transmission of the virus, these measures have caused serious social and

economic consequences for individuals, societies and businesses around the world.

Against this background, Asta-Ja International Coordination Council (Asta-Ja ICC), an assembly of affiliated scholars and professionals consisting of several hundred professionals in 17 countries, hosted on March 28, 2020 its First Global Virtual Meeting and discussed COVID-19 pandemic and Asta-Ja initiatives to fight against the pandemic. One of the decisions of the meeting was to produce and publish a document on issues and perspectives pertaining to Nepal in reference to global experience on COVID-19 pandemic. The document could be useful for planners, policy makers, professional, academics and political and business leaders in Nepal who are interested on the impact of the pandemic in Nepal. Basu Sharma and Ambika P. Adhikari, both Asta-Ja Board members, were given the responsibility to implement this project by becoming editors of the document. The editors decided that a document consisting of articles from interested Asta-Ja affiliated scholars should be compiled and published by Asta-Ja as an occasional paper series document. To mobilize additional support, the original two editors approached four other individuals – Prof. Keshav Bhattarai, Prof. Durga Poudel, Dr. Prasamsa Singh and Prof. Dinesh Gajurel – to help review the papers and support in the publication of the book. All three accepted the request and became part of the efforts for this publication.

The editors issued a call for papers in May 2020 asking for the commitment from potential authors to contribute to the projected volume. The editors received commitments from various scholars for 17 papers. However, only 10 papers were received by the deadline stipulated in the initial call for papers and subsequently extended. These papers were reviewed by the members of the review committee, and subsequently revised by authors to address concerns raised by reviewers. This volume is the product of compiling the papers through this process.

Even though Nepal has relatively fewer Covid-19 cases as of 24 September 2020 (about 70,000 cases and more than 450 deaths), the numbers are on the rise. If this trend continues for a while, the likely consequences of the Pandemic would be no less severe than elsewhere. Further, Nepal's next-door neighbor India is now experiencing a rapid rise in the virus infection rate and virus-related death toll. In fact, as of 24 September, 2020, India is seeing some about six million total Covid-19 cases, and more than 92,000 deaths. As India and Nepal have open borders, and as India is the only viable land connection for Nepal to the outside world, cross border transmission of the diseases is inevitable.

Nonetheless, we assume that the disease will eventually be managed successfully either through vaccination, anti-viral drugs, and the development of herd immunity in the population or a combination thereof. When Nepal, like many other countries, slowly emerges from the lockdowns and the viral disease burden as the Covid-19 pandemic begins to recede, one crucial problem for the government, policy makers and businesses will be to figure out ways to mitigate and reverse its negative effects to bring the country back to a normal situation.

The authors of the papers included in this volume discuss and analyze key issues facing the country to make thoughtful and evidence-based policy recommendations to inform decision makers in Nepal.

How various segments and sectors are affected by the Covid-19, and what can be done to restore a new normal in the post-Covid-19 era are the key questions directly or indirectly addressed by the authors of these papers. So, what we find in the authors' answers to these questions is clear articulations of what the challenges are and how the pandemic has also opened doors for new opportunities. To organize the renderings of our authors, we have used a concentric circles framework (Math Open Reference, 2020) as both the challenges and opportunities are the result of the Covid-19 being at the front and centre of this problem. In section 2 below, we briefly describe key characteristics of the concentric circles from geometry--the framework we are using for organizing summary of the papers included in this volume. For convenience, we have grouped the papers into three segments--each belonging to a unique circle in the concentric framework-- and presented the summary report subsequently.

2. An Organizing Framework

The volume contains a number of papers related to various sectors of the economy and different segments of the Nepalese society. An organizing framework becomes necessary to discuss the issues and the perspectives the authors have advanced in this collection. As mentioned above, we use a scheme of concentric circles framework for this purpose.

In geometry, when two or more objects share the same center or axis, they are said to be concentric or coaxial. The circumferences of the concentric circles never meet but are parallel to each other. They will have the same center but different radii. The Covid-19 is the center in our case. There are

several concentric circles with the circumferences parallel to each other. In terms of the papers included in this volume, we have put them into three broad categories—food and agriculture; education, environment and urban planning; and tourism, incomes distribution and the general economy. The categorization is based on the broad thematic thrust of the papers.

Putting the Covid-19 at the center and the three categories as objects, we can visualize the concentric circles as shown in the following diagram.

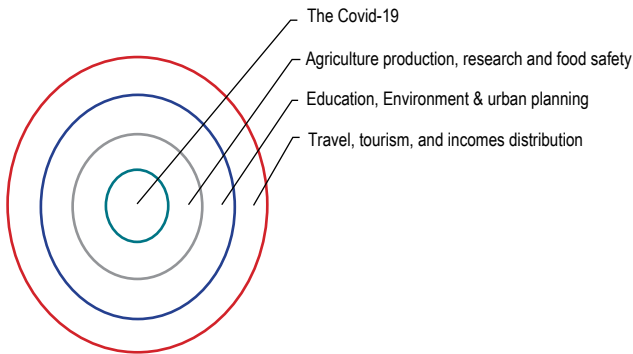


Figure 1: A Concentric Model of the Covid-19 and Its Impact

Of course, the circles do not cover all the affected areas of the Nepalese economy and society. We have designed the concentric circles model in view of the papers submitted, accepted after review and included for publication in the inaugural volume of the Asta-Ja Occasional Papers Series. Let us now turn to an overview of the issues and perspectives of these papers.

3. Issues, Perspectives, and Policies

The concentric model presented above is a general framework to examine multi-layer impacts of the Covid-19. Papers included in this volume address such multi-layer impacts in a limited number of sectors. Reading the papers from this lens, we have categorized them into three groups for discussion purpose.

3.1. Agricultural Production, Research and Food Safety

Food and agriculture are the foundation for meeting the basic survival needs of everyone. Research and program development are important elements not only for increasing agricultural productivity but also for determining

and ensuring food safety. The Covid-19 has affected various aspects of this foundation ranging from production to distribution to consumption. Scholars have analyzed and discussed many key objects belonging to this circle in their contributions to this volume.

Aditya Khanal examines demand and supply shocks in the food supply chain in the U.S. His main finding is that the pandemic has had adverse impacts on the food sector as it has affected the supply chain and altered consumption patterns. More and more people are getting accustomed to home delivery of groceries and prepared meals, and curbside pickups are becoming common in many places. However, increased cost of food due to disruption in supply chains has made many families and individuals face food shortage. On the positive side, the Covid-19 has promoted growth of online food business and perhaps the consumer's appreciation for the importance of "local" food supply chains. Policy makers in Nepal can certainly take a page or two from the U.S. experience while crafting their post-Covid-19 food and agricultural policies.

In another insightful paper, Kalidas Subedi analyses both the demand and supply shocks facing food security in Nepal. There is scarcity of input supplies such as seed and fertilizer on the one hand, and demand destruction because of high unemployment, income inequality and lockdown on the other. He has noted that the post-Covid-19 phase can bring an opportunity for reshaping the agri-food sector, provided government policies are directed towards fully engaging the unemployed youth and returnee migrant population. What is needed is facilities for year-round irrigation, availability of farm inputs such as quality seeds, fertilizers and financial credit, and use of cutting-edge production technology for farm mechanization. He is of the view that Covid-19 pandemic can become a transformative force for the development of this sector in bringing food sufficiency, developing agro-business industry and creating employment. His policy recommendations are along these lines.

Suroj Pokhrel's paper examines supply-demand imbalance in food situation arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. The supply of food has decreased because of lockdown and input constraints, whereas demand for food has increased due partly to migrants returning home. Pokhrel pleads for action to link agriculture to national Covid-19 mitigating program so that the issues related to supply constraints and demand management can be addressed appropriately. The author also recommends that educational programs and on-line counselling services to create awareness about food consumption, food wastage, and nutrition patterns are urgently needed as part of food security program.

Dilip Panthee and Khushi Tiwari explore agricultural research issues in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. They argue that the Covid-19 has affected work schedules, lab operation, field operation and greenhouse operation, among others. More importantly, it has affected grant writing and submission timelines that could adversely affect the timing of overall agriculture research. They ask granting agencies and others concerned with grant administration to pay attention to this particular consideration. Their findings in the US are a good lesson for the agro-researchers in Nepal too.

Pushpa Lal Moktan and Durga Poudel describe disruption in the supply-chain for both perishable and non-perishable agricultural products. Using published data and specific cases, they show how smallholder producers of perishable products have suffered the most from this pandemic. While there was oversupply of perishable products due to demand destruction, there was shortage of agricultural inputs such as seeds, fertilizers and pesticides due to lockdown and logistic problems. In addition, the pandemic also affected exports of such popular products as cardamon, ginger, and tea, among others. However, one of the positive spinoffs of the pandemic has been return of a large number of Nepali migrant workers many of whom have indicated that they will try to find work at home. And some local governments have come up with plans to provide incentives to help them. These incentives range from cash payouts to making uncultivated lands available for farming. Moktan and Poudel recommend that the governments at all three levels (federal, provincial, and local) should develop and coordinate concrete policies to address market disequilibrium and to promote employment opportunities in the agricultural sector.

3.2. Education, Environment and Urban Planning

Once hunger and poverty issues are addressed, quality of life becomes an important component of human development. Education and environment become nurturing forces for human development. Given the rapid pace of urbanization, designing urban space properly and managing its infrastructure efficiently to meet the public demand become additional the additional nurturing forces. However, the Covid-19 has brought obstacles and vulnerabilities on both counts. Papers by Udhab Khadka and Durga Poudel, and by Ambika Adhikari and Keshav Bhattarai analyze these vulnerabilities and provide policy pathways to overcome them in the post-Covid-19 era.

Khadka and Poudel argue that education plays a central role in bringing prosperity in today's knowledge dominated economy. As Nepal aspires to climb

economic development ladder faster, making education accessible to everyone is vital. However, the Covid-19 has presented obstacles for accessibility and delivery. Khadka and Poudel analyze remote delivery methods used to redress the problem created by the Covid-19 in the higher education sector. They find that remote delivery platforms have become a marvelous alternative medium for bringing together teachers and learners during this pandemic, despite missing live on-campus activities and experiences. They point out that even in normal situation remote learning could complement the face-to-face learning process. Their key policy recommendation is that both teachers and students should be provided with both (a) special package of internet connectivity with higher bandwidth, and (b) required training for remote delivery and learning.

Adhikari and Bhattarai elaborate on the theme of planning and design approaches “that help counter the pandemic, promote public health and improve the quality of urban life.” They argue that planning deficiencies, economic and spatial inequities, high mobility, and high population density have contributed towards increasing Covid-19 vulnerability in Nepal's cities. The authors review the current thinking on the topic by global experts who are analyzing the impact of densities on Covid-19, and how elements such as transit and occupants per dwelling units can be planned to ensure public health. Adhikari and Bhattarai, see a strong role for urban planners and policy makers in improving public health through planning and design.

They analyze the current urban environment in Nepal and propose new planning and design ideas to make the cities and urban areas public health friendly and resilient of any Covid-19 like pandemics in future. Drawing on insights and evidence from emerging ideas on planning for pandemics from around the world, they recommend public policies that are geared towards ensuring regular and clean water supply, reliable sanitary services, proper space configuration and design of buildings keeping social distancing requirement in mind, creation of “therapeutic garden” like public space facilities, development of a 20-minute city where possible, and availability of safe public transit system, among others. These policy measures are vitally important if Nepal's urbanization is to be environment friendly and people centric.

Another important aspect of urban environment is air quality. How air quality is being affected by the Covid-19 pandemic is an important question. Hari Kandel and Arjun Aryal examine the effect of the pandemic on air pollution in two major cities of Nepal—Kathmandu and Pokhara. Their research findings show that air quality significantly improved as a

result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The lockdown used by the Government of Nepal to minimize the spread of the Covid-19 virus reduced human mobility, curtailed on pollution creating activities such as driving and flying, and made people aware of healthy living. All these have contributed to reduce air pollution. Despite many challenges brought by the pandemic, this is one positive externality of the pandemic. Kandel and Aryal have masterfully demonstrated how behaviour changes, whether by necessity or externally mandated, can contribute to improvements in the environment, especially air quality.

3.3. Travel, Tourism and Incomes Inequality

Incomes inequality around the world is one of the major problems of the twenty-first century. Nepal is no exception. Remittance and public policies helped to reduce poverty level in Nepal in recent years. But the Covid-19 is like to bring a reversal to this situation as income from activities such as tourism begins to disappear and income from remittances begins to dry up. The Covid-19 suddenly appears as the disease of poor and the weak in the society. What to do to help restore some basic level of survival and preserve dignity of the poor and the weak becomes an important question.

Monika Ghimire and Udhab Khadka examine the effect of the Covid-19 on the tourism sector. Worldwide, tourism is one of the hardest hit sectors of the economy. Especially in the case of Nepal, tourism is one of the important sources of foreign currency earnings and employment creation. The authors show that travel restrictions and nationwide lockdown have adversely affected Nepal's tourism industry by making local tourism entrepreneurs, hotel businesses, souvenir sellers, tour guides, and porters jobless. The Covid-19 has drastically and adversely impacted the employees in the tourism industry in Nepal. The policy recommendation the authors make in the face of these adversities is to promote domestic tourism for sustaining the sector and build trust for safety and security of the international travelers which ultimately would contribute to the survival and revival of the sector.

Romy Karna in her paper notes that the effect of the Covid-19 has been disproportionately adverse on marginal communities, women and children. It is because they are more likely to be exposed to the disease, and more likely to have a higher mortality rate as many of them are deprived of the means of livelihood. In addition, women are predominantly in the informal sector; they bear brunt of widespread loss of livelihood; and some of them become victim

of domestic violence as stress levels rise in the house as everyone is forced to retreat in the house all day. Children from the marginal communities already suffer from malnutrition and hunger. The situation worsens with thousands of migrant workers returning from India and Middle-east, who need to be reintegrated with the family after quarantine and rehabilitated in the economy after the pandemic subsides. Das' policy prescriptions to address the problems include expanding testing, providing financial help, strengthening workplace safety, and working with the private sector to help returning migrants reintegrate.

Kanchan Joshi and Kalpana Khanal bring a political economy perspective to understand and evaluate the macroeconomic interventions used by governments around the world for mitigating financial and health-related problems created by the Covid-19 pandemic. They compare and contrast the approaches taken by the governments of developed countries with those of the governments of developing countries, particularly the South Asian ones. The authors provide comprehensive and comparative data related to the impact of the Covid-19 on the national economies, employment, production, and supply. In particular, the authors note that the vast majority of small businesses and individuals in the South Asian economies lie in the informal sector, which is not connected to formal financial and regulatory regime of the economy. When the current pandemic hit, the individuals working in the informal sectors were the worst hit as they had no fallback mechanisms such as insurance, credit line and cash reserves.

The authors find that firm and calculative actions to ameliorate the situation were taken by the former whereas they were lacking in the case of the latter. The authors ask for immediate policy interventions by governments to financially support and health-wise protect needy households and informal sector workers in South Asian countries such as India and Nepal. In addition, they recommend that the global North and international financial institutions help countries in the global South to tackle debt and financial crises as well as pandemic induced health crises.

While Joshi and Khanal explore North-South differences in tackling the effects of the Covid-19 on the needy households and informal sector workers, Karna focuses on the socio-economic impact of the pandemic on the poor of Nepal. Both papers bring important insights on how the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed and expanded vulnerabilities of the poor in developing countries like Nepal.

4. Concluding Remarks

This volume is the result of our initial curiosity for finding out the nature and extent of ravages of the Covid-19 pandemic in Nepal and how the Nepali diaspora academics are assessing the pandemic situation in Nepal. There is hardly any segment of the society and economy left untouched, directly or indirectly, by this disease. The impact of the Covid-19 in Nepal's society, economy and culture is enormous. The summary presented in section three above makes this clear.

The volume was published in a short time period to be of value to the individuals interested in reviewing the dynamics of the situation brought about by the Covid-19 in Nepal. For this purpose, the editors had to shrink the time period to collect, review and compile the papers to publish this document. The nature of the current pandemic is such that people will need to learn as they go forward. The editors and Asta-Ja believes that this volume will provide some good reference in this dynamic and fast-changing situation.

In the papers, the authors have attempted to capture those micro and macro effects and cast the stories in light of an evolving future where things also can become better if appropriate policy and program interventions are carried out by the government and businesses. Recommendations coming out of these well-researched and well thought-through papers add significantly to the public policy space in Nepal. The government of Nepal can certainly consider some of them, if deemed appropriate, in addressing the problems of the post-Covid-19 era. Similarly, this Occasional Series Paper can also be a useful reference to those researchers, professionals and students, who are interested to review the impacts of the Covid-19 in Nepal, and explore possible solutions to help Nepal face the impacts of the pandemic. It is our hope that this small volume will prove to be a meaningful contribution in this respect.

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