

Development Advocate

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COVID
RECOVERY





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CONTENTS

06

GOVERNANCE

The measures taken to control the pandemic were good but inadequate

By Bimala Rai Paudyal, Member of the National Assembly **06**

A country can do anything it wants to when it is economically prosperous

An interview with Krishna Prasad Oli, Member of National Planning Commission (NPC) **11**

Information Matters

By Yashoda Timilsina, a former commissioner of the National Information Commission **14**

16

GREEN RECOVERY

A climate cure for the COVID crisis

By Simon Lucas, Team Leader for Resilience and Inclusion Team of the UK Department for International Development (DFID) **16**

Biodiversity conservation and the impacts of nature-based tourism in the Annapurna Conservation Area

By Dr. Siddhartha B. Bajracharya, Executive Director of the National Trust for Nature Conservation and Dr. Dhanjaya Regmi, Chief Executive Officer of the Nepal Tourism Board **20**

A green post-pandemic recovery and resilience plan for Nepal

By Dr. Sunita Chaudhary, Ecosystem Services Specialist, International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) **26**

Post-COVID Tourism Recovery: Can nature-based tourism power Nepal's green recovery?

Dr. Regmi is Chief Executive Officer of the Nepal Tourism Board and Dr. Siddhartha B. Bajracharya is Executive Director of the National Trust for Nature Conservation **30**

34

SOCIAL PROTECTION

Going local and sustainable

By Saurav Dhakal, Founder and Curator at Story Cycle **34**

A Smart City is only possible with smart citizens, smart governance, smart economy, and smart infrastructure

Interview with Mr. Dilip Pratap Khand, mayor of Waling Municipality, Syangja **37**

Towards a more sustainable and resilient society: COVID-19 should serve as an alarm and herald our transition to a sustainable society that takes climate action into account

By Shail Shrestha, CEO Digo Bikas Institute **38**

Building bridges, surviving the pandemic and emerging stronger

By Lex Limbu, Digital Content Creator **40**

Inclusive eLearning: Leaving no one behind

By Sagar Prasai, Director, Diverse Patterns **42**

44

DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION

A digital transformation led by COVID-19

By Neelesh Man Singh Pradhan, Chief Executive Officer of Nepal Clearing House Ltd **44**

The government aims to turn all public services tech-friendly to help citizens

An interview with Asgar Ali, Information technology consultant to the Prime Minister of Nepal **49**

Opportunity Created by Covid-19 Information is power: Improving access to critical information to help improve lives

By Aradhana Gurung, Country Manager for Viamo in Nepal, Emma Leering, Director of Programs for Viamo in Nepal and Shruti Jha, Product Manager for Viamo in Nepal **52**



**THE MEASURES TAKEN
TO CONTROL THE
PANDEMIC WERE GOOD
BUT INADEQUATE**

BIMALA RAI PAUDYAL

The biggest challenge to the Covid-19 pandemic that I saw was a lack of preparedness, especially for the most pervasive pandemic we have ever faced. We dealt with a similar challenge during 2015's devastating earthquakes. This pandemic wasn't predicted but we should have started to prepare after the emergence of the virus in China. But, we were lost on that front.

We are dealing with the pandemic based on an outdated law. As the country has already been transformed into a federal set up, there should have been a new law with a clear mandate, especially for coordination among intergovernmental agencies, health mechanisms, provisions of relief and rescue for the needy, and ways to strengthen financial and human resources. An integrated legal framework is still necessary to tackle the pandemic effectively.

Some countries drafted new laws as soon as Covid-19 cases emerged in their countries. The move cleared legal hurdles, defined the roles and responsibilities of state bodies, and eased the procurement process. But we faced great difficulties in large-scale medical procurement and in maintaining transparency owing to the lack of a pandemic law.

As of now, the government is working under a law promulgated some 57 years ago.

Second, we failed to formulate a broad framework on how to tackle Covid-19 in time. Clear roles and responsibilities for all three tiers of governments would've helped in responding to the crisis in a coordinated manner.

Our health system is itself also a challenge. This pandemic exposed how vulnerable our health system is. Forget basic health protocols like quarantine facilities and isolation centres, there was not even adequate space to admit patients to the hospital. There was no preparedness in handling non-Covid-19 patients, particularly those suffering from pressure, sugar, cancer, and other health complications. Several pregnant women died on their way to the hospital or at home due to a lack of timely treatment. We lack sufficient health infrastructures and human resources.

The government should also have defined a broader framework before enforcing a lockdown. We didn't allot enough time for workers living in big cities like Kathmandu to go home. That's why we witnessed heartbreaking stories of people struggling to reach their homes. Arrangements should have been put in place to ferry people to their respective destinations before enforcing the lockdown.

Nevertheless, thousands of migrant workers from India and the Gulf countries managed to return home with skills and a little bit of seed money. They have returned with a desire to stay home. If we had tracked all returning migrant workers, analysed their skills and needs, and provided them with job opportunities, we could've easily replaced the 800,000 Indian and Bangladeshi people working in Nepal. They could've been mobilized to complete our megaprojects and resume agricultural farming. That

was the biggest opportunity for all of us, but we failed to cash in. Migrant workers have now started returning to their labour destinations.

We need a clear delineation of the jurisdiction of the three levels of government. For example, the federal government should have set a broader policy framework, such as isolation and quarantine centres, human resource ratio, finances and supplies, and dealing with non-Covid-19 complications. All these acts should've then been executed by the local governments with the provincial government coordinating. During the Covid-19 crisis, we saw that some local governments



were very innovative in handling the pandemic, although there were challenges related to capacity building. The way the local leadership, especially women deputy mayors, dealt with migrant workers arriving through the porous border with India deserves appreciation. The relevance of local government was proved during this pandemic.

Local governments can work effectively when they believe that the federal and provincial governments will support them whenever problems arise. Some local governments introduced the concept of agricultural ambulance to assist farmers in selling their products during the lockdown. Other local governments ensured reproductive services for people at their doorsteps. Provinces actually should have applied such good practices in other local governments as well.

Sadly, we couldn't empower local governments as necessary. There's always a problem in maintaining a delicate balance between the authority and capacity of local governments. In other words, some local governments have the authority but lack capacity whereas others have done little despite having enough working capacity.

A crisis response team should have been formed at the federal and provincial governments so that problems at the local level could be resolved immediately. The government formed the CCMC (Coronavirus Crisis Management Committee) to bridge the gap but it



has not been functioning effectively. Its activities are limited to organizing meetings and providing updates. It tried to ease the procurement process, but failed.

Mere bureaucratic decisions can't contain a pandemic. Therefore, the government should listen to experts

and execute their suggestions. There's the same problem at the local government level. Elected mayors don't respect public health experts. So, there's a mismatch between authority and expertise. Vulnerable communities, namely women, children, people with disabilities, and marginalised



groups, suffer the most during the crisis. Daily wage earners, small entrepreneurs, beauty parlor operators and those working in service sector have been deprived of their incomes. Hotel owners might have faced economic losses but those working in the hotels were deprived of food.

Despite all these shortcomings, the federal government announced a relief package for vulnerable groups a few weeks after announcing the lockdown. Local governments were mandated to provide relief. This was actually a good step, although there were some legal complications in receiving relief. But locals did not trust the government. They went to Khula Manch or temple premises to claim free food distributed by NGOs, but didn't go to their ward offices asking for help. On the other hand, local governments too failed to reach out.

During the pandemic, women were overworked at home while violence against women also increased significantly due to unemployment of males and rising frustration. Children too became victims as schools have remained closed for the last eight months. Disabled persons needed special care during the crisis but they continued to face problems. So did senior citizens. Women's access to reproductive health was also compromised. We raised these issues in Parliament and the government introduced a guideline, especially aimed at airlifting pregnant women and new mothers to hospitals. The government has categorized reproductive health as an essential service, but the service delivery is not satisfactory.

Social protection schemes were compromised too. The government announced an allowance for senior citizens and the disabled but they weren't able to go to the banks to collect their money.

Cases of suicide also surged. These problems were not foreseen in the initial days. Later, we started counseling and relief packages were announced, but we couldn't do better because of bureaucratic red tape.

Having said that, the measures we took in response to the Covid-19 crisis were good but inadequate. In order to do better, multilateral and regional organisations like SAARC and BIMSTEC can assist with relief, immediate health support, and economic recovery. Institutions like the ILO can support the strengthening of social protection schemes while multilateral organisations can support the Government of Nepal in reviving the economy. They can share experiences of other countries in reviving tourism, public transportation, and reopening academic institutions, and also support us technically and financially. I/NGOs can also support local governments in expanding health care, building infrastructure, public health, and awareness.

The Nepal government has the pandemic under more control than other developing countries and even some developed countries like the US and UK where the situation is out of control. Our government has been successful in stopping major health hazards so far. This is good for all of us.

Bimala Rai Paudyal is a member of the National Assembly. ◆◆◆



A COUNTRY CAN DO ANYTHING IT WANTS TO WHEN IT IS ECONOMICALLY PROSPEROUS

KRISHNA PRASAD OLI

An interview with Krishna Prasad Oli, member of the National Planning Commission (NPC)

The Government of Nepal (GoN) has heavily invested in post-COVID-19 recovery efforts. Some countries have taken this as an opportunity for a 'green recovery' to ensure a cleaner, healthier, and more sustainable society. Where do we stand in that respect?

The government has given due attention to COVID-19 recovery and the results will be seen in the future. Pandemics like this have taken place in the past and have often resulted in new ways of doing things. Some countries have thus seen this as an opportunity to develop the health sector while others have given emphasis to green recovery. Nepal's 15th periodic plan too has clearly spelled out ways to achieve prosperity through forests -- timber production, medicinal and aromatic plants, and forests-based industries. We have the potential to produce 130 million cubic feet of timber annually. Even if we are able to achieve half of

that figure with the current technology, the revenue will be phenomenal. With the use of more modern technology and skilled human resource, there is tremendous scope.

Likewise, our plan envisions establishing forest-based industries in all seven provinces. This can be accelerated in the post-pandemic recovery plan. Under the 'forest for prosperity' campaign, we have prioritized both timber and non-timber products. As a mountainous country, we also have great potential to produce medicinal and herbal products.

Energy is also a major sector for the development of a green economy and the government has accorded high priority to hydro and solar energy, which will be the engines of future economic growth.

As the pandemic is not over yet, we need to prioritize health, education, and the social sector. People's health and quality of education are indicators of development. During the height of the pandemic, students weren't able

to go to schools for months because of COVID-19. Even many students in urban areas were traumatized due to financial issues. All of this will have psychological impacts. The government is considering ways to deal these problems in the future. Virtual education has its limitations. Many of our mountainous districts and even some Terai areas still lack access to the internet. These issues should be prioritized in the post-recovery period.

Further, we are discussing how to revive other COVID-19-affected sectors like tourism and industries. Unlike the 2015 earthquakes, it's a bit difficult to respond to crises like Covid-19. For example, we prepared a post-earthquake recovery plan and it worked. But applying the same approach in the case of COVID-19 is difficult as we still do not know how long this pandemic will last and its full impacts on society and the national economy.



Periodic plans and annual plans are the tools that all three tiers of governments employ to usher in development. Noting the high risk that Nepal faces from both climatic and non-climatic hazards, how important is to 'risk inform' these development plans? How is the NPC supporting this process?

As an apex planning body, the NPC is working on a recovery plan to address these climatic and non-climatic hazards. It's stated that the temperature of the oceans has increased by two degrees due to global climate change, but if you talk about the impact of climate change on the mountains, one third of glaciers will melt by the end of this century, even if the target of maintaining 1.5 degree centigrade is achieved. The temperature of the Bay of Bengal increasing by another two percent will ultimately cause flash floods and untimely rainfall, impacting cropping patterns in countries like ours. Evidence also suggests that the nutrient content of the food crops will also be altered. Thus, our preparedness should focus on climate change-related disasters.

Economic growth, if not sustainable, has environmental costs. In Nepal's context, how can we move forward by balancing economic prosperity as well as environmental sustainability? The global discourse is currently centered on 'local solutions' to resolve this dilemma - what can Nepal's local solutions be?

Local solutions are related to nature. During the pandemic, we enforced a nationwide lockdown when cases of coronavirus were reported. Many people were likely protected because of the lockdown. People are now walking about and doing their work by adopting precautions and health

protocols. They seem to have realized that they can stay safe when they take precautions.

As far as growth is concerned, when the coronavirus emerged in Nepal in March, we were in line to meet seven percent economic growth as projected. But COVID-19 disrupted economic activities and the supply chain, which in turn hampered our economy. Despite all odds, the construction of mega projects continues, even if their pace has been a bit slow due to the pandemic.

Talking about sustainability, the 15th periodic plan has incorporated all of the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and indicators. We have been consistently monitoring the progress made so far in meeting the targets. As per the most recent monitoring report, we are close to meeting SDG No. 6, which relates to energy. We are also close to goals in the environment and forest sector.

The SDGs are not a separate goal. They are part of a holistic development approach that prioritizes the green economy and natural sectors. Thus, we are focusing on clean energy and have already generated 1,400-1,500 MW of electricity. More hydropower plants will soon be producing about 3,000 MW of electricity. We are also making good progress in solar energy. There are some issues related to land acquisition and the building of transmission lines but as we are a democratic country, people's concerns need to be settled amicably. That's why the completion of some projects is behind schedule. Nature-based solutions are also related to development. People might say that the government is only constructing roads and building airports by destroying forests. But the present government is very environmentally sensitive. We need to maintain a fine balance between

development and preserving the environment. Otherwise, we will remain underdeveloped forever. If you look at China, they have now allocated 62 billion Yuan for ecosystem restoration in Tibet while also pursuing development there. A country can do anything it wants to when it is economically prosperous.

In order to pursue nature-based solutions at the local level, we need to encourage community forestry where community user groups have been expanding forest coverage, generating employment, and helping the people's livelihoods. Similarly, we have also given major emphasis to the conservation and protection of the Chure region. Local solutions are emerging from both local communities and local governments.

The GoN recently revised its National Determined Contributions that outlines Nepal's ambition towards net-zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. This commitment is in-line with the 15th plan. Do you think COVID-19 will overshadow other important agenda such as climate change and disaster risk reduction?

This should be viewed from three perspectives—global, national, and local. If you look at things on a global scale, climate change is related to greenhouse gas emissions by the burning of fossil fuels. But Nepal only contributes 0.027 percent to global carbon emissions, which is almost insignificant. However, we can't shy away from our responsibility as we are also party to the Paris Agreement and morally responsible to be a part of the solution. That's why we are working on national strategies that are formulated based on the agreement. At the local level, we have taken initiatives to mitigate the risk of climate change. To reduce carbon emissions, we have

maintained almost 45 percent forest coverage—the second highest in South Asia, after Bhutan, which has 75 percent forest coverage.

These are our climate adaptation measures. Apart from this, we want to promote massive agroforestry programs that will support our economy and development works.

But going back to your question, COVID-19 has definitely disrupted the economy and has largely affected revenue generation. We may have to suffer for at least a couple of years because of this, even if the virus is contained.

What kind of support can multilateral agencies, including the UN, provide to complement the government's green recovery efforts? What is your impression of the on-going cooperation?

The UN is also our agency. That's why they should not be treated as different stakeholders. They are doing their best to support us. We have been partnering with them in preparing our recovery plans. They are also supporting the NPC in localizing SDGs, preparing guidelines, and providing technical assistance, as and when necessary. UNDP especially can support us technically where we have

deficiencies, i.e., human resource and knowledge, which they have been doing.

Multilateral donors like the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and International Monetary Fund support us by providing grants and loans as well as sharing experiences. These types of support should continue for countries like us that are progressing to graduate from LDC status. And given COVID-19, that support will be even more important. Additionally, we are formulating a recovery plan and we anticipate support for certain funding requirements.

What measures are being put in place to strengthen social protection systems for vulnerable and marginalized groups to protect them from future shocks?

On social protection, health insurance is important. The government will come up with new policies with a special focus on health, education, and nutrition. New policies will be introduced based on the recovery plan.

As official development assistance has been declining for Nepal (and other developing countries headed towards LDC graduation), what is Nepal's strategy for self-sufficiency? Is Nepal going to focus on enhancing public revenue, allocate the budget

more efficiently, or push for more Official Development Assistance?

We should focus on enhancing production in every sector – green, energy, industry, food, and others. Our forest and grassland coverage should be utilized in an optimal fashion. Tourism is another area of income generation. More importantly, we should move towards human capital formation, which means we should enhance the knowledge and skills of our people. National revenue should also be increased.

Existing industries should run at full capacity and new industries should be established at the local level. Mines should come into operation. Some transformative projects envisioned in the 15th five-year plan should be our priority. As we are an LDC, we must continue to negotiate support from bilateral and multilateral agencies.

In order to graduate from LDC status, we have managed to meet the criteria for human wealth index and the threshold of economic vulnerability. However, we have to still work hard on per capita national income. We also have to think seriously about sustaining that graduation in the longer term. ◆◆◆

THE GOVERNMENT WILL COME UP WITH NEW POLICIES WITH A SPECIAL FOCUS ON HEALTH, EDUCATION, AND NUTRITION. NEW POLICIES WILL BE INTRODUCED BASED ON THE RECOVERY PLAN.

INFORMATION
MATTERS

RIGHT INFORMATION CAN PROMOTE TRANSPARENCY, RULE OF LAW, AND ACCOUNTABILITY, ESPECIALLY DURING A CRISIS

YASHODA TIMSINA

People's access to Right to Information (RTI) becomes all the more essential during a crisis.

This is what we experienced during 2015's devastating earthquakes. At that time, people from 31 quake-affected districts, particularly those from the severely affected 14 districts, demanded all kinds of information, as was their right. But there were lapses in disseminating right information about relief materials. The government was accused of embezzling material and funds in the name of relief. That's why we at the National Information Commission asked the Ministry of Home Affairs to disclose all details of relief materials like lentils, rice, oil, and tents and money, both in cash and pledges, every day at 4 pm. We asked them to disseminate right information so that the people themselves can evaluate how much relief the government is getting from various sources. The ministry, however, never publicized the information.

A similar situation has now emerged with the COVID-19 pandemic. A month ago, the prime minister informed the

nation that Rs 18 billion had been spent so far to contain the spread of the coronavirus. Since then, people have sought details of the expenditure. Some have even argued that the people would benefit the most if that money had been divided and directly distributed to every household. Legally, every citizen has the right to question the government and seek information.

Following this criticism, the prime minister stated the funds had been dispatched to 753 local governments, who could provide the expenditure details. But the local governments weren't transparent and we did not fulfill our responsibility by asking them to be transparent to the citizens.

Going back to the COVID-19 crisis, the government has done some good jobs. For example, the Health Ministry's spokesperson presents a national COVID-19 update every day. But the way the spokesperson presents the details raises questions about whether he is disseminating information or terrorising the people.

Second, key offices of all offices, mainly those involved in preventing

pandemics, are able to publicise the details of all expenses incurred during the pandemic. For them, this is a challenge as well as an opportunity. RTI law clearly states that key information should be disseminated every three months, so both federal and local governments should make their expenses public. People should know what the government is doing with their money. But since governments don't disclose their expenditure details, they face facing criticism despite their good work.

The importance of RTI has thus increased more than ever, but sadly, citizens' pursuit of information has gone the opposite way.

Our team was the second in office at the National Information Commission since its founding. The first team was more focused on institutional development but during our five-year tenure, we tried our best to expand to all 77 districts and spread awareness to local bodies about constitutionally guaranteed rights like the right to information. We made it mandatory to appoint an information officer at all government offices. Except for a few exceptions, most offices



followed our instructions. However, the tendency to guard information that might potentially harm public officials continues.

Not many citizens are seeking information, either. I think about 10 percent of the total population understands that RTI is their fundamental right while only two or three percent exercise this right. Thus, it is difficult to implement the law until people are aware and apply it in practice.

During my time at the commission, I wanted to do three things: promulgate an RTI law in all seven provinces, conduct research about our work performance during our five year stay in office, and begin a massive campaign to disseminate information regarding state-provided facilities for women. Sadly, I was unable to do it all. We are already a federal country but only Kathmandu has an information commission. This isn't the way to expand people's access to information.

As part of making women more aware about women-specific facilities provided by the state, we prepared a booklet in seven different languages

and disseminated it. But it wasn't possible to reach out to all local governments and make women aware about their legal rights. We also published a book about the changes made possible because of the right to information. We had high expectations from the media, but the media fraternity made little effort in exercising RTI. Although right to information is every citizen's law, media persons could effectively exercise it in practice.

When we analysed reasons behind the low participation of journalists in using RTI tool to get information, we learned that there's a tendency to collecting information from backdoor channels or through personal relations instead of filing a petition as per the law.

Nevertheless, we have made some progress in the field of right to information. But in our context, law implementation is weak. This applies to all sectors, not just in the field of RTI. When we held discussions with RTI commissioners and experts from countries like Australian, Japan, the USA, and Canada, they told us that their law had a more limited mandate than ours. Still, they said there were few problems in information

dissemination while we have many. This shows that we are smart when it comes to promulgating laws but poor in implementation.

There are also institutional problems. For example, bureaucrats simultaneously take an oath of office and secrecy and an oath to implement the constitution and the country's laws. But once they take charge, they seem to forget their oath taken to implement the law and only focus on maintaining secrecy. Based on conversations with information officers, I can say that they feel more comfortable hiding information instead of assisting RTI applicants. More importantly, politicians who want to hide information during their time in power seek the same information once they are not in power anymore. For RTI, this is a tragedy.

But this is not to say that we shouldn't stop questioning the authorities and asking for information. Right information will promote transparency, rule of law, and accountability.

Yashoda Timsina is a former commissioner of the National Information Commission. ◆◆◆



A CLIMATE CURE FOR THE COVID CRISIS

Green recovery plans are being developed to help Nepal bounce back greener– but are they the best path for Nepal?

SIMON LUCAS

Last year, Nepal faced a complex set of challenges as the pandemic took hold. Hundreds of thousands of migrants walked home from India and quarantine centres were

overflowing. At that time, 55 percent of people in Nepal had lost incomes from the lockdown and 28 percent of households were facing food shortages. Economic growth slipped from 7 percent to 1.5 percent and up

to 30 percent of the population is still at risk of slipping back into poverty. In stark terms, Nepal's development has been set back a decade and for those affected by shocks such as the 2015 earthquakes or the 2017 floods, their recovery has once again been halted.

At the height of the pandemic, recovery seemed a long way off with the priority on a direct COVID-19 health response. But with vaccines being rolled out in Nepal from the end of January 2021 we are, at last, at the beginning of the end.

We know that the impacts of the pandemic cannot be magicked away with the wave of a wand, but we must remember how resilient and resourceful Nepalis are. The recent example of the first winter ascent of K2 by Nepali climbers is an inspiration in this respect. A team of highly experienced climbers had lost their normal guiding season to the pandemic and so, used their time instead to plan and then conquer the last, great, unclaimed winter mountain ascent. The team lived up to their slogan of 'Action is Possible'. But should COVID-19 recovery be the catalyst for climate action? Reinvigorating remittances, rebuilding the decimated tourism industry, and attracting investment will not be easy. On the other hand, the pandemic has given us time to rethink how to make the most of Nepal's peoples, mountains, water, nature, and neighbours to make its recovery greener and more sustainable.

What needs to be done

Initial analysis suggests that there is the potential to create over 3 million new jobs in Nepal by focusing on natural resources, infrastructure, urban development, and private sector growth based on innovation and the adoption of new, green technology

that is resilient to future shocks. Initial analysis has shown four areas of particular potential.

The first is sustainable, natural resource-based job creation in agriculture, forestry, and eco-tourism. These new jobs can generate immediate employment and raise incomes in rural areas. For example, Nepal has committed to planting 50 million trees and achieving 45 percent forest cover in its Nationally Determined Contribution. These forests can generate over 100,000 jobs in sustainable forestry and forest-based enterprises and reduce erosion and landslide risks whilst absorbing greenhouse gases and protecting ecosystems. Similarly, investing in sustainable, nature-based tourism can create 2 million jobs by 2025 and increase revenues from tourism to over \$3.5 billion per year, if managed sustainably in collaboration with Nepal's conservation agencies and local governments.

Second is more investment in clean power, which can create another 100,000 jobs and meet domestic and regional demands for clean energy. Hydropower alone can generate revenues of up to 1 trillion rupees (US\$ 9 billion) per year. This sector can also attract investment from the private sector and lead to equitable, clean power trading in the region. In the short term, public works schemes on slope protection, water resource management and river training can provide over 200,000 immediate jobs for those that have lost theirs due to COVID-19 while also reducing landslide and flood risks.

Third, green and resilient cities will be drivers of Nepal's growth. Over 70 percent of future carbon emissions in Nepal will be from cities if they follow the high carbon 'dirty development'

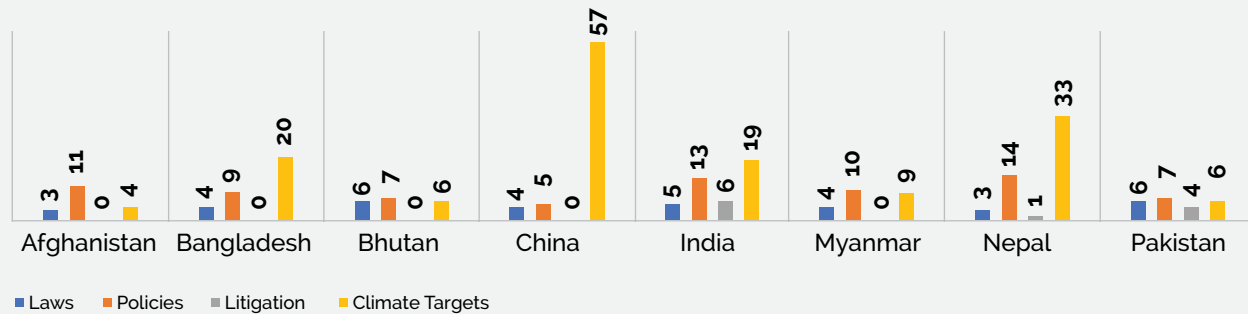
route of the 20th century. But Nepal has the opportunity to drive sustainable and resilient economic growth as it urbanizes at over 3 percent per year. Urban mayors can provide incentives for clean electric vehicles, cooking and heating, as well as generate energy from waste projects that reduce air pollution. Finally, it is critical to build resilience not just to COVID-19 but any future climate shocks by using new technologies to track new diseases, improve early warning systems, and enable vulnerable people to diversify their incomes away from climate-sensitive agriculture. Research has shown that early warning systems can reduce the impact of future shocks by \$4 to \$7 for every \$1 invested.

New risk financing instruments, such as 'catastrophe bonds' can help reduce the burden of future shocks on government budgets and invest in shock-responsive social protection systems to protect up to 10 million people who are vulnerable to slide back into poverty due to COVID-19. The green recovery package set out above can help Nepal get back on track to Middle Income Status and achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. The areas identified are firmly based on the Nepal government's 15th Development Plan, its sector strategies, and climate commitments.

How do we do what needs to be done

Investment, both public and private, is required to support a green and resilient recovery. Nepal's Nationally Determined Contribution to climate change estimates that the country needs \$25 billion dollars to achieve its green growth targets. In the short-term, relief efforts will rely heavily on public funds but in the medium and long term, there are

CLIMATE POLICY IN THE HINDU KUSH HIMALAYAN COUNTRIES



increasing amounts of private green finance available. For example, the global green bond market reached \$1 trillion at the end of 2020, despite the pandemic. Nepal needs to attract more of these resources to invest in green industries and public-private partnerships in urban, energy, industry, and transport to ease the burden on government finances.

Well implemented policies also need to complement the investment required to support a green recovery in Nepal. Climate policies in Nepal provide a strong foundation to support green recovery, with ambitious targets related to energy, transport, agriculture, and forestry. Nepal is already seen as leader in the Hindu Kush Himalaya in its efforts to support

green and resilient development, so there is much to build on. More can be done to make investment in forestry, solar electric vehicles, and sustainable tourism easier and more secure.

Innovations and new technology are essential to making the shift to green recovery and promote green growth in Nepal. The World Bank estimates that a 10 percent increase in access to broadband can accelerate GDP growth by up to 1.3 percent. So, access to digital technologies that can help Nepal cope with COVID-19 and develop a greener and more resilient economy will be critical. Digital innovations can improve natural resource use efficiency, enable business innovations, and support job creation. Digital innovations can also

improve resilience to shocks through access to weather data, satellite landslide risk management, and e-access to relief funds.

In many areas, we must recognise the need to provide skills to enable those affected by COVID-19 to take advantage of Nepal's green recovery. Climate-smart agriculture, solar parks, low carbon industries, green IT hubs, and sustainable tourism all require different skills. So, the recovery package will need to be tailored to ensure that those affected by COVID-19 have the skills to respond to local needs and the requirements of the private sector.

The opportunities available make a compelling case for Nepal to

INNOVATIONS AND NEW TECHNOLOGY ARE ESSENTIAL TO MAKING THE SHIFT TO GREEN RECOVERY AND PROMOTE GREEN GROWTH IN NEPAL. THE WORLD BANK ESTIMATES THAT A 10 PERCENT INCREASE IN ACCESS TO BROADBAND CAN ACCELERATE GDP GROWTH BY UP TO 1.3 PERCENT.

prioritize a green recovery – but is it the very best option for Nepal? Unsustainable forestry can generate incomes now. Diesel pumps can water fields and new roads can open up tourist destinations quickly. Nepal's development partners are working together to test this 'ambitious' green growth against the business-as-usual of dirty development. These will allow the National Planning Commission, the Ministry of Forests and Environment, and the Ministry of Finance to weigh the costs, benefits, and viability of these scenarios. The work will also inform the development of Nepal's

long-term strategy for climate change. In parallel, Nepal's development partners have used the framework above to estimate the current and future investment pipeline to identify resources of up to \$7.4 billion for green recovery and in December 2020, agreed to a joint statement with the Government of Nepal to work together on Nepal's green recovery.

A final thought

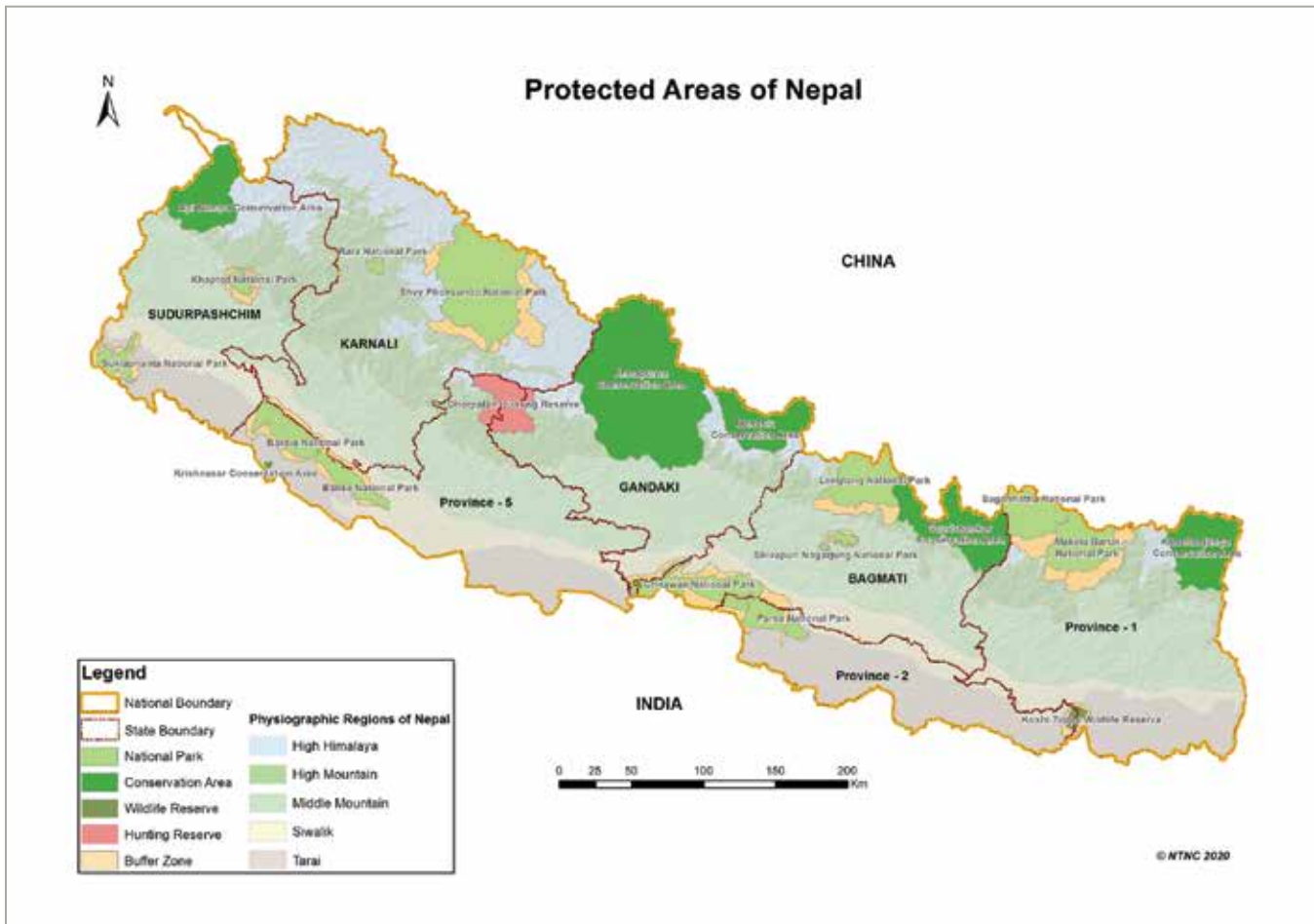
Nepal is uniquely placed to leap-frog from the fossil-fueled growth of the past and benefit from new technology and green finance. In doing so, Nepal

can demonstrate that not only is a low carbon, climate-resilient, and green recovery possible, but it is affordable, achievable, and advisable. A message that will be increasingly important for the world to listen to in the run-up to COP 26. It will not be easy, but if we accept the challenge, prepare well and work together -- as the Nepali team on K2 proved -- action is possible.

Simon Lucas is Team Leader for Resilience and Inclusion Team of the UK Department for International Development (DFID). ◆◆◆



BIODIVERSITY CONSERVATION AND THE IMPACTS OF NATURE-BASED TOURISM IN THE ANNAPURNA CONSERVATION AREA



DR. SIDDHARTHA B. BAJRACHARYA AND DR. DHANANJAY REGMI

A majority of tourists arriving in Nepal visit its 20 protected areas (PAs) -- national park, wildlife reserve, conservation area, and hunting reserve. PAs and their surroundings receive about 60 percent of all international visitors to the country with areas such as the Annapurna Conservation Area, Chitwan National Park, and Sagarmatha National Park playing important roles in development of nature-based tourism in the country. But despite Nepal's rich natural and cultural endowments, tourist spending is very low -- an average of only \$44 per day in 2018, compared to a regional average of \$100-150.

Tourist expenditure on the way to the park and in communities adjacent to or within the area can be significant, leading to increased incomes, poverty reduction, and opportunities for vertical advancement. Tourism also assists in protecting the resources on which it is based through the generation of revenue. This provides a powerful economic justification for conserving biological resources, particularly in protected areas. However, there are other roles that tourism plays, which are often overshadowed by its obvious economic role, including social and environmental impacts -- some of which are considered negative, others positive, and some neutral.

Visitor use of PAs can threaten their conservation values. Therefore, a balanced interaction between visitors, parks, and local communities -- or between biophysical resources and people -- is essential to provide mutual benefits to all. Such a balance is also

considered important to strengthen the conservation capacity of the park authority, while at the same time influencing local attitudes toward conservation.

However, the recent COVID-19 pandemic has had a dramatic impact on socioeconomic activities, including tourism. The number of international visitors collapsed from March 2020 as a result of the outbreak, resulting in a sharp decline in visitors and losses of about \$460 billion, according to UNWTO. Neither tourism operators nor visitors have since developed enough confidence to resume travel.

Nature-based tourism in the Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA)

The Annapurna Conservation Area (ACA) is Nepal's largest protected area, covering 7,629 square kilometres. It is located in the hills and mountains of west-central Nepal, covering five districts, bounded to the north by the dry alpine deserts of Dolpo and Tibet, to the west by the Dhaulagiri Himal and the Kaligandaki Valley, to the east by the Marshyangdi Valley, and to the south by the valleys and foothills surrounding Pokhara.

ACA is well known both nationally and internationally for its scenic beauty, unique ecology, and rich cultural heritage. Some of the world's highest mountains including Annapurna Himalaya range and the deepest river valley the Kaligandaki Valley in the world lie within ACA. Rich in freshwater resources, home to a great variety of flora and fauna, a living museum for the blend of culture as well as a number of biodiversity hot spots, ACA offers unique nature-based tourism opportunities for the development of the area itself, as well as for

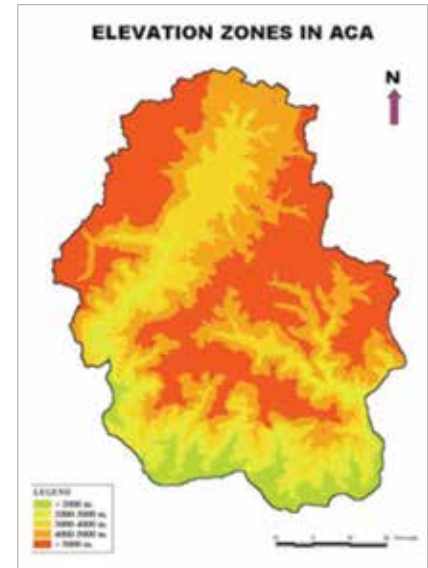
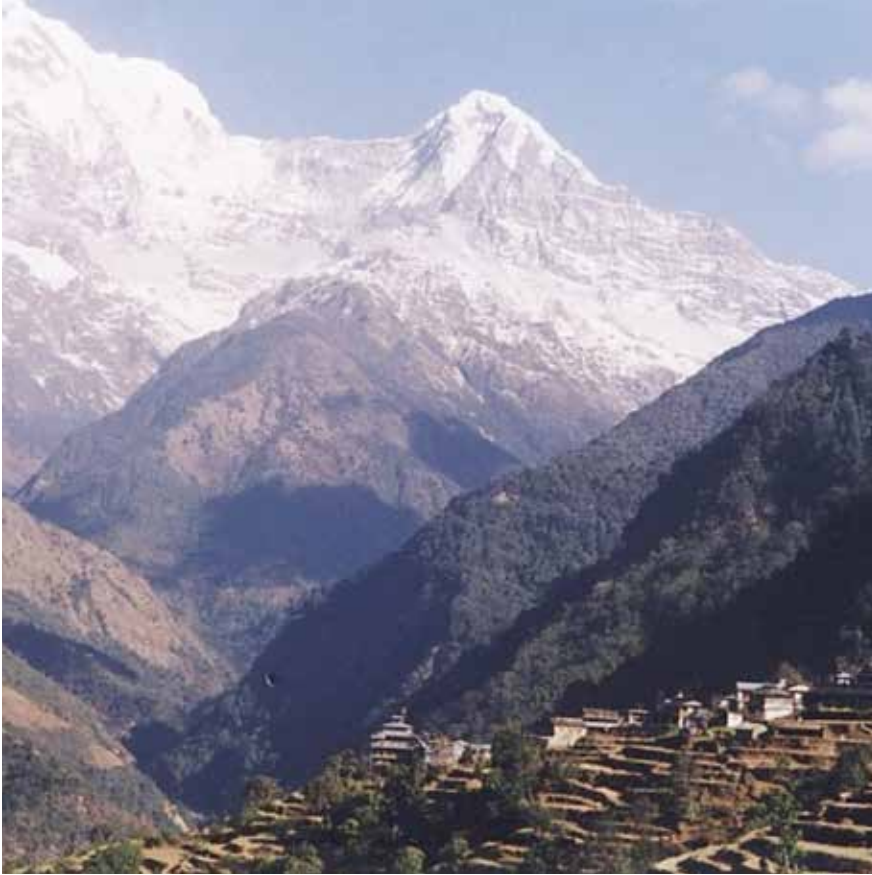


Figure : Annapurna Conservation Area elevation zones

surrounding lowland areas.

ACA is the most popular trekking destination in the Nepali Himalayas, receiving more than 180,000 international visitors in 2018. Tourism development and management in ACA are considered good examples of ecotourism. Two major types of trekkers, organised groups and independent trekkers, visit the area, as well as mountaineering groups. Tourism data indicates an increasing trend in the annual number of visitors to ACA. However, there has been a sharp decline in the number of visitors since the COVID-19 pandemic.

ACA was created partly in order to alleviate environmental degradation linked to trekking tourism by managing conservation and development. The sustainable development of tourism is one of the principal goals of ACA management. Tourism management in ACA is globally considered a good example of community involvement.



Moreover, the revenue from tourism in the area has helped restore degraded features of the ACA's natural and cultural environment.

Tourism management activities in Annapurna Conservation Area

Nature-based tourism in ACA is directly contributing to effective conservation and sustainable rural development. More than 1,000 local teashops, lodges, and hotels in the area directly benefit from tourism. However, there are challenges in the development and management of nature-based tourism in ACA. The growing aspirations of local communities for infrastructure, particularly roads, might significantly transform the modality of nature-based tourism in the region.

Meaningful participation of local communities in the tourism value-chain has long been encouraged through local-level institutions such as Tourism Management sub-Committees (TMsCs) and mothers' group. TMsCs develop local policies regarding tourism, including a policy to reduce firewood use. Moreover, TMsCs are responsible for improving the quality and standard of their facilities and services, standardising and monitoring their rates, and preparing menus. TMsCs and mothers' group also look after the security and safety of tourists in their area. At present, TMsCs are seeking guidance and support to maintain health and safety standards in the present COVID-19 situation.

Capacity enhancement of local lodge operators and tourism entrepreneurs

through various training and workshop is regularly provided in order to enhance the service quality. Accommodation facilities, food quality and variety, sanitation and hygiene, waste management, spoken English, hospitality, and so forth are addressed. Various workshops are conducted at the local level to generate awareness about the impacts of tourism, garbage management, nature conservation, clean energy use, etc. Exchange visits are also organised to expose and share experiences with other community groups within ACA, and elsewhere in the country.

Responsible travel to the fragile mountain area of ACA is promoted among visitors and other stakeholders. The national and international visitors to ACA are informed to minimise negative economic, environmental and social impacts; support in the generation of greater economic benefits for local people and enhance the well-being of host communities; and make positive contributions to the conservation of natural and cultural heritage.

Access infrastructure (roads, trails, bridges, signage, etc.), safe drinking water stations, information centres, environmental management, and other tourism-related infrastructure are gradually being upgraded to enhance the quality of the experience of tourists. New destinations and routes within ACA are continuously being explored and developed in order to reduce crowds in certain sites and provide unique natural experiences. An example is the Mardi Himal Trek, identified in the early 2000s.

Tourism development in ACA is often considered a benchmark for the development of tourism in other areas of Nepal. Nevertheless, there are certain constraints that might hinder tourism development in ACA in the

future. The growing desire of local communities and elected leaders to connect each and every settlement by a motor road, and possible development of megaprojects such as hydropower plants in the ACA might put decades of conservation and development efforts at risk.

Impacts of tourism in Annapurna Conservation Area

All forms of tourism produce negative impacts on the natural environment and the ACA is not exempt. Nature-based tourism, which is generally considered to contribute to biodiversity conservation, can also cause the degradation of natural areas if unregulated. These impacts may include the crushing or clearing of vegetation, soil modification, the introduction of weeds and pathogens, water pollution, visual impacts, and disturbance to wildlife.

ACA receives around 180,000 tourists annually. Each tourist brings with them an average of at least one support staff as a guide, porter, or cook, which makes the total number of outside visitors to the area about 360,000 per annum. However, the number of trekkers alone does not indicate the intensity of the impact. For instance, tourism impact is reported to be higher in the Sagarmatha (Everest) National Park than in the Annapurna Conservation Area, although the former receives fewer tourists. This indicates that, although the impacts of tourism are inevitable, they can be reduced by the meaningful engagement of the local community.

The environmental impacts of mountain tourism have been noted in numerous publications, particularly deforestation and forest degradation caused by the demand for fuelwood. Most tourist lodges still use fuelwood

for cooking and room heating. However, tourism in ACA has so far not had a significant impact on the structure and composition of the forests because various conservation activities, including the provision of alternative forms of energy, no campfire policy, and afforestation have been successful. This is primarily because of the successful development of community and private woodlots through the establishment of tree plantations, together with an increase in conservation awareness and the introduction of alternative energy sources, such as fuel-efficient stoves, kerosene, liquid petroleum gas, solar technology, and electricity. Wildlife populations in ACA have increased after the introduction of conservation initiatives. Although there is occasional hunting in ACA,

evidence suggests that tourism has made a positive social contribution to the conservation of wildlife because tourists are sympathetic to the cause of environmental protection and conservation. However, some negative impacts on wildlife behaviour were observed in ACA such as frequent sightings of the common langur and birds scavenging on discarded food and litter. Some wildlife species have also become habituated to humans as a source of food in tourism areas. Another visible impact of tourism has is on the physical environment. The construction of new tourist lodges, or the expansion of existing ones, has increased. New lodges are often modern in design, undermining the traditional local style and creating visual impacts.



Tourism is a driving force for integrated conservation and development in ACA. Significant investment has been made in infrastructure schemes such as micro-hydro schemes, health centres, and bridges. Tourism has helped generate resources for these schemes and also increased the capacity of local communities to contribute. Income generation and creation of employment opportunities are the major economic benefits of tourism in the area. More than 5,000 locals are employed by lodges in the Annapurna area. However, tourist spending is very low. Tourists spend an average of only \$39 per day, making it a low-cost destination.

Nature-based tourism has brought better economic opportunities to remote mountain areas, such access to better housing, education, and healthcare. However, tourism also generates biodegradable and non-biodegradable waste. Disposal of solid waste is a serious concern as decomposition is an extremely slow process in the high mountains. Its effects and significance depend on the volume produced, the application of recycling, waste prevention strategies, and the nature of the receiving environment.

Some villages, such as Chhomrong, have been very successful in preventing the accumulation of plastic water bottles and glass beer bottles. The lodge management

committee of this village has banned the use of plastic water bottles and glass beer bottles, and instead encourages the use of boiled water, electric water filters, and canned beer.

But tourism also brings inflation. The majority of foodstuffs, fuel, and household items come from outside the ACA region. Therefore, tourism causes economic leakage and local inflation by driving prices up. Local communities have also expressed their growing concern about the shortage of labour, which is deflected to tourism, for agriculture.

UNWTO market research suggests that people will seek out adventure travel, natural spaces, and safe and quality experiences post-COVID-19. Protected areas in Nepal such as ACA can offer visitors this opportunity. Therefore, it is imperative that protected areas are prepared to attract this surge. Nature-based tourism in protected areas must 'built back better' after COVID-19, by not returning to business as usual but by seriously taking into account of the quality of service and tourism infrastructure.

Dr. Siddhartha B. Bajracharya is Executive Director of the National Trust for Nature Conservation and Dr. Regmi is Chief Executive Officer of the Nepal Tourism Board. ◆◆◆

MORE THAN 5,000 LOCALS ARE EMPLOYED BY LODGES IN THE ANNAPURNA AREA. HOWEVER, TOURIST SPENDING IS VERY LOW. TOURISTS SPEND AN AVERAGE OF ONLY \$39 PER DAY, MAKING IT A LOW-COST DESTINATION.





A GREEN POST-PANDEMIC RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE PLAN FOR NEPAL

Nature-based solutions will not only help immediate recovery but also strengthen key sectors that help build resilience to climate change-related risks and disasters.

DR. SUNITA CHAUDHARY

Over the past years, we have witnessed progress across the world when it comes to recognising and responding to the shared threats of climate change. From the Paris Agreement to various national and regional green new deals, countries have prioritised climate action in their political agendas and developmental programmes. These plans and targets can be scrutinised and criticised for their potential to deliver substantive climate action, but the discourse and public consciousness are undoubtedly headed in the right direction. However, the COVID-19 pandemic – with its deep and cascading impacts rippling across the global economy – could upend such progress as countries seek to recover by any means possible.

For Nepal, the pandemic comes on the back of the devastating 2015 earthquakes. Environmental policies have taken a backseat to growth targets in the country's road to recovery. The post-earthquake "build back better" mantra has focused on infrastructure rebuilding and cash transfers, overlooking existing inequalities, ineffective public sector services, ailing economic sectors, and climate change impacts, all of which leave us vulnerable to an array of disasters and setbacks. Worryingly, the same growth-oriented recovery seems to be on the cards for dealing with the disruptions caused by the pandemic. We need to shift tracks to address longstanding issues with our economy and approach to development. And as climate change remains at the heart of our problems, now and into the future, any path to recovery needs to be a green one.

Impacts on people and nature

The 2015 earthquakes were a major shock for Nepal, but the country's history is replete with climate-induced disasters. Nepal is ranked among the top five for climate-change related hazards and is the 20th most multi-hazard prone country. As glaciers melt, temperatures rise, and ecosystems degrade, the frequency and magnitude of climate-induced disasters increase, impacting the environment, economy, and society. The 2017 floods, for instance, caused the deaths of 160 people, affected around 1.7 million, and led to an estimated Rs 7.2 billion in losses in the agriculture sector.

The COVID-19 pandemic has compounded this constant stress on the economy and ecology. Agriculture, tourism, and remittances – the major sources of economic growth accounting for 24 percent (2019), 8 percent (2018), and 26 percent (2019) of the country's GDP, respectively – have been hit the hardest. Farming, especially commercial and semi-commercial farming, also took a big hit due to transportation restrictions and marketing issues. As of August 2020, about 23 percent of households were found to be food insecure, and about 9 percent of households had lost their livelihoods. An estimated 800,000 people working in the tourism industry have been impacted, while remittances dropped sharply by 12 percent in 2020. As such, economic growth is projected to decline by 2.3 percent compared with the previous fiscal year, and around 31.2 percent of the population is at risk of falling into extreme poverty. To make matters worse, floods and landslides during the 2020 monsoon took 348 lives and impacted 23,478 households across the country.

The lockdown imposed to curb the spread of COVID-19 in Nepal has also

exerted pressures on the environment. Human intrusion into protected areas has increased significantly since the start of the lockdown in March 2020. There have been increased incidences of animal poaching inside and outside of protected areas, possibly linked to financial insecurity during

the pandemic. The illegal logging and harvesting of natural resources has been alarmingly increasing. The impacts on both nature and people have increased inequities and further marginalised already-vulnerable communities.



A green recovery

The country has responded to the COVID-19 crisis through fiscal and monetary measures focusing on immediate health and safety measures, food distribution to reduce livelihood impacts, and economic support to severely affected firms. However, these measures are temporary fixes and do not aid long-term recovery. Moreover, they do not address underlying climate- and environment-related issues and associated disasters and vulnerabilities. The environment must be central to the post-COVID recovery plan. A green recovery is the need and opportunity of the hour in Nepal.

A green recovery plan should integrate nature, climate, and development to ensure sustainable growth. A recovery plan that pushes nature-based solutions will not only help immediate recovery but also strengthen key sectors – such as organic agriculture, nature-based tourism, niche mountain products, green entrepreneurship, renewable energy, and ecosystem-based adaptation. This will help build resilience to climate change-related risks and disasters.

A green recovery would entail a holistic, inclusive, environment-friendly approach encompassing key sectors. **We need concerted policy attention on organic agriculture and smallholder farming in Nepal.** Smallholder farming needs to be supported and its products diversified by supplying subsidised agricultural inputs, ensuring greater access to markets and finance, and guaranteeing insurance for climate shocks and other disruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic. It is particularly interesting that family farms proved to be more resilient than commercial





farming systems during the 2015 earthquake and the pandemic. Such farms also ensure the use of abandoned land, youth engagement (particularly migrant returnees), and the promotion and conservation of indigenous seeds and local food systems. For example, 'jholmal' – a bio-pesticide and nutrient supplement – contributes to improving plant health and productivity, and also promotes the use of traditional knowledge and practices in maintaining soil and plant health.

We can also promote nature-based tourism at the community level through avenues such as homestays and bird ecotourism at the transboundary scale – supporting livelihoods while conserving nature. We can also restore and conserve ecosystems by investing in protected area management and building on our success in community forestry. This could halt illegal harvesting and poaching and build resilience by creating green jobs and generating income at the community scale. Similarly, we can promote green enterprises and their niche mountain products, from high-value non-timber forest products to medical and aromatic plants and other agro-commodities such as tea and large cardamom. These enterprises need policy support – capacity building, improving market linkages, and introducing digital services – to ensure sustainable and equitable socioeconomic and ecological benefits.

Likewise, subsidies to renewable energy, especially in transportation and cooking, would decrease the country's dependency on fossil-fuels and fuelwood. We can revise the increased tax on electric vehicles and invest in related infrastructure and services to promote cleaner transportation, such as the construction of charging stations. We can also invest in green and blue infrastructure and proper waste

management systems, especially in urban areas. Investment in blue infrastructure at different scales would help address the water scarcity that plagues the country. For example, restoring and conserving natural springs can help rural households become resilient and open up different livelihood possibilities. Likewise, an enabling policy environment is needed for green infrastructure such as parks and urban forests. This would increase green spaces and clean air and increase infiltration and water-holding capacity of urban areas.

Ecosystem-based adaptation could also be promoted to increase flood and landslides resilience in both rural and urban areas. Nature-based solutions such as bio-engineering measures and springshed restoration and management should be promoted. We could help communities at risk of annual flooding by widening the implementation of the Community-Based Flood Early Warning System (CBFEWS) and strengthening communication networks between upstream communities and downstream receivers of flood early warning information.

In this green path to recovery, it is of utmost importance to ensure the meaningful participation of youth, women, and marginalised groups for sustainable growth and equitable outcomes. A fair and inclusive green recovery would not only help conserve important ecosystems and biodiversity, securing Nepal's future, but also make communities – urban and rural – more resilient to challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic.

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POST-COVID TOURISM RECOVERY: CAN NATURE-BASED TOURISM POWER NEPAL'S GREEN RECOVERY?



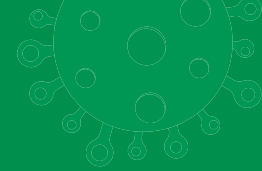
**DR. DHANANJAY REGMI
& DR. SIDDHARTHA B.
BAJRACHARYA**

Tourism is a mainstay of Nepalese economy and one of the priority sectors for the Government of Nepal. While the prospects of growth of Nepal's tourism sector is huge, the sector is already facing several challenges, such as adverse impact on the environment, growing demand for world-class infrastructure, waste management, imparting and maintaining proper sanitation and adequate tourism linkages with rural areas to ensure equitable distribution

of tourism dividend for the economic benefits for the host communities.

Tourism in Nepal remains the top-notch development option for the government and the private sector. It hinges mainly on two pillars: preservation and conservation of biodiversity and improving the living conditions of rural communities, eventually bringing in equal distribution of tourism benefits to all levels of society that is paramount for sustainable tourism development.

Tourism is one of the most thriving industries in Nepal. The snow-capped mountains, a rich diversity of cultures,



scenic places, rivers, lakes, flora and fauna, historical monuments, bilingual and hospitable people are the main attractions for the foreign visitors. Nepal has immense diversity in natural and socio-cultural aspects. Endowed with such pristine natural treasures, Nepal has both comparative and competitive advantages to attract tourists in search of authentic new experiences and those seeking to escape to nature, which significantly is more pronounced during the time of COVID-19.

Nature-based tourism

Although it is very early to predict the direction of tourism in post-COVID era, health and hygiene protocol and safety would be the prime concern of the visitors. Several tourism experts and destination managers have pointed out that the nature-based destination would be the first and comparatively resilient to recover. Although nature-based tourism has been prioritizing the community, conservation and knowledge sharing as the major form of the ecotourism principle, nature-based tourism on new normal needs to be streamlined by a green and sustainable recovery approach. Global Guidelines developed by UNWTO to Restart Tourism has prioritized the vision of development and implementation of recovery plans which contribute to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which recommends lines of action to guide a responsible tourism recovery for people, planet and prosperity, namely public health, social inclusion, biodiversity conservation, climate action, circular economy and governance and finance. Nepal being a pioneer in ecotourism and majority of visitors approaching nature-based destinations, the green recovery concept seems relevant and applicable

for sustainable revival approach. Different components of sustainable recovery such as Sustainable Transportation, Renewable energy use and energy efficiency, use of local foods and resources should be implemented in destination level well facilitated through policy endorsement. Still Nepal lacks a policy guideline for ecotourism and this can be an absolute opportunity to endorse ecotourism policy of Nepal.


Policy, plans and programmes

Policy and plan level intervention in the tourism sector can be traced back in 1972, after the development of the First Tourism Master Plan which had recommended the concept of foreign currency earning through employment and income generation through development of tourism activities. Likewise, Tourism Act 2035 was promulgated in 1978, immediately after establishment of the Tourism Ministry in 1976, as the major recommendation of the Tourism Master plan. Hereinafter, several policy development milestones were initiated in Nepal. Development of Tourism Policy 2052 in 1995 prioritized the role of the private sector together with highlighting the concept of Rural Tourism. Green recovery strategies are more effective only when we first address community development issues. The involvement of local stakeholders has been emphasized as one of the significant aspects towards sustainable tourism development. Nepal has rich experiences in various community development programmes.

Nepal has a solid experience of promoting tourism as a means for poverty alleviation in the mainstream development policy. In 2001 a pilot

program called Tourism for Rural Poverty Alleviation Program (TRPAP) was launched in six districts of Nepal with the goal of reducing rural poverty through the development, promotion and marketing of new tourism models in the program district; and institutionalizing tourism in local self-governance systems through developing appropriate institution and policy. TRPAP worked in both top-down and bottom-up approach: policy, plan and budgets were designed by a steering committee while programmes were devised at community level and executed by local level. The institutional modality was unique in its approach that clearly lived to the spirit of inclusion where community was fully empowered. This way, by venturing into rural areas, the programme was able to connect with and encourage local people to contribute to their own community in particular and the country in general. Local communities were empowered in decision making. TRPAP encouraged community-based tourism. Today, Nepal's empowered communities have transformed the traditional community-based tourism to community-driven tourism. Having economically benefited through tourism, rural communities have taken priority over resource conservation, eventually benefitting environment. Moreover, there are numerous examples of the community-led tourism projects having multiplier effects. Tourism has acted as an impetus to large transformations. The stakeholders have set examples of leading in conservation as well. For instance: the communities of different buffer zones of Bardiya National Park and Chitwan National Park have not only made the areas favorite destinations but have also made the





country the only country in the world to nearly double the tiger counts. With environment friendly tourism, our different destinations and programs have proved that such projects have benefited the community financially, country economically and the whole globe environmentally.

Lots of work has been done in shaping tourism planning and development for responsible and meaningful tourism development in Nepal. Carefully designed and well-planned strategies are essential for overall tourism development. The notion of community involvement in tourism is fraught with difficulties in developing countries such as Nepal, as it requires strong institutional and socio-economic set up. There was a paradigm shift in the Eighth Plan (1992-97) and the Ninth Plan (1997-2002) as rural tourism got emphasis in the Five-Year plan. Finally, rural tourism development was featured in Tourism Policy 2065 (2008) to provide the impetus for the development. Homestay tourism took its shape and was finally recognized by the Government of Nepal with promulgation of Homestay Operating Procedure 2010. With the advent of the Procedure in 2010, Nepal saw profusion of homestays across the country with Ghale Gaon Homestay (Lamjung), Amaltari Homestay (Nawalparasi, Chitwan National Park), Lwang Ghalel Homestay (Kaski), Khata Jaibik Marga Homestay Dalla (Bardiya) etc.

Further in 2009, maximizing the priority in the tourism sector, a new rectified tourism policy was developed highlighting the

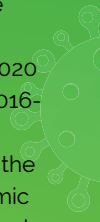
community participation, expansion and diversification of rural tourism, destination development and diversification, and so on prioritizing the engagement of the private sector in tourism. Meanwhile on 1999, Nepal Tourism Board was established as per the Nepal Tourism Board Act, which carries the spirit of public-private partnership modality and serves as a strategic think-tank Evaluating the progress and impacts of Strategic document such as Tourism Vision 2020 and Nepal Tourism Strategic Plan 2016-2025, streamlined implementation uniformity has been realized. Given the changed socio-political and economic context, the policy directives reflected by the Constitution of Nepal, our own commitment under the Sustainable Development Goals and several natural and anthropogenic situations faced by the industry, a new contextual policy has been realized by the entire tourism fraternity.

Health and hygiene protocol

Consumer behaviors have changed since the outbreak of COVID-19 and are preferring from short haul to long haul and are preferring destinations which are away from the hustle bustle of cities, offering off-beat travel delivering a safe and hygienic experience to visitors giving overall immersive experience of people, place and culture. In this regard, NTB along with the Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation (MoCTCA) released 'Operational Guideline with Health Protocol for Tourism Sector' for the Tourism Industry to minimize

risk for both consumers and providers of tourism services. Further, NTB in collaboration with concerned tourism organizations conducted online training for tourism entrepreneurs focusing on imparting safety, security and hygiene of Nepal as a destination.

Way forward: Green tourism strategies



In the post COVID-19 scenario, the very survival of the tourism industry had become the biggest challenge, particularly because there was no specific preparedness strategy in case of any crisis of this scale. This gap is something that we need to pay heed to. Secondly, the concept of Restart, Revive and Rethink can be streamlined for sustaining and streaming tourism in new normal. Development of health and hygiene protocol and strong monitoring together with effective tourism guidelines can give immediate direction to restart. Similarly, a public private collaborative approach for tourism resilient building and preparedness for future possible crisis management should be the prime concern of the sensitive tourism industry. Accordingly, investment on nature-based solutions can have potentials to drive innovation in tourism mitigating the environmental impact in tourism activities and development interventions, which ultimately results into sustainable natural resource management and conservation. Also, contribution of the value of revenue generated as an ecotourism service at destination level could enable the tourism sector to capitalize ultimately to enable sustainable recovery.



Moreover, a transformational stage can be envisioned in the post Covid-19 era, where destination management organizations and policy makers can lead this crisis as an opportunity to rethink the future course of sustainable tourism.

Covid-19 has forced people all over the world to escape and reconnect with nature. They are more attracted to green ways of living, which can offset their carbon footprint. It is highly recommended to enact a green recovery policy based on "tested experiments" or "proven approaches" as Nepal has rich experiences in sustainable tourism development. There are tremendous windows of opportunity to implement strong measures ensuring the green recovery activities both at local and regional level.

Nepal – Reason for All Seasons

Travellers will be looking for secluded places of incredible natural beauty. In this regard, Nepal has initiated to develop Hill-Stations. This has two-fold approaches. Firstly, it will add on to new products and will showcase to travelers. Secondly, it will address the major issue that Nepal is currently facing – a destination for a limited period. Nepal needs to change itself from a destination for a limited season to a destination that is Reason for All Seasons. This will not only help to change the brand image of Nepal that is perceived as a country for mountaineering and trekking, but will also help to provide immersive

experiences that are based on nature-based tourism engaging with locals and taking in new experiences.

Nepal is focusing on betterment of local people as well. Local ecology, culture, creating linkages between vocational skills training and tourism has been the prime focus since the last two decades. A fine balance between guest and host have well-taken care of giving prominence to local ecology and culture. Local bodies and authorities are not unnecessary catering to tourist demands. Overall, tourism must enhance local life instead of hampering it. In post-COVID-19 tourism, travelers will embark on a journey to an exotic location; will seek out the less crowded places. Visitors will be preferring destinations which are away from the hustle bustle of cities.

Unique geographical and geological positioning of Nepal has been a boon for Nepal's natural and socio-cultural diversity. Terai, the lower plains in the southern parts has immense potentiality in cultural and nature-based tourism with maximum market potential for cross-border Indian tourist specially for religious purpose, entertainments, VFR (Visiting Friends and Relatives) and Terai based protected Areas like Sukhlaphanta NP, Bardiya, Chitwan and Koshi Tappu Wildlife Conservation Area. Similarly, mid-hills have absolute potentiality with numerous hill stations and cultural trails connected with socio-cultural and landscape diversity, Integrated Farming System and Terraces with all season tourism attractions. Himalayas as the water tower of Asia, matters to be the

lifetime experiences for the global tourism enthusiast, with world-class trekking trails, mountaineering options and numerous hard and soft adventure activities.

A critical point concerning the social sustainability is the induced effects of tourism. Induced effects reflect the trickle-down benefits to local community, and people whose livelihoods are related with incomes from the informal sector. Efforts are made to take care of induced effects as it is an essential factor to be considered for green recovery in tourism. Mid-Hills in Nepal have potential to generate induced effects that can boost livelihoods of local people.

With bountiful magical beauty, mid-hills in Nepal offer tremendous potentialities. Mid-Hills in Nepal are culturally rich and feasible for all seasons both for domestic and international tourists. Climate and accessibility wise Mid-Hill regions in Nepal are well-suited for travelling and livelihoods as this falls under 2000 m. In most of the years, the regions are mostly sunny, with breathtaking landscapes, views and greenery in the surrounding areas. Yoga, meditation, organic foods, agro-tourism, wilderness, local people and culture are some of the potential activities that can be introduced in mid-hills regions.

Dr. Regmi is Chief Executive Officer of the Nepal Tourism Board and Dr. Siddhartha B. Bajracharya is Executive Director of the National Trust for Nature Conservation. ◆◆◆



GOING LOCAL AND SUSTAINABLE

With the right economic and environmental policies, it is possible to create an economy that thrives, both culturally and economically, co-evolving with nature itself.

SAURAV DHAKAL

In 2012, I travelled for 99 days on the Great Himalayan Trail. As someone who'd always been interested in environmental issues and the unheard

stories of remote communities, the trip led to me realise that I needed to organise StoryCamps in remote locations. Walking for 1,555 kilometres in the hills and mountains of Nepal

led me to realise the needs -- food, health, education, accessibility and connectivity -- of many of the country's peoples.

When I came back to Kathmandu, I decided to go back to the community and explore their stories in more detail, as part of StoryCamp, a local initiative of my storytelling group, StoryCycle.

Through StoryCamp, I learned that many of our communities have been working together on renewable energy. In recent years, there has been a flurry of activity by NGOs, the government and others to introduce

renewable energy sources such as water mills, solar and biogas at the local level.

I also learned that there were initiatives to prioritise and protect local seeds. New types of seeds were being promoted and distributed in the villages. While these new seeds were capable of producing higher yields, they needed to be purchased every year. Traditionally, farmers get seeds for the next season from their current harvest. Many farmers prefer to stick with the local seeds, which have a long history of use.

StoryCycle has impressed upon me how our economy depends on nature for its survival. The economy is part of the living environment, and it can only thrive if nature and humanity both thrive. With the right economic and environmental policies, it is possible to create an economy that thrives, both culturally and economically, co-evolving with nature itself. Such an economy will ideally be decentralised, democratic, culturally rich, and circular. In order to achieve this kind of economy, there are a few steps that we can take, both on an individual level and a broader scale.

Individual lifestyle change

A lifestyle that is predicated on a plant-based diet, biking or walking to work, recycling, eating organic, fair-trade food, and other green choices has an important role to play in being sustainable. If our values are not reflected in our lifestyle, they will not be reflected in the society we wish to create. Rethinking our own consumption habits regarding what we eat or wear is one way to assert the development of the economy towards a more sustainable future.

Political mobilisation

When a green lifestyle is combined with political activism, such as forming transition towns, practicing permaculture, buying from local farmers, industries and business, protesting unsustainable business practices, and voting for political parties with green policies, we can have an even greater impact. These actions can be supplemented by starting an organic food club, local producer clubs, sharing stories and best practices.

Economy democracy

The forces allied against sustainability -- the corporate capitalist system and its economic machinery of production and finance -- are formidable, and until they are dismantled and democratically, we cannot expect to see a truly sustainable economy. In order to achieve economic democracy, we can start working with small and medium business enterprises, buying local produce, and promoting local businesses over global franchises.

Maximum utilisation

All natural resources need to be utilised in the most efficient and ecological way possible. We need to create affluence from effluence. And we need humanity to proceed with caution and respect for life when introducing new technology. So many resources are wasted before, during, and after the production cycle. Moreover, money and resources are unequally distributed, dividing the world into rich and poor countries. This growing trend needs to be altered.

Circular economy

The new restructured economy needs to be rooted in ecological wisdom and practices. It needs to be a cradle-to-cradle, circular economy where all its by-products circle back into production, just as they do in nature. The economy needs to be guided by an ecological ethics that is inspired by ancient wisdom as well as the latest ecological and technological sciences.

Saurav Dhakal
is Founder and
Curator at Story
Cycle. ◆◆◆

A portrait of Dilip Pratap Khand, Mayor. He is a middle-aged man with dark hair, a mustache, and glasses, wearing a light blue polo shirt with a dark blue collar and cuffs. He is seated in a black leather office chair behind a dark wood desk. A red nameplate is on the desk in front of him. The background features a white wall with a framed certificate and a window with patterned curtains.

**Dilip Pratap Khand
Mayor**

A SMART CITY IS ONLY POSSIBLE WITH SMART CITIZENS, SMART GOVERNANCE, SMART ECONOMY, AND SMART INFRASTRUCTURE.

DILIP KHAND

Among Nepal's 753 local government units, Syangja's Waling Municipality has been at the forefront of championing the digital agenda. The municipality has developed a 'Smart Waling' mobile application that connects residents directly with the local government, among other measures meant to take governance and bureaucracy online. Recently, Waling started various initiatives to provide employment opportunities to those who lost their jobs due to COVID-19. Development Advocate spoke to Dilip Khand, the Waling mayor, about the local government's handling of COVID-19, his embrace of digital initiatives, and the way forward in a post-COVID-19 world.

What has Waling Municipality done in terms of health recovery and what type of initiatives are you conducting as part of COVID-19 recovery?

We have provided 210 ward committees with training on information collection and quarantine monitoring and management. These committees are monitoring the health status of the people who enter Waling, only allowing them entrance after negative PCR test results. This has helped reduce the risk of spread of the coronavirus. These committees also provide us with information about COVID-infected people and their visitors. We manage quarantine and isolation systems and send critical patients to the hospital, accordingly. We even provide daily health checkups and counselling to patients. We were adequately prepared for 1,500 migrant returnees from India and other countries. So far, we provided well-managed quarantine facilities to over 1,200 people. The situation is under control now, but we are also ready to conduct mass testing if the virus spreads at the community level.

As part of recovery measures, the municipality is providing health insurance up to Rs 100,000 to those infected with COVID-19. We are also providing treatment to anyone suffering from cardiovascular diseases, diabetes, cancer, etc. Our goal is to get health insurance to 60 percent of the Waling population by this year, 80 percent in next year, and more than 95 percent after two years. Currently, we are identifying people who are not insured and getting them health insurance. We are also conducting public health awareness programmes, old age health care programmes and counseling through 17 health posts. One of our aims is to decrease the infant mortality rate so we are providing services focusing on maternal and infant health by creating awareness about vaccination and anti-natal checkups through SMS.

What kind of job opportunities has Waling provided to the local people?

Since poverty reduction is our priority, we focused on having at least one agriculture and business cooperative in each ward and our 310 villages to support the livelihoods of local communities. In partnership with UNDP, we have established 200 agriculture cooperatives and 20 enterprise cooperatives. Secondly, dealing with the consequences of not a getting market for the local produce was a problem so UNDP and Waling came up with the Waling Product Holding Cooperatives with municipality, cooperatives and private shares of more than Rs 100 million. The cooperatives must buy all the farmers' produces, which will play a significant role in promoting local enterprises. With the subsequent improvement in the living standards of people, there will ultimately be positive impacts on health and education. We've also established an Entrepreneurship,

Business Incubation, and Innovation Centre in various city wards focusing on migrant returnees and youth to promote startup culture.

Waling Municipality has put pledged to become a 'Smart City'. What is the progress so far?

We are focusing on drafting a 20-year comprehensive plan as we already have a yearly strategic plan and a 5-year periodic plan. We aim to establish a 'Basic City' within 10 years, a 'Sustainable City' by 2030, and a 'Smart City' by 2040. Currently, we are working on infrastructure like road, drinking water supply, irrigation, and information and communication technology to connect our 310 villages, ward offices, municipality office and different organisations. This comes under the 'Basic City'. People's perceptions will not change until they get out of poverty. A 'Smart City' is only possible with smart citizens, smart governance, smart economy, and smart infrastructure.

We have succeeded in turning waste management into resource management. We have also made a profit from waste and are now working on recycling waste and making products. This will also provide employment to people living in poverty.

But all of this takes time. The municipality is digitalizing and slowly, there will be transformations in the villages as well. With the support and partnership of organisations like UNDP, the progress has been quick, we hope for UNDP's help in the future as well. ◆◆◆

TOWARDS A MORE SUSTAINABLE AND RESILIENT SOCIETY

COVID-19 should serve as an alarm and herald our transition to a sustainable society that takes climate action into account.

SHAIL SHRESTHA

COVID-19 has disrupted our lives in ways we could not have imagined. The pandemic blurred political borders and exposed how interconnected the different socio-political systems and global economy are. On the other hand, while the global economic engine, industries and cities slowed down, people saw the return of a habitable environment in cities that were previously clotted with congestion, dust, pollution, and noise. Almost overnight, streets became safer to walk and cycle and the air felt cleaner. Many even reported hearing bird songs in their morning windows while residents in Mumbai shared that they could see the stars from their city for the first time ever. Kathmandu residents saw better glimpses of the Himalayas while asthma patients in Dhaka reported they have stopped taking their daily medicine. We can surmise that many lives were saved as a result of the cleaner air and fewer traffic accidents.

Globally, cities, leaders, and communities that were better prepared to transform their streets towards a better medium of transport took this opportunity to take the

leap towards sustainable urban mobility. Popup cycle lanes appeared in European cities, Latin America, and some parts of Asia. Cars were restricted on many streets, inviting families and businesses onto the streets, recognizing the true nature of streets as networks of public spaces meant equally for social-cultural activities as much as for economic purposes.

Many city residents don't want to go return to business-as-usual and plan to transform their city streets and mobility considering COVID-19 as a turning point. With public transport unable to function as usual, cities have invested more in pedestrian and bicycle facilities. Work from home and distance education has become the norm, minimising the need to travel daily through congestion.

Science too has called for a drastic transformation in our ways of living to meet global warming mitigation targets that call for a massive reduction in fossil fuel use in the next 12 years. Our trajectory and political commitments show that we would not meet the target without a serious transition.



Suddenly, drastic measures for carbon mitigation goals that climate science has long called for were visible and experienced by all around the world. For Nepal, local mobilisation proved to be its strength. Cities and communities that had strong social bonds not only responded well for their own safety, but also mobilised to support the needy. Self-organised groups and institutions took the lead to offer fresh food and free accommodation for those who needed it. The cycling community was among the many that responded with offers of services.

Politically, federalisation appeared to be a timely transition we have headed towards to prepare ourselves for a more resilient future that can withstand and recover from similar crises. After months of efforts in education, the federal government handed over the decision-making responsibility to local governments to make independent decisions.

COVID-19 also exposed the limits of our present mindset. As many tried to return home from foreign countries, we as a nation realised the limits of our abilities to respond on a national scale. The threat in built in an economy dependent on remittance was also brought to the harsh light of reality. COVID-19 has sent a loud and clear message that the well-being of society, economy, and the environment go hand-in-hand. The pandemic has taught us that if the environment is not viable, then any system and plan of operation will fail. In education, it showed us the possibility of distance learning and other, unexplored methods of learning through available technologies. It also made us realise how much of our daily travel was avoidable. With odd-even regulations on motorised vehicles, bicycle usage has grown on the relatively safer streets of Kathmandu.

Municipalities in Nepal have yet to take into account this positive behavioral

change and introduce relevant policy interventions. However, commitments from policy makers, along with the interest and enthusiasm of leaders at all local, provincial and federal levels, indicate a promising future.

Nepal is still transitioning to a federal governance structure. COVID-19 sounded an alarm. We need to ensure that we document the lessons learned to influence the path we take forward. COVID-19 has helped us realise that we are all in this together and what happens to one of us will have consequences for others. We are in this together and collaboration is the only way forward. This is the time to prepare to transition our economy and political systems. Climate action and transformation to a sustainable civilisation is the call of the hour. We need to see COVID-19 as nature's warning signs.

Shail Shrestha is associated with the Digo Bikas Institute. ◆◆◆

BUILDING BRIDGES, SURVIVING THE PANDEMIC AND EMERGING STRONGER

The LGBTIQ+ community suffered disproportionately during the pandemic as COVID-19 only entrenched inequalities and pushed individuals into poverty.

LEX LIMBU

The COVID-19 pandemic overall has not been kind to the LGBTIQ+ community as it continues to entrench existing inequalities, push hard-working individuals further down the socio-economic ladder, and even take lives. The death of transman Manish Yadav, an activist and a figure of inspiration to many, rocked the Nepali LGBTIQ+ community in early June 2020. Unfortunately, Yadav's death was followed by further losses.

The measures introduced to control the coronavirus and save lives exposed the already vulnerable LGBTIQ+ community to much financial hardship and emotional distress. Anish, a gay young man studying and working part-time in the travel sector, loved his open life in the capital. However, everything changed when he had to board a bus for his hometown in the Tarai. Anish felt suffocated by not being able to be himself. The uncertainty surrounding the lockdown and not being able to see an end in sight only challenged him further. A few months into the lockdown, Anish took a chance and boarded a bus to Thankot. He walked all the way back to Kathmandu. Whilst Anish's story continues, many LGBTIQ+ lives came to an abrupt halt during the lockdown.

The lockdown only exacerbated social stigma and economic hardship for many vulnerable groups, including daily-wage earners, single women and sex workers, many of whom are also part of the LGBTIQ+ community. LGBTIQ+ individuals face a scale of inequalities. Murders of transwomen have grabbed headlines long before the arrival of COVID-19. Violence against transgender people is on the rise in many parts of the world, including the USA where 32 transgender and gender non-conforming people have been killed already this year. At home, transgender people are denied equal rights to citizenship and education, among many others. The pandemic has further highlighted the precarious position that many transgender and intersex people occupy as stories surfaced of transgender women struggling to receive food rations due to concerns about the legitimacy of their citizenship cards.

Critical conversations regarding citizenship and protecting the right to gender self-determination have continued in the midst of the pandemic. If lessons are to be learned then let this pandemic teach us the importance of being connected and having access to support networks. Every Nepali has a right to a citizenship that best reflects the person, their name, and

chosen gender identity. Unfortunately, it is not only people belonging to the LGBTIQ+ community, but also many other vulnerable groups, that continue to be excluded from receiving what is their constitutional right.

As we find ways to live through the pandemic, there's an urgent need to improve access to health care for many LGBTIQ+ individuals. The earlier half of the lockdown resulted in many struggling to obtain necessary hormonal medication, HIV medication, and sexual health screening, resulting in deteriorating physical, emotional, and mental health. Furthermore, loss of income due to the closure of entertainment venues affected millions across the country and negatively impacted many within the LGBTIQ+ community. As the country's economy slowly restarts, it risks leaving vulnerable groups behind.

An education campaign focused on internet safety and behaviour is also necessary, not just for the LGBTIQ+ community but various other cross-

sections of society too. Rapid access to internet connectivity in the country has catalysed many learnings but also presented unique challenges. Cyber bullying and malicious online harassment targeting vulnerable young people and those from the queer community have increased drastically since the lockdown. A multi-pronged effort is required to improve and inform the mass about online safety.

The year, however, has also shown the great adaptability of people. As photos circulated of daily wage earners walking from mountain communities to the plains to reunite with their families, some of us sought inspiration from the hardship and sought to reflect hard on our privileges. Those of us who comfortably enjoying our broadband connectivity, food deliveries and Zoom learning need to reflect on the society that we are part of and all we have done to support others in these challenging times. Why have some struggled to adapt to the 'new normal' is a question that many of us in privileged positions should be seeking

to answer. What can I, as a cisgender gay man, do more to support LGBTIQ+ people is a question that I need to continue asking myself.

The inaction by the state during the lockdown has not only embedded existing inequalities but further disillusioned millions of people from the system that should be supporting them. The state has failed its most vulnerable groups and unfairly left the people of Nepal to support one another. Yet, it is in this support that marginalised groups are once again unlocking new networks to collaboratively champion causes and discover the interconnected nature of their fight. With this approach, we once again find strength in our activism and campaigning, and hope that we emerge from the pandemic building stronger bridges, unlocking more resources, and striving to go beyond for the most vulnerable in our communities.

Lex Limbu is a London-based Nepali digital content creator. ◆◆◆



INCLUSIVE eLEARNING: LEAVING NO ONE BEHIND

Learning should never stop. We have heard this all our lives. Maybe because of this philosophy, education didn't come to a halt during the pandemic despite being one of the hardest-hit sectors. Remote teaching and learning activities continued in various forms using technology. One such popular form was the use of the eLearning platform.

SAGAR PRASAI

During COVID-19 and the lockdown it followed, several eLearning platforms were developed and launched. They offered both free and paid courses and enabled people to learn from the comfort of their homes. They worked quite well for many people, but not for all. None of these eLearning platforms were made accessible (disability-friendly) for the benefit of persons with disabilities.

WHO and the World Bank estimate more than 15% or nearly a billion people living in this world have some form of disability. These organizations also suggest that 80% of these people are living in developing countries. The National Census of Nepal (2011) declared that around 2% of the total population are people with disabilities. Given the data, it is universally accepted that people with disabilities are one of the largest minorities in the world.

People with disabilities have difficulties accessing essential services like education and health, even in normal circumstances, because of existing physical, communication, and systemic barriers. The situation only gets worse for them in a pandemic situation. When necessities are out of access, demanding access in eLearning platforms is often taken as a luxury and frequently unanswered.



Accessible eLearning

In the context of disability inclusion, accessible (or accessibility) is the design of products, services, or facilities to be accessed and used by persons with disabilities on equal footing as their peers without disabilities. Thus, an accessible eLearning platform means, persons with various forms of disabilities (visually impaired, deaf, learning disabled) could use it without difficulties.

Every eLearning platform at its core is simply a website. Thus, the guidelines that list out steps to create an accessible website will also apply to them. The community that governs and promotes the development of the Internet, called the World Wide Web Consortium (W3C), has developed a Web Content Accessibility Guideline (WCAG). Many governments worldwide have adopted this and made it a requirement while developing public websites/web apps.

According to WCAG, there are just four principles that make any digital content, including eLearning platforms, accessible to persons with disabilities.

- The information presented in the platform should be **perceivable** by persons with disabilities. It means that all information should be relayed to those with disabilities, even if it requires an alternative approach. For example, if an image is used, then an appropriate text alternative should be included so that the content is accessible for persons with visual impairment.
- The platform should be **operable** by all users. It means that people with disabilities should navigate different parts of the platform with assistive devices. For example, those using screen readers should be able to

operate all functions of the platform by just using the Keyboard (not mouse).

- The content should be **understandable**. It relates more to the content than the technology. It means that all users should understand the message/content in the eLearning platform.
- The platform should be **robust**. Persons with disabilities use a variety of assistive technologies to access the web. For example, a person who can't see might use an audio device to listen to a document. Thus, the platform should be able to function correctly on all devices.

Introducing Learning Inclusion

In June 2020, I was a part of a motivated team working day and night to create a fully accessible eLearning platform called Learning Inclusion (<https://learninginclusion.com>). When launched, Learning Inclusion became Nepal's first-ever fully accessible and inclusive eLearning portal.

We developed Learning Inclusion with two objectives. The primary goal was to provide an accessible learning experience to all, including persons with disabilities. The second focus was to serve as a model so that web developers and content creators could replicate the best practices we used in the portal.

We followed the four principles of WCAG while developing the platform. Some examples of accessibility measures implemented in the site are the following:

1. A learner who uses only the Keyboard (e.g., a blind user) can navigate to

- all parts of the website like a visual learner.
2. All the video lessons include Nepali sign language interpretation and captions in Nepali and English language.
3. Learning Inclusion is available in both Nepali and English language and is FREE for everyone.

We also developed a free course to learn essential digital accessibility and ways to create accessible documents. To date, 250 students have completed the class, and more than half of these students are persons with disabilities. We can interpret this data as, if provided a disability-inclusive learning environment, persons with disabilities are willing to enjoy the world of digital learning. Unfortunately, for these groups of learners, there are very few such accessible learning platforms. Creating an accessible and disability-inclusive eLearning platform is not difficult and doesn't require a sizable budget. However, as in any well-designed project, good planning from the initial stage is necessary. Also, including a person with a disability as a team member can ensure that the project meets the disability community's needs.

Access to information and education is a human right. Our country is also a signatory of several UN treaties, including the UN Convention on the rights of persons with disabilities. Thus, we are legally and morally bound to create learning platforms accessible to all, including persons with disabilities. But at the very core, it all comes to a question - if we want to do the right thing! Because, as they say- Learning should never stop, for all.

Sagar Prasai is Director at Diverse Patterns. ◆◆◆



A DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION LED BY COVID-19

While the impacts of the pandemic have been severe, there is also an opportunity for Nepal to pursue digitisation in all spheres of service delivery.

NEELESH MAN SINGH PRADHAN

COVID-19 had already touched 41.5 million people and has taken more than 1.1 million lives worldwide as of October 2020. Nepal's case was

no different, with 153,000 reported cases and 829 deaths. The largest economies in the world have been hit hard with negative GDP growth and so has Nepal. Many industries and sectors have been impacted and

are struggling to get back to the new normal to live with COVID-19.

Until the pandemic hit, Nepal had been a true believer in manual processes. Perhaps it is because Nepali are so relaxed that most things tend to be done at its own pace, whether it is government processes, business activities, billing & record keeping, or deliveries. But COVID-19 pushed almost every business and service provider to automate their processes, including their record keeping, sales, customer acquisition, supply chain management, marketing, delivery management, and payments. All of a sudden, insurance companies realised that their decades-old agent-based network was not working. The capital market awakened overnight to realise that less than 2 percent of its investors had access to its online platform even two years after its online trading platform was launched. Remittance companies dependent on cash-based agent delivery mechanism moved towards direct-to-bank account deposits. And banks and financial institutions, who had been extremely aggressive on opening up new branches, reduced the number of footfalls by increasing their digital services.

The government too expedited the automation of its public data/information, approvals process, and revenue collection and payout processes, which it had been attempting to do for many years.

Sectors that had already adopted technology within their core product and service delivery were better able to survive the pandemic. Many others have adapted, using digital technology in electronic record keeping, governance, education, social interactions, trade, services, banking and finance and other.

A shift in education

Education has hit the most by COVID-19 with schools closing down amidst fears of the coronavirus. By April 2020, a total of 1.6 billion students in 192 countries, representing 90 percent of all students, were not going to school, according to the UNDP Human Development Report. But some schools and colleges have been able to go online to continue with the learning and education.

A major challenge for teachers and students has been to migrate from a physical classroom to online teaching and learning using technologies like

Zoom, Google Classroom, Teams, etc. However, this has also created a major digital divide, particularly in Nepal, with those who do not have access to such tools. Schools and colleges were unprepared to transition to online teaching, and limited access to the internet deprived students from their basic right to education. There was also indecisiveness on some policy level matters related to acceptability of online classes, evaluation procedures, and access to internet. Access to technology for the students and readiness of schools, especially public schools and colleges, will be critical to reducing this digital gap in education.



Governance going online

The federal government initiated e-payments for its payout transactions in 2015 and its revenue collection transactions directly to/from banks accounts of beneficiaries in 2018. It took over three years for government agencies to migrate from cheques to direct-to-bank deposits. Such digital payout transactions have seen exponential growth, from Rs 3.1 billion during fiscal year 2016/17 to Rs 221.1 billion in the fiscal year 2019/20. During the COVID-19 lockdown period, from mid-July to mid-October 2020 (first quarter of the fiscal year 2020/21), the volume for government transactions (payout and revenue collection) increased by 943 percent compared to the same quarter last fiscal year.

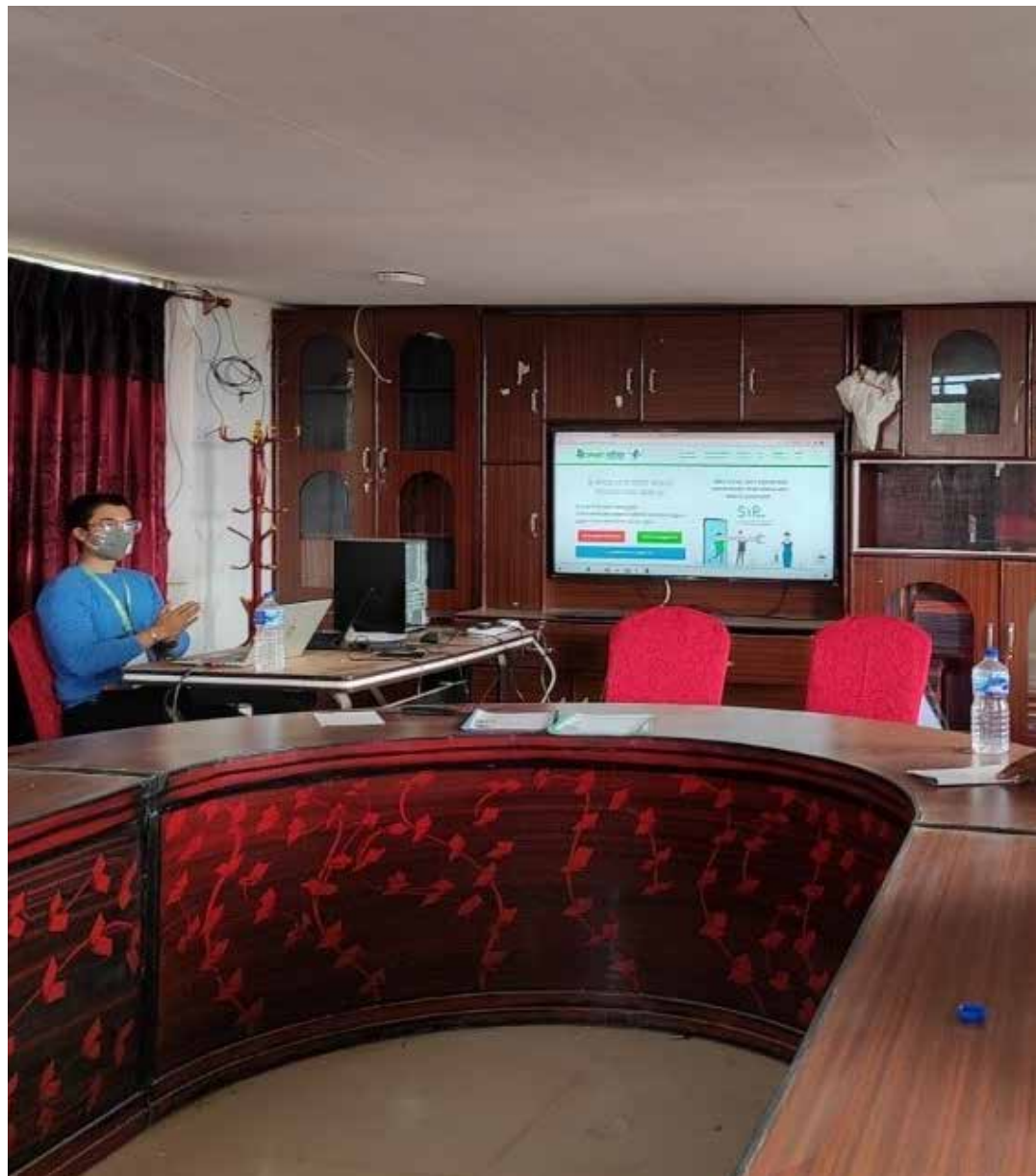
In order to meet the public demand for service delivery, multiple government ministries, departments and local government units took the initiative to introduce their own web and mobile based applications. Some such initiatives are the Local Government App released by the federal Department of Information Technology; Smart Palika rolled out by few local governments; online No Objection Certificates from the Ministry of Education; online Export Import Code renewal by the Department of Customs; online registration and renewal at the Office of the Company Registrar, Department of Industries; and online personal event registration at the Department of Civil Registration. All of these initiatives are related to the collection of public data and service delivery. Such data collection has helped to some extent but has also resulted into fragmented outcomes due to decentralized initiatives and uncoordinated implementation. There exists a risk of having multiple systems

without integration with each other and a risk of personal and business information exposure.

Banking and financial services

The investment in banking and financial technology has been given utmost importance in the recent past,

but COVID-19 has put it at centre stage for regulators and banks & financial institutions (BFIs). There are technologies being implemented by the BFIs for customer acquisition, new product development, service delivery and improving operational efficiency. Sizeable upticks in card subscription (9.48 percent), mobile banking (35.46 percent), internet banking (12.41



percent), and other similar digital instruments were seen in the fiscal year 2019/20.

Transaction values and volumes have also grown, further escalating during the COVID-19 period. Transaction value during the month of August-September (second month of the current fiscal year as per Nepal

Rastra Bank data) increased to for digital transactions of NCHL (non-cheques) to Rs 215.0 billion, cards to Rs 34.1 billion, mobile banking to Rs 20.3 billion, internet banking to Rs 4.7 billion, and digital wallets to Rs 7.3 billion. Similarly, automation in various banking products, including online self-service activations, transactional data driven loan disbursements, and similar other digital services are being introduced for product innovation by BFI with their rollouts being preponed due to business requirements during the lockdown.

Beyond COVID-19

The pandemic has given Nepal's businesses and the governments an opportunity to automate and digitise its processes, which will eventually help them stand stronger and be more resilient in similar situations in the future. But Nepal has a weak institutional memory, as was seen after April 2015 earthquakes. So there is also a big likelihood that businesses and customers will move back to old manual processes once things normalise.

However, traction already generated for digitization during the lockdown and the extreme pressure that businesses and the government have suffered from customers has left with no option but to move towards digital channels. The focus by all stakeholders should be on scaling-up the existing digital infrastructure, including easy access to telecom and internet services; bringing service providers, including businesses and government agencies, on board the digital ecosystem in a sustainable manner; and customer awareness and engagement.

The impacts of COVID-19 have been severe but one silver lining is the chance to maximise the opportunities provided by digitisation for better livelihoods.

Neelesh Man Singh Pradhan is the Chief Executive Officer of Nepal Clearing House Ltd. The views expressed here are personal. ◆◆◆



DURING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN PERIOD, FROM MID-JULY TO MID-OCTOBER 2020 (FIRST QUARTER OF THE FISCAL YEAR 2020/21), THE VOLUME FOR GOVERNMENT TRANSACTIONS (PAYOUT AND REVENUE COLLECTION) INCREASED BY 943 PERCENT COMPARED TO THE SAME QUARTER LAST FISCAL YEAR.



THE GOVERNMENT AIMS TO TURN ALL PUBLIC SERVICES TECH-FRIENDLY TO HELP CITIZENS.

ASGAR ALI

An interview with Asgar Ali, information technology consultant to the Prime Minister of Nepal

As the IT consultant to the prime minister, could you tell us about the Government of Nepal's vision for digital transformation, including but not limited to the Digital Nepal Framework, given the context of rural Nepal where not everyone has smartphones and access to the internet?

From the get go, the prime minister has embraced the slogan of 'Prosperous Nepal, Happy Nepalis'. The question of a prosperous Nepal is linked with physical infrastructure. For happy Nepalis, we need to think about utilising the resources we have and easing access

to public service. The prime minister has made it clear that tech-friendly public service will help citizens. In order to advance this agenda, the prime minister appointed an information technology advisor and digitised his Cabinet.

Believing that working in fragments won't amount to much, we have come up with the Digital Nepal Framework. After deep discussions with all stakeholders, we have defined eight areas and 80 different initiatives. We have also readied a high-level document on how to transform public service using info-tech within a few years. We were affected by Covid-19 while implementing the framework but if we look at the time before the pandemic struck, the government has been approaching info-tech from three angles.

First, the government has formulated a policy to promote local IT companies, industries and human resource so as to ease the lifestyles of the people. Under this, we have a policy to discourage foreign software if there's an alternative in the local market.

Another aspect is to make all of the government's services tech-friendly. But there's a gap between what we and the government call 'tech-friendly'. Previously, the norm was to lead government offices to automation and make work inside the offices tech-friendly, but this was not helping service seekers, however easy it may have been for government employees. So now, we are designing a 'Nagarik' app so that all the government services are centralised. We expect that the app will solve nearly 50 percent of problems in government service.

The third aspect concerns promoting Nepali info-tech companies globally. India is famous for its outsourcing, the Philippines for its BPO work, and if any big company wants to open a branch in Asia, Singapore is their first choice. So we too are trying to take our info-tech sector to the global stage.

But in order to really make the country tech-friendly, infrastructure is essential. First comes physical infrastructure, which is being implemented by the Nepal Telecommunications Authority. Telecom service providers deposit two percent of their annual income to the Authority's Rural Telecom Development Fund. The Authority then utilizes the fund to expand physical infrastructure across the country. The Authority has also requested Nepal Telecom

and Ncell, two of the country's leading mobile service providers, to provide 4G services to places where establishing physical infrastructure would be difficult. As of now, over 76 percent of the country's population has access to the internet. The government is working to expand this number further and making info-tech services accessible to all.

The pandemic has only increased the importance of IT. How has the government used this opportunity?

The answer to this question lies in this year's budget and the government's policy and programmes. Both documents state the government's aim to turn certain areas tech-friendly within a certain time frame. The government is working towards changing the modalities of businesses affected by the pandemic by turning them into info-tech friendly enterprises. Moreover, the government is also working to reduce the cost of IT services.

Even though the movement of people has been limited by Covid-19, the market has been ensuring that people receive basic services through the use of info-tech, and the government has been easing the process.

But how effective has the government's use of information technology been? Has it increased efficiency and transparency? What are the challenges?

The government has three bodies through which it embraces info-tech: the Ministry of Communications and Information Technology, the Information Technology department under

the ministry, and the National Information Technology Centre. Of these three bodies, the info-tech department and national info-tech centre implement the decisions of the ministry.

The Financial General Comptroller's Office has also been training accountants to implement a unitary system across all of its offices across the country. But for other offices, the system has yet to be used. Because of the lack of a unitary system, the government's investment might have doubled but the standard of the services has not increased accordingly. To improve this, we have asked all of the country's local units to use a single mobile app, the 'Nagarik' app, which is being designed.

The private sector is a key partner in the development of information technology. How is the government planning to harness the concerns of the private sector?

In every country, the government assumes the role of a guardian. Governmental policies that are making functioning difficult should be discussed, but there's a communication gap between the government and the private sector. What is the private sector trying to do and how is the government hampering it? How we can protect these companies? This should be discussed.

We need to identify the sectors whose solution can be found in Nepal, and protect local companies that offer these solutions. The government disbursed a total of Rs 2.6 billion in last year's budget to subsidise startups. But that disbursement hit obstacles and now, the implementation is being done through the National Planning Commission.

E-commerce and digital payments have been booming since COVID-19. But there are increasing security concerns. How is government planning to ensure that digital transactions are safe and secure while also creating a favourable environment for the private and public sector?

Talking about monitoring, e-commerce businesses that operate solely via social media are more numerous than those that are registered with the trade department. We need to discourage these social media-centric operations and bring them into the mainstream. Now that the trade department itself is running an e-commerce site, the government believes that it will come forward to monitor the e-commerce ecosystem.

What are the government's strategies on making digital technologies accessible to all, including persons with disabilities and those from remote areas with no access to reliable internet?

The government believes that facilities for persons with disabilities should be provided to all, not just those in the info-tech sector. Info-tech can be a tool to ease the lifestyles of the visually impaired and those with disabilities. The government aims to design its info-tech services focusing on the needs of those with disabilities. Many government web sites have been made disabled friendly and the government will also work to encourage the private sector to adopt similar methods. ◆◆◆



INFORMATION IS POWER: IMPROVING ACCESS TO CRITICAL INFORMATION TO HELP IMPROVE LIVES

ARADHANA GURUNG, EMMA LEERING & SHRUTI JHA

Mobile penetration has increased exponentially in Nepal, with 98 percent of Nepali households currently owning a mobile phone, according to recent data from the Nepal Telecommunications Authority's report of August-September 2020. This increase in mobile phone usage has correlated with an increase in access to information, with phones acting as information relays.

Viamo, shorthand for 'via mobile', is a new social enterprise that understands this paradigm shift, and in turn, seeks to connect individuals and organizations with right information via mobile devices to make better decisions.

Viamo's services enable organizations to engage with traditionally hard-to-reach populations through their mobile phones in meaningful, real-time, two-way conversations in local languages, instantly reaching across distance and literacy barriers. Through a combination of digital strategy advice and support in implementing meaningful mobile engagement campaigns via our established

platform, Viamo is able to offer rapid, cost-effective and impactful solutions thanks to our close partnership with mobile telecommunication companies and existing infrastructure integrations into their core networks.

Viamo is committed to pushing the envelope in terms of outreach, information dissemination, data collection, and inclusivity. In this regard, we are constantly expanding our services to mobile communication channels like voice (Interactive Voice Response, IVR), text (SMS and USSD), and ChatBots.

Viamo's 321 service, known as Suchana ko Sansaar in Nepal, has been playing an integral role in bridging the information gap among communities in rural Nepal. Viamo has partnered with Nepal Telecom (NTC) and launched a service where anyone can access information by dialing 32100 on an NTC sim at no cost to them. The themes covered by the platform are child protection, health, agriculture, early childhood development, weather forecast, news, entertainment and disaster risk reduction. Each theme is subdivided

into various topics with key messages created by experts and approved by the concerned government entity in Nepal. Every month, the platform is accessed by over 192,000 unique listeners in Nepal. Viamo hosts similar platforms in 19 other countries, with more being added every year, reaching over 10 million unique listeners every month.

In the wake of COVID-19, in order to understand the information gaps and new needs of our users, Viamo developed the 3-2-1 Service COVID-19 Survey with researchers from the Tulane University School of Public Health and Tropical Medicine. The survey evaluated our users' knowledge of the coronavirus, as well as the impact of the pandemic on their lives and livelihoods. Tulane and Viamo developed 12 separate questionnaires, each addressing a specific COVID-related topic. These topics include knowledge of COVID-19, attitudes towards the pandemic, preventive behaviors, motivation levels, and impacts on food security, income, and mental health. Apart from Nepal, the survey was also deployed in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, Madagascar, Malawi, Rwanda, and Tanzania.

In May 2020, Viamo partnered with UNICEF in Nepal to design and deliver a mobile-based remote training service to build capacity and support community health workers via Interactive Voice Response (IVR). As conducting group training sessions for 10,465 Female Community Health Volunteers (FCHVs) and 3,445 Community Health Workers (HWs) was a new challenge due to movement restrictions in the wake of COVID-19, the IVR remote training was an innovative approach that cost both effective and engaging.

A four-module training curriculum for FCHVs and a seven-module training curriculum HWs was deployed daily through their mobile phones. UNICEF, along with the National Health Training Center (NHTC), designed the curriculum and Viamo optimised the final content to suit mobile engagement. The modules revolved around COVID-19, its symptoms, prevention, and differentiating between quarantine, social distancing, and isolation, the use of Personal Protective Equipment, diagnostic methods of COVID-19, and how to keep safe while serving COVID-19 patients. There was a pre and post test survey before and after each module to understand the knowledge changes that took place. We found a 97 percent knowledge increase from before and after the training on content surrounding routine screening for COVID-19.

At the end of each module, a survey was conducted to make it more interactive and collect data on knowledge recall. It was found that 80 percent of HWs stated that the modules were easy to understand and 66 percent considered it effective. One of the key lessons from the training was the negative correlation between large modules and the training completion rate.

The core focus of Viamo lies in three approaches -- digital strategy advice, implementation of mobile engagement services, and advice on best use of digital data. These three themes define our activities and are also our core output processes. Hence, the culmination of these three themes helped World Vision International Nepal (WVIN) integrate an IVR component into their Sikka platform. Sikka is a blockchain powered digital assets transfer platform designed for

vulnerable communities to receive tokens to represent a cash or voucher value through SMS, developed by the WVIN Innovation Lab in 2017. Sikka has, to date, distributed approximately \$600,000 to beneficiaries across 14 districts in Nepal as part of various emergency response programmes.

Viamo has been engaged as a thought partner with the Sikka project ever since it started and recently supported the team in incorporating IVR features on its platform to further reach at-risk groups and address challenges faced by communities with low levels of digital literacy.

Development professionals around the world have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic with new initiatives to aid beneficiaries to get through this crisis. These have included reimagining programming in education, agriculture, environment, governance projects, and humanitarian response in light of new social distancing requirements.

During this time, many new partners increasingly engaged with Viamo to assist in their response. So far, in 2020, we have managed three times more mobile phone-based initiatives than we originally forecasted. So far this year, we have reached over 23 million people, a 415 percent increase from 2019! Moving forward, our focus will be on continuing to build a global platform that delivers life-enriching access to the digital economy to people who need it most.

Aradhana Gurung is the Country Manager for Viamo in Nepal while Emma Leering is Director of Programs for Viamo in Nepal and Shruti Jha is the 321 Product Manager for Viamo in Nepal. ◆◆◆

VOICES: HOW HAS COVID IMPACTED LIVES?

Development Advocate asked people from different walks of life how the pandemic is affecting them. From students to entrepreneurs and from doctors and wage earners, the pandemic has disrupted lives and livelihoods of millions of people. Here are some of the responses:



MANISHA DHAKAL

25, Mahadevtar, graduate student at Gateway College of Professional Studies

COVID-19 has been a catastrophe for me. After completing my bachelor's degree in hospitality management, I applied for work abroad. My flight was just three days away when the lockdown was announced. All these months I've stayed home. I am unemployed, and moreover, my visa has been canceled. A fear of catching COVID-19 haunts me. But I have also had time to reflect on myself. I started to read different books and even prepared myself for an English proficiency test. After seven months of lockdown, I am not that panicked about my future now. I have decided to pursue a master's in hospitality management. I am hoping that this will all slowly be over and that we will cope with it by adhering to precautionary measures.



ANITA BHANDARI

24, Karyabinayak, shopkeeper

I had been running a new clothing business in Karyabinayak for three months when the nation-wide lockdown was announced. Business had been going fine but suddenly, everything stopped. There was a fear of catching COVID-19 but there was also a fear of not having enough money to survive. I was in a dilemma over whether to work or stay home. After the first lockdown, my husband, who is a migrant worker, sent me some money which I used to pay rent. I used some of our savings to feed our family. Now, although the lockdown has been lifted, the virus is still around. I am afraid of going home after work because I have a two-year-old son waiting. Even though I use precautions, I am still afraid. I hope that this COVID-19 will disappear soon and everything will be normal again.

DR. MANITA NEWA KHADGI

29, Basantapur

The COVID -19 has changed the way I look at my job and made me realize how vulnerable my life is and how it impacts my family. We as healthcare providers forget that we aren't as immune as we would like to be. We are human and we can't save everyone, especially not ourselves because we must be relentless no matter what the situation. It has taken me in the turbulent whirlpool of emotions like faith, sadness, fear, doubt, anger, hurt, guilt, despair, luck, relief, and hope.

I am coping with it one day at a time because in the heart of it all I realized that that's the only thing certain in life, the present. I am not being dramatic when I say that I feared thinking of the future and dreaming even of the short-term because it isn't promised. Everyday work felt like going to a war with the invisible enemy not knowing what I would bring back home to the most important people in my life.

I hope for a safer place, a better place, a place where we are more prepared, a place where we are kind.

DR. SAILESH SHRESTHA

29, Kuponole

It started with subtle changes- mind, body, spirit. Like all it began with the unsettling feeling. Fear for self and the loved ones, especially ageing parents. Anxiety at work and panic among peers was palpable. It felt like a death sentence but gradually things began falling into place. We worked with whatever we had. Mid-2019 I started to get affected in many ways- mainly in spirit. Few of my friends from around the world were lost to COVID-19. I felt so helpless and kept going through old pictures with them. Work was getting busier and scarier but like many of us life went on.

To be honest I don't know how I am coping. Work helped. I scheduled zoom with few close friends regularly- that helped. I read a lot- picking good books helped. My dog helped.

I hope that we are kind to each other and self. It seems like the need of the hour. COVID-19 in many ways is like a reset button. World will move on, but we need to adapt to the new world. Value good relations, be kind, and care for nature. Focus on quality and make sure you take care of your heart.

RAMCHANDRA GAIRE35, Disability Right Advocate/
Entrepreneur

Like everyone my business was closed after lockdown, I used my saving for basic needs. I was very cautious about the virus during lockdown. I spend time with my children. The most haunting thing to me was the news, people suffered a lot and to hear about that was depressing. When lockdown was loose, I became more scared because the crowd was increasing.

There was less awareness among people about the virus whereas people were also less equipped. For low income family buying 10-rupee mask and washing hand where there is less water to drink is a problem which should be acknowledged. Behavior does not change only by providing information there should be internalized program.

SANJU MAHATO

26, Birgunj, Transgender woman

Discrimination towards me as an individual and as a transgender increased more during COVID-19. There was no job no money. Aid was distributed but somehow, I feel neglected because it was provided to my family not to me. Organization like Blue diamond provided aid.

Somehow, some of the saving that I made fulfilled my need.

Without employment there won't be saving and when there is crisis like this, we are left with nothing. I hope the aid, health facilities, food to be provided equally irrespective of their gender.

SAVITRI B.K

55, Nuwakot, Daily wage worker

When lockdown started, I immediately lost my job of scrubbing marbles. The first month went by but when two of my family members got ill the financial pressure strike me. I have to be at the hospital, I was constantly on fear of losing my family members and getting virus. The additional loan was added up. We did get aid which was relief for us but after some time it was too getting scarce. We were not prepared though we got through it only because of the support of my youngest daughter who was providing us finance from gulf.

I hope to get better health care facilities, employment so that we can survive even in the epidemic like this.

CHETLAL SHRESTHA

Kuwait Returnee, Koteshwor

After 3 months of no work in Kuwait, I returned to Kathmandu. It has been 6 months now since I have returned due to COVID-19. I missed home during pandemic and when I came in Kathmandu, I was relieved.

With a little saving that I had and lend loans from my friends, I opened a little café. But due to pandemic, there is less customer. I am hoping that now that I have started business in my country things would go better.





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