

**Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic in Nepal – current scenario, challenges and way forward**

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**Background**

The day before the New Year 2020 started with some cases of pneumonia of unknown cause detected in Wuhan, China. These cases of a newly emerging infectious disease were reported immediately to the World Health Organization (WHO) Country Office in China. This new virus and the resulting diseases have been named severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2) and coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), respectively.<sup>1</sup>

The WHO published on 5 January 2020 about the disease outbreak from the new virus. On 30<sup>th</sup> of January, the WHO declared the outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC) following an Emergency Committee meeting under the International Health Regulations 2005. While the first confirmed case outside of China occurred in Thailand on 13 January, the disease was characterized as a pandemic in mid-March considering the alarming level of spread and severity. By the 21 of June the disease has affected 213 countries and territories worldwide with 8,962,808 cases and 467,579 deaths.<sup>2</sup>

**Nepal's scenario and response to COVID-19**

The first COVID-19 case in Nepal was confirmed on 23 January 2020 in a 31-year old Nepali student who had returned to Kathmandu from Wuhan on 9 January. The second case was confirmed on 23 March and the first death occurred on 14 May.<sup>3</sup> As of 21 June the number of cases has increased to 9,026 with 23 deaths from the disease affecting 74 out of 77 administrative districts.<sup>2,4</sup> The United Nations (UN) has realized that effective response to COVID crisis is beyond the capacity of any country which reaffirms the WHO's declaration of COVID-19 as a PHEIC. In April 2020, the UN Nepal came up with the Preparedness and Response Plan to address the effects of COVID-19 spread in Nepal.<sup>5</sup> The objectives of the Plan include supporting the Nepal Government in preparing and responding to an outbreak of COVID-19. In addition to the health cluster, the plan has covered other clusters, e.g., coordination, planning and monitoring, protection, risk communication and community engagement, food security and nutrition among others. The Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP), Nepal has also prepared in May 2020 a Health Sector Emergency Response Plan to combat COVID-19 outbreak in Nepal. This Plan includes public health and social measures, hospital-based interventions and management and oversight. The preparation of response plan including guidelines for quarantine, isolation, treatment and funeral were timely completed.

One noticeable research work on vaccine against COVID-19 has been conducted by Tribhuvan University's Institute of Forestry. The researchers have discussed with the WHO about the vaccine and methods employed for its preparation. As per the discussion with the WHO there is a possibility of large scale study on this with the WHO trial funding.<sup>6</sup> Nepal Health Research Council has also approved COVID-19 related studies in the areas of knowledge, perception, psychosocial impact on public and health workers, and infection prevention status in health care settings.<sup>7</sup>

**Challenges, constraints and way forward in response to COVID-19 and its long-term consequences**

The Nepal Government announced a nationwide lockdown on 24 March 2020 which remained in force until 14 June 2020. It remained a challenging task for the government to modify the lockdown modality and resume economic activities that would find a balance between control of COVID-19 transmission and ensuring the livelihood of the poor and marginalized segments of the population. The same modality of lockdown for almost three months and the unsafe migration in the border areas resulted in poor implementation of the lockdown that favored the COVID-19 transmission.

Despite current efforts by the government, the cases of COVID-19 and resulting deaths are increasing in an alarming trend which brings concerns about the effective implementation of the response plan and related guidelines. Among 11 countries of the WHO's South East Asia Region, Nepal is now ranked fourth just after India, Bangladesh and Indonesia in terms of total number of COVID-19 cases.<sup>8</sup> Reports from various parts of Nepal reveal that the COVID-19 test coverage is low, test performance and test results are delayed to an extent that affects prompt interventions to save the lives of the infected people. There have been instances when test results were reported positive only after the death or even after the funeral of the COVID-19 patients. In a recent case a 20-year old man staying in a government-managed quarantine in Surkhet district was declared negative to COVID-19 and thus returned back to his home but died later the same day. His after-death test result

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came positive for COVID-19.<sup>9</sup> Such incidents coupled with alarmingly increasing cases and deaths from COVID-19 call for a more serious focus on implementing the plans and conforming to the guidelines as well as proper utilization of the resources allocated by the government to control COVID-19 spread and its consequences.

The trend of COVID-19 in Nepal, the choice of diagnostic method, resource allocation and its use, management of transmission control activities and the lockdown modality suggest several areas of improvement for upcoming days. Addressing COVID-19 and its effects requires proper management of quarantine centers including measures for maintaining distance among individuals, adequate nutrition, safe and secure stay in the quarantine, well-managed health-desks at the international airport and border checkpoints, avoiding the procurement and use of the diagnostic tests that are not of internationally accepted standard, timely diagnosis of COVID-19 infection, modified lockdown modality to ensure physical distancing as well as employment and relief measures for the needy population. Finally, improving good governance in all matters related to COVID-19 control, reliable and appropriate technical assistance to the MoHP, facilitating the active engagement of the concerned departments of the MoHP and well managed program activities at the federal, provincial and local levels are key requirements to bring down the escalating trend of COVID-19 cases and deaths and alleviating the long-term consequences of this pandemic in Nepal.

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