

**COVID-19 AND ITS IMPACTS IN NEPAL: AN EXPLORATION OF
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, INTERSECTIONALITY,
AND SOCIAL JUSTICE APPROACHES**

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Letter of Recommendation

This dissertation entitled “COVID-19 and Its Impacts in Nepal: An Exploration of Sustainable Development, Intersectionality, and Social Justice Approaches” is prepared by Amit Gautam under my supervision and guidance. I hereby recommend this dissertation for final examination by the Research Committee at the Department of International Relations and Diplomacy, Tribhuvan University, in fulfillment of the requirements for Master’s Degree in International Relations and Diplomacy.

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Mr. Prem Raj Khanal

Supervisor

Date: July 14, 2021

Declaration

I hereby declare that this dissertation is my own work and that it contains no materials previously published. I have not used its materials for the award of any kind and/or any other degree. Where other authors' sources of information have been used, they have been acknowledged.

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Amit Gautam

Date: July 14, 2021

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All the shortcomings in this dissertation are my own.

Abstract

While the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic are multiple, this study explores the impacts on people's income and its cascading impacts on four sustainable development proxy indicators – No poverty, Zero hunger, Good health and well-being, and Quality education, consequently affecting Nepal's sustainable development. This study focuses also on how the intersectionality among these four goals is becoming visible in the way the pandemic is affecting the lives of marginalised communities, especially in Nepal. The study reviews laws, policies, and programmes of the Government of Nepal (GoN) related to each of these four goals to investigate the prevalence of the notion of resilience in these policies and whether and how have they considered the needs of vulnerable groups like the people living in poverty, workers in informal sectors, women, people with disabilities (PwDs), and those from minority and minoritized communities. These laws, policies, and guidelines are official documents of the GoN to understand where the government stands in terms of its preparation to protect the vulnerable communities and groups in crises. Finally, this research recommends more comprehensive and integrated social security schemes, such as insurance and immediate cash transfer, with special considerations for vulnerable populations such as the workers in informal sectors, the poor, women, children, and other structurally and systemically disadvantaged communities. As the adverse effects of the pandemic have put us in risk of increasing and widening disparities in the future, my recommendations focus on dealing with the threat of virus at present by building socio-economic changes from the bottom-up strategies that center social justice approaches while making policies and implementing them.

Key words: COVID-19, sustainable development, social justice, social protection

List of Abbreviations

EPF	Employees Provident Fund
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FSIN	Food Security Information Network
FY	Fiscal Year
GoN	Government of Nepal
ICT	Information and Communications Technology
ILO	International Labour Organization
IMF	International Monetary Fund
LMIC	Low and Middle-Income Countries
PMEP	Prime Minister' Employment Programme
PwDs	People with Disabilities
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SSF	Social Security Fund
UN	United Nations
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UN-SDG	United Nations Sustainable Development Goal
WTO	World Trade Organization

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Background

COVID-19, a contagious disease that was first identified in Wuhan, China, in December 2019, has affected us all, around the world and in Nepal. The United Nations has declared it “a global health crisis unlike any in [its] 75-year history... one that is killing people, spreading human suffering, and upending people’s lives” (UN n.d.). The pandemic has caused an unprecedented challenge to human health, livelihoods, and education among others. By the third week of July 2021, globally, the pandemic has already killed more than four million people (Worldometers 2021); the virus has disrupted the livelihoods of billions of others and has caused unparalleled damage to the world economy (Ozili & Arun 2020). In March 2020, when the world realizes it is slipping into the global health crisis, markets, industries, factories, offices, and educational institutions around the world had been completely shut down as the global epidemic unfurled (Ozili & Arun 2020). The whole world started experiencing this terror collectively but on different levels.

The COVID-19 has brought down even the strong economies like the United States and Europe to their knees, let alone a developing country like Nepal. In Nepal, as economic activities are slowed down and weakened by the COVID-19 epidemic, the economic growth rate has turned negative at 2.1 percent in FY 2077/78 (MoF 2078). The World Bank envisages the country’s real gross domestic product (GDP) growth to be a mere 0.6 percent in 2021 (World Bank 2020a). As the World Bank had reported in 2013, a global disaster like this affects low-and middle-income countries because these countries lack the resources, well-planned-out strategies, and capacity

to deal with such shocks (2013). And now the world is witnessing it on a global level. Record level job losses in one month since the global outbreak of the virus (Cajner et al. 2020) is a clear indication that the upcoming economic consequences of the pandemic are going to be adverse. By comparison, the number of people who have lost their jobs due to this pandemic is way larger than the number of people who had lost jobs as a result of the economic recession of 2008 (Reanda Biz Serve 2020). Most of those who have lost their jobs due to the disaster are workers in the informal sector (WHO 2020b). In 1993, the 15th International Conference of Labour Statisticians at the International Labour Organization (ILO) defined the informal sector as a group of production units operating at a low level of organisation with no specific consideration for division of labour. In informal sector works, labour relations are mostly determined by personal or social relations rather than contractual arrangements (ILO 1993). In Nepal, where more than 80 percent of workers are involved in informal sectors, the pandemic has hit this population of workers hard (ILO n.d.). These informal workers have fallen short of funds for food, health, and education post-pandemic partially, if not completely.

In most of the developing countries, workers in informal sectors do not have access to any kind of social security programmes and/or schemes, such as pension and social security fund schemes which have made these workers more vulnerable to the effects of this global crisis. Some of these social protection plans and schemes include pension, old age allowance, and contribution-based social security fund. These means of social protection are aimed at either the workers in the formal sectors or a very small group of people whereas a large section of the vulnerable population has been deprived of any formal means of support from the state.

Until the fiscal year 2018/19, social security programmes in Nepal, such as pension and allowances (including the old-age allowance, single women's allowance, child grant, disability allowance, and allowance for endangered ethnicity) have together been able to encompass a mere 17 percent of the total population and the government allocation of budget for social security has been only 11.7 percent of the total budget (NPC March 2020). These statistics are a clear indication that a large section of the population in the country is deprived of social security schemes, and whatever resources the government has allotted is inadequate to meet the needs of vulnerable people, more specifically in crisis times. In crisis times, people's needs are manifold, and there is a need for external support so that these people have no difficulty in fulfilling their basic needs.

The United Nations Development Programme has declared that because of the COVID-19, more people in Nepal are at the risk of falling back into the never-escaping poverty trap (UNDP 2020). While the pandemic has aggravated the existing matrix of discriminations (such as sexism, homophobia, ableism, casteism, classism), it has also exacerbated healthcare-related inequities especially among low-income communities and historically marginalised groups of people across the world (Benfer et al. 2020). And while the entire world is suffering, the pandemic has intensified the poverty level in developing countries like Nepal (Nepali Times 2020). Moreover, the reduction in remittance inflow as the result of COVID-19 has hit Nepal as anticipated. And what this means is more people will join this "multidimensional poverty club" in Nepal. Every year, Nepal sends out millions of youths abroad for international labour. While remittances range up to 25 percent of the GDP, a reduction in remittances during the time of COVID-19 will limit the source of income of remittance-receiving households in the country (World Bank 2020c). The diminution in remittance can

restrict the families from getting out of poverty and this will also disable these families from paying off potential loans, consequently limiting their investment in education and health services among others. Lack of regular sources of income in the family will directly hit their access to basic needs such as food and nutrition, health, and education. The already vulnerable population is affected on various intersectional levels resulting in the widening economic and social security-related gap between the haves and the have nots.

Furthermore, a study conducted by Food Security Information Network (FSIN) reveals a very dismaying picture about the future of food availability in the world. The FSIN study predicts that additionally 130 million people around the world will face starvation due to the COVID-19 crisis (FSIN 2020). The impacts of COVID-19 range from loss of income/jobs to difficulties in purchasing food and an inability to find alternative sources of income for vulnerable groups (UNDP 2020). A Study found that only 10.6 percent of those who had lost their income sources amid the COVID-19 pandemic could find an alternative income source during the pandemic (The Asia Foundation 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has wielded an unexpected shock on food supply chains, agricultural production, food manufacturing, and demand all at the same time (ADB 2020). And in the case of Nepal, there was a shortage of food immediately after the lockdown in 2020 (Adhikari et al. 2021) mainly due to income reduction in the families and a sudden obstruction in national and international food supply due to movement restrictions imposed by other countries (Subedi 2020), primarily India.

While it is evident that deepening food insecurity will grow more tragedy in the lives of people and areas that are already vulnerable intersectionally (WFP 2021),

which ultimately always includes the poor and marginalised populations (Laborde et al. 2020; Kesar et al. 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic has contributed to widening food insecurity in developing countries like Nepal where food insecurity is proportionately higher among the poor and marginalised (Morales et al. 2020) often deeming these poor developing countries unable to reach the sustainable development goal (SDG) two i.e., Zero hunger.

Meanwhile, reduced access to health care services has negatively affected the health of poor people in most of the developing countries (Rodela et al. 2020), especially in the countries with weak state-funded social security nets. Because of the lack of external support and coping mechanisms, in Nepal, wage labourers, indigenous people, and women from marginalised groups and rural areas who are already vulnerable in terms of food insecurity and malnutrition have suffered more due to COVID-19 (Adhikari et al. 2021). This also means poverty and poor health are common among marginalised people during the pandemic (Benfer et al. 2020), as was evidenced in the cases of SARS, Zika, and Ebola outbreaks (Kapiriri & Ross 2020). Some studies also show that public health measures like movement restriction, self-isolation, social distancing, and quarantine have affected the overall physical, mental, spiritual, and social wellbeing of the Nepalese

1.2 Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to identify the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic on each of these four sustainable development proxy indicators—No poverty, Zero hunger, Good health and well-being, and Quality education. The study goes beyond this objective to explore whether and to what extent social security-related laws, policies and programmes, and other relevant laws, policies, and

programmes in Nepal have been effective and resilient in dealing with these kinds of pandemic-led shocks.

Since these four goals are interrelated (in fact, all 17 SDGs are interrelated to each other), where pandemic effects in one readily affect the other goals as well, they are presented in that way. The uniqueness of this study is the focus on how COVID-19 pandemic's effects on one of these goals affects all other goals, consequently affecting the lives through social justice approaches. In Nepal, most of the other studies deal with the pandemic effects on each SDG in isolation. Also, there have not been any such studies to identify the degree of effectiveness and resilience of laws, policies, and programmes related to social security and social protection in a country during a crisis like this. So, while attempting to address some of these research gaps, the study focuses on the four SDGs related to intersectional effects of COVID-19 on the marginalised and minoritized communities such as workers in informal sectors, people living in poverty, ethnic and religious minorities, women, children, and people with disabilities (PwDs) among others. While presenting the picture of the current situation, the study aims to draw attention to the need of specific arrangements in laws, policies, and programmes from the government providing special protection to vulnerable communities and safeguard their particular needs in the time of crises like COVID-19 pandemic through social justice approaches.

1.3 Research Questions

Drawing from the research objectives specified in the previous section, this study strives to identify the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on four sustainable development proxy indicators—No poverty, Zero hunger, Good health and well-being, and Quality education through the social justice frameworks. This study seeks to

answer whether and to the extent have social security-related acts and other relevant acts, such as those related to livelihood, food, education, and health among others as well as policies, and programmes of the GoN been able to deal with the existing social and economic vulnerabilities in the country. Besides, this study also tries to explore whether and to what extent there exist(s) specific concern/attention /provisions in the laws, policies and programmes of the GoN for the protection of the already vulnerable groups of people such as the people living in poverty, elderly people, children, women, PwDs, and ethnic and religious minorities among others.

1.4 Limitations

The limitation of this study is that it studies the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic only on the first four SDGs, namely No poverty, Zero hunger, Good health and well-being, and Quality education rather than all seventeen SDGs. The study focuses on these four goals primarily because the field of SDG is very broad and that this study is constrained by time, space, and resources. Besides this limitation, the prevalence of the COVID-19 pandemic itself largely restricted my accessibility to various resource materials because of which I had to rely on study/reference materials available online. Despite this limitation, this study expects to contribute in identifying the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on income and then on food security, health, and education. Apart from this, the study is expected to identify how developing countries like Nepal, after being hit by the crisis like COVID-19, can fall behind in their goal towards SDGs of eradicating poverty and hunger, maintaining good health and well-being of its citizens and providing quality education for all.

1.5 Organisation of the Thesis

This dissertation identifies numerous impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on human lives with a particular focus on four SDGs, namely No poverty, Zero hunger, Good health and well-being, and Quality education.

Chapter 1, “Introduction,” begins with the contextual background of the COVID-19 pandemic and then a brief introduction about the UN-SDGs, mainly to offer a look at where this thesis emerges from. While doing so, it also introduces the keywords and key concepts of this thesis which will be reiterated throughout the thesis. Then, this chapter briefly offers a statement of the problem, research objectives, research questions, and limitations of the study.

Chapter 2, “Literature Review,” includes, as the title suggests, the review of literature on key concepts that have been introduced in the introduction chapter. Additionally, this chapter provides an extensive literature on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic in human lives in Nepal and around the world with the focus on sustainable development goals (SDGs), namely: Goal one–No poverty; Goal two–Zero hunger; Goal three–Good health and well-being, and Goal four–Quality education. While doing so, the chapter also identifies the gap in the existing body of literature.

Chapter 3, “Methodology,” provides a detailed description of the research methodology. The chapter provides a detailed account of the sources of information used in preparing this dissertation.

Chapter 4, “COVID-19 and Sustainable Development and Social Protection in Nepal,” begins with a brief introduction of UN-SDGs, particularly about the first

four goals in the list – No Poverty, Zero Hunger, Good health and well-being, and Quality education. The focus has been placed on these four goals primarily because the main intent of this dissertation is to examine the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on livelihood, food, health, and education. The chapter further records and analyses various social protection and social security-related laws, policies, programmes, and schemes mainly to identify whether and to what extent have they been able to address the needs of vulnerable communities and groups in crisis times.

Chapter 5, “COVID-19 and Its Impacts on Nepal’s Economy, Livelihood and Food Security,” analyses mainly the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the first two SDGs: No Poverty and Zero Hunger. While the chapter largely revolves around the issues related to the economy, livelihood, and food security, it also touches upon the third and fourth SDGs (Good health and well-being and Quality education) to demonstrate the relationship and connection among the effects of these four goals. It also provides a detailed analysis of various laws and policies of the GoN related to these issues to understand how encompassing those documents are in terms of including people’s spheres of life with special consideration for vulnerable communities and vulnerable groups of people.

Chapter 6, “COVID-19 and Its Impacts on Health and Education in Nepal,” focuses particularly on the impacts of COVID-19 on the third and fourth SDGs, Good health and well-being and Quality education. The chapter analyzes the laws and policies of the GoN related to health and education mainly to recognise if and how comprehensive have those been in addressing the health and education-related risks underpinning the lives of vulnerable communities and groups of people during the pandemic.

Chapter 7, “Conclusion and Recommendations,” is the final chapter of the thesis, which gives a summary of this dissertation and offers some recommendations for the stakeholders based on the findings of this research. While doing so, the research equally prioritizes the following: i) the ways to face and resolve the current disturbances, disruptions, and damages caused by the global pandemic and ii) the ways to do so through social justice frameworks so that the widening and deepening socio-economic disparities that are becoming more visible due to the pandemic can help us combat social injustices.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Since the first reported case of Covid-19 in Wuhan, China in December 2019 (WHO 2020a), the pandemic swiftly spread all over the world, and in less than 3 months since the first reported case of WHO declared it to be a global pandemic on 11 March 2020 (WHO 2020c). What had begun as a health crisis at the end of 2019 quickly became a human and socio-economic crisis (UN 2021; Khanal et al. 2020). In the Asia-Pacific region, there is a need for more focused efforts towards people's and states' improved resilience to natural disasters, enhanced social protection, and increased investment in basic services for the vulnerable, more proactive role from the stakeholders to reduce existing food insecurity and malnutrition, and equal access to education and improved school infrastructures (UN 2021).

These efforts together can help countries achieve sustainable development goals (SDGs), namely: Goal one–No poverty; Goal two–Zero hunger; Goal three–Good health and well-being, and Goal four–Quality education (UN 2021). But unsurprisingly, the need for these initiatives has come to be even more pressing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic has had a profound effect on the employment, health, and education of the marginalised populations around the world. The economic implications of this pandemic make it clear that it will procrastinate countries' journey towards achieving the SDGs risking losing some achievements in sustainable development made in the last few years (Filho et al. 2020; Srivastava et al. 2020), which is more likely to be worse in case of developing countries like Nepal.

Many studies indicate that the developing countries are more susceptible to pandemic led shocks (Ahmed et al. 2020; Sumner et al. 2020b) mainly because of an already existing high-level poverty, weaker healthcare system, large informal sector,

and prevalence of intergenerational households in those countries (Alon et al. 2020). Worse, these countries are more vulnerable to the pandemic due to the reduced international support to help them achieve SDGs during this time (Barbier & Burgess 2020). Nepal's position as a developing country is not much different from the situation discussed above (Joshi et al. 2021). Apparently, since the outbreak of the pandemic, budget implementation in the country has waned and there has been a dramatic reduction in revenue collection (World Bank 2020a) causing an unprecedented contraction in the country's economy. World Trade Organization (WTO) had approximated that Nepal's GDP would decrease by 0.13 percent owing to the COVID-19 pandemic (WTO n.d.).

The COVID-19 and the subsequent lockdown have added economic strain in a large section of the population because of the loss of income sources and jobs (UNDP 2020). As of January 2021, one in every five households in the lower-income quartiles suffered job losses because of the outbreak of the COVID-19 and the economic quarantine that followed (UNICEF 2021). A nationwide survey carried out by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) in Nepal found that nearly 35 percent working population had lost their jobs and only 26.3 percent of the sample individuals were receiving their salaries during the lockdown. Similarly, three in every five workers lost their jobs owing to the effects of COVID-19 (UNDP 2020). These and other similar effects caused by the pandemic have high chances of perpetuating in the future as well. A survey by the Ministry of Finance (MoF) of the GoN indicates that unemployment will exacerbate in the future (MoF 2020b). Meanwhile, sustained lockdown since the outbreak of the pandemic has precipitated a hike in the price of food and other essential goods like clothing, footwear, housing, and utilities along with the scarcity of essential food items in the country (Khadka et

al. 2020). The shortage of vital supplies and an unprecedented hike in the price of essential goods have pushed daily wage labourers, and the poor and marginalised in the country towards the risk of falling into the gnawing poverty trap. Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic has caused millions of people are at risk of falling into the vicious cycle of poverty (Anser et al. 2020).

While talking about informal businesses in Nepal, they account for more than 50 percent of total business enterprises, and they are the major source of income for most of the labour force in the country (World Bank 2020a). Additionally, more than 80 percent of the total job holders in the country are affiliated with informal sectors (ILO n.d.). And though the pandemic has terrorized everyone, the impact of COVID-19 has not been the same for all. The most vulnerable groups of people, including women, children, the poor, the elderly, the marginalised (UN Women 2020), and workers involved in informal sectors (Rutayisire et al. 2020; Estupinan & Sharma 2020) have experienced the severest effects. These workers have experienced pay cuts or jobs losses because of diminution in the economy caused by prolonged lockdown resulting in slowed economic activities in the country. ILO had estimated that in the worst-case scenario the pandemic may impede 1.6 to two million such jobs in the country (ILO n.d.). And most of these people have little to almost no access to social protection apparatuses of the government.

Another source of income that is heavily affected by the pandemic is remittances. In Nepal, the prevalent condition may further degenerate due to reduced remittances. One in every four households has at least one member working out of the country (ILO 2016) and most of these remittance-receiving families have no alternative sources of income. In 2019, remittances accounted for more than twenty-five percent

of the GDP, which has come to a sudden decline since the outbreak of COVID-19 in the first half of 2020 (Prasai 2020). Remittances have been contributory towards poverty reduction, improved living standards, and facilitating higher education of the members of remittance-receiving families in Nepal (Pant 2011). Therefore, a sudden decrease in it means plunging financial consequences for those families.

Consequently, this ushers in a condition where every family member will have hard times meeting the most basic needs.

As a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been a surge in the cases of job losses and income reduction because of business closures and a sudden halt in economic activities following the lockdown in most parts of the country. In a survey conducted jointly by the GoN and World Food Programme (WFP) in all seven provinces in Nepal, 11 percent of households reported job losses, and 31.2 percent households reported of having their income radically reduced because of the result of the pandemic (GoN & WFP 2020). Having lost their income sources, these people will have to compromise on their basic needs and rights including those related to education and health. And consequently, this may result in long-term consequences in these families whose breadwinners have lost their jobs. Meanwhile, most of those who have lost their income do not even receive any incentive from the government to keep their most basic daily needs going.

Similarly, more than half a million workers involved in tourism-related works, which accounts for nearly eight percent of the total employment in Nepal, have been affected as the sector has come to a halt (ILO n.d.). Initially, not having medication and vaccines with them, most of the countries resorted to public health interventions such as social distancing and locking down the cities to prevent the further spread of

the virus (Anderson et al. 2020). Although lockdown measures are necessary to curb the spread of the virus, this has spawned detrimental effects in the financial health of people whose income capacities were already minimal (Sumner et al. 2020b).

International efforts to control the virus by limiting human movement is inevitably causing economic shocks and social costs that will affect the functioning of agricultural and food systems worldwide (Stephens et al. 2020). In Nepal, disruptions in supply chains inside the country and restrictions on export and import have highly affected people's access to food (Adhikari et al. 2021).

While talking about the effect of the pandemic on food systems and its chain effect on the economic sectors, the scale of agricultural activities, tourism and trade, and industry has depleted sharply across the globe (Buheji et al. 2020). And since the focus of the study interconnections between how each goal is affected by the pandemic, we cannot fail to observe that although the COVID-19 is primarily a health crisis, it has turned into an economic crisis due to global stagnation and sluggish economic activity after the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 (Mukarram 2020). Alongside, the revenue collection has declined since the global outbreak of the pandemic. In Nepal, there was a sharp decline in revenue collection in all seven provinces during the lockdown. As a coping strategy, enterprises in different provinces had adopted different measures: businesses in Karnali Province resorted to laying off workers; in Gandaki Province prioritised business closures; businesses in Sudurpaschim opted for pay cuts; and businesses in Province No. 2 preferred sustaining businesses through borrowing (UNDP 2020). These measures consequently led to a reduction in revenue in these provinces. Whatever measures are taken, it has reduced the income of the people and has had a detrimental impact on all aspects of their lives including access to food, health services, and education among others.

The COVID-19 is exposing the fragility of these 17 SDGs adopted by the United Nations (UN)—two-thirds are now unlikely to be achieved (Naidoo & Fisher 2020). The stringent lockdown measures, isolated economies, and financial burden to contain the pandemic emergency have resulted in the slowdown of socio-economic development, and if it continues for a longer period, that would put a question mark on developing plans and pathways to achieve the SDGs, even in decadal-scale (Mukherjee et al. 2020). The epidemic is likely to affect SDGs at different levels in different parts of the world. As a result, countries' economies, societies, and the environment will entirely be greatly affected (Mukarram 2020).

In developing countries, the pandemic is expected to push the poverty rate like the ratio documented 30 years earlier. There are projections that the income and hence, people's ability to purchase may shrink by 20 percent, and the number of people living below the poverty line could rise from 420 million to 580 million. Globally, as many as 395 million people fall into extreme poverty in the worst-case scenario (Sumner et al. 2020a), earning less than \$ 1.90 a day. Having less income means reduced ability to purchase essential goods such as food and medicine too among people living in socio-economically vulnerable conditions. This is a clear indication that a lot of people have lost their usual access to nutrition, health services, and education following job losses since the outbreak of the pandemic. Globally, the COVID-19 has caused a contraction in the economy, as many as 135 million people are likely to be pushed into poverty (Mahler et al. 2020). Due to COVID-19, various poor countries around the world have met various socio-economic and livelihood-related consequences (Buheji et al. 2020). The pandemic appears to be undermining the two main objectives of the UN-SDGs: to fight poverty and eradicate hunger (Filho et al. 2020) among others. Because of the pandemic, the number of newly

impoverished people will increase significantly, most notably in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia (Sumner et al. 2020a).

The COVID-19 has caused immense negative effects on the production network and equally on consumption patterns. The COVID-19 has disrupted the global food supply chain (Torero 2020). The current food crisis is likely to be exacerbated by the economic crisis that began with the COVID-19 pandemic. And Nepal is not spared from this potential risk and reality of the food crisis. There are two main reasons behind the risk of food crisis in Nepal in the context of the COVID-19: i) reduction in food exports by Indian farmers (Prasain & Shrestha 2020) and ii) the inability to properly distribute domestic products due to restrictions in movement in the country (Aryal 2020; Onlinekhabar 2020). Reduced production, poor distribution chains, and reduced accessibility to food together contribute to a surge in food insecurity in poor and marginal communities, who are already marginalised in the current food systems. A study shows that severe food insecurity is 20 percent higher in low-income countries in Asia and Africa as compared with middle-income countries in those continents. In poor families, income/job loss means depletion in the supply of food and nutrition (FAO 2019). Whereas loss of income sources caused by the COVID 19 forces these poor families to compromise on their food and nutritional need. This inability to purchase food is largely a result of the fact that food prices have escalated like anything since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In a study in Nepal, conducted jointly by the GoN and WFP, nearly 20 percent of participants shared that food prices had risen since the outbreak of the COVID-19 epidemic, which has tragically affected their access to food (GoN & WFP 2020). Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) delineates food security as being a state where all individuals are physically and financially empowered to access their dietary

needs and food priorities and the adequate, safe, and nutritious food for active and healthy life (FAO 2019). One thing that becomes evident through this definition is that food security is largely guided by the economic status of a person or a family and the existing social structure. And in this socio-economic structure, everything is interconnected making already vulnerable populations further vulnerable in every aspect of their survival, wellbeing and, chances to find a better life for themselves.

Continuing the discussion of the food systems and food in/security, the COVID-19 pandemic is likely to result in even more acute food shortages in the world, affecting mostly developing countries. This state of the food crisis is even further exacerbated by floods, droughts, and various market-related irregularities (Pereira & Oliveira 2020). The second round of WFP's mobile Vulnerability Analysis and Mapping project (mVAM) survey concludes that two provinces, Sudurpaschim and Karnali, are the most food-insecure provinces in Nepal. These two provinces have the highest proportion of food-insecure households, with 23.8 and 23.3 percent of households consuming inadequate diets respectively. Likewise, food consumption was highly inadequate in Province No. 2 (GoN & WFP 2020).

While food insecurity itself is regarded as one of the leading health and nutrition issues (Gundersen & Ziliak 2015), people's health has been doubly affected also due to the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Although a few countries around the world have had some success in preventing the pandemic, the virus still possesses a serious threat to most people and countries around the world. Nepal government's response to deal with the pandemic so far has been deemed insufficient. The country has not been able to increase its capacity for testing and set up quality quarantines (Rayamajhee et al. 2021).

The pandemic also threatens to overturn recent achievements in development and health (Mejia et al. 2020). Due to the lack of quality healthcare, increasing population density, and lack of proper sanitation, the risk of COVID-19 and other infections is very high in developing countries like Nepal. Primarily, this economic crisis could be a major blow to the success achieved so far in national health programmes such as healthcare and various nutrition-related programmes (Gopalan & Misra 2020). There is also no question, based on the evidence of previous global crises, that non-monetary indicators such as infant and maternal mortality, malnourishment, and educational achievement would also be seriously hit by the pandemic (Sumner et al. 2020a).

Besides, the effects of this epidemic have spread rapidly around the world. Although the rate of transmission of the virus (with the surge of its Delta variant) has fluctuated a lot in the most developed countries, the COVID-19 has consistently continued to remain a major problem in most of the world's poorest countries. Primarily, the poor and impoverished in developed and low- and middle-income countries (LMICs) have an increased risk of infection from the COVID-19 (Mejia et al. 2020). Lack of basic healthcare in economically-disadvantaged countries has exacerbated the risk of epidemics (Anser et al. 2020). In the case of developing countries like Nepal, it has become massively very difficult to fight epidemics like the COVID-19. And the main reason for this is that developing countries around the world are struggling with the COVID-19 as well as many other infectious diseases (Filho et al. 2020), eventually affecting UN-SDG three i.e. Good Health and well-being. Moreover, people with underlying health conditions are at a higher risk of being infected from COVID-19, leading to death (Jordan et al. 2020). As we can see, the risk of the COVID-19 infection is directly linked to poverty, pollution, and malnutrition (Sumner et al.

2020b). Besides, there persists a risk that various mental health issues will be overlooked, since the isolation of social distancing may conceal or lead to an increase in the percent of sufferers (Filho et al. 2020). And not only that but the hushedness and stigma around mental health issues and the lack of mental health awareness make the situation worse.

While exhibiting the existing crisscrossing among these four SDGs, this paragraph will touch upon the effects of the pandemic in the fourth UN-SDG, i.e. Quality education. The extended closure of the academic institutions has a major setback in students' learning and achievements (Burgess & Sievertsen 2020; Kuhfeld et al. 2020). And the most vulnerable children among these students, especially the ones from poor families and geographically remote areas, are confronted with the possibility of further losses in their education, leaving them further behind by worsening prevalent inequality and jeopardising their future potential (World Vision 2020). The pandemic is widening the gap that was already there, and this gap seems to be continuing to grow. Globally, the level of schooling and learning of children will diminish substantially (Azevedo et al. 2021) and the prolonged school closures will result in an increased dropout rate (Onyema et al. 2020). The pandemic will disrupt education outcomes which may be even worse in the case of the most vulnerable children including the children with disabilities being left behind from access to literacy (Azevedo et al. 2021). And, this would mean a very large number of children across the world will be deprived of education, consequently depriving them further from the future career opportunities. Children from economically-disadvantaged families and those in rural areas are likely to be affected the most because of the school closures and due to lack of access to distance learning infrastructures, computers, and the internet for effective learning (Tadesse and Muluye 2020). And by

the time schools can run physical classes the parents of these children will have already lost their sources of income as a result of the COVID-19. In consequence, these poor families will be unable to send their children to school even when everything and everyone will be back to “normal”. Failure to send children to school means an immediate setback to the country’s SDG four–Quality education, which, in the longer run, will continue snatching away future opportunities from these families. Hence, only the equitable initiatives to keep the classes going would help these families to continue their children’s education. This often may require immediate support to the family so that they can continue their children’s education even after they have lost their jobs/income sources.

And no less important is equitable infrastructural development, which must be the priority of the government. Because, though many academic institutions have started virtual learning programmes to continue the education, it may not be as effective as the earlier learning method for many economically and geographically marginalised students. The existing digital divide between the rich and the poor may further widen the existing gap in education (NPC 2020). With only twelve percent of people in the country having access to broadband internet connection, the plan to hold online classes is somewhat an exaggeration from the government, which may further contribute to the ever-widening digital divide in the country (Ghimire 2020).

A study in Nepal found that only 7 percent children’s schools offered distanced learning facilities and most of these schools which provided distance learning were the schools where they studied children from top-income groups in urban areas of Bagmati and Gandaki (UNICEF January 2021). The same study revealed that the average number of hours studied per day is 15 percent higher for

children from upper-income group families as compared to the average number of hours for children from lower economic quantile (UNICEF January 2021). The number of youths who attended online video lectures in low-income countries is 18 percent, which is way lesser than those in high-income countries, where 65 percent of youths attended video lectures (ILO 2020). Besides, four in every five students reported some kind of interruption in their studies and training because of the pandemic and lockdown restrictions (ILO 2020). In developing countries with a poor record of gender parity measures, this will result in a sharp decline in the number of girls attending schools even after schools reopen (Tadesse & Muluye 2020). Thus, when a large number of female students remain out of school for a long time, it will deprive them of various opportunities not only now but in the future, as well as adversely affect the gender-related and justice-driven education and consciousness of the country as a whole.

As can be seen, the effects of the pandemic on the economy, livelihood, food availability, are almost certain to be last long among marginalised communities, which result in and are resulted by the effects on health and education as well. As the four SDGs gigantically affected by the COVID-19 are interdependent, there is an increased risk of long-term effects. At the first glance, the pandemic has adversely affected the economies of most of the world's least developed and developing nations. As a result, it is almost certain that these countries will face difficulties in achieving their sustainable development goals. In particular, the pandemic has made it increasingly difficult for minoritized communities in these least developed and developing countries, such as workers in informal sectors, women, and the poor to further complicate their livelihoods, food, education, and health needs. They are the ones bearing the brunt of it all.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach – a review and analysis of secondary literature on COVID-19 and its impact on livelihood and economy, food availability, health, and economy. Most of the literature reviewed for the study was accessed from various online domains like JSTOR and ScienceDirect, including freely accessible web search engine like Google Scholar. The literature was first divided into two main categories before starting to review them – research materials (books, book chapters, research papers, research reports) and legal and policy documents (laws, policies, regulations, and guidelines). These two kinds of literature have been reviewed separately in different periods as these two would serve different purposes in course of writing this dissertation.

The review of book chapters, research papers, and research reports was conducted in March and the first half of April 2021 whereas the review of legal and policy documents was done in May 2021. The review of research materials was done primarily to understand the context of COVID-19 and its impacts on livelihood and economy, food availability, health, and education. Whereas the laws and policies were reviewed to understand whether and to what extent those have been able to address specific needs of the vulnerable groups in crisis times like this. This dissertation explores the challenges for Nepal in achieving the first four UN-SDGs: No poverty, Zero hunger, Good health and wellbeing, and Quality education in the context of the global outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study attempts to serve the following two purposes:

1. To understand the challenges marginalised people face in attaining these UN-SDGs and test the effectiveness of the social security act, policy, and

programmes of the GoN and how pertinent those are to entail the needs of the most vulnerable population in the country, such as the people living in poverty, ethnic and religious minorities, women, children and PwDs among others

2. To inform stakeholders of Nepal and other developing countries about these challenges so that countries adopt necessary strategies in the future and do not have to compromise their goal towards sustainable development in the future through social justice frameworks

The study also reviews policy documents of the GoN, particularly those related to employment, food nutrition, health, and education to understand whether those policies have sufficiently addressed the need of the vulnerable communities in the time of crises like COVID-19. Towards this objective, this study reviews and analyses a wide range of available literature on COVID-19 and its impacts on income, food availability, health, and education in developing countries with a specific focus on Nepal and the marginalised and minoritised communities. Besides this, the study also reviews and analyses few most important and recent social security policies, programmes, and schemes of the GoN along with few other policy documents with special consideration for, but not limited to, poverty reduction, food security, health, and well-being, education and gender equality which will inform the study about the prevalent condition of social security in the country.

Chapter 4: COVID-19 and Sustainable Development and Social Protection in Nepal

Sustainable Development Goals are a set of seventeen goals related to future international development – 1) No poverty, 2) Zero hunger, 3) Good health and well-being, 4) Quality education, 5) Gender equality, 6) Clean water and sanitation, 7) Affordable and clean energy, 8) Decent work and economic growth, 9) Industry, innovation, and infrastructure, 10) Reduced inequalities, 11) Sustainable cities and communities, 12) Responsible consumption and production, 13) Climate action, 14) Life below water, 15) Life on land, 16) Peace, justice and strong institutions, and 17) Partnership for the goals (UN 2015). The United Nations had adopted seventeen goals in 2015 with a global call for poverty alleviation, protection of the earth, and shared prosperity. These seventeen goals were created by the UN and have been promoted as shared global goals for sustainable development since 2015 (UN 2015). UN-SDGs have been introduced as a shared global strategy to deal with various livelihood-related challenges, namely economic, ecological and political challenges facing our world. Meanwhile, the UN identifies that elimination of poverty being one of the greatest global challenges and a key to sustainable development (UN 2015). In this context, this chapter gives a brief introduction to UN-SDGs. And after that, the chapter records and analyses various social protection and social security-related laws, policies, programmes, and schemes in Nepal mainly to identify whether and to what extent have they been able to address the needs of vulnerable communities and groups in crisis times.

The journey towards poverty alleviation is almost certainly not as easy for all countries in the world as a country's capacity to deal with the poverty-related issues

depends very much on the availability of resources in the country which becomes even more pressing in the time of disasters and other kinds of crises like we are facing currently (Barbier & Burgess 2020). And COVID-19 is a crisis that the UN has not seen in its history of 75 years. Immediately after the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, most of the countries went on lockdown and imposed movement restrictions which affected both the demand and supply sides of the economy. And it resulted in disabling people from working and firms from producing, consequently leading the entire human world to global economic setbacks. And this economic downfall has led to increased vulnerability among people living in poverty, women, low-wage earners, old age people, people with disabilities leading to ever-widening inequality and poverty (Khanal et al. 2020).

There have not yet come enough concrete research outcomes about the exact impact of COVID-19 on SDGs, however, the possible impact of COVID-19 on the SDGs has manifested in three ways, it has effaced some of the exemplary achievements towards achieving SDGs made to date, it has slowed down the progress in some other goals, and countries have reallocated their budget to facilitate the sectors that have been affected the most, which combinedly contributes to delays in the achievement of SDGs (Mukarram 2020).

Although the pandemic has affected all the SDGs, its main impact has been on the first four of the SDGs: No poverty, Zero hunger, Good health and wellbeing, and Quality education. And the developing countries like Nepal have not been able to remain untouched by these effects. Several studies have shown that pandemics such as COVID-19 increase the world's poverty rate (Sumner et al. 2020a; Cuesta & Pico 2020; Suryahadi et al. 2020). Due to COVID-19, poverty on the global level has hiked

like this for the first time since 1990. Also, there persists a risk of losing all the achievements made in poverty alleviation in the last 10 years due to this pandemic. Nepal's difficulties in dealing with these kinds of shocks emanate mainly from its i) weak economic condition, ii) fragile health system, iii) existing social inequalities, iv) excessive external dependency, and v) prevalence of a highly informal economy and informal labour market (Khanal et al. 2020).

It is almost certain that because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the least developed countries, developing countries, and the countries with sparse resources have suffered more than those countries with abundant resources (Loayza 2020). And the impact of this pandemic has been catastrophic for people in low-income quartile and low-skilled workers (Furceri et al. 2020). One of the reasons why individuals or families of the above-mentioned nature are at risk is because of the contraction in their financial base and income source after the pandemic. Overall, it is almost certain that this will make it difficult for most of the nations around the world, most particularly developing countries, to achieve their SDGs by 2030.

SDGs have been given priority in all development programmes at the federal, provincial, and local levels in line with the commitment to include individuals or communities from all walks of life in all dimensions of development. Given that Nepal has lagged compared to other countries in socio-economic development in the past, today it has become inevitable for the country to take immediate steps in the pace of socio-economic development (NPC March 2020). At the outset of the Fourteenth Periodic Plan, Nepal embraced SDGs intending to facilitate “socioeconomic transformation and poverty reduction through high economic growth, with productive employment and equitable distribution of resources” (ADB n.d.). The

work of involving SDGs in determining and prioritizing budgets and programmes began at the beginning of the fifteenth periodic plan itself. In this regard, capacity-building programmes have been conducted at various levels to advance the process of formulation and implementation of development programmes at the provincial and local levels towards setting SDGs (NPC 2073).

While human development is crucial for timely attainment of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development and its 17 SDGs, due to the post-COVID economic downturn, it is almost certain that all investments made by nations to achieve SDGs will be diminishing. The COVID-19 has jeopardised the progress countries have made thus far in the implementation of the SDGs and several other achievements made in the sustainable development indicators in the past several years. The effects have been more severe for developing countries like Nepal. Although crises like this pandemic and their ramifications are not entirely avoidable, countries need to live up to their commitments to implement the SDGs, so that progress to date is not compromised (Filho et al. 2020). In Nepal, the COVID-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented challenge to achieve the country's goal to achieve UN-SDGs (Joshi et al. 2021). The success of the UN-SDGs is largely possible only through the collective initiative of nations; sustainable development goes well beyond the capacity of one nation. For example, there can be no end to the COVID-19 pandemic until people espouse public health intervention measures such as i) the use of masks in public places, ii) maintaining social distance, iii) staying in isolation in case of confirmed infection and, iv) vaccines. All these need to be implemented and distributed equally and equitably around the world.

These public health interventions help save individuals, families, communities, nations, and the world from the risk of contracting the virus. Due to this epidemic, there is a danger of losing all the achievements Nepal has made in the last few years in human development and sustainable development indicators. Nepal's aim to advance itself as an enterprise-friendly middle-income country by 2030 and reduce the poverty rate in the country way below to single digits (GoN December 2017) will face a severe setback due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Financial and human resource inadequacy to endow the programmes to translate SDGs into national programmes are the key reasons behind challenges facing Nepal towards the attainment of UN-SDGs (B.K. et al. 2019). Due to the economic crisis after the epidemic and the decline in employment, different aspects of people's lives have been affected.

The pandemic has been catastrophic to the core principles of the concept of sustainable development like inclusivity and impartiality. COVID-19 will certainly create additional economic pressure on nations around the world. As a result, nations will face long-term financial problems. When allocating funds by determining priority areas, there is a strong possibility that many areas that are not in the priority of the government may fall behind due to a lack of necessary resources (Mukarram 2020). Therefore, nations need to learn from this epidemic and move towards achieving the development goals that might be threatened once again in the future due to similar disasters. In fact, there is an urgent need to reconsider that the deadline for achieving the SDGs. And at the heart of it all, there should be social justice approaches aiming to eliminate various forms of social discrimination and oppression.

Talking about social security and social assistance programmes, they go a long way in reducing the risks that exist in society by ensuring that even the vulnerable sections of the population have access to basic services and facilities. Social security and assistance programmes and plans, specifically, cover the areas of food security, health, employment, and poverty reduction. In a broader sense, Social Security covers policies and programmes related to cash transfers, insurance, and employment (Drucza 2019). The nature of social protection programmes, however, depends largely on the available infrastructural power and logistic capacity of the concerned state (Pradhan et al. 2021). And there is no single universal model of social security that encompasses all groups and segments (ILO 2004). At the same time, the social and economic status and position of workers in the informal sector, who have been denied largely by the social security schemes, also varies. Therefore, while determining the provisions and programmes related to social security, it is necessary to have a good analysis of the living conditions and a good realisation about available resources and formulate social security measures accordingly.

Besides, the Fifteenth Period Plan of the GoN, which was brought into action since the fiscal year 2019/20, has a vision of rapid and steady economic growth, prosperity, good governance, and happiness for the citizens in the country. The plan acknowledges that social security in Nepal has not been able to encompass private sectors workers and workers involved in informal sectors (NPC March 2020). The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic followed by tremendous job losses has impacted these informal workers the most. In Nepal, more than 80 percent of workers have informal jobs who already lack any social protection scheme and state-funded safety nets will be the ones to be affected the most because of the pandemic. And as many as two million such jobs will be affected due to the crisis either with complete job loss or

partial pay cuts (ILO n.d.). The impacts of the pandemic are harsher on the economically-disadvantaged workers in informal sectors who lose sources of income or suffer pay cuts in crisis times.

Considering the discriminatory social structure in Nepal, the GoN has been implementing various programmes related to social security at different stages since the 1990s. This makes it clear that the GoN is committed to the concept of social security. However, the government has not been able to encompass a wide range of groups in these schemes, plans, and their strategic implementation. With the introduction of the first global social pension system by the GoN in 1950, non-contributory social security programmes have been introduced in Nepal. Previously, the Employees Provident Fund (EPF) was a concept of contribution-based social security and could only cover government employees.

The formal social security system in Nepal includes mainly social and health insurance, social assistance programmes/schemes (including old-age pension, disability pension, widow's allowance, and maternity plan), microfinance plans, and labour market programmes. Similarly, social insurance is limited to a provident fund, which includes civil servants, army, police, and teachers or at least workers in the formal sectors. This means a large section of the population is deprived of such protection and security schemes. Due to a lack of resources, social security programmes and plans in Nepal have not been very effective. Except for cash transfer programmes such as old age allowance, disability allowance, widow's allowance, and maternity plan, there are no such programmes that have been effective in the country. And, tragically but not surprisingly, people living in poverty, communities who are already systemically and structurally marginalised, and workers in the informal

sectors have been affected the most by the pandemic in absence of proper social security programmes and schemes. Since most of the social security arrangements of the GoN cover workers in the formal sector (Sigmund n.d.), the epidemic is likely to put a large segment of people who are not covered by social security programmes at even greater risk in the absence of any assistance or external support. Nepal's resource allocation for social protection is slightly above 3.5 percent of the country's GDP (Ghimire 2019). This is mainly to strengthen the public welfare role of the state, provide social security and protection, and achieve prosperity by centering the issues related to social justice.

The Constitution of Nepal envisions social security and social protection, especially for at-risk classes and groups. The preamble of the Constitution affirms that the state is committed to ensuring social justice by ending all forms of discrimination (GoN 2015). The constitution recognises the right to employment, the right to food, the right to health, the right to education among others as fundamental rights. Besides, article 43 of the constitution specifies the right to social security and pronounces that the indigent citizens, incapacitated, single women, citizens with disabilities, children, citizens who cannot take care of themselves, and citizens belonging to the tribes on the verge of extinction shall have the right to social security (GoN 2015). Similarly, as specified in the state's guiding principles and policies, the government adheres to the principles of guaranteeing social security, while ensuring the basic rights of all labourers, in consonance with the concept of decent labour. Likewise, different schedules in the constitution, particularly the schedules five, seven, eight, and nine define social security and poverty alleviation as lone and concurrent responsibility of the federal, provincial, and local level governments in the country (GoN 2015).

Based on the constitutional provisions about social protection for vulnerable groups, the GoN enacted the Social Security Act, 2075 (2018). The act stipulates that it is crucial to provide special protection and ensure the right to social security of indigent citizens, incapacitated, single women, citizens with disabilities, and children as specified in the constitution. It demands the formulation of necessary provisions for the protection of citizens who are incapable of helping themselves along with those citizens who belong to tribes on the verge of extinction. The act has been specific to identify senior citizens, the poor, single women, PwDs, children, and people who are unable to take care of themselves as those eligible to get the social security allowance (GoN 2018a).

At the same time, the GoN enacted the Contribution Based Social Security Act, 2074 for the purpose of increasing the scope of social security. As specified in this Act, anyone who contributes to the social security scheme can benefit from the programme. For the first time, this act has succeeded in bringing the workers/labourers involved in the informal sector under the purview of social security. The act specifies that if any worker is unable to deposit the amount in the fund due to any reason(s), then the listed employer has to deposit the amount of the employee's contribution in the fund for a maximum period of three months. Also, the fund will facilitate various security plans such as medical treatment and health security plans, maternity security plans, accident security plans, disability security plans, old age security plans, and unemployment security plans among others (GoN 2074c). In addition, towards the implementation of the Contribution Based Social Security Act, 2074, the GoN has issued the Contribution Based Social Security Regulations, 2075. This regulation has been successful in expanding the scope of

social security by ensuring the participation of workers involved in the informal sector under the GoN's scheme for contribution-based social security (GoN 2075a).

The GoN has issued the Social Security Fund (Management and Operation) Regulations, 2067(2011) as a prescription for effective management and operation of the Social Security Fund (SSF). The Social Security Fund (Management and Operation) Regulations, 2067(2011) laid down a foundation for establishing SSF. As specified in the regulations, SSF may provide several insurance plans/schemes for its contributors, such as unemployment insurance plans, disability insurance plans, old-age insurance plans, medical insurance plans, and family insurance plans among others. The regulations specify that the purpose of this fund is to ensure the right to social security based on the contribution of the workers and to provide social security to the contributors (GoN 2067). SSF programme aims at reducing the economic and social risks of all workers by incorporating them into the social security scheme, embodying the concept of universal social security and ensuring the constitutional right to contribution-based social security. The Contribution Based Social Security Act, 2074 provides for the inclusion of formal and informal sector workers and self-employed persons in the social security scheme. Regarding the operation and management of the contribution-based social security programme from the fund, the social security scheme under this fund has been expanded to informal and self-employed and foreign employment in addition to the formal sector of the economy (GoN, SSF n.d.).

Additionally, the GoN has tried to give a concrete form to the implementation of the social security scheme by issuing the Social Security Scheme Operation Procedure, 2075. The procedure specifies the schemes that will be covered under the

banner of social security schemes. These schemes include medical treatment, health and maternal care schemes, accidental and disability care schemes, dependent family care schemes, and old-age pension schemes. The procedure also provides details about who can benefit from each of these schemes and in what many ways (GoN 2075d).

As per the Constitution and other Acts mentioned earlier, schemes related to social security have also been included in other schemes of the GoN. As the field of social security expands, the GoN seems to be expanding the scope of social security through various schemes and programmes. The government has also been allocating a budget every year targeting social security programmes with the objective of strengthening the social security situation.

The GoN's Fifteenth Periodic Plan aims to improve the health of citizens through investment in child health and nutrition (NPC March 2015). At the same time, the periodic plan has set goals for equality and sustainability by improving the existing system of access to capital and skills, minimum wage, and social security (NPC March 2020). Similarly, in the budget speech of the Fiscal Year 2078/79, the state has adopted the principle of strengthening the public welfare role, providing social security and protection, and achieving prosperity including social justice as its guiding principle (MoF 2078).

In Nepal, the history of EPF dates back to 1934 AD when the fund was introduced for army personnel. The fund included the service employees in Kathmandu in 1944 and civil service employees throughout the country in 1948 (EPF n.d.). Likewise, the government had introduced a universal old-age allowance from the Fiscal Year 1994/95 with the introductory allowance of NPR 100, which is now

the largest non-contributory social security scheme operated by the GoN (Bhandari 2075). With the commencement of the Fiscal Year 2078/79, the amount of this old age allowance has been increased to Rs. 4,000 (MoF 2078).

Despite the fact the the GoN has put several plans and provisions of social security and social protection in place, they do not seem to be meaningfully taking into consideration a significant number of vulnerable, minority, and marginalised groups. Most of them cover only workers in the formal sector and the cash support that is provided to some vulnerable groups also is insufficient to fulfill their most basic needs and the needs of their families. And, in few other cases, these schemes have been deemed insufficient to meet people's needs during the crises, such as a pandemic. People's needs in crises are manifold and to fulfill those needs requires additional support/effort from the side of government, policymakers, and administrators. As a result of the pandemic, many of these vulnerable groups including informal sector workers have lost their jobs/income sources which have directly affected their families' access to food, health facilities, and children's education among others. In this context, the government is required to intervene with immediate and equitable support to such vulnerable communities and groups of people so that their day-to-day needs are met.

Chapter 5: COVID-19 and Its Impacts on Nepal's Economy, Livelihood and Food Security

This chapter analyses mainly the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the first two SDGs: No Poverty and Zero Hunger. While the chapter largely revolves around the issues related to the economy, livelihood, and food security, it also touches upon the third and fourth SDGs (Good health and well-being and Quality education) to demonstrate the intersectionality among the effects of these four goals. It also provides a detailed analysis of various laws and policies of the GoN related to these issues to understand how encompassing those documents are in terms of including people's spheres of life with special consideration for vulnerable communities and vulnerable groups of people. And to do so, this chapter opens with the discussion of the sharp contraction in the GDP together with a massive scale job loss, which means a gigantic setback to the country's economy, and what that means, again, is an abysmal gap between the haves and have nots. There will be a surge in the number of poor people. It's hitting the people living in poverty and the historically marginalised and oppressed communities around the world. As Gabriela Bucher, the executive director of Oxfam International, says, "The deep divide between the rich and poor is proving as deadly as the virus... that the fight against inequality must be at the heart of economic rescue and recovery efforts" (Oxfam International 2021).

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) forecasts that the COVID-19 pandemic will result in the worst global stagnation since the Great Depression of the 1930s and much worse than the 2008 economic crisis (IMF April 2020). And, while the world and especially the developing countries are suffering, no wonder, it has hurt Nepal's economy as well. The real GDP of Nepal contracted by 1.9 percent in 2020,

mainly because of the nationwide mobility restrictions for 5 months in the single calendar year which impacted all sectors of the economy in the country (World Bank 2021). Nepal's absolute poverty, which scaled to 18.7 percent of the total population in the fiscal year 2017/18 (MoF 2020b) is almost certain to be much worse due to the COVID-19 pandemic. There is bound to be some slowdown in this pace of poverty alleviation in Nepal (Joshi et al. 2021) and the world in general (Suryahadi et al. 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected the employment and income of the structurally vulnerable population. Globally, about one-third of the population is below the poverty line. The pandemic is certain to lead to a massive decline in employment, which in turn is bound to increase poverty in the country. More than two out of every five economically active populations have lost their jobs, according to the World Bank's COVID-19 monitoring survey (World Bank 2021). The pandemic has jeopardized all the progress Nepal had made in poverty alleviation in the last few years. In the last few years, Nepal had made very remarkable progress in terms of poverty reduction (SDG goal 1). Nepal's poverty rate had decreased by more than 6 percent between 2016 and 2018 (NPC March 2020). However, with the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the population below the poverty line remains in danger of falling below the national average (Joshi et al. 2021). The lack of a source of income and the lockdown in many parts of the world have reduced the access of many people to food and have had a negative impact on the health and nutrition of children, adults, and old people.

A nationwide survey by the Ministry of Health of GoN found that more than a third of the children under five years had issues of stunting, which is proportionately

higher among children in rural areas (MoH, New Era & ICF 2017). These issues are specifically more severe in poor families and among the children born from mothers who do not have access to healthcare needs. Not just in small children, the issues of lack of food and nutrition were visible among adults as well. More than 15 percent of the surveyed individuals, particularly in rural areas, were found to be thin and underweight (MoH, New Era & ICF 2017).

Global remittances are projected to decline sharply due to the COVID-19 epidemic and the economic crisis caused by the shutdown (Rasul et al. 2021). The main reason behind this decline is the reduction in the wages and employment of migrant workers as COVID-19 epidemic spreads globally (ACAPS 2020). The economic crisis caused by the pandemic has resulted in a sharp decline in employment opportunities and sources of income in the host country. In 2020, the World Bank estimates a historical decline in global remittances of USD 110 billion, with South Asia expected to experience a decline of about 22.1 percent (World Bank 2020b). It's true that for decades, remittance has been financially influencing the lives of Nepali migrant labourers and their families positively towards reducing the poverty level (Khanal 2020). But it has been observed that while protracted lockdown has already taken a toll on the lower- and middle-income countries, the sharp decline of remittance has now pushed these economies further into crisis (Bhattarai & Subedi 2021). Remittances are the major source of income, or in some cases the only source for many families in Nepal. For these families, the money received as remittances is the only money for their daily household expenses, including food.

As mentioned in article 33 of the Constitution of Nepal, every citizen has the right to employment (GoN 2015). The Right to Employment Act, 2018 and the Right

to Employment Regulations, 2075 have been issued and are being implemented. As per the provisions mentioned in the Act and Regulations, the Prime Minister's Employment Programme (PMEP) has been implemented from the Fiscal Year 2075/76 with the main objective of providing social protection to the citizens by guaranteeing minimum employment and expanding employment-oriented services and facilities (GoN 2018b; GoN 2075c). As specified in the Right to Employment Act, 2018, every citizen shall have the right to get unemployment support under this act. Except as per the prevailing law, no person engaged in employment shall be removed from the employment without any reason (Act no. 7:1-4). After the commencement of this act, the GoN, provincial government, and the government at the local level shall conduct necessary employment programmes to provide the unemployed persons with minimum employment. While conducting employment programmes, it clearly states, priority shall be given to the women, Dalit, and economically destitute among others (GoN 2018b).

The Right to Employment Regulations, 2075 specifies that necessary coordination will be made by the GoN, the State Government, and the local level to provide employment to the unemployed persons in the programmes and projects to be implemented by various agencies for job creation. At the same time, necessary coordination and cooperation had been decided to be carried out to conduct activities related to poverty alleviation and job creation in an integrated manner. Employment service centers will be established at every local level for data collection of unemployed and promotion of employment at the local level. The centre will also distribute subsistence allowances to unemployed families (GoN 2075c). Similarly, article 34 of the Constitution of Nepal mentions that every labourer shall have the

right to appropriate remuneration, facilities, and contributory social security (GoN 2015).

Similarly, the Labour Act, 2074 issued by the GoN is expected to make an important contribution to the fulfillment of the objectives of providing rights and benefits to the workers and developing good labour relations by clearly defining the rights and duties of workers and employers, ending all forms of labour exploitation and increasing productivity (GoN 2074b). The act identifies five different kinds of employment based on the nature of involvement of employees – regular employment, task-based employment, time-bound employment, immediate employment, and partial employment. The employer can recruit and involve their/her/his employee(s) in any of these kinds of works depending upon the former's need. The act also specifies that any labour contract that does not abide by this act shall be deemed ineffective. The Act disallows employers to involve anyone in work without signing a formal employment contract. The act mentions that the workers shall receive wages and facilities right from the first day of employment. This act has made special provisions for pregnant and lactating women. Pregnant women workers will get a total of 14 weeks of maternity leave before or after delivery and women who take such leave will get a total of 60 days' pay (GoN 2074b). As mentioned in this act, every employer must deposit money in EPF every month. And the employer should deposit an 8 percent amount of the employee's basic salary in the gratuity fund; however, once this act comes into effect, the amount in retirement/gratuity fund shall be deposited into SSF. The act specifies that the employer will have to provide medical treatment insurance and accident insurance to each employee working under him/her (GoN 2074b).

Similarly, the Prime Minister's Employment Programme is another of the various social security programmes implemented by the GoN. This Programme, however, has come under severe criticism, mainly because the amount it has inculcated as daily wage for workers is insufficient and the delayed payments have made the situation worse (Khadayat 2019; Annapurna Post 2078). Despite these criticisms, the government seems to be taking the Programme forward even for the F/Y 2021/22. As mentioned in the budget speech of the F/Y 2021/22, the Prime Minister's Self-Employment Programme will be restructured and a minimum of 100 days of employment will be ensured to the unemployed. The government has allocated Rs. 12 billion for the Prime Minister's Self-Employment Programme intending to create 200,000 jobs for the F/Y 2021/22 (MoF 2078).

While discussing the effects of COVID-19 on income, employment, and the economic system, we cannot isolate these discussions from the effects on the existing food system. How much of a threat is coronavirus to the world's food supplies? There are serious warnings about the global shortage of food as the pandemic spreads. So, how can the availability of food be safeguarded, and can a famine crisis be averted? The COVID-19 pandemic has indicated an example of an unprecedented challenge to the global food supply system as well as undermining countries' commitment to the principles of the SDGs (Fleetwood 2020). COVID-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented income shock that is expected to expedite food insecurity in a developing country like Nepal (Joshi et al. 2021). In Nepal, remittances have helped to increase consumption of goods available in the market and have also been instrumental towards market functioning.

The economic crisis that began with the onset of the COVID-19 epidemic has also had a major impact on food production and its supply. The most visible impact of the pandemic on food security is through loss of income (Laborde et al. 2020); the loss of income means reduced access to food for poor people. The COVID-19 pandemic has made it clearer that existing food systems are inefficient to the task of achieving Zero Hunger (von Grebmer et al. 2020). Food and nutrition insecurity exacerbates in the poor and underserved areas due to health and economic crises (von Grebmer et al. 2020). Various legal and policy measures have been adopted in Nepal to ensure access to food for the public. However, a large section of the population in Nepal still seems to be deprived of easy access to food and nutrition, more so in the time of crises like COVID-19. It is because Nepal imports its food from other countries, mainly India, and a sudden disruption in supply means a shortage of food in the country. Meanwhile, a lot of others lost their jobs because of COVID-19 cutting off a large number of the human population's access to food.

When it comes to the food-related constitutional rights in Nepal, Article 36 of the Constitution identifies the right relating to food as one of the fundamental rights. As specified in the constitution, every citizen shall have the right relating to food, and every citizen shall have the right to be safe from the risk of life due to the scarcity of food (GoN 2015). As mentioned in the Food Rights and Food Sovereignty Act, 2075, all three tiers of government will make necessary arrangements in coordination with each other to respect, protect, and fulfill citizens' right to food. The act specifies that every citizen in the country will have food rights and food security. At the same time, there will be regular access to adequate, nutritious, and quality food without indiscriminately. Together, the federal government, state government, and local government need to identify individuals, families, and communities that are more

vulnerable to a shortage of food than others. The trio will work for effective storage and distribution of food. Likewise, the local government must keep records of the families that are vulnerable to food insecurity due to poverty, geographic remoteness, and disasters. Either of these three governments (federal, provincial, and local) shall provide food to targeted families at a reasonable price or even free of cost to vulnerable families. Equitable efforts will be made to provide food to reduce the food and nutrition shortage in case of emergencies such as earthquakes, floods, and landslides. However, emergency does not include crises led by the pandemic like COVID-19. The local government should issue food support identity cards to concerned families. In case of food shortage in an area due to disasters like earthquakes, floods, landslides, fires, and pandemics the GoN can declare the affected area to be a food crises area. The government shall work towards expansion and easy accessibility of advanced technologies, fertilizer, pesticides, and farming instruments. To work towards ensuring farmers' access to the agricultural market. The federal government, state government, and local government plan to formulate and implement a targeted agricultural programme with special consideration for the Dalit, tribes and communities on the verge of extinction, and indigenous and landless farmers among others. The GoN has included the subject of food and nutrition in the periodic plans. For the proper management of food production and distribution, there are the national food council, provincial food council, and local level food coordination committee at federal, provincial, and local levels respectively (GoN 2075b).

To look after the issues related to food and nutrition such as food security and food technology, there is a separate department at the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development (MoALD) of the federal GoN. Food and Nutrition Security

Department at the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock Development is responsible for the following: i) the formulating and regulating of national food security programmes, ii) conducting activities related to the promotion of endangered and indigenous crops and tubers, iii) engaging in food security analysis, iv) involving in monitoring and projection, and v) coordinating towards formulating necessary legal standards to maintain food security and regulation and food reserves (GoN, MoALD n.d.).

Similarly, the GoN allotted budget in the FY 2020/21 for relief package and to provide support for the most affected sectors, such as tourism, agriculture and industry, cottage, and small enterprises. Besides these packages, the government declared to provide some scale of exemptions in income tax, value-added tax (VAT), and customs duties exemptions (MoF 2020a). These kinds of immediate external support to the affected individuals and the affected firms are expected to help them recover from the shocks generated by the pandemic more easily.

Furthermore, there are four flagship programmes of the Agriculture Development Strategy (2015-35) implemented by the GoN for the overall development of the agricultural sector. These four flagship programmes include the following: 1) Food and nutrition security programme, 2) Decentralised science, technology, and education programme, 3) Value chain development programme, and 4) Innovation and agro-entrepreneurship programme. And among these four programmes, the first one aims to improve the food and nutrition security of the most backward sections of the society and envisages the Agriculture Development Strategy. In this context, Food and Nutrition Security Enhancement Project (FANSEP) directly contributes to the achievement of the targets of multidimensional

poverty, absolute poverty, and agricultural indicators. The project is funded by Global Agriculture and Food Security Programme (GAFSP) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) provides technical assistance to the project (GoN, MoALD, & FANSEP n.d.). These kinds of programmes need to be scaled up to cover a wider range of vulnerable populations so that the potential risks arising from the crises like COVID-19 and other disasters can be meaningfully reduced.

As evidenced in this chapter and the preceding chapters, the COVID-19 pandemic has subdued food and nutrition security for many, mainly people in poverty and those living in rural areas, and its effects will likely ripple into the future. COVID-19 has a negative impact on human health because of its impact on food production and distribution. While many families lack usual access to food and nutrition, the government's initiatives are insufficient to deal with the vulnerability in human lives caused by the loss of income, which has consequently led to menacing food insecurity.

Chapter 6: COVID-19 and Its Impacts on Health and Education in Nepal

This chapter focuses particularly on identifying the impacts of COVID-19 on health and education and it also briefly touches upon an analysis of laws and policies of the GoN related to health and education. Apart from the direct effects of the virus on human health, the invisible physical and psychological effects of the virus are unlimited. In developing countries, with poor health care nets and a lack of resources, problems are bound to become more complex (Poudel & Subedi 2020). In Nepal, the strict restrictions on mobility left a visible impact of the pandemic on people's usual access to health services and health care most specific to maternity services, immunization, and supply of essential medicine among others. There are accounts of disruption in essential health services such as maternal and child health services and treatment of chronic illness that were severely affected in the country (Singh et al. 2021). This was mostly because health facilities were lacking a holistic approach to the crisis and concentrating only on COVID-19 patients.

Health crises like COVID-19 lead to increased mental stress in marginalized or low-income people due to socioeconomic problems such as job insecurity, lack of safe housing, and food insecurity, consequently to long-term mental health problems (Goldmann & Galea 2014). As a result of the psychological distress caused by the COVID-19, the number of suicide cases has increased in Nepal. A lot of people in the country suffer anxiety due to loss and uncertainty because of the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing lockdown. In Nepal, between mid-March 2020 and Mid-September 2020, a total of 1,350 people, including 319 children and 876 women committed suicide (UNICEF September 2020).

In an economically disadvantaged country like Nepal with low availability of well-planned strategies and resources, public health measures like social distancing, self-isolation, or quarantine are the only ways that can help control and reduce the cases of COVID-19 infection. More than anything else, the existing disparity in terms of distribution of and access to resources has contributed to the fact that some countries in the Global North have been able to control the spreading of COVID-19, whereas it is still beyond the capacity of many other countries in the Global South. These countries in the Global South have weak health care systems and infrastructures and it is very much evident that these countries need viable assistance from the countries in the Global North in their fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. In the FY 2020-2021 budget, the GoN took a vital step to increase funding in the health sector by 32 percent. Of the allotted amount, NPR 6 billion was particularly to address health needs and issues arising from the COVID-19 pandemic (MoF 2020a).

As the spread of the virus is global, the intervention to combat the virus requires an integrated approach. This requires the strategy that leaves no one behind, and that there is subtle preparedness with particular attention to vulnerable groups such as ethnic minorities, the poor, the elderly, and those with some kind of poor medical conditions. In this case, only non-discriminatory and equitable distribution of vaccines could help. And that would also ensure that countries are committed to the basic principles and values enshrined in the SDGs (Ottersen & Engebretsen 2020). To prevent the long-term effects of the COVID-19 epidemic on the health care system, special attention needs to be paid to people from remote areas and marginalized groups (Gopalan & Misra2020). This has affected the mental health of people as much as their physical health, and it is not the case only with poor and marginalised communities. What we cannot afford to forget is that mental health morbidity is

becoming more common even among first-line healthcare workers treating COVID-19 patients in Nepal (Gupta et al. 2020) and in China (Lai et al. 2020). Some studies show that the frontline healthcare workers are even developing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder as “they face a high risk of being infected and, consequently, of spreading the virus to other people” (d’Ettorre et al. 2021).

Given this overwhelming scenario, the GoN had proposed a significant increment in the health sector budget for the F/Y 2020/21 compared to the previous year mainly to combat the COVID-19 situation (MoF 2020a) yet the number of new cases continues to increase. On 11 May 2021 alone, Nepal reported 9,317 new cases of coronavirus infection and 225 death cases (The Kathmandu Post 2021). The main reason behind this is that the government failed to make adequate preparations for the effective management of the disaster in time (Sharma & Bhatta 2020). Partly, this was the result of the fact that the pandemic was beyond the government’s capacity to manage.

On the policy-making level, the GoN has also taken various initiatives on the issue of human health. Article 35 of the Constitution of Nepal mentions that no citizen in the country shall be deprived of emergency health services and that every citizen shall have equal access to health services. GoN enacted the Nepal Health Service Act, 2053 with the objective to make the health service in the country more capable, robust, service-oriented, and accountable to the people. Towards this objective, the act has introduced a provision of health service as a separate entity with the framework of civil service. The act is specific to mention various issues related to civil servants in the health sectors such as appointment, payment, and other facilities (GoN 2053).

The Health Insurance Act, 2074 has been issued to protect the right of the citizens to get quality health care, reducing the financial risk of the insured through prepayment by health insurance, and establishing easy access of the public to healthcare services by enhancing the efficiency and accountability of health care providers. The act stipulates that every Nepali citizen should be a part of a health insurance programme. Also, in the case of vulnerable groups like infants, children, senior citizens, PwDs, and their caregivers and/or parents are responsible for involving these people in the health insurance programmes (GoN 2074a).

Nepal Living Standards Survey 2010/11 found that the number of men and women who have never attended schools is 23 percent and 44 percent respectively (GoN November 2011). And the quality of education and students' achievements in learning is still a big problem in Nepal (MoE 2072). Like health care, education is defined as a fundamental right in the Constitution of Nepal. Article 31 of the constitution mentions that every citizen in the country has the right to receive education up to the high school level for free. Similarly, the act stipulates that citizen with disabilities and those from poor families have got the right to get free education even at the higher levels (GoN 2015).

Intending to prevent the spread of COVID-19, which has become a global epidemic since the beginning of 2020, most countries, including Nepal, decided to go for partial or complete lockdown; countries have put partial or complete movement restrictions in the movement of people. At one point almost all countries in the world banned international travel, while Australia has restarted COVID-19 lockdowns just recently; schools and universities have been closed. School termination and closure of academic institutions and other learning spaces have impacted more than 94 percent

of the world's student population around the world (Pokhrel & Chhetri 2021; UN August 2020). There are reports prepared by the ILO that about four in every five students are having various kinds of interruption in their studies and training because of the pandemic and lockdown restrictions (ILO 2020). And Nepal is not exempted from this effect.

In Nepal, as of the last week of May 2021, more than 8.7 million learners have been affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and schools across the country are partially or fully closed for the last 41 weeks since the country declared the pandemic to be a health emergency in April 2020 (UNICEF May 2021). Thus, when the educational institutions are closed for a long time, the students' education is disrupted, and this can have various setbacks in children's learning and likely future achievements (Burgess & Sievertsen 2020; Kuhfeld et al. 2020). Future earning losses related to the learning setback are substantial. To estimate the long-term economic impact of these learning losses, one can project the effect of this learning loss on future earnings. Based on data on household labour incomes, an average child in South Asia may lose USD 4,400 in lifetime earnings once having entered the labour market, equivalent to 5 percent of total earnings (World Bank 2020a).

Since the beginning of 2020, educational institutions have been closed in most countries around the world with the aim of controlling the spread of COVID-19 as a global epidemic. As a result, a variety of alternative learning methods have been adopted, many of which are new to many children. Most children are unfamiliar with these modern methods of teaching and learning. Most students have not been able to learn effectively from these methods. Comparatively, children in urban areas and families with easy access to technology and multimedia and children in high-income

countries are more likely to benefit from these alternative means of learning. In Nepal, these alternatives seem to be less effective for children from poor families, families in rural areas, and those with less proficiency in handling technologies (Devkota 2021). The number of students attending online video lectures in low-income countries is less than a third of the number of students attending video lectures in high-income countries (ILO 2020). Most students from poor families, especially in developing countries do not have access to this virtual learning. Because these virtual learning facilities are concentrated in urban areas and only 12 percent of the Nepali population has access to broadband internet (Ghimire 2020), disabling the children from other poor families from accessing such facilities to continue their studies in these trying times. Lack of access to the internet combined with poverty has deranged the online higher education system in Nepal (Acharya et al. 2020).

According to a survey on child and family trackers conducted by United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) Nepal, only 7 percent of parents reported that their children's schools provided distance learning facilities (UNICEF January 2021). Most of the families thus benefiting from distance education were from urban areas of Bagmati and Gandaki provinces and belonged to the top income groups. According to the UNICEF study, children from upper-income families spend 15 percent more time studying on a daily basis than children from lower-income families (UNICEF January 2021). Similarly, a joint study by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), UNICEF and World Bank mention that in low-income countries, remote learning has not been as effective as learning in physical classes (UNESCO, UNICEF & World Bank 2020). In many instances, it was equally difficult for teachers as they needed to adjust themselves to teaching remotely using technologies that they had never used nor had any trainings to use (Tili et al. 2021).

In a survey with nursing students and teachers in Nepal, more than 40 percent of teachers reported having experienced a disturbance in online classes because of electricity problems, and nearly half of them reported having internet problems. Similarly, more than 60 percent of students reported disturbance in their online classes because of issues related to electricity and the internet.

Similarly, only 64.4 percent of students who had participated in the survey had internet access for their online classes. And for more than half of those who are attending online classes, the only internet source is mobile data and the only device was mobile phones (Subedi et al. 2020). And not to forget about unaffordability or the financial burden that comes with this only source they have. Likewise, more than 60 percent of students did not feel comfortable with online classes, and more than two-thirds of students who are studying virtually want to meet the instructor for a better understanding of course matters (Acharya et al. 2020). This disparity in access to the internet can contribute further to the ever-widening digital divide in the country (Ghimire 2020). Differential access to the means of technology and multimedia for proper education and learning will lead to a gap in the personality development and future opportunities for these children, which will ultimately affect the country's journey towards achieving SDGs.

Lack of financial support is one of the reasons impeding online classes (Almaiah et al. 2020). In many low-income countries, poor families stop sending their children to school and engage them in household chores and other agricultural activities. Because such low-income families do not have an alternative source of income, they do not have the ability to buy technology related to alternative education, especially when they might be already losing the source of income they

have. Due to this, the danger of these children having to end their education remains high. Thus, due to different levels of accessibility to technology, students from affluent and disadvantaged families have different levels of accessibility to education and opportunities. Thus, the closure of educational institutions for a long time has had a major negative impact on the education and achievement of students from poor families (ECDC 2020; Burgess & Sievertsen 2020; Kuhfeld et al. 2020). Meanwhile, it was particularly more difficult for children with disabilities to learn remotely (Tlili et al. 2021). These children from poor families have difficulties in continuing to attend classes remotely as they do not have access to technological devices like computers and mobile phones, and most of them do not have access to internet connections as well. Meanwhile, children with disabilities, who need different tools and equipment to keep up with their studies, too have not been able to learn effectively in absence of those types of equipment and tools.

And not to forget that each of these setbacks will go to another intersectional level if we fail to pay attention to how not only the present but also the future of female children, especially with intersectional disadvantages such as disabilities or/and economic challenges, are at risk. Given this situation, gender-based disparities are startlingly increasing as well. The extended lockdown of several months meant women and adolescent girls needed to spend long hours on unpaid/informal care, care for their children and other family members, consequently limiting their access to and opportunities in education (UNDP 2020). When the education of girls is disrupted, even more so if they are from poor families, it not only disrupts their learning process in the immediate future but also has a negative impact on their economic condition in the long run. Due to a lack of education and opportunities at present, these girls will be deprived of employment opportunities in the future. And their chances for a

financially independent and relatively freer life are already compromised. In developing countries in South Asia including Nepal, where the situation of gender equality is even more pathetic, the number of girls attending school is likely to fall sharply when schools resume after the COVID-19 pandemic (Rasul et al. 2021). A study conducted in Nepal by Room to Read reveals that a large number of children deprived of schooling as a result of COVID-19 are never enrolled in school again (Room to Read n.d.). This forces us to anticipate a bleaker future in terms of gender-based discrimination and violence if some drastic social-justice oriented measures are not planned and implemented immediately.

To combat the possibility of this bleak future, the GoN has promulgated the Education Act, 2028 with the objective of preparing human resources for national development and developing quality education by improving the management of schools operating in Nepal. The eighth amendment in the act has introduced provisions about special education, inclusive education, non-formal education, continuing education, distance education, and open education. As specified in the clause, the Ministry of Education can arrange for special education, inclusive education, non-formal education, continuing education, distance education, or open education in certain community schools by providing them necessary infrastructures. The act specifies that distance, inclusive education, and special education will be dealt in an equal footing as to normal education. However, the act also stipulates that there will be a separate curriculum, study materials, and evaluation system for students with different kinds of disabilities. Similarly, the eighth amendment in the Act also added a provision that the government could conduct community learning centres to promote literacy, skill development, and continued learning. The seventh amendment in the act envisioned the Education Development Fund (EDF) at the central level with the aim

of facilitating community schools in strengthening their physical infrastructure and embolden the quality of education. Similarly, in each district, there will be a District Education Fund (DEF) and a separate fund in each school as well (GoN 2028).

Additionally, the Compulsory and Free Education Act, 2075 stipulates that every citizen in the country will have equitable access to quality education and there will be no discrimination among people in terms of their access to education. The act specifies that citizens with disabilities will have the right to obtain education through special means. Citizens from poor families, citizens with disabilities, and Dalits will have the right to free education up to higher levels. As mentioned in the act, every local government will have to make proper arrangements for the education of children affected by natural disasters, accidental cases, and other kinds of emergencies until they complete the basic level. The local level can even provide monthly scholarships to children from rural areas, children from poor families, and children from the families in which elder members are disabled so that these can complete their basic level education (GoN 2075e).

National Education Policy, 2076 acknowledges that a lot of children are still deprived of schooling mainly because of families' existing socio-economic conditions and the inability of the government to fairly distribute access to modern technology and infrastructures across the country. The policy has multiple provisions such as implementing the right to education as a fundamental right, ensure easy and equitable access of quality education for all, ensure quality education for PwDs, and promote the use of information and communications technology (ICT) in education. Also, the policy has a strategy to promote appropriate educational opportunities for children with disabilities. As specified in the policy, there will be arrangements for

scholarships for children from poor Dalit families, poor indigenous families, and minorities among others to promote education for all. Similarly, the policy plans to gradually increase in the quality of every school with appropriate physical infrastructure including their capacities in disaster preparedness (MoEST 2076). Despite the policy has laid down such provisions to safeguard and ensure the education of these minority groups, the schemes of the GoN are not comprehensive enough to address the needs of these vulnerable families in crises times.

The School Sector Development Plan (2016/17-2022/23) has budgeted a total of NPR 40,516 million (USD 386 million) for scholarship and incentive programmes which amount to 6 percent of the total education budget for the period (MoE 2016). These scholarship programmes are considered one of the largest social protection programmes in the education sector (GoN 2014). Despite all these provisions, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a very negative impact on the education sector. This seems to have had a very bad effect on the education of women and girls. Nepal Living Standards Survey 2010/11 indicates that the number of illiterate women is nearly double the number of illiterate men in the country (GoN November 2011). This is a clear indication that the initiatives undertaken by various government and non-government organisations to promote women's education are insufficient.

There have, undoubtedly, been some good policy provisions by the government to address the special needs of vulnerable groups to safeguard their health and education-related needs, however, none of them deal with the needs of these groups specifically in the context of crisis times. In addition to this, the government needs to know that only the formulation of policies does not change there has been a lack of budget allotment to address the needs related to the health and education of

these vulnerable groups. The emphasis should be on the translation of good policies into the better lived-experiences of these vulnerable groups. How these groups are experiencing the health and education system in the country is the only evaluation criteria of the government and its policies.

Chapter 7: Conclusion and Recommendations

COVID-19, the global health crisis, has not only led humanity toward social and economic crisis but also exposed the already existing disparities in our world on both global and local levels. It exposed the socio-economic and human rights crises that were always already there. Although the virus might have terrorized the entire world equally, there is no equality in the way the effects of this virus have been experienced by different countries, communities, and groups of people. This research, while reviewing and analysing the SDGs-related policies and laws, also endeavoured at demonstrating these inherent inequalities in our societies so that when the policies and practices to combat the crisis like these are designed and decided, they should be done through the frameworks of social justice. As the adverse effects of the pandemic have put us at risk of increasing and widening disparities in the future, my recommendations focus on dealing with the terrorizing virus at present by building socio-economic changes from the bottom-up strategies that center social justice approaches while making policies and implementing them.

As the research has exhibited the tragic reality of how the pandemic has disrupted the first four sustainable development goals (No poverty, Zero hunger, Good health and well-being, and Quality education), marginalized communities and developing countries around the world are the ones to bear the brunt of the pandemic in terms of these four SDGs. What made the situation even more frightening is that these goals were not disruptively affected in isolation but disruption in each risked the interference in another shaping the future of these countries and communities in the bleakest way. No surprise there that Nepal has been plunged into an unprecedented economic crisis and especially the ones working in the informal sector, people from

minority communities, and women are at the forefront of job losses. Due to the contraction in the sources of income, the access to food in most families has decreased. This has happened also because of the movement restrictions and restrictions in imports and exports of the country.

COVID-19 infections have had a direct impact on human health on the one hand, while on the other, the lack of nutrition in those individuals and families has long-term effects on human health. With the spread of the virus worldwide, most countries in the world including Nepal have shut down educational institutions in the country. And, this has impacted the education of millions of children, consequently affecting their usual intellectual growth. While in the case of developing countries like Nepal, there is also a danger that the education of these children will be permanently cut off when the family's sources of income are lost.

Because of this pandemic, developing countries like Nepal will have to face hindrances in achieving the SDGs by 2030, which will at least delay the progress Nepal has made so far towards that goal. A lot of vulnerable communities and groups will fall behind in terms of their limited to no access to health services and education. There are visible indications that SDG proxy indicators have all been affected by COVID-19 both directly and indirectly. Although the laws and regulations issued by the GoN call for the identification and protection of at-risk groups during the crises time, the inability to implement appropriate and timely programmes and lack of well-planned strategies and resources have posed a serious threat to the country where these at-risk groups do not seem to benefit from state-related social protection/security plans, programmes, and schemes. Therefore, based on what is witnessed throughout this research as evidenced in the preceding chapters in this

dissertation, the study makes some recommendations by broadly categorising them into four types, immediate measures, integrated and intersectional approach, beyond band-aid measures, and bottom-up approach to problem solving.

There is a need for specific arrangements in laws, policies, and programmes from the government that aim to provide special protection, such as health insurance and immediate cash transfer for vulnerable groups and safeguard their needs in the time of crises like the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since the spread of the virus is global, the intervention to get rid of the virus requires an integrated and intersectional approach. This requires a strategy that leaves no one behind, and that there is subtle preparedness with particular attention to vulnerable groups such as Dalits, ethnic minorities, people in poverty, women, children, people with disabilities, the elderly, and those with poor medical conditions. As evidenced in this research, the solutions cannot be found through an isolated approach to problems. As SDGs are interconnected and the disruption in one goal disturbs the success of another goal, this intersectionality must be understood and acknowledged, and the policies must be designed accordingly.

The GoN must learn from this crisis that its approach to problem-solving cannot be band-aid measures that cannot think beyond what is happening right now. Their approach must be future-oriented equitable economies and justice-oriented infrastructural developments.

As evidenced in this research, despite the provision of incentives from the government, the most disadvantaged communities and groups of people still do not have access to the COVID-19 stimulus and relief. And the only thing it indicates is that there is a huge gap between policies from the government and the realities of

people. And this leads to my further recommendation: bottom-up participatory approaches to problem-solving. In this approach, the communities whose experiences the government is attempting to improve should be considered experts in these problem-solving projects and invited to the dialogic table. Instead of a top-bottom approach, only the meaningful collaboration between the ones who have lived experiences and the ones who have (access to) resources can solve problems and attain the sustainable development goals holistically.

There is no better way of describing the current situation other than calling it terrible and terrorizing. While everyone is affected by it, the extent of how it hurt people from different countries and communities is not the same. The current loss and its ensuing effects have a lot to do with current policies, how/if they are implemented, and the current infrastructural, structural, institutional, and systemic structure. Without acknowledging the problem that was always there before COVID-19, no government and its policies can make things better for the ones who are hurt the most and who might continue hurting because of the pandemic. Hence, the attainment of the sustainable development goals is possible only by intersectionally and holistically combating the disparities that were already there and will continue widening and deepening with the pandemic if Nepal does not take radical social justice measures right away.

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