







Editorial

**Engaging Displaced Nepali Workers in Post COVID-19 Situations:
A Call for Action**

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As the battle against COVID-19 is on-going, it may not be suitable a time to worry about the world of work in post-COVID-19 situations. Nevertheless, it is logical for academics to envision ways out in response to the socio-economic challenges that we have to face. Through this editorial, we portray some strategies for engaging the displaced Nepali workers in post-COVID-19 situations.

Nepal Country Profile

Nepal embraces a huge socio-cultural and ecological diversity, which is a significant development resource. Being small in area (just over 147181 square kilometres) and with a population of less than 30 million, Nepal has geographical diversity with fertile plains in the southern part, mid-range hilly landscape and high mountains as we move north. This topography provides Nepal with a high potential for varied agricultural and other economic activities. Not a very strong economy as indicated by the per capita income of approximately US\$ 1000, Nepal lags in many development indicators such as poverty, physical infrastructure, public service delivery, etc. Already weak development indicators get intensified in the post-COVID-19 situations as the remittance from migrant workers is steeply going down because approximately three hundred thousand workers working abroad are expected to return

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as soon as the current ban on overseas travel is lifted. Besides, amid a spreading pandemic, many domestic workers previously employed have been displaced from their jobs. This is likely to create social unrest of large scale, if not managed efficiently.

Displaced Workers in Post COVID-19 Society

In Nepal, like elsewhere, the nationwide lockdown has caused a higher impact on the national and international labour market. Further, the pandemic has also affected the food supply chain both at the farm-level production and the downstream supply chain (Poudel et al., 2020; Anderson et al., 2020). World Health Organization (2020) has also warned that the COVID-19 will have disruptions in the food supply chains. Similarly, the International Labour Organization ([ILO], 2020) projected displacement of the labour and workforce. All these show that there is a critical need for a concerted action to address the situation. In a situation of this kind, which we have never experienced before, the agriculture sector can plausibly engage a large number of displaced workers and keep the food production and supply chain intact.

Having foreseen the inflow of labour migrants and the need to focus on employability in the post-COVID-19 situation, Nepal Government has placed high importance on the agriculture sector, and it envisions this to be the critical sector of employment (Government of Nepal, 2020). Likewise, the government redirects its focus on enhancing agricultural production with a slogan "consume and promote domestic products" to fulfil the immediate needs. To achieve this objective, the agriculture sector requires a large number of workers, and the Government plans to engage the unemployed, displaced or oversea returnee youths in the agriculture sector.

Incessant lockdown and curfew for more than six months and subsequent closures of workplaces have already displaced thousands of workers in Nepal and many more working abroad will join the local workforce market as soon as the travel restrictions are lifted. ILO (2020) has estimated that a hundred thousand internal workers and three hundred thousand Nepali migrant workers are at the rim of losing their jobs because of the pandemic related lockdowns and closures. Moreover, thousands of Nepali workers have already returned from India. Likewise, within the country also thousands have returned to their villages from cities like Kathmandu because of the loss of jobs.

Loss of job and income has placed workers in a very vulnerable situation. The displaced workers' vulnerability has multiple impacts on the entire family and society

because they might be the only earning persons in the family. Displacement of people at this scale has raised several pertinent concerns that might include pressure on available limited services like health and sanitation. Besides, social researchers fear possible social unrest. In these contexts, it is essential to develop strategies that would help to manage the displaced workers to engage in agriculture, enabling them to recover their lost jobs so that they could have a dignified livelihood. This would also help in avoiding possible social unrest.

The agricultural sector, being the backbone of Nepali society, culture, and economy, has a higher potential of generating employment than other sectors such as infrastructure development (roads, dams, electricity), forestry-related, health, skills, education, service, etc. “While the contribution of primary, secondary and tertiary sectors of GDP was 28.7%, 14.3% and 57.0%, respectively in the previous FY 2017/18, their contribution to the current FY is estimated to stand at 27.6%, 14.6% and 57.8%, respectively” (Ministry of Finance, 2019, p. 7). In this sense, agriculture only covers around 28% of the total GDP of Nepal. However, agriculture largely lost its value in the past few decades. Decreasing engagement of people in agriculture was because of the rising costs (higher investments but lower sale value), land degradation, fragmentation of agricultural plots, etc. (Deshar, 2013). The government's re-energized priority to agriculture could be an important strategy to engage the displaced workers. Hence, the sector should be a viable option for them. But it is important to see what skills they learnt, if any, in their migrated workplaces.

The emphasis on studying displaced workers is to provide research-based information so that the policymakers could develop appropriate policies to address the COVID-19 related social and economic challenges. The major challenge is to provide livelihood opportunities to thousands or maybe millions of Nepali youths who might now be returning from their labour destinations and many others who are displaced from their jobs within Nepal. It is now for over six months that Nepal has remained locked down fully or partially. Yet, it may be too early to estimate the economic and other losses Nepal and Nepalis will have to bear. Hence, the big picture is to save the country and society from plunging deep into the trouble of unemployment and its outliers. The indication of such big trouble is already there – remittance has already started to decrease, agricultural production is going to lower down this year, and maybe for some years to come, supply-chain has not been working. There are news reports

where farmers are wasting (throwing, burning, feeding to cattle, distributing free-of-cost) their products because there was no one to buy them, a large number of externally and internally displaced workers are to be engaged for their basic livelihood.

Engaging Displaced Workers

Though policy priority is there, Nepal has yet to develop a comprehensive and research-based action plan to deal with the circumstances that would arise due to the pandemic. One most important concern would be providing jobs to displaced workers. And, agriculture could be a viable option for this. In a broader term, this would be a strategy to revive the national economy. How could such an action plan be developed, what are the concerns that need to be addressed while developing such a plan and what could be the process of preparing such a plan? These are some of the existing problems that need urgent exploration. Against this backdrop, this editorial calls for research-based evidence on what works and how for reviving the agriculture, identifying some key agricultural products with high-value chain, and developing a strategy for engaging a large number of displaced workers so that they could have a dignified life.

To address the foreseeable challenges, a sort of blueprint needs to be designed based on which a relevant programme could be developed for implementation (Bajracharya, 2020). To enact this, this study emphasizes providing a feasible work plan for relevant working opportunities to engage the displaced workers. In this context, World Economic Forum (2020) highlighted four major dimensions including: (i) transiting toward digital work environment, (ii) moving toward the platform with an innovative idea, (iii) adding up new skills, and (iv) planning a feasible work-blueprint to engage displaced worker. However, as recommended by Uematsu et al. (2020), Nepali displaced workers initially need support via social assistance programmes for immediate relief.

As discussed above, there should not be any dilemmas whether or not to employ new trends of the working environment for the displaced workers. Now it is all about offering relevant strategies towards providing a demand-based working environment by adopting a demand-and-supply approach. Thus, in developing countries like Nepal, there is an urgent need to focus on three major components as highlighted in Figure 1: (i) Platform to enhance employability skills (P), (ii) Digital (working) competency (D), and (iii) Multitasking working tendency (M).

Figure 1

A Model for Engaging Displaced Workers



These three components (PDM), illustrated in Figure 1, further need to be validated by adopting design and development research with key stakeholders. Further, sub-components also need to be elaborated for developing relevant programmes as per the need of the working environment. Of course, there are a lot of strategies the government can adopt (such as issue bonds and raise funds for immediate needs, repurpose foreign aid to changed priorities, among others); however, we propose PDM as a model for building out platforms and developing resources which can better engage the displaced workers in post-COVID-19 Nepal.

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