

CONVERGE COVID-19 Working Groups for Public Health and Social Sciences Research

Research Agenda-Setting Paper

This paper was written to help advance convergence-oriented research in the hazards and disaster field. It highlights areas where additional research could contribute new knowledge to the response to and recovery from the pandemic and other disasters yet to come. Questions about the research topics and ethical and methodological issues highlighted here should be directed to the authors who contributed to this paper.

Working Group Name:

COVID-19 and Migrant Workers in Nepal

Working Group Description:

COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted returning migrant workers in Nepal. This Working Group is examining the social, economic, and psychological implications of COVID-19 on returning migrant workers, their families, and communities. Related to this, the Working Group is also assessing the patterns of domestic and gender violence among low-income families in urban and rural settings due to the outbreak of COVID-19 and the implementation of stay-home orders by the government to contain the spread.

Research Context:

Migrant workers are returning to Nepal from India, South Korea, Malaysia, United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and many other countries due to COVID-19 outbreaks in their employment locations. According to a news report published in *Kathmandu Post* (a national newspaper in Nepal) on May 21, 2020, it is estimated that about 3 million migrant workers are returning due to this outbreak, and 33.5 percent of them are unskilled physical laborers. Among the aforementioned countries, India has been the most popular destination for youth workers from Western Nepal, where the infection is hitting the hardest. There is no official data about Nepalese migrant workers in India. As a result, it is not possible to estimate their return rate. They are returning through the open southern border with India. They get escorted from the border checkpoints to the sub-standard quarantine centers. Prolonged lockdown in their workplace and in Nepal put these returning workers under economic, health, and psychological distresses. Since they spend time in quarantine centers, they are viewed as potential sources of disease in their villages and towns. Local news reports show that there are incidents of boycotting and abandoning migrant workers by residential populations throughout the country. There are also incidents of suicides among these workers. The COVID-19 impacts on returning migrant workers are emanating to their families and communities.

Priority Research Topics and Specific Research Questions:

Priority Research Topics	Potential Research Questions
1. Social, cultural, and psychological issues among migrant workers in Nepal during the COVID-19 outbreak	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the social, perception-related, and cultural challenges faced by returning migrant workers in Nepal after the COVID-19 outbreak? • What are the psychological issues among returning migrant workers in Nepal during this Pandemic? • How are migrant workers dealing with issues of loneliness and isolation during the Coronavirus outbreak?
2. COVID-19 and policy priorities for returning migrant workers in Nepal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What are the policies and programs in place to address the issues of migrant workers in Nepal? • How do the different levels of government address the issues of migrant workers during this pandemic? • What are the necessary policy reforms to address the challenges of migrant workers in the post- COVID-19 phase? • What are the necessary institutional and public health changes to address the issues of returning migrant workers?
3. Economic issues of migrant workers in Nepal during and after the pandemic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are returning migrant workers planning for current and future livelihoods? • What are the employment-related challenges of migrant workers? • How does economic distress among migrant workers impact their social status, psychology, family ties, and community relations?
4. Socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 and prolonged lockdown among the resident population of Nepal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are the low income and daily laborers dealing with the economic impacts of the COVID-19 outbreak? • How remote and isolated areas are being impacted by the outbreak and lockdown? • How do residents perceive the returning of migrant workers in cities and villages? • How is the urban resident population dealing with the lockdown and social distancing measures?
5. Household issues and domestic violence during the lockdown and coronavirus pandemic outbreak in Nepal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are people using their time during the lockdown? • What are the challenges of obeying stay home order? • How the lockdown and outbreak of Covid-19 impact women and children? • How the COVID-19 outbreak and prolonged lockdown impacted the cases of self-harm, domestic violence, and gender violence?
6. Regional disparities of COVID-19 impacts in Nepal	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How has COVID-19 impacted different provinces of the country? And what are the driving factors behind these disparities? • Are there differences in social and economic impacts between rural and urban areas? What are the driving factors? • Do the returning migrant workers contribute disproportionate social and economic impacts of COVID-19 among regions?

Ethical / Methodological Considerations:

Our Working Group has already administered the survey among returning migrant workers in more than 70 districts out of 76 districts of Nepal. Based on the early work done by the group, there are four major ethical and methodological challenges. The first is a challenge to administer the survey. Although the Working Group has developed the survey online, it was challenging to reach the targeted respondents (i.e., returning migrant workers). The most vulnerable returning migrant workers do not have access to smartphones or computers to complete the survey. They do not have internet access, and survey administrators could not physically contact them due to stay home order.

The second challenge is related to privacy and trust from the migrant workers. Although this research is reviewed and approved by the Human Studies Program of the University of Hawaii, respondents are unwilling to take the survey because they fear that their personal information could be exposed to media and government. Due to lockdown to contain the coronavirus, the study team cannot not mobilize surveyors to explain to the respondents how their information will be protected in this research.

The third challenge is access to migrant workers. The official data for returning migrant workers are not available. The study team could not know when and how many migrant workers returned to the country after the Covid-19 outbreak. The majority of them are afraid to participate in research due to potential exposure of their identity, which can result in social exclusion, public perception as a source of disease, and strict government measures. On top of that, they are living in quarantine and isolation facilities, which have limited accessibility.

The last challenge is the timing of this research. The primary priority of returning migrant workers is to return to their families. They are facing challenges of lack of transportation, sub-standard quarantine facilities, lack of health service, social exclusion, financial problems, and uncertainty of employment. It is hard for them to participate in the survey or the interview during this time. In spite of this, the Working Group has to collect the data during this time because it will not be possible to get access to these migrant workers after the pandemic due to their travel schedules.

To overcome these challenges, the Working Group is executing two approaches. The first is a collaboration with other agencies to administer the survey. In Central, Western, and Far-Western Provinces of the country, the study team is collaborating with local municipalities, NGOs, and colleges to reach returning migrant workers. The second strategy is filling out the survey over the phone. The migrant workers who completed their quarantine have returned to their families in remote areas. It would be hard for the Working Group to reach them. Most of them have access to a cellphone. Through the network of local journalists in the regions, their contacts are collected. Local enumerators are mobilized to fill the paper-copy questionnaire over the phone with them.

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