

### Impact of COVID-19 on Tourism in Nepal

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3 Perspectives

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For Peer Review

1 We read the recent article by Shrestha et al.,<sup>1</sup> about Nepal's first case of COVID-19 and  
2 public health response with great interest.<sup>[1]</sup> Despite recent progress and the government's  
3 commitment to reduce the absolute poverty rate to 16.67 % from 18.7% last year, <sup>[2]</sup> the  
4 World Bank forecasts that 31.2% of Nepalis are at risk of falling into extreme poverty,  
5 primarily because of reduced remittances from overseas workers, foregone earnings of  
6 potential migrants, collapse of the tourist industry, job losses in the informal sector, and  
7 increased cost of essential commodities, all as a result of COVID-19. <sup>[3]</sup>

8  
9 COVID-19 related deaths worldwide were approaching 400,000 as of June 1st. The effects  
10 of COVID-19 on the global economy have been and will be, catastrophic. However, the full  
11 global impact, in both economic and health terms, remains unknown. The consequences in  
12 Low- and Middle-Income countries, such as Nepal, where national economies rely on a  
13 small number of services and industries, are deeply worrying.

14  
15 Tourism is one of Nepal's largest industries. Tourism revenue in 2018 accounted for 7.9%  
16 of the country's Gross Domestic Product and supported more than 1.05 million jobs, with  
17 the expectation of providing more than 1.35 million jobs by 2029. <sup>[4]</sup> Nepal hosted 1.19  
18 million foreign tourists in 2019, and the "Visit Nepal 2020" campaign, officially introduced  
19 on January 1st, aimed to attract 2 million tourists, generate \$2 billion and create thousands  
20 of new jobs.

21  
22 However, on January 23rd, the first case of imported COVID-19 was detected in Nepal. In  
23 response to cases worldwide increasing exponentially and amid growing public concern,  
24 the government suspended the "Visit Nepal 2020" initiative on March 3rd. Shortly after the  
25 World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 a pandemic on March 13th, the

1 government suspended all permissions for mountaineering expeditions and suspended all  
2 visas.  
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7 4 After confirmation of the second imported case on March 23rd, the government locked the  
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10 5 country down and suspended all national and international flights. Massive cancellations of  
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12 6 hotel and tourist bookings followed, resulting in widespread unemployment, loss of  
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14 7 income, and threatened livelihoods for thousands. The collapse of international and  
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16 8 domestic tourism followed a 2% drop in tourist arrivals in January 2020 compared to 2019.

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19 9 [5] Over 10,000 tourists who had entered Nepal before the lockdown was also left stranded,  
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21 10 although many of them were eventually repatriated.  
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24  
25 11 Remittances from 3.5 million Nepalese living and working abroad account for almost a  
26  
27 12 quarter of the country's GDP. Since 2009, Nepal's Department of Foreign Employment  
28  
29 13 issued over 4 million permissions to migrant Nepalis working in 110 countries. [6] When  
30  
31 14 the 2015 earthquake hit Nepal, foreign remittances jumped 20%, cushioning families  
32  
33 15 against the financial shock of the disaster. Covid-19 is set to have a much worse economic  
34  
35 16 impact than the earthquake and the migrant worker saviours have themselves become a  
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37 17 problem. International flights are banned, keeping job-seekers at home and stranding  
38  
39 18 migrant workers abroad. On March 24th, the government's High-Level Coordination  
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41 19 Committee for Prevention and Control of Covid-19 informed Nepalis abroad to remain  
42  
43 20 where they were and appealed to host countries to offer them protection. Many have been  
44  
45 21 laid off and are unable to return home. In some countries, migrant workers are still  
46  
47 22 employed but the safety and health of all are jeopardized by the pandemic. [6] The  
48  
49 23 government is currently investigating the repatriation of workers stranded in Covid-19  
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51 24 affected countries, even though this may place extra strain on the nation's health system.  
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2 Healthcare systems of any country depend on the economy and Nepal's lost remittances  
3 and tourism revenues have crippled the nation's finances. Loss of income has concomitant  
4 adverse impacts on the health of all citizens. Funding from donor countries to help Nepal's  
5 health system, which constitutes around 50% of the health budget, [7] will probably  
6 decrease, as donors are also suffering from the pandemic, although billions of dollars have  
7 already been pledged to help Nepal's COVID-19 response. Unfortunately, the move to  
8 federalism, work to overcome regional health disparities, and attempts to accomplish the  
9 Sustainable Development Goals and improve the nation's poverty rate have all been set  
10 back by the pandemic.

11  
12 Fortunately, Nepal has so far evaded the full impact of COVID-19. As of May 31st, there  
13 were around 1,500 confirmed cases, most of which were asymptomatic, with only eight  
14 deaths. Yet Nepal has insufficient resources and manpower for the massive testing and  
15 treatment of people that may be needed. Currently, Nepal has 18,000 doctors and 35,000  
16 nurses working in 500 public and private sector hospitals, but there are only around 1,100  
17 critical care beds and 600 ventilators for a population of 28 million. ~~Overall, it is reported~~  
18 ~~that there are only 0.67 doctors and nurses per 1000 population in the country.~~[8]

19  
20 Because of the high prevalence of the respiratory disease in Nepal, due to air pollution,  
21 large numbers of cigarette smokers, and widespread indoor combustion of biomass fuels,  
22 coupled with weak health care facilities, the country will likely experience a high death toll  
23 if community transmission of COVID-19 does occur. Furthermore, the country's public  
24 health and social support systems will be put under great strain to cope with a flood of

1 returnees from abroad, especially via the border with India. All returnees will need to be  
2 tested, quarantined, fed, and sheltered.

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4 At present, concerted efforts are being made to resolve the lack of testing kits, PPE, and  
5 medical supplies. ~~†<sup>9</sup>~~ Diagnostic Diagnostic and treatment protocols have been established.

6 As of May 30<sup>th</sup>, the government has established RT-PCR labs in each province and testing  
7 is now available in 20 centers in Nepal and 127 hospitals have been designated as COVID-  
8 19-ready. ~~†<sup>10</sup>~~ So far more than 60,000 RT-PCR tests have been carried out. Emergency  
9 medical deployment teams (EMDT) has been established in the hub hospitals and medical  
10 colleges and is planning to mobilize them as per the need of the provincial and other  
11 hospitals. All points of entries (PoEs) at international airport and ground crossings are  
12 strengthened with a dedicated standard health desk equipped with adequate human  
13 resources and necessary commodities.

14  
15 The pandemic has already challenged Nepal's economy and the healthcare system. The  
16 resurgence of tourism may take longer than witnessed after the 2015 earthquake and  
17 remittances may not normalize soon. The government is taking steps to invest significantly  
18 in Nepal's agricultural sector and is planning to incentivize migrant workers to stay and  
19 work in Nepal, as a means to boost the country's economy in the long term. The COVID-19  
20 pandemic has sensitized the entire population as well as central and local authorities to the  
21 need for quality in health care. The government has increased the health sector budget to  
22 over 6% for the coming fiscal year, although this is still well below the recommendation of  
23 WHO (10%).



1 The pandemic necessitates long-term extreme measures to prevent health care facilities  
2 from being overwhelmed. The extent of the impact will depend on COVID-19 progression  
3 and the country's ability to cope. Thus, there is a profound need for all stakeholders to take  
4 a far-sighted view and plan how best Nepal can, in the future, offer an appropriate and  
5 affordable healthcare service to its citizens.

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