



Reports monitoring covid-19 pandemic in countries and regions of the Global South

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Nepal and its labour migrants

Nepal is a South Asian country situated between two of the region's largest powers, India and China. With a population of 28.5 million people, two-thirds work in the relatively undeveloped agricultural sector, which accounts for 27.59% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Most of the GDP, 57.81%, belongs to the tertiary sector where the predominant service is tourism. Since the beginning of the pandemic, tourism has been severely affected by international mobility restrictions and the cancellation of major events (WB, 2019).

In view of the global situation of the pandemic, the government of Nepal declared the state of alarm on March 24th. Consequently, many Nepalese displaced within or abroad the country decided to return home. Rural migrants in the capital, Kathmandu, reported that it was difficult to return home since there was no transportation and during the long 3-4 walking days no houses offer them food or place to sleep because they were afraid to get the virus.

It is worth mentioning that the rural areas of the country that are not part of the Kathmandu Valley, despite being more isolated and potentially having less contact with the virus, have two variables that concerned experts. Firstly, according to *The Kathmandu Post* newspaper, before the pandemic there were only three ICU beds available in a hospital in the capital. Although in March the government made more beds available for isolating and treating patients, the vast majority were only in Kathmandu Valley. That means that from certain rural areas it would take days to reach the hospitals. Secondly, NGOs such as *Practical Action*, *Base-A* as well as the AWASUKA program, denounce that the houses where a large part of the country's rural population lives do not have a healthy indoor atmosphere to be safely confined. The kitchens, which are connected to the rest of the rooms in the house, do not have any smoke extraction system. As a result, the toxic gases produced by the combustion of wood used in cooking are dispersed throughout the house and pollute the domestic air. This daily practice causes non communicable diseases that affect the heart, the blood clotting and the lungs and could cause lung cancer or strokes. In fact, according to a study carried out by the AWASUKA program in collaboration with the *Autonomous University of Barcelona*, the main reason for medical consultation in rural health centres, as well as a common cause of mortality in the region, is respiratory diseases. Even though the same program directed by Monica Sans Duran is working to install kitchens with bells and chimneys that facilitate the extraction of the fumes in many households, thousands of houses still lack it and are therefore more vulnerable to diseases like covid-19 (AWASUKA, 2020).

The pandemic has also decreased the remittances that migrants send from different countries which represented in 2019 28% of Nepal's GDP, 8.1 billion dollars (WB, 2020). Moreover, these migrant workers, despite representing a great economic force for the country, have been,

according to *The Kathmandu Post*, abandoned by their government during the months of the pandemic.

The main countries of immigration for the approximately three million Nepalese migrant workers are Malaysia with half a million workers and the Gulf countries with 1.34 million workers. According to the *Department of Foreign Labour of Nepal*, 75% of the labour migrants are unskilled workers and work mainly in industries.

All these countries in mid-March had cases of covid-19 detected and declared national confinement. The vast majority of migrants were thus left without work and without the economic means to continue living in the country. The following table, produced by the *Nepal Association of Foreign Labour Agencies*, shows the estimated percentage of Nepali workers who have lost their jobs during the covid-19 crisis.

Countries	Number of Nepali workers	Estimated job loss
Malaysia	500,000	30 %
UAE	400,000	30 %
Qatar	425,000	20 %
Saudi Arabia	380,000	20%
Kuwait	80,000	15 %
Bahrain	35,000	12%
Oman	17,500	10%

Table 1. Percentage of Nepalese workers by country who have lost their jobs since the beginning of Covidien-19
Source: Nepal Association of Foreign Labour Agencies

The same association estimates that between 20 and 25% of labour migrants are in need to return home. Moreover, there is a considerable number of circular migrants (workers with a temporary contract in a country of which they are not nationals and whose return is already planned) who had to return in the spring and have not been able to do so because of the pandemic.

Malaysia and the United Arab Emirates are the countries with the largest estimated job losses. The United Arab Emirates declared state of alarm and national confinement on March 26th and many workers were confined to their apartments. However, as *The Kathmandu Post* reports, many Nepalese workers were not paid and thus found themselves in a very vulnerable economic situation. There have also been cases where workers were dismissed by the company where they worked and did not have any more accommodation or food. Faced with these situations, Nepalese migrants asked their government to take charge of the situation, but the government has not responded.

As reported by the director of the *Law and Policy Forum for Social Justice (LAPSOJ)* in Nepal, according to Article 75 of the Foreign Labour Act, in the event of war, pandemic or natural disaster the Nepalese Government has to ensure that expatriate workers return to Nepal (FEA 2064, 2007). However, Nepal closed its borders on March 24th restricting entry to anyone, including its own nationals. The official reasons were the lack of infrastructure to deal with the

virus as well as the dangerous nature of it. Experts warn, however, that this failure to act has been due to its inability to react as well as the increase in unemployment in the country. As the country's *Trade Union Coordination Committee* warns, as a result of the return of so many migrants as well as the confinement and loss of national jobs, unemployment in the country is increasing and it will cause social tensions and discontent with the government.

Finally, on June 1st, Nepal reopened its borders to international flights. The Nepalese government decided to accept the entry of nationals as long as they had a negative covid-19 test and paid for their own travel. The first emigrants entered the country on the 5th of June from the United Arab Emirates followed by migrants from Kuwait. It should be noted that Kuwait launched a General Amnesty for irregular workers in the country in April. This amnesty consisted on "forgiving" people for their irregular stay and returning them as quickly as possible to their countries of origin. Exceptionally, it also allows these migrants to return to work in Kuwait in the future. Currently, 300 of the estimated 7,000 irregular Nepalese in the country have been granted amnesty and returned to Nepal.

During the covid-19 pandemic, countries have closed their borders and prioritized the health of nationals. These measures have made visible the existence of many labour migrants, regular or irregular, as their health has eventually become a public health issue. However, there have been many cases where neither the countries of destination nor the countries of origin have been willing to take responsibility for the health and integrity of these people. In this report we have given the example of Nepal as a country of origin and two Gulf countries as destination countries, but this reality has been cross-cutting throughout the world.

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The research group BIOCOS-SC from the Polytechnic University of Catalonia is in contact with different research groups and governmental offices in order to jointly predict the evolution of the pandemic covid-19. Moreover, we follow up local media in 35 African countries and 9 Latino American countries and complemented it with interviews to field experts.

<https://biocomsc.upc.edu/en/covid-19>