

Challenges in Preventing the Spread of COVID-19

Observations in Nepal and Japan

(Tentative, as of 30 April)

1. Introduction

In addition to restricting entries at legal borders, governments generally recommend, and to great extent enforce, four common actions to prevent the spread of COVID-19: *staying home*, *social distancing*, *wearing mask*, and *washing hands*. Table 1 shows an observation (based on news reports and actual experiences) between Nepal and Japan.

Table 1 Policy Difference in COVID-19 Preventive Actions between Nepal and Japan

Preventive Action	Nepal	Japan
<i>Staying Home</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mandatory Imposition of lockdowns since March 24, 2020 (<i>military, police, and related enforcement agencies from all levels of governance are engaged</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Non-Mandatory No imposition of lockdowns (<i>drawing on individual responsibility and cooperation</i>) - Emergency declared in most affected seven prefectures since April 7, 2020.
<i>Social/Physical Distancing</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cancellation of group events (e.g., religious worship, marriage ceremonies, and festivals) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Avoidance of 3Cs: crowds, closed spaces, closed contacts; Also cancellation of group events (e.g., marathons)
<i>Wearing Mask</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Legislated at all three tiers of governments (<i>punishment for violation of order</i>) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Encouraged but not legislated - National Government announced giving out masks
<i>Washing Hands</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Encouraged (on your own) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Encouraged (with wide establishments' support)
<i>Essential Services and mobility</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The range of normal essential services are limited (e.g. general banking, general health access, groceries have become very limited) - Public transportation services are suspended. - No international connectivity and services except rescue. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Healthcare facilities, groceries, food facilities are running normal. - Public transportation is normal with some guidelines. - The nationals and permanent residents can enter Japan and the foreigners can go out. The services are running regularly.
<i>Incident Command System</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cabinet of Prime-minister and ministers at the apex - Cabinet formed a special Covid-19 Prevention and Control High Level Coordination Committee headed by Deputy Prime-minister (DPM) - Establishment of separate Covid-19 Crisis Management Centre under the high level committee chaired by DPM - The Centers are replicated to province and district level. - Incident Command Coordinator is at Health Emergency Operation Centre 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cabinet Office, the Prime minister, and the ministers are working at the national level. - The governors in all prefectures have taken necessary decision at their levels. - The municipalities and local level institutions are working in front. - Disaster management and Health centers are active at all levels. - Prime Minister received the power from parliament to declare and urge governors to impose emergency

	<p>(HEOC) under the Ministry of Health and Population at the federal level.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Infectious Disease Act, 1964 is applied for necessary actions. - The Councils and committees under the Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act-2017 are working at all levels as supplementary in a coordinative way. 	<p>suspending some facilities to control the spread of the diseases.</p>
Immediate Reliefs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Food and stuffs is provided for the neediest people. - Transportation facilities and some medicine to the essentials. - Reliefs are distributed by local levels only. - Many volunteers are helping them. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The government of Japan announces monetary reliefs of 100000 yen per head to the needy people and subsidies to small industries.

Policies and actions taken by governments differ for many reasons, including: 1) preparedness of the health systems, 2) demographics, e.g., percentage of elderly, poor and illiterate, 3) population density, 4) testing capacity, and 5) cultural, social, and political dynamics.

2. 'Home/Community Quarantine' in Nepal

Relief goods from the local government are a common sight of daily life during the quarantine. Families, especially those living 'below poverty line', 'daily wage earners' and some students receive relief goods to alleviate hunger. Goods usually include 5-50 kilos of rice, 1-5 kilos cereals, a salt packet, oil, soaps, sugar, vegetables and some packs of instant noodles per family (Photo 1). The amount and items of relief vary from one local level to another. The volunteer contributors are also contributing in coordination of the local levels. Some local levels and volunteer organizations are helping the transportation of road-left people to send them home and hospitals by providing money or vehicles. In Itahari Sub-metropolitan City (a city in Province 1, eastern Nepal), where my relatives live, *daily wage earners* include: 'tricycle drivers', 'co-drivers', 'sidewalk vendors', 'hairdressers', 'local factory workers', 'street labors', 'mason-helpers', and 'street cleaners'. Other daily wage earners earn by selling freshly harvested fruits and vegetables or fish. They have so much anxiety during quarantine, particularly how long relief goods can sustain. 'In a common quarantine, there are 72 people including some foreigners are fully supported by the municipality' deputy mayor Laxmi Gautam Said on 25 April 2020. Essentially, this situation is happening not just in Itahari but also in many parts of Nepal.



Photo 1. Relief distribution in Itahari [Pic: Suresh]

When did it start?

When first case was reported on December 30, 2019 in China, World Health Organization (WHO) issued some recommendations to the world after some days. Then the Government of Nepal took initial step forming a separate special Covid-19 Prevention and Control High Level Coordination Committee headed by Deputy Prime-minister (DPM). The first meeting of this high-level committee held on March 1, 2020. Then different task forces and action teams formed at different places at different levels: federal, provincial, district and local. On 13 January (with one quarantined returnee from Wuhan China, reported confirmed

COVID-19 cases)¹, the Government of the Nepal started enhancing examination and response capacity first inside the capital city Kathmandu.² In March 10, the high-level committee decided to establish health quarantine desks at the borders, avoid the gatherings, maintain distance and urged to establish quarantine centers to the authorities.³ This committee, further in 21 March, recommended and urged the authorities for Nepal-lockdown from 24 March 2020.⁴ On 27 April, cabinet decided to extend the lockdown until seventh may accumulating 45 days in total. The only international airport will remain closed up to 15th may additionally.

It restricts people's movement

Mass gathering is prohibited (e.g., temple fellowship, ritual ceremonies and parties, movies, and sports events), public transportation is stopped, and schools at all levels are closed. Front-liners (i.e., doctors, nurses, army, police, and relevant personnel) are exempted. Private companies are ordered to implement “telework” arrangements. Only one person in the household is allowed to go outside to buy basic needs (e.g., food and medicine). In restricting people's movement, police checkpoints are established and violators are taken in control (Photo 2). People should apply for ‘travel pass’ (Photo 3) for essential movements and they receive e-pass.



Photo 2 Police Arrests Violators (Nepali Times)

Photo 3 Travel Pass (Home Ministry 2020)

It imposes closure of establishments

Hotels, casinos, cockpits, and related businesses are not allowed to operate. Exempted establishments are financial institutions such as banks, money transfer services, groceries for limited hours. Some vital construction projects (e.g. Malachi water supply) are also exempted. Violators and antisocial activists will be penalized implying the legal procedures (See high-level committee minutes dated 21 March 2020).⁵

It restricts travel

Issuance of visas and entry of foreigners into the Nepal are already suspended. Travel outside the country is also restricted with exemptions to those who travel with medical supplies related to COVID-19. Cargo forwarders, farmers, and other food producers are exempted. Nepali people who wanted to enter Nepal from India are also not allowed entry; hundreds of them are quarantined at Indian side and vice-versa.

2.1. Entire Nepal under ‘Uncertainty of Calamity’

On the second day of the lockdown, President Bidhya Devi Bhanadari urged all stakeholders to obey and cooperate to the government to fight unified against the *Calamity* for the coming days.⁶ Earlier, the

¹ Correspondence, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/339163164_The_first_2019_novel_coronavirus_case_in_Nepal

² <https://www.onlinekhabar.com/2020/01/831087>

³ Cabinet office Notice, <https://www.opmcm.gov.np/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Corona-Meeting-2076-11-22.pdf>

⁴ Cabinet office Notice, <https://www.opmcm.gov.np/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Corona-Meeting-2076-12-08.pdf>

⁵ Cabinet Notice, 2020, <https://www.opmcm.gov.np/wp-content/uploads/2020/03/Corona-Meeting-2076-12-08.pdf>

⁶ News President Office, <https://www.presidentofnepal.gov.np/?p=4035>

government requested all local governments to use their respective emergency funds, usually by providing relief goods to the needy peoples in the territories. Some local governments invest on providing free emergency transportation and free medicine to elderly people prescribed (e.g. Thulung Dhudhkoshi Rural Municipality, Solukhumbu).⁷ Kathmandu Metropolitan City, the capital, did some disinfection-related activities.⁸ Note that, the Government also issued a memorandum that ordered the freezing of price of basic goods, emergency medicines, and medical supplies. The authorities are continuously taking legal actions if found fault in monitoring. Still the regulatory mechanism has not seen strong enough.⁹ On April 7, Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli addressed the nation speaking about the progress and challenges against Covid-19. He also motivated the related fighters and repeated the request to obey lockdowns for better days very soon.

2.2 Local levels are working well

Local level bodies are the new entities after the 2017 election in Nepal under federal system. They have established strong bond to people during the fight against Covid-19. Local governments are jolted tempestuously into action in reaching out support to vulnerable individuals – the elderly, children, wage earners and frontline health workers disproportionately impacted due to economic consequences of the lockdown.¹⁰ On March 29, the Cabinet announced a slew of decisions, measures and relief packages. Since then, they are doing their best on this regard. Local levels are only the designated window of relief to vulnerable. Establishing new quarantines, adding health facilities and taking care of their citizens out of the homes are some examples of good works by local levels. One issue, seen from media, is the packages by the local levels are not covering the tenants and poor unorganized sector people leaving them in starvation. These people are finding their footway to their own villages very far very hard.

2.3 Challenges

Although many activities are implemented to restrict people's movement, there is no standardized quarantine and isolation system in many hospitals, lack of necessary Personal Protective Equipment-PPEs and not having enough testing kits for COVID-19 are the main challenges Nepal. It would be very difficult for Nepal to fight the coronavirus alone due to its limited resources and fragile healthcare system.¹¹ Limited health care personnel are available in country and they are transferring their knowledge to the provincial levels by providing training and establishing new labs. Additionally, these challenges are also noted:

- The graph of quarantined people is recently increasing. Which indicates the mobility of people is high. Media say that almost half of the infected people are from India that shares open border to Nepal. It is a challenge to control people's mobility to break the chain of infection.
- 29% of Nepal's GDP is from foreign employment. The high number of vulnerable Nepali abroad are asking rescue to the home. Government seems in dilemma on this matter. It will have high adverse impact in Nepal.
- There are anecdotal reports of stigma that identification of poor needy people and providing them supports for their daily needs have not gone rational. This blanket approach is another challenge to provide continue support and engaging in productive sectors in future.

Actually, the government was in uncertainty about the period of the lockdown. So that government took 'watch and decide' strategy for continuing lockdown. Initially it was set for the period 24 to 31 March and extended to April 7. Further, they extended it to 15 April and again to April 27 and now it reached until May 7, 2020 on its 4th extension. However, with less indication of flattening the curve, the Government

⁷ News, <https://radiosolu.org/news/830>

⁸ Disinfection Activities, http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/2020-03/26/c_138917556_11.htm

⁹ Sapkota R, Nepal's Readiness Against Covid-19, <https://www.himalkhabar.com/news/112284>

¹⁰ Rijal M, Fighting Covid-19 at the Local Levels, <https://risingnepaldaily.com/opinion/fighting-covid-19-at-the-local-levels>

¹¹ Nepal Cannot Fight Coronavirus Alone, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/nepal-cannot-fight-coronavirus-alone/>

accepted the recommendation from the Task Groups under the Covid-19 Prevention and Control High-level Coordination Committee to extend the lockdown considering situation developed.¹²

3. Drawing on ‘Individual Responsibility’ in Japan

Unlike Nepal, where much of Government control is imposed on the people, Japan appears lenient. Under existing Japanese law, lockdowns cannot be enforced. So, it amended the *Special Measures Act for Pandemic Influenza and New Infectious Diseases Preparedness and Response* so that the Government of Japan (GoJ) can declare health emergency that would restrict people’s freedom by requesting and ‘ordering’ them stay home to prevent the spread of novel corona virus. However, there is no penalty if people refused. As there will be closures to many stores, restaurants, amusement facilities, and factories in order to prevent people from going out their homes unnecessarily, the government will implement a financial aid package for those businesses, which includes providing 2 million yen to small and medium-sized corporations as well as those relatively larger corporations to sustain their businesses. It will also provide 1 million yen to individual owners.¹³

On these bases, Prime Minister Abe, on 7th April 2020, declared a month-long *State of Emergency* for Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama, Chiba, Osaka, Hyogo, and Fukuoka prefectures (until 6th May).¹⁴ This declaration allows the governors to introduce restrictions to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Note that the government’s countermeasures on COVID-19 is evolving, and on 16 April 2020, the Prime Minister announced to provide a cash handout of 100,000-yen (approximately US\$930) to every resident in Japan as economic measure to counter the effects of the new coronavirus outbreak.¹⁵

3.1 Covering 7 Prefectures Only¹⁶

Out of 47 prefectures, only 7 are covered in the State of Emergency (please note that the government policy is evolving. On 16 April 2020, the State of Emergency has been expanded to entire Japan). In essence, the state of emergency is more of an authority of the governors to request and order. Among these are *asking* residents to refrain from non-essential movements and *requesting* schools to close and place limits on the use of nursery schools, elderly daycare centers, and other welfare facilities. The governors have no legal authority to order private companies to close. So, unlike Nepal, there are no excessive use of military and police in Japan. In some sense, Japan’s *State of Emergency* contrasts that of Nepal.

In addition, residents can still go outside their houses without a pass. Some people can still walk under the cherry blossoms¹⁷ and can still do groceries in orderly manner at supermarkets.¹⁸ Private companies are only encouraged to arranging telework, but are not mandated to close. And public transportation still operates. Railway and bus companies essentially maintain normal schedules. Additionally, there are no restrictions on taxi drivers.

¹² Cabinet Press Notes and Notices, <https://www.opmcm.gov.np/>

¹³ Amendment to Special Measures Act (Article 32), https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/202004/_00001.html

¹⁴ NHK World, https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20200407_43/

¹⁵ Y100,000 cash handout, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/japan-offers-covid-19-stimulus-payment-to-all-residents-12653052>

¹⁶ Expansion of State of Emergency to entire Japan, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2020/04/da404143318b-urgent-japan-looks-to-expand-areas-covered-by-virus-emergency-declaration.html>

¹⁷ Cherry blossoms, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2020/03/14fb6e803d74-feature-japan-struggling-to-get-a-grip-on-social-distancing.html>

¹⁸ Special time for elderly, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20200408/p2a/00m/0na/015000c>



Photo 4 People under Cherry Blossoms (Kyodo News 2020)



Photo 5 Special time for elderly in Kobe (Mainichi 2020)

3.2 Challenges

Perhaps, peoples' anxiety in Japan is whether the democratic approach to flattening the curve will be effective. Also, whether the limited coverage of the State of Emergency is enough since other prefectures also have COVID-19 cases (<https://covid19japan.com/>). In fact, some prefectures (e.g. Kyoto and Aichi), which are not covered in the State of Emergency, are implementing their own versions of state of emergency.¹⁹ Another challenge is on 'perception'. There is anecdotal observation that most Japanese still prefer to go to work physically at office, as they perceive working at home is less productive. Additionally, the support of higher management is essential. If the higher management supports telework, then employees will be inclined to work at home. Furthermore, 'culture' is also a factor. There are reports that the traditional 'seal system' hampers telework.²⁰

4. Insights

Both Nepal and Japan have systems in place to handle disasters, and these systems (activated through the Declaration of Lockdown and State of Emergency) were used in efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The Government of Nepal established the Covid-19 Prevention and Control High-level Coordination Committee, a temporary but powerful structure, wherein the chair now leads the Task Forces on COVID-19.²¹ The National Disaster Risk Reduction Authority and all the ministries concerning health, security, industry, finance and others are working in coordination to the high-level committee. The local government levels (chaired by mayors and chairperson) are subsequently utilized, particularly in the distributions of relief goods. In Japan, it's usually the local governments (especially the governors) who are leading and directing the efforts of the addressing the crisis. Japan is utilizing its permanent structure to fight this pandemic. So, the procedures applied in this pandemic are slightly different in Nepal and Japan.

Japan's approach is more democratic. Japan maintains the separation of powers between the national government and prefectural governments amidst corona virus. Most importantly, Japan did not impose mandatory restrictions. Instead, the Government calls on people to support and recognize their 'individual responsibility'. The Government of Japan can afford this kind of decision since the country has stronger health system, better welfare support, and cooperative citizens.

¹⁹ NHK World, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/backstories/1025/>

²⁰ Japan Times, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/04/13/business/corporate-business/traditional-japanese-seal-system-hampers-telework/#.XpT8xIMzb-Y>

²¹ Prime Minister Direction to strictly implement lockdown, <https://kathmandupost.com/national/2020/04/18/prime-minister-oli-directs-high-level-covid-19-committee-to-strictly-implement-lockdown>