



LEGISLATIVE AND
POLICY REVIEW ON
**THE IMPACT
OF COVID-19
ON YOUTH IN
NEPAL**



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Author: Jamshed Vazirov
Special Review for APDA

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Abbreviations and acronyms

| | |
|--------------|---|
| AFPPD | Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development |
| APDA | Asian Population and Development Association |
| AYOM | Association of Youth Organizations Nepal |
| CCMC | Coronavirus Crisis Management Centre |
| CSE | comprehensive sexuality education |
| ICPD | International Conference on Population and Development |
| PMEP | Prime Minister Employment Programme |
| PoA | Plan of Action |
| SDGs | Sustainable Development Goals |
| UNDP | United Nations Development Programme |
| UNFPA | United Nations Population Fund |

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

COVID-19 has affected all countries. The Nepal Government decided on a relief package to cushion the impact of the pandemic on the economy. It set up an 11-member COVID Prevention and Control High-Level Coordination Committee and formed a task force, the Coronavirus Crisis Management Centre (CCMC), to implement the policy level decisions taken by the High-Level Coordination Committee.

The Nepal Government has reported 274,216 positive COVID-19 cases and 2,777 deaths from COVID-19 across the country as of 2 March 2021. About 124,126 people of the age group of 15–34 years were infected with the virus. This means that about 50 per cent of the total positive cases in Nepal were among young people. For this age group, the COVID-19 pandemic has posed considerable risks in the fields of education, employment and overall health including sexual and reproductive health and mental health.

The Ministry of Youth and Sports of Nepal has established a National Youth Council to strengthen Nepalese youth and ensure the meaningful participation of youth in developing the country. During the pandemic, the Ministry launched different programmes through the Council. The Council assisted and coordinated with other Government agencies, as well as development partners and civil society organizations, to provide support and assistance to youth. Specifically, the Council focused on building youth leadership and mobilization, youth innovation and incubation, youth entrepreneurship, and youth policy dialogue. Similarly, during the COVID-19 pandemic, various ministries of the Nepal Government have implemented programmes after designing sector-based policies related to youth in education, health, agriculture, tourism, labour, employment and sports.



1. INTRODUCTION

Investment in the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) Plan of Action (PoA) has not met original expectations, and due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, domestic investment in populated areas is likely to shrink in many countries. International resource mobilization and partnership in these areas will also become even more complicated, with potentially devastating consequences for vulnerable populations. All of this undermines the numerous commitments governments reiterated towards accelerating the ICPD PoA at the Nairobi Summit in 2019, which commemorated the 25th anniversary of the ICPD Cairo conference.

Since their establishment in 1982, both Asian Population and Development Association (APDA) and Asian Forum of Parliamentarians on Population and Development (AFPPD) have collaborated with the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) to advocate with and engage parliamentarians in addressing population and development issues, including youth. It is hoped that such coalitions will be further strengthened through the implementation of projects. The COVID-19 pandemic has affected a whole generation of young people and has caused a life-altering impact on health, education, and nutrition. As COVID-19 is striking already vulnerable populations, including youth, more severely, countermeasures are urgently required from a humanitarian and development standpoint. AFPPD's three key areas of focus, gender, ageing, and youth, have become all the more meaningful in responding to the global challenge of COVID-19. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, young people have been hard hit by job loss at home and abroad, school and university closures, and lack of access to sexual and reproductive health education, which even prior to COVID-19 was already critically under-resourced, profoundly affecting youth.

Parliamentarians, with their law-making and budget-making functions, and robust elective mandates, have responsibility for protecting and ensuring people's rights and needs. This includes considering the specific needs of young people in response to health, social and economic challenges caused by COVID-19 and beyond. Parliamentarians hold their governments accountable for implementing national, regional and global commitments. They can – and should – play a critical role in translating the unfinished ICPD PoA into national implementation. This will be made possible by providing parliamentarians with a platform for political influence at the regional and global levels.

In the Asia region, although progress has been made in the development of laws and policies for protecting youth, there is also recognition that some policies and legislation that have been enacted are not implemented in practice. There is a need to understand the current situation and explore how best to improve and address these issues, especially in the context of the ICPD commitments and the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. Younger champions should reinvigorate their positioning and influence so that parliamentarians can be essential players in advocacy, legislative and policy actions. It is an opportunity to propose legislation to implement the ICPD PoA to help realize youth's full socio-economic potential, allocating sufficient budget for related programmes, and removing legal barriers that prevent implementing legislation.

1.1 Objectives

The overall objectives of this review are to map, understand and assess the legal and policy impacts of COVID 19 on youth in Nepal.

The review has following specific objectives:

1. To determine what policies in response to COVID-19 were adopted in the National Parliament to protect young people.
2. To examine the current condition/situation of young people in relation to COVID-19, providing a situation analysis of the implementation of policies and, if possible, analysis of their impact.
3. To generate recommendations regarding policies to prevent the spread of and help the recovery from COVID-19.
4. To summarize ICPD PoA progress at the national level.

1.2 Methodology

The content of this assessment is based on the information collected through a systematic review of the existing laws and legal and policy frameworks for the protection of youth in Nepal.

Qualitative research techniques have also been adapted for this assessment.



1.3 Data collection

The data gathering and analysis, and interviews all followed the approach set out in the terms of reference.

The key elements are:

Desk review

During the desk review, all socio-economic data (policies, strategies, reports, regulations, and other related documents) have been reviewed.

Key informant interviews

Key informants were interviewed using an open-ended, semi-structured questionnaire with the questions selected based on the context of the conversation. Questions were rephrased, relying on the informants and topics. The domains of the questionnaire were actions taken by Government or youth during the COVID-19 pandemic, and policies formulated with the involvement of youth.

Names and positions of key information interviewees

- Mr. Bijay Thapa (Assistant Representative, UNFPA Nepal)
- Mr. Jagdish Ayer (President, Association of Youth Organizations Nepal)
- Mr. Anup Adhikari (Co-Founder, Nepal Family Development Foundation)
- Ms. Situ Shrestha (Regional Coordinator, Me for Myself for Mental Health)
- Ms. Awnu Shrestha (Cofounder, Working Group on Disabilities and 2030 Agenda)
- Mr. Kewal Shrestha (Project Manager, Association of Youth Organizations Nepal)
- Mr Fura Sherpa (National Coordinator, Y-PEER Nepal)

1.4 Limitations

The data collected might miss some details and components, or underreport some issues. It is essential to acknowledge that the completeness of data may vary from country to country and within Nepal.

No face-to-face interviews or surveys were taken with youth in Nepal to understand their perspectives about the Government's efforts. The news and sources were mostly from online and offline national media sources and may not include local governments' critical efforts that were not highlighted in national media. Another limitation is not addressing sources such as public notice and media, such as TV and radio.

2. YOUTH AND POLICIES RELATED TO YOUTH IN NEPAL

2.1 Definitions of youth

The Government of Nepal defines “youth” as persons between the ages of 16 and 40 years of age, which accounts for over 40.3 per cent of the country’s population, according to the Population and Housing Census Report of 2011. The Ministry of Agriculture Development has defined youth as up to the age of 50 years. Political parties and social or private institutions seem to define youth relevant to their situations. The National Youth Council Act, 2015, and the National Youth Policy, 2015 have fixed the age of youth as aged 16–40 years. Youth Vision–2025 has classified youth aged 16–40 years into two groups: ages 16–24 years and ages 25–40 years, and group-related priorities have been determined accordingly.

2.2 Policies related to young people and health, pre-COVID-19

In Nepal, after the establishment of the Ministry of Youth and Sports in 2008, the National Youth Policy, 2010, was formulated solely for the development and mobilization of youth in the country. This policy is framed to provide youth with loyalty to the nation and its people, fulfilling the basic needs of youth and promoting basic values and norms. This includes the principles of equality and equitable distribution, constitutional supremacy, individual freedom, and universal principles of human rights. The National Youth Policy of Nepal was promulgated in 2009. After the Constitution of Nepal 2015 was adopted, the National Youth Policy was reformed in 2015, following a review made after five years, to ensure continued youth development. The same year, Youth Vision: 2025 was prepared involving long discussions and interactions with the participation of stakeholders, line-agencies, and personnel of the Nepal Government. It was approved on 5 October 2015 by the Council of Ministers of the Nepal Government with the objective of implementing the National Youth Policy effectively.

Articles 18.2 and 51.j (7) of the Constitution contain provisions for youth rights relating to participation and empowerment in Nepal, as well as protection from discrimination. Furthermore, the Constitution of Nepal 2015 states that youth should have the right to participate in State bodies based on the principle of inclusion, and the participation of youth in national development should be enhanced to support their character development while providing special opportunities in the areas of education, health, and employment for the empowerment and development of youth, along with providing youth appropriate opportunities for the overall development of the State.

Due to its interrelationship with various ministries and bodies concerned with youth, the Ministry of Youth and Sports has been coordinating with national and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the Nepal Scouts, and organizations politically associated with youth and donors.

To take policy initiatives for youth development, and to constitute a National Youth Council as an autonomous organization chiefly responsible for the implementation of youth programmes, the National Youth Council Act, 2072(2015) was adopted at the initiative of the Ministry of Youth and Sports, and the process of constituting the National Youth Council has been pushed forward.

The National Youth Policy has prioritized the following policies with the sectoral policies of the State for the objectives envisioned by the National Youth Policy:

1. Programmes to be conducted focusing on awareness-raising about the basic principles, norms and values of the nation, nationality, national unity, national integrity, democracy and human rights, with the aim to transform youth into industrious, active, innovative, and creative powers capable of undertaking accountability and responsibility towards society, as well as committed to a democratic system.
2. Promotion of youth involvement and leadership in the process of transforming the economic, social, and governing system of the nation.
3. Encouragement of youth through economic, social, political, and cultural empowerment for making meaningful contributions to policy-making of the State.
4. A policy of mobilizing youth shall be adopted to address the problems of poverty, illiteracy, untouchability, evil practices, gender violence, discrimination, and disparities prevalent in society.
5. Youth to be developed as agents of social change in collaboration with the private sector, NGOs and local bodies.

The Ministry of Youth and Sports is responsible for monitoring and evaluating the implementation of the National Youth Policy.

The Family Health Division of the Ministry of Health and Population of Nepal developed the National Adolescent Health and Development Strategy (NAHDS) initially in 2000. Later, in 2011, the National Adolescent Sexual and Reproductive Health Communication Strategy 2011–2015 was formulated. In 2015, the Ministry of Health and Population of Nepal revised NADHS 2075 (2017) in accordance to the United Nations Global Strategy for Women's, Children's and Adolescents' Health (2016–2030). The revised NAHDS included participation and leadership of adolescents, inclusion and equality in the role of adolescents in the federal structure of Nepal, and a rights-oriented approach to realizing responsibility, strategic partnership and expansion of adolescent programmes through cooperatives, non-government agencies and private sector partners. Moreover, NAHDS incorporated the key steps for prioritizing the improvement in sexual and reproductive health, nutrition, the establishment of supportive and safe environments, and the development and promotion of psychosocial, emotional and mental health.

2.3 Policies related to youth and adolescents in Nepal in the context of COVID-19

To prevent the spread of COVID-19, Nepal planned a series of activities and preventive measures:

- procuring essential supplies, equipment and medicine,
- upgrading of health infrastructure,
- training medical personnel, and
- spreading public awareness.

The Nepal Government formed a High-Level Coordination Committee on 29 February 2020 under the leadership of Deputy Prime Minister Ishwar Pokhrel to coordinate the preparedness and response efforts. The High-Level Coordination Committee included the Home Minister; Education, Science and Technology Minister; Agriculture and Livestock Development Minister, Health and Population Minister; Industry, Commerce and Supplies Minister; Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation Minister; Communication and Information Technology Minister; and Finance Minister. A subcommittee was also formed, including some young people.

Similarly, a high-level committee was established in coordination with the hospitals at state, district and local levels to carry out tasks corresponding to the prevention and control of the pandemic. A three-member committee was formed, which was coordinated by the 11th level employee of the Ministry of Health and Population, and included a section officer of the National Health Training Centre and a public health officer of the Ministry of Health and Population. With a second COVID-19 case, Nepal imposed a strict lockdown on 23 March 2020 in response to the threat of COVID-19, which lasted into July 2020. Nepal then formulated different plans and policies. However, no policies were formulated specifically for youth during the COVID-19 crisis.

The Prime Minister Employment Programme (PMEP) was established in February 2019 to guarantee employment to unemployed persons registered in employment service centres for at least one hundred days in a fiscal year. Meanwhile, the Ministry of General Administration published a notice regarding the implementation and expenditure of the conditional grant of the PMEP to all the local levels on 12 May 2020. Similarly, with a focus on enabling poor and vulnerable youth gain access to employment, skills development and capacity building opportunities, the 'Youth Employment Transformation Initiative' project was jointly launched on 20 July 2020 aligned with PMEP. The USD 120 million project is financed by the World Bank, continuing over the next four years.

Overall strategies and decisions taken by the Government are listed following by target areas:

Healthcare

- To provide free health insurance and an increased allowance to healthcare workers treating COVID-19.
- To set up quarantine facilities at provincial and local levels.
- To provide healthcare workers with personal protective equipment.
- To provide free treatment for COVID-19.
- To mobilize medical students to assist with the response to COVID-19 (approximately 75 medical students enrolled as volunteers).
- To establish hotline services in response to psycho-social problems and gender-based violence.

Households

- To provide a discount on electricity costs (25 per cent discount on electricity for customers consuming more than 150 units every month).
- To enforce no penalty if utility bills and tax payments did not clear until mid-April.
- To subsidize essential food items and fuel.
- To distribute essential food materials to the needy via local government and fine price gougers.
- To advise landlords waive rent.

Education

- To close all educational institutions and halt examinations.
- To ensure continuity in teaching and learning practices at all levels by developing operational guidance on alternative and distance learning (2076)

Economy

- To contribute USD 500 million to the Coronavirus Fund and take one month's salary of all Cabinet ministers for the fund.
- To provide interest subsidies and reschedule loan payments for individuals and businesses.
- To lower the cash reserve ratio and reduce the interest rate on standing liquidity facility rates.
- To extend the tax payment deadline.
- To relax regulatory requirements for banks and financial institutions.

Other

- To enforce a law to imprison (up to six months in jail) returnees from abroad who do not stay in quarantine for 14 days.

3. STEPS TAKEN BY THE NATIONAL GOVERNMENT TO REDUCE THE IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON YOUNG PEOPLE

3.1 Employment and the economy

In Nepal, the unemployment rate for youth aged 15–29 years is 19.2 per cent, while it is only 2.7 per cent for the whole population (UNDP, 2018). Over 400,000 young people are estimated to enter the labour force every year. Similarly, according to the National Labour Migration report of 2020, the total number of Nepali migrant workers in age group 18–35 years in 2018/2019 and 2017/2018 were 182,298 and 274,081, respectively. A study by the Foreign Employment Board to estimate the number of migrant workers expected to return home and those who had lost jobs showed at least 127,000 Nepali migrants will return to Nepal once travel restrictions are lifted, while another 407,000 are expected to return later from 37 different countries. The COVID-19 CCMC estimated that 1.3 million Nepalese working abroad wanted to return home during the pandemic.

Data from the 24 months before the lockdown was imposed in Nepal from most destination countries in March 2020 showed more than 1 million labour permits were issued by the Department of Foreign Employment for work in countries other than India, while just over 35,000 workers had gone to the Republic of Korea under the Employment Permit System since 2015. Another source, the 2017/2018 Nepal Labour Force Survey, estimates that there are 2.8 million Nepalis who had migrated abroad for work (of whom only 5 per cent were women).

A significant number of Nepali migrants have lost their jobs as a result of COVID-19, and many other have been forced to either go on unpaid leave or return home before their contract period is over. It is estimated that some 20 per cent of Nepalese abroad are at risk of being unemployed. Workers have not received their wages and other benefits, and are deprived of access to basic services including health facilities while working and living at the risk of infection.

On 12 May 2020, the Ministry of General Administration published a notice regarding the implementation and expenditure of the conditional grant of the PMEP to local levels. This has been implemented amidst the pandemic to reduce the unemployment situation. PMEP also has provision for the inclusion of workers who had obtained a work permit for foreign employment but were unable to go.

In addition, the Government announced and started the repatriation of migrant workers in need of return. Pregnant women, people who have lost their jobs, those with health issues, those that have lost a family member at home, and those that have overstayed their visas are to be given priority for repatriation assistance. The Government coordinated with different non-resident Nepali associations and recruitment agencies during the repatriation process. The Supreme Court issued an interim order to the Government. Provincial and local governments established quarantine facilities in their respective locations and have formulated several programmes and policies to promote local employment opportunities. The National Youth Council coordinated with various civil society organizations to manage the quarantine facilities at the local level.

Despite the economic crisis during the COVID-19 pandemic, several business models and manufacturing companies are getting high-level revenue. Many start-ups by young people have flourished during this period. To reduce the economic impact and burden of COVID-19, the Central Bank of Nepal provided an interest subsidy for lenders and rescheduled loan payments for businesses whose incomes have been affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. Similarly, the Nepal Government encouraged rental owners to waive rent for tenants during the lockdown period starting 24 March 2020 and ordered rental owners to waive one month's rent. However, this was not followed by most property owners. The Government also decided to provide compensation to the families of migrant workers who died due to COVID-19. This was in addition to the existing policy in which the family of a deceased migrant worker receives Nepalese rupee 700,000 from the Migrant Workers' Welfare Fund managed by the board. The Government also asked Internet service providers to extend a 25 per cent discount to customers on data and voice call packages.

3.2 Domestic migration/International migration

The Nepal Government closed the borders with India and China from 23 March 2020 onwards and stopped issuing on-arrival visas to all foreign nationals. Similarly, people were advised not to travel overseas and later, all flights were halted.

During the early phase of the pandemic, the Nepal Government chartered a flight to evacuate 179 stranded Nepalese students from Wuhan, China, and isolated them for fourteen days in a quarantine facility.

3.3 Actions by government

The Ministry of Youth and Sports mobilized 1,473 youth to raise awareness of COVID-19. Similarly, 9,650 scout youth volunteers were mobilized for COVID-19 programmes disseminating information, making quarantine and isolation centres, sanitizing, swab collecting, managing waste (including dead bodies), managing transportation for health workers, and producing and distributing masks. Local governments mobilized youth for an awareness and sanitization programme.

3.4 Actions by United Nations agencies

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), in coordination with two municipalities, mobilized over 50 youth volunteers under its COVID-19 Response Initiative to raise awareness of COVID-19 in a specific region.

Similarly, UNFPA Nepal supported the Association of Youth Organizations Nepal (AYON) to organize a webinar: Exploring Opportunity in Nepal in the COVID Context for ICPD/SDGs. The consultation aimed to conduct discussion among young industry leaders, entrepreneurs, government representatives, civil society delegates and agents from the financial sector about the current status of the Nepali economy and labour market in order to distinguish location-based open doors for job creation, upgrade wellbeing, and administer sexual and reproductive health and comprehensive sexuality education (CSE) services

in the COVID context. Moreover, UNFPA Nepal supported AYON to develop various programmes and bring together youth organizations and individuals to amplify the voice of youth for their rights in relation to sexual and reproductive health, harmful practices (including gender-based violence) and child marriage, life skill education/CSE, employment, and participation in decision-making in line with the ICPD25 priorities and SDGs.

3.5 Actions by youth networks

Several initiatives were taken by youth networks that focused on raising awareness of COVID-19. Some of the key examples and initiatives were also listed by the regional campaign “@LiveNowTogether”.

Some of the initiatives also focused on raising awareness on mental health issues for adolescents and youth, which are key priorities.

AYON, in collaboration with the National Youth Council, distributed welcome kits to the returnee migrants at Tribhuvan International Airport on 18 December 2019. The welcome kits included an aluminium water bottle, mineral water, lunch box, pack of sanitary pads, wet tissues, information/education materials, hand sanitizer, scarf and handbag among other items.



4. RECOMMENDATIONS AND OVERALL FINDINGS OF RESEARCH

ICPD25 Commitments

The National Youth Webinar on the ICPD25 organized in December 2020 concluded that the follow-up of the ICPD Nairobi Commitments and PoA was slow due to several political issues. Thus, the Government of Nepal, with the support of United Nations agencies, civil society organizations and youth networks should focus on turning the commitments into actions.

International and domestic migration

The effort to bring back migrant workers from foreign countries was limited and very slow. The Government should utilize the funds collected from migrant workers as migrant worker welfare funds to bring back the migrant workers who are still stuck in other countries, as well as utilize the funds to provide support for their rehabilitation within the country as the majority of migrant workers and returnee migrant workers are young people.

Similarly, the Government should maintain proper data on internal migration to provide key support in future crises and humanitarian contexts.

Emergency response and relief

Emergency relief was very slow and limited in all parts of the country. In the rural communities, the response was limited. Young people were not prioritized, as the realization of their needs was limited. Adding to that, shelters for migrant workers or people affected by COVID-19 were limited and not sufficient. Thus, preparedness should be done in advance using proper data.

Information sharing and communication

The sharing of information mostly focused on safety measures for preventing the spread of COVID-19 and counting the number of people infected and killed by COVID-19. Other information, such as how to remain mentally healthy during the pandemic or how to get relief was very limited. The Government should prioritize information sharing and uniformity among all sectors.

The tax of more than 23 per cent on the Internet and telephones was a barrier and it affected online education, and the sharing and receiving of information. Thus, the government, as well as the private sector, should reduce taxes and fees during such crises as the movement of people was limited during lockdown and online and telephone communication was the only method for education and information sharing.

Education

The COVID-19 pandemic showed the difference between the private and government sectors. Though everyone, including adolescents and youth, were affected, adolescents and young people who were admitted to government and community-run educational institutions were much more affected in comparison to private sector education. Thus, steps should be taken by the Government to reduce the difference between the education sectors.

Many educational institutions did not follow government directives to reduce or waive the fees. Thus, strong action is required by the government.

Health

The Government of Nepal focused on preventing the spread of COVID-19 since the beginning of the pandemic, which was a positive aspect as the restrictions and lockdown were imposed similarly with other countries in the region. However, for several months, the government's only focus remained on prevention of the spread and not on addressing other essential needs of its citizens, including the needs of young people. Essential services were limited to food and shelter, whereas other services, such as counselling, mental health, protection services for women and girls including protection from gender-based violence, and sexual reproductive health including family planning services were not prioritized. The Government should have also focused on overall aspects of health rather than only COVID-19. Systematic research should be done so essential health services fall under the category of priority.

Overall youth involvement and response

Frontline workers, such as doctors, police, army and others, and many young people were involved in relief, cleaning and awareness campaigns throughout the year. They were mostly involved in local government activities as volunteers in the field as well as in online awareness and information campaigns. Similar to the Nepal Earthquake response of 2015, the COVID-19 response involved young people, but without proper insurance measures or recognition of them as front-line workers. This kept many young people at high risk. Also, the mental health aspect of people, particularly children and adolescents, were not considered, which led to many suicides.

Young people and others were also involved by many political parties and groups in mass rallies and protests, despite the risk of spreading COVID-19. The government should have plans to take proper action in such cases, as well as to keep young people safe.





**ASIAN FORUM OF PARLIAMENTARIANS
ON POPULATION AND DEVELOPMENT (AFPPD)**

2-19-5 Nishi-Shinbashi Minato-Ku,
Tokyo 105-0003 Japan
Tel: +81-3 5405-8844
Fax: +81-3 5405-8845

www.afppd.net