

Role of Policymakers and Operators towards Tourism Revival in the Era of COVID-19 in Nepal

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Abstract

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) had adversely affected different sectors, including, tourism in 2020. It had compelled tourism stakeholders to follow additional health, hygiene, and safety measures. But, tourism is one of the crucial sectors to develop the least developed countries, like Nepal. It was prioritized by the government to generate money and enhance the local livelihood more sustainably. With an objective to assess the steps taken by tourism stakeholders (policymakers and operators) during COVID-19 in Nepal, this study was focused on the national level with examples taken from the local level. A review of online news articles and collection of secondary data from different governmental agencies of Nepal was done for data collection. More than 219 online articles were reviewed, and the published information was also cross-checked with the government's press release. Policymakers and tourism operators have applied different strategies to recover tourism in Nepal. But COVID-19 had adversely affected their business despite these policy measures and actions. To revive the tourism industry, infrastructural development, promotion of domestic tourism, and health, hygiene, and safety measures were prioritized.

Keywords: COVID-19, policy and actions, domestic tourism, infrastructures, health and hygiene, Nepal

1. Introduction

Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) had adversely affected different sectors in 2020, in which tourism was one of the worst affected ones (Naumov et al., 2020). This disease started in late 2019, was caused by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus two (SARS-CoV-2) (Mayo Clinic, 2020), and had reached almost all the countries of the world. The highly infectious nature of the disease had compelled all people to follow social distancing and health, hygiene, and safety (HHS) precautions (WHO, 2020), which was also observed in the tourism sector. It had affected people of all age groups and caused severe health impacts to older people and people with chronic health diseases (Mayo Clinic, 2020). Health experts and policymakers had focused on policies and actions towards hygiene and safety to reduce its transmission and adverse impacts (WHO, 2020). Tourism stakeholders around the world have to follow these HHS measures to recover tourism from the pandemic.

Different countries around the world have followed different strategies to minimize the impact of COVID-19. Some countries have imposed complete lockdown allowing only emergency activities, while others have allowed people to do their regular activities with precautions (Sarkar et al., 2020). Some countries have restricted international flights and closed the international borders allowing only rescue flights (Gössling et al., 2021). This restriction has stopped travel and tourism activities globally, affecting the tourism sector (Naumov et al., 2020). Especially in South Asian countries, including Nepal, complete lockdown in the initial stage has brought economic disturbances adversely affecting the people's livelihood (Sarkar et al., 2020). People depending on tourism and hospitality for survival were one of the worst affected ones in this region.

Tourism had been taken as an essential source of economic development and livelihood enhancement for a least developed country like Nepal (K C & Thapa Parajuli, 2014). The government of Nepal (GoN) had prioritized tourism for the past four decades with international organizations' initial support (Bhandari, 2019). Later, tourism was integrated into the national policy-making process for the country's overall development (Regmi & Walter, 2017). Highly diverse nature and culture are the primary sources of attraction for the foreign tourists inside the country (Espiner, Stewart, & Lama, 2017). There are many tall peaks, trekking routes, protected areas, and religious and cultural sites across the country (Neupane, K C, & Pant, 2013). But the situation of tourism in the whole world had been changed by COVID-19.

There were very few publications in the tourism literature focused on the country-level policies and actions on the tourism sector towards COVID-19. In the context of Nepal, there were very few studies focused on COVID-19 and its impact on tourism. Also, there was limited literature focused on experts' recommendations and their further implications to minimize the adverse effect of COVID-19. There is a need for in-depth study to highlight the approaches taken by the tourism policymakers and tourism operators for recovering tourism during COVID-19 in the context of the least developed country, like Nepal. So, this paper was prepared to provide information to tourism researchers about the involvement of tourism policymakers and operators in Nepal to revive the tourism sector in the COVID-19 era.

2. Methodology

This paper is prepared by reviewing the online articles published in the English language by popular media houses of Nepal starting from January 24, 2021, till January 6, 2021. More than 219 articles published by Khabarhub (11), My Republica (32), Nepali Times (NT) (7), The Annapurna Express (3), The Himalayan Times (THT) (65), The Kathmandu Post (TKP) (75), and The Rising Nepal (TRN) (16) were reviewed. These news media prepared these articles by interviewing tourism experts, tourism policymakers, and tourism operators inside the country. They have also visited the area, attended press conferences, and interacted with local tourism operators to get information about the tourism scenario. Almost all the information related to the steps taken by the government and tourism operators were published in most of these media houses but in different structures and forms. For preparing this paper, only a few of these articles were cited in this paper. These articles were reviewed by searching through Google using keywords: tourism, COVID-19, Nepal, and these English Newspaper headings. Secondary data on tourist numbers were also taken from the Nepal Tourism Statistics 2019 published by the Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Civil Aviation (MCTCA) and Arrival/Departure Data published by the Department of Immigration (DoI). And COVID-19 cases were taken from health sector response reports published by the Ministry of Health and Population (MoHP).

First of all, the heading of the article was scanned. If the title of the article was related to tourism, the whole piece was scanned for tourism-related information. If it was related to tourism, the article's link was copied in Microsoft Word in chronological order for further detailed review. After finishing the copy of the links, the reports were

reviewed in detail, and relevant tourism information was extracted with a citation in Microsoft Word using RefWorks (a reference management software). If similar information was seen in different articles, only one was followed and cited. But the report published was cross-checked with each other for more accurate information. In many cases, the information published in the articles were also cross-checked with the published press release of the governmental institutions. Collected data was analyzed in Microsoft Excel and presented in tabular form. Other information was presented in the descriptive form in the manuscript.

3. Results

Among the reviewed articles, more than 37 news have focused on the impact of COVID-19 on hotels, restaurants, and bars, while more than 46 reports have focused on travel and tourism inside the country. They have also highlighted the impact on income and livelihood of tourism-dependent people. International tourists rescue related news was focused on more than 25 articles, and they have focused on repatriation flights and accommodation of these tourists. Many of these publications have focused on domestic tourism and its promotion throughout the country (more than 41). Similarly, tourism related infrastructural development during lockdown was focused on more than 11 articles.

3.1 International Tourist Number and COVID-19 Cases in Nepal

According to World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), in 2018, Nepal generated Rs. 240.7 billion tourism revenue and provided a job to 1.05 million people, directly and indirectly, contributing 7.9 percent to GDP (Prasain, 2020g). According to World Trade Organization (WTO), one tourist inside a country supports 11 staff directly and indirectly in seasonal and regular jobs (Prasain, 2020c). But, Nepal saw a decrease in international tourist arrival from November 2019 compared to the previous year.

There are certain ups and downs in international tourist numbers starting from 2015 till 2020 (table 1). The devastating earthquake of 2015 had caused a fall of international tourist numbers by more than 32%. The tourism sector recovers very soon in Nepal after 2016 as there was an increasing international tourist number from 2016 till 2019. The government of Nepal had planned to increase the international tourist number to 2 million in 2020 from 1.2 million by declaring the year 2020 as Visit Nepal Year (VNY) (Prasain, 2020f). But there was a sudden downfall of the international tourist number in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1. International tourist flow in Nepal from 2015-2020

Year	Total International Tourist	Growth Rate (%)
2015	538,970	-32
2016	753,002	40
2017	940,218	25
2018	1,173,072	25
2019	1,197,191	2.05
2020	230,085	-80.78

Source: MCTCA (2020) and DoI (2020)

Monthly international tourist arrival decreased significantly in 2020 compared to 2019 after the pandemic started hitting the entire world (table 2). Before the COVID-19 was declared a global pandemic on March 11 by World Health Organization (WHO), international tourists were seen traveling in the country but less than in previous years. COVID-19 fear had reduced the travel from the beginning of the year. Then, the Government of Nepal started applying preventive measures to decrease the transmission of COVID-19, and the tourism operators

followed the approaches recommended by the government, which causes tourism to a complete stop in the country.

Table 2. International tourist flow in 2019-2020 and COVID-19 cases in Nepal

Months/ Years	International tourist number		COVID-19 cumulative total cases
	2019	2020	2020
January	81,273	79,686	1 (Jan 23)
February	102,423	101,400	1
March	127,351	34,025*	5
April	109,399	13*	57
May	78,329	30*	1,572
June	74,883	100*	13,564
July	70,916	195*	19,771
August	94,749	268*	39,460
September	92,604	582*	77,817
October	134,096	1,874*	170,743
November	130,302	1,947*	233,452
December	100,866	9,965*	260,593
Total	1,197,191	230,085	260,593

*by air only

Source: MCTCA (2020), DoI (2020) and MoHP (2021)

After the first positive case of COVID-19 was detected on January 23 in Nepal (table 2), the Government of Nepal (GoN) started becoming careful towards its prevention. After more than two months, the second positive case was detected on March 23, and then the COVID-19 cases started rising gradually. A total of 57 COVID-19 cases was detected till the end of April, which become 1,542 till the end of May. Then the cases started increasing exponentially till the end of November. Till the end of the year 2020, the total cumulative COVID-19 cases reached 260,593.

3.2 Steps Taken Towards COVID-19 by Tourism Policymakers and Operators in Nepal

Both the government and private sectors considered each other important to revive Nepal's tourism industry (Lama, 2020b). With the increasing COVID-19 cases in China, Iran, Italy, Japan, and South Korea, GoN suspended the visa-on-arrival for these countries' citizens starting March 10. But they were allowed to take visas from a mission abroad and show COVID-19 uninfected health certificate. Later, France, Germany, and Spain were added to the list starting March 13. Beginning March 14, all on-arrival visas, including non-resident Nepali (excluding diplomatic and official visas), were suspended. If they have taken the visa from a mission abroad, they have to show negative polymerase chain reaction (PCR) results within seven days of the test and have to quarantine for 14 days. The trekking permit was suspended for the tourists arriving after March 15 (DoI, 2020; Prasain & Shrestha, 2020).

On March 17, tourism experts have recommended that the government utilize the social security fund and the prime minister's employment fund to support people working on a daily wage. Also, they urged the Central bank to extend the time and amount for refinancing (Shrestha, 2020). Taking care of this, the central bank had opened the refinancing, restructuring, and rescheduling of loans to affected sectors on July 17. It had allocated a refinancing fund of Rs. 50 billion at an interest rate of 5%, which was suitable for the tourism sector (Shrestha & Prasain, 2020). A 20% discount on income taxes was also provided to the tourism and the hospitality industry (airline, hotel, transport, travel, and trekking). The time for filing different taxes was made quarterly. Income tax

exemption for micro-enterprises was extended from five to seven years, and those run by women entrepreneurs was extended from seven to ten years by further removing the value-added tax (Khabarhub, 2020a). But, tourism and hospitality associations were not satisfied with this package, including Hotel Association Nepal (HAN), as they could not pay salary to their one million workers by borrowing a loan. They were not hopeful of becoming stable before two years to make profits and pay salary, rent, and other costs (THT, 2020b).

The GoN stopped international flights from March 20. Similarly Visit Nepal Year (VNY) 2020 promotion was canceled on March 22 (Prasain & Shrestha, 2020). On March 24, the lockdown was started in Nepal to stop the transmission of COVID-19 (Sah et al., 2020). Due to this lockdown announcement, tourists have to fly back as all the trekking and mountaineering was canceled by the government, and they have to catch flights before March 24 (Phuyal, 2020). During the initial lockdown, some international tourists stayed in Nepal as they feel safer staying in the rural area instead of taking a long flight back to their own country (Awale, 2020). GoN also provided a flexible visa policy to extend their visa and stay with patience in Nepal (MyRepublica, 2020). On May 4, NTB recommended reviving the Nepali tourism industry in two phases: survival and revival. It is recommended that the GoN provide an income tax discount of up to Rs 50,000 per person to encourage travel within the country. To ease the travel inside the country, it recommended indicating red zone and green zone inside the country. Indian and Chinese were the two major nationalities traveling inside the country, so they should be attracted to travel in the revival phase. In the meantime, tourism entrepreneurs have suggested that the government utilize the VNY 2020 budget to promote domestic tourism as they see the high potential of domestic tourism to help the tourism industry recover (THT, 2020c).

As there were no guests, HAN announced on July 18 to pay uniform salaries for all their employees from top to bottom (Prasain, 2020b). It was done in consultation with trade unions and hotel workers (Paudel, 2020). Due to the lack of revenue in their business since March, resorts, star hotels, and casinos closed their businesses and laid off their staff. In the beginning, they have provided economic relief to their employees according to their financial capacity (Prasain, 2020). But the government had requested the tourism operators to pay salary to their employees during the lockdown (Ale Magar, 2020a). After the lockdown was lifted on July 21 (with some restrictions still in place), the government had allowed international flights from September 1, but international tourists were not allowed to enter (Prasain, 2020d). Initially, in the announcement of July 20, they were planning to resume domestic and international flights from August 17 and hotels, restaurants, trekking, and mountaineering from July 30 (Paudel, 2020; Prasain, 2020).

On August 17, Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) announced that they were supporting job retention of trekking workers in mountain tourism with the collaboration of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP). They planned to clean and repair trails of the Toni Hagen trekking route and Annapurna base camp trekking route in the first phase (Ale Magar, 2020b). It was done with the initial recommendation of trekking operators, workers, and leaders (THT, 2020d). Minister of Tourism had also started a domestic tourism promotion campaign (#DeshDarshan) on September 26. To help recover the Nepali tourism sector, the Tourism Recovery Task Force (TRF) was formed on the same date. It was set up to support all major authorities and organizations related to tourism for their adaptation and earlier recovery. It should recommend the plan and necessary resources to the private sector and the government to enhance resilience and sustainability in the tourism sector (THT, 2020a). After its establishment, TRTF had prepared a training manual with its 'Empowering Rural Destinations' campaign to provide training and build rural destinations' capacity on HHS issues (Prasain, 2020a).

On September 14, GoN announced that it could allow foreign tourists for mountaineering and trekking from October 17. But the GoN planned to provide an on-arrival visa for the tourists only if they have taken pre-approval or recommendation and have COVID-19 negative report (within 72 hours of departure). Those who were already inside the country could renew their visa if they could not travel back due to a pandemic (DoI, 2020). GoN had

initially discussed mandatory 7 days quarantine and COVID-19 insurance for visitors to travel inside the country (Prasain, 2020). This plan was objected by the TRTF team and many other tourism and hospitality leaders and policymakers as they opined that tourists would move to another country. Later, GoN waived 7 days mandatory quarantine and COVID-19 insurance provision. But a spike in COVID-19 cases had compelled the government to restrict international tourists till mid of November (Prasain, 2020). On December 23, all passengers flying as a port of call or transit from the United Kingdom were not allowed to enter the country due to the new mutant of COVID-19 (DoI, 2020).

3.2 Rescue of International Tourists Being Prioritized

Initially, all papers wrote about international tourists being stranded in Nepal and seeking support. NTB coordinated with different stakeholders to bring these foreign tourists to Kathmandu for repatriation flights. Those tourists who were in trouble were provided food and accommodation by the same hotels where they stayed before. Domestic rescue flights from different parts of the country were conducted through Nepal Airlines, Tara Air, Summit Air, Sita Air, Kailash Air, and Air Dynasty. International tourists were sent to their countries of origin from repatriation flights from Kathmandu. International rescue flights were conducted for the tourists of France, Germany, Czech Republic, Malaysia, Netherlands, England, Canada, Australia, United States, South Korea, China, Hong Kong, Vietnam, Cambodia, Poland, Belgium, Switzerland, Denmark, and Argentina through Qatar Airways, Malaysia Airlines, Malindo Air, Korean Air, and Nepal Airlines (MyRepublica, 2020).

Despite these rescue flights, some international tourists were stranded unwillingly for a more extended time period in the country. The government had suspended its visa services for longer-term and requested all foreigners in Nepal to remain in patience (MyRepublica, 2020). Till the third week of May, many tourists have chosen to stay back in Nepal rather than returning to their home countries (Gurung, 2020). They feel safer staying in Nepal instead of taking a long flight back to their own country (Awale, 2020). They stayed at various hotels and homestays in Manang, Mustang, and Kaski of Annapurna Conservation Area Project (ACAP) (Gurung, 2020). These tourists have supported the trekker family, who has no regular income after the COVID lockdown. Few others got involved in health and environmental awareness towards COVID-19 infection (Awale, 2020).

3.3 Impact of COVID-19 on Tourism in Nepal

Almost all the tourism service providers (airlines, trekking sectors, hotels, restaurants, souvenir shops, and travel agencies) were adversely affected by COVID-19 (Lama, 2020a). Revenue of protected areas from visitors in Nepal had stopped entirely from the end of March till the end of October due to the closing of 12 national parks, 6 conservation areas, 1 hunting reserve, and 1 wildlife reserve. This had affected activities of wildlife conservation, park management, and community forest user group upliftment. But they were planning to resume the visitor entry by providing sanitizer bottles, water, and soaps at the ticket counters (Mandal, 2020a). Elephant safari had also suffered a lot due to the Chitwan national park closure in the initial phase of COVID-19. Elephant owners were unable to feed their elephants and were willing to sell their elephant or keep in the cooperatives. Hired elephants from India were also returned (Mandal, 2020b). These elephant-rides, along with jeep safaris and canoe tours, were opened earlier in Bagmara and Kumroj buffer zone community forests. And jungle safari inside the park was opened after the rainy season was over (Paudel, 2020).

A scenario of the trekking sector didn't look great during the pandemic. People living in the trails were hopeful that trekkers would come during the trekking season when the country's lockdown restrictions would be lifted as people were tired of staying at home (Pant, 2020). Porters and low paid seasonal workers in the trekking route had suffered a lot from the pandemic as they had no saved money for their family members, and they have been jobless since March 2020 (Lama, 2020c; Sijapati, 2020). Many of them worked on their farm, looking after the livestock, and taking care of their family members (Lama, 2020). Trekking and tourism in the Karnali region

(Chandannath, Dudul Chaitya, Chumchaur, and Guthichaur) were also adversely affected as no tourists were seen traveling on the road (Budha, 2020). Tourism operators of Namche Bazar, Mustang, and Pokhara, who were benefiting from tourism before COVID-19, were affected adversely after COVID-19 as they had no other sources of income (Gongal, 2020).

Four months of lockdown had compelled more than 70 hotel operators to close their business and hand over their keys to their owners as they could not pay rent in Pokhara. From March to April, house owners provided operators a 50 percent discount on the rent. This had affected 15,000 direct and 20,000 indirect jobs in Pokhara (Pariyar, 2020). Also, hotels and restaurants near many religious sites were closed during the lockdown (Upreti, 2020). Due to the lack of guests, restaurants have a different look as new events had not started (Sijapati, 2020). Hotels in Sauraha and Meghauri of Chitwan had also laid off their staff as there were no international tourists and domestic tourists in recent times. More than 120 hotels in Sauraha, 10 hotels in Meghauri, and 10 homestays nearby were adversely affected (Kandel, 2020).

Also, there was a decrease in occupancy of hotels in Thamel since February (Kumar, 2020). The sale of branded stores in Thamel targeted at international tourists had also decreased significantly since February. The sale of handicrafts and other domestic products had been reduced considerably. It was challenging to pay the rent, staff salaries, and utilities. Money changers and taxi drivers had also suffered a lot during the pandemic (Kumar, 2020). Domestic airlines were not moving during the lockdown, so they had not generated any revenue and had provided a calibrated pay cut for their staff (Sijapati, 2020).

3.4 Expert Recommendations during COVID-19

NTB has recommended that the government provide financial support to the tourism industry for at least three years to recover and sustain. There were 129 star-rated hotels, 1,125 tourist standard hotels, 3,508 travel agencies, 2,649 trekking agencies, 77 tourist transportation service companies, 73 rafting agencies, and 324 homestay services registered in Nepal demanding the interest subsidy from the government. They have recommended fixed cost control (bank interest, retention of human resources, and rent subsidy for tourism operators) and a cash refinancing scheme (low-interest bank loans) (Ale Magar, 2020). The trekking association and trekking guides of Nepal have requested the government to extend the deadline for the renewal of trekking agencies' license for at least 6 months without penalty. They have also recommended that the government provide training for guides and porters on maps, navigation, risks, and evacuation. More than 22,000 trekking guides and 35,000 trekking workers were in trouble due to the lockdown (THT, 2020).

Experts suggested publicizing Nepal as a safe destination on digital platforms to recover tourism. There should be economic stimulus packages, sustainable tourism promotion, quality of living, financial tax relief, and priority on diaspora, domestic, and distance tourism markets (THT, 2020). Some of the Nepali travel agencies were promoting tourism in Europe before the onset of COVID-19, but they had to return before the lockdown. They were thinking of promoting domestic tourism and targeting the regional market of India and China (Sijapati, 2020). In this lockdown period, experts had suggested planning for the sustainable management of the overcrowded destinations (Gongal, 2020). Experts suggested that most of Nepal's gross domestic product was spent on consuming imported goods, so it was necessary to prioritize local and domestic products. Even some tourist destinations (Kathmandu valley, Sagarmatha, Nagarkot, Pokhara, Annapurna Circuit, and Lumbini) suffer from over-tourism. It is necessary to develop other destinations for adventurous activities (rafting, kayaking, bungee jumping, zip flying, mountain viewing, and skiing) (Parajuli, 2020).

3.5 Opportunity for Tourism Recovery from Domestic Tourism in the COVID-19 Era

Different online news had reported the increase in domestic tourists' flow across the country when the lockdown was eased, and people were allowed to travel. Tourism entrepreneurs were hopeful of reviving tourism in the country by attracting domestic tourists (Mandal, 2020). Khabarhub (2020b) reported an increase in domestic tourists in Rara lake, Pokhara, and Mardi Himal. TKP has reported that domestic tourists were prioritized in Pokhara, Kathmandu, Chitwan, Bandipur, Manungkot-Tanahun district, Sukute Beach, Baglung, Champadevi hiking, and other hiking across the hills nearby Kathmandu valley (Lama, 2020). It also focused on the increase in domestic tourist number in Shree-Antu, Dhampus, Rara lake, Sagarmatha trekking, Annapurna trekking, and biking from Beni to Jomsom (Prasain, 2020). NT has also reported on domestic trekkers in the Sagarmatha region (Sherpa, 2020). TRN (2020) focused on the Visit Sauraha campaign for domestic tourists. It also focused on increasing domestic tourists in Pokhara, Chitwan, and Dhulikhel (Madai, 2020). TRN has also reported an increase in domestic tourists in Pokhara (Chapagain, 2020). THT has reported domestic tourism growth in Mardi Himal, Manang, and Langtang (THT, 2020). Religious sites in Jhapa (Domukha, Satasidham, Jamunkhadi, and Happy Land Fun Park) had started receiving domestic tourists when the lockdown was lifted (Upreti, 2020).

Airlines have also sold over 220 domestic packages during Dashain, reducing prices up to 60% (Prasain, 2020). Hotel operators in Chitwan and Pokhara provided a discount offer to attract domestic tourists (Prasain, 2020). They were hoping to recover soon from these tourists as they have started enjoying hotel facilities (Ale Magar, 2020). Different online news had focused that social media has played a significant role in distributing these destinations for domestic tourists (Lama, 2020; Madai, 2020; TKP Editorial, 2020). In September, Tourism Ministry also sends a proposal to the Cabinet for a two-day weekend to promote domestic tourism (Lama, 2020; Prasain, 2020). To benefit from domestic tourism, the time during school break in April, winter school break in January, and festival break in October should be prioritized. Attractive packages should be targeted for families besides other times of the year (Parajuli, 2020).

3.6 Priority towards HHS in COVID-19 Era

Almost all papers have reported on following HHS protocols in different tourist destinations of the country (Madai, 2020; TKP Editorial, 2020; TRN, 2020). Experts also recommended preparing HHS guidelines in all three government levels (local, provincial, and central) (Madai, 2020). Following this, NTB prepared an HHS guideline for the tourism industry to reopen with adequate safety measures. It was to be followed by all tourism and hospitality stakeholders (hotels, hospitality businesses, travel agents, and transport sectors) for service providers and guests' safety. In the meantime, COVID-19 has brought behavioral change as all people have followed physical distancing, and this would be followed in the near future (Bhandari, 2020). Inside the country, to fly a plane, especially to Lukla from Kathmandu, visitors must wear a mask, visor, and latex gloves. For Lukla, it was also necessary to submit a negative PCR report not older than 72 hours. To check the PCR negative reports, health check posts were set up in Pasang Lhamu Rural Municipality of Namche. Lodge owners in the Khumbu region were happy to welcome domestic visitors in September by following appropriate HHS measures (Phuyal, 2020).

3.7 Opportunity to Develop Tourism Infrastructures during Lockdown

Different tourism infrastructures were renovated, and some new structures were built during the COVID-19 lockdown. GoN planned to connect and repair the hiking and trekking route around Kathmandu Valley (Shivapuri, Dakshinkali, and Nagarkot). Along with this, GoN planned to repair the trekking route of Manaslu and Kanchanjunga (Prasain, 2020e). Similarly, trekking route repair work in Chho-Rolpa lake, Kanchenjunga Base Camp, Makalu Base Camp, Dolpa, Panchase, and Maipokhari to Sandakpur was completed during lockdown (THT, 2020e). Tourist service centers in Bhaktapur were opened to repaint, clean, and remove weeds after 4 months of closure. For this, 20 cleaning staff were mobilized in Durbar Square, Taumadhi Square, and Dattatreya

temple. The pavement of roads was targeted for the length of 2.5 kilometers from Bharbacho to Chamashingh, 200 meters from Ram Mandir to Bulucha, and over 150 meters from Dhoka Phalcha to Barahi Mandir (Ojha, 2020).

Other infrastructures such as footpath, view tower, bridges, and decorations have been constructed in Dhanushadham, Indrasarovar, Jagdishpur Lake, Rara Lake, and Joginiya Lake (THT, 2020). Similarly, 91% of work was completed in Gautam Buddha International Airport (GBIA) in Bhairahawa, 59% of work was done in Pokhara International Airport (PIA), paperwork for the construction of Nijgadh International Airport (NIA) was underway, Tribhuvan International Airport (TIA) renovation work was running, 65% runway pavement work at Bhairahawa, Baitadi, Dhangadhi, and Doti airport was completed, terminal buildings construction in Janakpur, Lukla, and Tumlingtar airports were undergoing, and blacktopping of runway and taxiway of Bajhang and Masinechaur airports were done during lockdown (THT, 2020).

4. Discussions

The tourism sector has been suffering from seasonality, natural disasters, diseases, economic disturbances, and conflicts (Shen et al., 2008). In the past, global tourism has already suffered from the September 11 terrorist attack, SARS, Middle East respiratory syndrome, and the global economic crisis (Gössling et al., 2021). At the country level, it had suffered from natural disasters and conflicts. Nepali tourism has already suffered from political instability and natural disasters in the past (K C et al., 2020). In 2020, COVID-19 was affecting the travel and tourism sector. Policy and actions towards COVID-19 is helping to recover from the current tourism crisis (Rogerson & Baum, 2020).

COVID-19 had disrupted tourism and hospitality globally (Naumov et al., 2020) and nationally (Lama, 2020) in 2020. Welcoming a large number of international trekkers and mountaineers was not possible in 2020 after the COVID-19 pandemic (Sijapati, 2020). Initially, the lockdown was effective in controlling the transmission of infection in Nepal and South Asia (Sarkar et al., 2020), but lockdown time was not utilized efficiently to develop enough infrastructures to minimize its further transmission and to enhance the medical services to the Nepali people (Lama, 2020). In the earlier phase, GoN had provided free testing and medical services to its citizens. It had continued free testing for poor and needy people with specific restrictions from time to time (Poudel, 2020). During the lockdown, GoN was unable to provide money and save low paid tourism employees from hunger. But political leaders were running for their personal interest and power during the peak time of pandemic (Shrestha, 2020).

HHS was prioritized in the tourism and hospitality sectors in the global (Chebli & Ben Said, 2020) as well as the national level (Madai, 2020; TKP Editorial, 2020; TRN, 2020). Tourism operators were aware of the health, safety, and operational protocols for trekking, hotels, and restaurants prepared by NTB and operation protocols for airlines and airports prepared by the Civil Aviation Authority of Nepal. They also highlighted that these protocols were not enough, so the private sector and the NTB should jointly start the COVID testing center at the airport (Prasain, 2020). In Nepal, tourism infrastructural development was kept under priority as there was an unmanaged airport, fewer quarantine and isolation facilities, inadequate health care facilities, and poor coordination between private and public sectors (Lama, 2020). Trekking routes (Prasain, 2020), airport infrastructures (THT, 2020), and religious sites (Ojha, 2020) were also renovated in different parts of the country

To recover the tourism sector from COVID-19, domestic tourism was prioritized in the global (Hao, Xiao, & Chon, 2020) as well as the national level (Lama, 2020; Madai, 2020). In Nepal, social media had played a significant role in the publicity of these destinations for domestic tourists (Lama, 2020; Madai, 2020). Storytelling and virtual tours could be more suitable for attracting international tourists towards a tourism destination during travel restrictions (Lama, 2020d). Two-day weekend and vacation time should be targeted to promote domestic

tourism in Nepal. Furthermore, tourism entrepreneurs, NTB, and the government should work together to promote domestic tourism by setting a reasonable price (Dahal et al., 2020; K C & Thapa Parajuli, 2015; Lama, 2020).

4.1 Practical Implications

This paper highlights the policy measures formed by the GoN and implemented by the tourism operators to recover tourism after the COVID-19 pandemic. It has also highlighted the recommendations of tourism experts during COVID-19. Thus, it will provide baseline information for future studies on tourism and COVID-19. Also, policymakers and operators could utilize this paper's information in future tourism disturbances to help the tourism sector recover. It will also provide information to the researchers about the impacts of the pandemic on different tourism sectors in the case of least developed countries with high tourism potential.

4.2 Limitations and Future Research Recommendations

This paper is based on the review of published news articles and secondary data verified with the press release of the relevant governmental agencies. Most of these reviewed articles were prepared by interviewing tourism experts, policymakers, operators, and local people. This is the main limitation as the paper is prepared entirely from the published secondary information from the newspaper sources, governmental press releases, and periodic reports due to the lack of published peer-reviewed articles on the topic from the study area. International and local travel restrictions and lack of online communication with the policymakers and tourism operators had also limited the field visit and primary data collection.

Collecting primary data by interviewing policymakers, tourism operators, and local people would be the future research implication to assess the impact of COVID-19 and the steps taken by policymakers and tourism operators to recover during the pandemic.

5. Conclusions

To prevent the transmission of COVID-19, complete travel restrictions for the first four months and partial restrictions after that was followed in Nepal. The rescue of international tourists during the peak time was prioritized by the tourism regulating authorities. All the country's tourism sectors were adversely affected by the COVID-19 and tourism operators are hopeful of reviving the tourism soon in the country. Economic relief measures were focused on by the GoN for the tourism operators and the employees during the pandemic but were perceived as inadequate by these tourism stakeholders. To recover the tourism sector, infrastructural development, HHS safety precautions, and promotion of domestic tourism was focused throughout the country.

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