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COVID-19 and the Vulnerability of Nepali Youth

In light of the general and added vulnerability during COVID-19 for Nepali youth, a concentrated effort to gather data about the youth demographic to address youth vulnerability by informing public policy is required. With this aim, Niti Foundation and the ILO commissioned a survey of 2,000 young people between 18 to 40 years of age across Nepal. Along with the vulnerability and anxiousness, the survey findings show pessimism and hopelessness to be the dominant perceptions among Nepali youth.

Youth and vulnerability

Nepali youth have stood at the frontline of the struggle for social and political change at various stages of Nepal's history. From the *Jayatu Sanskritam* (Sanskrit school) movement in 1947, to a student demonstration against the autocratic Rana rule, which eventually contributed to the overthrowing of the regime itself in 1950, to an uprising against the absolute rule of then King Birendra which forced reforms in the Panchayat system in 1980, to the 1990 and 2006 political movements — the role of youth in triggering these changes has been well documented (O'Neill et al. 2020). In recent years, Nepal's youth have rallied for reforms in governance, education, health, and the medical-education sector (Kafle and Karki 2020). Most recently, youth came out onto the streets in frequent protests, as many as three times a week — demanding proactive government action on the COVID-19 response (Pradhan 2020).

Ironically, in Nepal, youth often stand at the receiving end of the state's neglect and they have to leave the country to find employment in foreign countries. The 2020 Nepal Labor Migration Report shows that since 2008/9, the

Department of Foreign Employment has granted over four million labor approvals to Nepali workers, whose mean age is 29 and median age 28. In 2018/19, 36 percent of the total migrants were youth between 18 and 24 years of age (Ministry of Labour, Employment and Social Security 2020).

Unemployment and over-reliance on employment in the informal sector have been major issues for Nepali youth. The Nepal Labor Force Survey 2017/18, for example, shows that while young people between 15 and 24 years of age make up 20.3 percent of the labor force, they comprise only 18 percent of those employed (Central Bureau of Statistics 2019). Of the employed youth, 65 percent work in the informal sector (ibid). This disproportionate representation of youth in the informal sector is also shown by the ILO and Niti Foundation's *Diagnostic Report on Extent, Circumstances, Causes, Factors and Nature of Informality in Nepal* (2021). These youth are most likely to be paid below the prescribed minimum wage and work jobs without any formal contractual relationship or social security.

COVID-19 effects

Given already high youth unemployment rate and overrepresentation in the informal sector, youth were bound to face acute unemployment-related problems when the COVID-19 pandemic hit. The pandemic has also led to increased anxiety and a decrease in the overall wellbeing of Nepalis (Poudel and Subedi 2020). Within them, due to their concentration in the informal sector, worsening employment prospects, and lockdown measures taken by governments leading to the shutting down of educational institutions, health clubs, and so on, youth are at a high risk of being affected by anxiety and depression.

The public expression of anxiety has increased as the COVID-19 crisis has evolved. Since May 2020, youth in Kathmandu and across the country have organized repeated non-violent, citizen-led, nonpartisan protests. Their demands have included proactive government action to tackle the pandemic through increasing the scope and coverage of the highest-standard PCR testing for everyone at risk; safe quarantine facilities; recognition of, and a targeted response for, stranded migrant workers, daily wage workers, and marginalized communities; and transparency and accountability across all governmental responses to the pandemic. These protests drove some change (OnlineKhabar 2020).

However, these changes were not sufficient to prevent a second deadly wave of the virus sweeping across the country. As of April 2021, Nepal had the world's highest COVID-19 reproduction rate (Our World in Data 2021), with higher reported infections among youth (Sharma 2021). To tackle the rising infections, governments have introduced stringent lockdown measures throughout the country. As was the case in the first wave lockdowns, the current lockdown measures can have adverse effects on youth anxiety and employment, and their overall vulnerability. There is also a danger of rising unemployment and anxiety leading to social unrest (Pervaiz et al. 2012).

In light of the general and added vulnerability during COVID-19 for Nepali youth, a concentrated effort to gather data about the youth demographic to address youth vulnerability by informing public policy is required. With this aim, Niti Foundation and the ILO commissioned a survey of 2,000 young people between 18 to 40 years of age across Nepal. Along with the vulnerability and anxiousness, the survey findings show pessimism and hopelessness to be the dominant perceptions among Nepali youth. Combined with their low opinion of government performance during the pandemic and lack of trust in government machinery, there are signs of youth disenchantment with state institutions. Summarizing the key survey findings, this Niti Brief provides policy recommendations to government and other policy actors to address the general and added vulnerability facing Nepali youth as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

What does the data say?

Youth are anxious

While earlier data on youth anxiety is unavailable for longitudinal comparison, an overwhelming proportion of Nepali youth (84%) reported feeling anxious due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent problems they faced, including unemployment. Youth from Karnali Province experienced the greatest anxiety (97%) and 'severe anxiety' is felt most by youth who are unemployed but actively looking for work.

Whereas existing academic literature links youth unemployment, anxiety, and social unrest, the survey finds that a plurality of Nepali youth prefer peaceful means — e.g., posting on social media (42%) and submitting petitions (20%) — to express their

dissatisfaction with government. Only about 11 percent of youth considered strikes (*Bandha* and *Chakka Jam*) as an option for expressing dissatisfaction.

Youth are vulnerable

In line with their historically high unemployment rate and overrepresentation in the informal sector, youth have faced unemployment-related problems the most during the pandemic. The survey reaffirms the vulnerability of Nepali youth during COVID-19, with 19 percent of the youth reported being unemployed and 53 percent of the total employed youth working in the informal sector. The vulnerability of youth was also seen in the responses given by foreign-employed returnee youth. About 70 percent of foreign-employed returnee youth mentioned that they were compelled to return due to reasons related to the company terminating their job, not renewing their contract or visa, or failing to provide their salary as per the labor contract. On the other hand, 19 percent of returnee youth mentioned that they were on unpaid leave and only four percent reported being on paid leave.

Women and minority youth are even more vulnerable

The data from the survey also amplified the increased vulnerability of members of minority groups and young women during COVID-19. Ethnicity/caste disaggregated data on the proportion of workers receiving full salary at the time of survey shows that while nearly 50 percent of Khas-Arya youth reported receiving a full salary during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, the proportion is less when it comes to Madhesi (30%), Adivasi Janajati (27%), and Dalit (22%) youth. The data also showed Khas Arya youth (39% compared to 24%) have substantially more representation in formal sector compared to informal sector than Madhesi (20% compared to 24%), Adivasi Janajati (29% compared to 28%), and Dalit (4% compared to 11%) youth.

Madhesi (30%), Adivasi Janajati (22%), and Dalit youth (17%) were less aware than Khas-Arya (39%) youth of the government programs to support youth. Among minority youth, Dalits (45%) felt the least confident about their access to government support whereas Khas Arya (71%) youth were the most confident. Lack of awareness, access, and confidence characterize the vulnerability of

youth from minority communities, indicating their need for greater support during crises.

The survey's gender-disaggregated data reveals similar vulnerabilities for young women. Despite being demographically even with men, the survey finds that women are overrepresented (56%) in the informal sector and underrepresented (39%) in the formal sector.

Women were also less likely to access government reintegration measures when compared to men. Of the total youth who accessed government reintegration measures, 39 percent were women and 61 percent were men. Within this, women aged between 18 and 22 accessed the measures in the lowest proportion (14%) while those aged between 33 and 40 accessed in the highest proportion (31%). Moreover, of the youth who did not have current or future plans, women (70%) comprised a significantly greater proportion than men (30%).

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Lack of awareness of government measures

Most (72%) youth were unaware of government programs to integrate young people into the labor market and, even among those who were aware, most of them had not accessed these programs. For example, only 28 percent of youth respondents knew of government employment programs; of these, only 22 percent reported having accessed employment programs. The survey also found that Nepali youth believe that accessing government programs requires “informal networks” and various forms of collateral.

Addressing youth vulnerability: policy recommendations

Focus on strategic communications and orientation

From technical and vocational education and training to young informal sector workers laid off due to COVID-19, to entrepreneurship training, governments have designed several measures to support youth during the pandemic. But the problem, as the survey data shows, is that the majority of youth are unaware of these measures. To mitigate this, *equal focus should be on implementation and communication so that youth are aware of the support available to them in the first place.*

Given youth tendency to rely on social media for communication and expression, *governments can utilise*

social media to create public forums to communicate their policy positions, advertise existing measures, introduce bills, amongst others, and increase collective ownership amongst youths. Furthermore, *implementing the programs via local units is an effective way to deal with the existence of this information gap.* In addition, while designing an implementation and communication strategy, *there should be added focus on marginalized youth and young women as they tend to be the least aware of these measures.*

Remove collateral restrictions

Leaving aside the problem of information gaps, a significant proportion of youth were not confident that they could access government measures, as they did not have collateral and/or felt that they needed “informal networks” to access these measures. *Youth participation can be significantly increased by spreading the message that potential beneficiaries do not need to have “informal networks” and by lifting collateral restrictions to a reasonable level.* This should also increase the access rate of marginalized youth and young women as the survey shows they are less confident of accessing these measures.

Bring additional support measures and increase the scope and effectiveness of current measures

For the fiscal year 2020/21, as part of its employment drive, the federal government planned to create 700,000 jobs (Seddon 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the context. Recent media reports mention of the need to create at least 1.5 million jobs to avoid an “imminent unemployment crisis” (ibid). This includes a significant proportion of foreign employed returnees, most of whom, according to the current survey, want to now work in Nepal. The government needs to adapt to this changed circumstance and *realize the urgency to make existing programs effective, increase their scope and bring in additional measures to accommodate the employment needs of youth during COVID-19.*

As part of making the current measures effective, the government will have to address the disconnect between its range of investments and support to youth working or planning to work in the agriculture sector and the lack of interest amongst youth to engage in the

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sector, as the survey shows only nine percent of youth prioritizing working in agriculture-related fields. The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the number of people choosing to shop online (Sijapati 2020). Given that youth are more likely to be engaged in e-commerce, one of the ways the government can support youth is by investing in required infrastructure needed for e-commerce. This can range from expanding internet coverage, building customer-friendly digital payment gateways, organized numbering of houses and streets to strong legal protection and regulation for facilitating e-commerce transactions (Marasini 2019).

Address mental health separately

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in an increase in mental health-related issues (Indo-Asian News Service 2020; Annapurna Express 2021; Devkota et al. 2021; WHO 2021). Vulnerable groups facing tremendous financial burdens, including daily wage workers, minority youth and young women, and individuals with disabilities have been affected at a higher rate (ibid). The survey also shows how a majority of youth are anxious and that the rate of ‘severe anxiety’ is highest amongst the unemployed and youth working within the informal sector. This tells us two things — first, addressing the problems of unemployment and informality will improve the mental health of youth; second, due to their prevalence, *there should be policy and programs to tackle mental health-related concerns as standalone issues*, rather than just indirectly via addressing unemployment and informality route. Currently, there are limited government measures that directly tackle the issue of mental health.

Safeguard and promote freedom of expression

The dominant literature shows a link between unemployment, anxiety, and social unrest (Pervaiz et al. 2012). In Nepal’s case, the link might be more tenuous as a majority of youth prefer expressing their dissatisfaction via social media. In this regard, *it is salient to recognize the importance of social media in preventing more violent forms of expression and, accordingly, protect the right to freedom of expression using social media.* The recent directives and bills (cited in Lama 2019 and Freedom

Forum 2021) curbing free expression and speech that the government has proposed does not follow this spirit.

Increase youth trust in politics and country's governance institutions

While the rising dissatisfaction with, and distrust of, politics and government is partly the result of the inability of Nepal's governments to contain the pandemic and its subsequent effect on the youth and society, the fact that previous pre-pandemic reports and accounts (Dörzenbach 2017; O'Neill et al. 2020) reveal similar trends of pessimism and distrust is testament to how youth interests have not been represented, now or in the past, in contemporary politics and by the country's governance institutions. *Increasing youth representation in the decision-making bodies of the country's governance institutions is a key way to address this general distrust and pessimism.*

Governance institutions (e.g., political parties, governments, media, NGOs, etc.) provide a vital link between state and society, and with adequate representation of youth in these institutions they can either directly address youth grievances or lobby to divert the state's focus and resources towards addressing those grievances. Increased youth representation will also expand youth understanding of politics as a consultative decision making and governance process, away from the current understanding limited to power and partisanship. This broader understanding is particularly important as youth form the largest voting bloc, for they comprised more than half of registered voters for the 2017 federal and provincial elections (Shrestha 2017).

Ensure a youth-inclusive politics and public policy

Youth require an array of services from state and non-state actors. They range from the need to provide quality education, safeguard decent work and expand employment opportunities, to the provision of platforms for engagement at the political and policy-making processes, and more. It is difficult to address these needs on a piecemeal basis. *The focus should therefore be on*

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transitioning to ensure that a youth-inclusive approach shapes politics and public policy. This, if achieved, will snowball to address various sectoral demands that pertain to Nepali youth. To this end, the recommendations above should not be looked at in isolation but as a part and parcel of youth-inclusive politics and public policy. Further, to make a youth-oriented practice of politics and public policy more effective, *there must be continuous concentrated efforts to gather data on youth demographic and channel insights into decision making of state and non-state actors, as the current Niti-ILO youth survey attempts to initiate.*

Conclusion

Conducted amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, the Niti-ILO youth survey reveals feelings of anxiety and pessimism to be widespread to be amongst Nepali youth. To address this, there is an urgent need to transform governance in Nepal with youth as the preponderant focus of development and politics. For this to happen, political representation and government have to be sufficiently reflective of and attentive to youth interests. This ultimately requires better collaboration with youth associations and networks, greater representation of youth interests in political processes and parties, and an openness to formal youth involvement in problem solving of a public nature. As Nepal fast approaches another election period, it is worth heeding signs of restiveness amongst youth, who with 52 percent (Shrestha 2017) of the total registered voters, form the country's largest voting bloc.

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Afterword

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