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The case of Nepalese Non-Government Organization (s) during and after COVID

Pandemic scenario

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Abstract

Non-Government Organization (NGO) in Nepal have long history of supporting the people-in-need. COVID pandemic posed significant threat to human societies, causing negative impact on all level, i.e. health, education, food security, etc. The article explored the scenario of NGOs during and after pandemic scenario through an adoption of qualitative research methodology. The findings of the article are based on literature reviews as well as reflection of author's experience at NGO world. As the impact was rapid and severe, NGOs collaborated and partnered with government organization to deliver the health specific services such as test centre and isolation spot establishment and management, delivery of medical supplies, distribution of food items and hygiene items, and health specific infrastructure development. NGOs worked to meet immediate needs as well as long-term needs. In delivering the ever-increasing needs, NGO themselves had to face series of setback such as barrier in transportation of support items, limitation in trained human resources, lack of formal guidelines and policies to contain COVID outbreak, inadequate financial resources compared to the needs and demands, stoppage of ongoing development works, unusually high inflation rate, etc. The case of NGOs in post-covid scenario is comparatively changed, in terms of priorities and allocation of financial resources from funding agencies. The resources have been diverted to health specific projects, causing problem of budget deficiency for NGOs working in non-health areas. The article suggests government and non-government agencies to have rapid response guideline within their organizational mandate, that could be adopted and mobilized during emergency scenario. Article found the need of NGOs having a self-assessment of their organizational capacity, and fulfil the gaps in periodic manner to prepare themselves for emergency response. For the sustainability perspective of NGOs as an institution, the NGO-private partnership modalities need to be explored and adopted to ensure operation of NGOs at varied level.

Keywords: NGO, Funding, COVID, Nepal, Sustainability

Introduction

Non-Government Organization (NGO)s is one of the key pillars of Nepalese socio-economic development, and has been prioritized by national periodic development plan since 1990s. National Planning Commission (NPC) recognizes the NGOs a partner in national development to identify and mobilize available resources in grassroot level, and has categorized into community and rural development, women empowerment, environment conservation, etc. (Dhakal, 2007). From its establishment period, NGOs worked in the areas of agricultural development, water, sanitation and hygiene, health care services and family planning, environment conservation, peace initiatives, conflict management, urban planning and development, advocacy works for the policy level influences, infrastructure development, protection and promotion of human rights, including that of women, children and person with disabilities, gender equality and social inclusion. Across the years, NGOs played prominent role in national development and achievement either it be Millenium Development Goal (MDG) or Sustainable Development Goal (SDG).

Historically, NGOs started working in Nepal since 1930s, advocating for the rights of citizen in country. The government plans and policies formulated during 90s played crucial role in expanding the role of NGOs in development sector of country. Social Welfare Council (SWC) Act 1992, stated NGOs as non-profit, non-political and to be established with an objective of undertaking social services and improve socio-economic aspects of vulnerable and/or marginalized population (Heaton, 2010). Social Welfare Act 1992 emphasized and gave importance to NGOs by prohibiting the foreign agencies to directly implement any activities, instead engage at community level through the partnership and engagement with NGOs. As of 2024, over 54000 NGOs are legally registered at Social Welfare Council, and are eligible to receive financial resources from any sources.

Operation wise, NGOs relies on the financial resources from International Non-Government Organization (I/NGOs), United Nation (UN) agencies, foreign agencies and private donor. Over 95% of the NGOs depend on the foreign agencies, whilst remaining are dependent on either government or private resources (Dhakal, 2007). Operational modalities, governance structure and organizational capacity amongst majority of the NGOs act as the barrier to access foreign fund, and has to rely on INGOs, and UN agencies. Limitation to

access global fund often become a hindrance to achieve an organizational vision, mission and objective, and to create and long-term tangible impact.

COVID Pandemic and Responses

Since the identification of first COVID case in Nepal, total of 1 million COVID cases has been registered, of which 12,031 suffered death with fatality rate of 1.21% (Worldometer, 2024). Besides human health, COVID cause severe impact on almost all sectors, notably on socio-economic sector. COVID preventive measures such as lockdown and social distancing measures adopted by government agencies during early stages of COVID outbreak impacted millions of people relying on formal and informal business sector, as entire economic activities were shut down (Bista et al., 2022). Lockdown measures disrupted the local as well as national supply chain, impacting trade and availability of goods, which ultimately became the reason for temporary or permanent closing of small and informal enterprises. People relying on daily wage and information economic activities were forced to lose their income sources or reduce their wage scale, while over millions of migrant workers lost their jobs within month of COVID outbreak. The disruption in supply chain made it difficult for agri-suppliers and retailers to bridge between producers and consumers, creating an issue of availability of goods at local market, and destabilizing the prices for available foods and non-food items. As COVID affected entire world, foreign employment and remittance too got impacted, causing further impact on household income. All of these aforementioned activities significantly impacted the national Gross Domestic product (GDP) growth rate, which falter to negative rate during 2020 (-2.37%, a 9.03% decline from 2019), the first time in past three decade (Ministry of Finance, 2023).

Existing health infrastructures were insufficient to cover the needs, while the shortage of medical supplies, oxygen, test kits and hospital beds became the common scene throughout the pandemic period. Even though government and non-government agencies responded the needs, unpredictability of COVID cases and their impact became the worst-case scenario for health sector. Shutdown of education institutions violated children's fundamental right to access education. As an alternative strategy, education institutions adopted technological mode of teaching learning practices. However, those could not be effective and compromised the quality of learning, due to poor connectivity issues, low internet literacy and weak financial resources to access digital resources. Adoption of digital teaching learning method further pose question mark over the discourse of equal access to

education. Mis-information and dis-information about pandemic and their impact brought fear and uncertainty amongst public, further affecting mental health. Domestic violence, especially Intimate Partner Violence (IPV), emotional violence and sexual violence increased dramatically during pandemic scenario (Bhandari et. al., 2022; Bhatta et. al. 2023).

Government responded to pandemic at varied level i.e. federal, provincial and local government level to mitigate impact of COVID (Basnet et. al. July 2021). As an immediate measure, government-imposed lockdown to prevent the movement of individuals i.e. both in-country movement and cross-country movement, and initiated awareness raising activities through daily briefings, social media platforms and press-media. Policy wise, federal government amended the Quarantine Operation and Management Protocol (2020) and Standards for Home Quarantine (2020). Testing facilities and quarantine centers were expanded across the country and were improved by second wave (Basnet et. al. 2021; Rayamajhee et. al. 2021). Government launched the successful vaccination program during Jan 2021 reaching to 75% of the overall population within six months of its launching period (Pandey et. al. 2022). Local government distributed food items, and hygiene and sanitation items within their geographical territory, and deviated their development budget into COVID prevention and response program.

Private sector stakeholders, non-government agencies and volunteers contributed in both financial and non-financial manner. The media agencies played key role in making people aware about the COVID preventive measures. Enterprises distributed personal protective gears, supported food items and hygiene and sanitation items across the country, and also contributed financially to the Prime Minister Relief Fund. Donor agencies diverted their fund (20%) as mandated by the Social Welfare Council (SWC) from their regular programs into COVID prevention and response focused activities. Regardless of the numerous efforts from government and private actors, the joint effort from diverse stakeholders alongside government agencies were able to address immediate health, sanitation and hygiene specific needs. However, other sector relating to economic development i.e. tourism, remittance, agriculture, small and medium enterprises, etc. remained affected and are yet to get back into pre-pandemic scenario.

The role of NGO to respond COVID crisis

NGOs has been playing crucial role in emergency response activities being the frontliner to serve the communities during the need of crisis, i.e. 2015 Earthquake, 2018 Flood and 2020 COVID pandemic. Amongst 50000+ NGOs, only 206 NGOs officially registered their COVID specific activities under Social Welfare Council (SWC, 2024). Total of 1606 small or larger projects were implemented to respond the needs of COVID affected population. Majority of them being implemented at Bagmati Province. Realizing the urgency to address needs, new projects were approved in shorter time frame (within a week for COVID response projects compared to minimum of six month for regular development projects). Furthermore, SWC amended their policy to shift the development budget to COVID prevention and response activities. 61.02% of the NGOs either deviated their existing funds or approved new projects under same amended policy, enabling their immediate engagement to reduce impact of COVID. Majority of the organization deviated their budget into health (42%), food security (23%), risk communication and community engagement (14%), water, sanitation and hygiene (11%) and education (9%) (SWC, 2021).

NGOs immediately coordinated with government agencies and improved isolation and quarantine centres, distributed sanitation kits, including Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) kits, implemented awareness raising and community sensitization event through use of social media and mass media, provided psychological counselling targeting children and youths, supported financial backward families with food assistance and direct cash assistance (KC, 2022). NGOs either reinforced government-led efforts or filled an institutional void left by federal and local government.

Impact of COVID on NGOs

Including the socio-economic sector across the country, NGOs too had to face series of challenges due to pandemic. Government-imposed lockdown across the countries forced NGOs to shut-down their community-based operations for temporary manner, that lasted for almost a year. Majority (87%) of the NGOs reported in reduced ability to implement the planned activities during first wave, while 58% reported facing similar situation till second wave (KC, 2022). By end of second wave (2021), 14% of the NGOs completely stopped their activities for over a year, and were in risk of complete closing of their operation due to their inability to access communities and implement activities as per actual plan. The inability to

access the communities affected their expenditure trend as well as the detailed implementation plan.

Citing the lockdown scenario and reduced operational modality, numerous NGOs downsized their human resources, causing the loss of income sources for NGO staffs. Alternatively, NGOs adopted the remote management approaches, but were not as successful and effective as the real-time in-person work modalities. Considering the geographical context, technological literacy and networking issues across the remote areas of Nepal, the participation from the communities, and awareness raising activities through online based interventions were comparatively ineffective. Due to the adoption of remote management approaches, NGOs had to depend on the community level leaders for an identification of individuals and families requiring assistance. During the selection process, NGOs found challenging to verify the lists, as their mobility was restricted with lockdown and COVID preventive protocol adopted by government. The case of duplicating the families, communities and the case of well-off families in the beneficiary list were quite common scene during pandemic scenario, posing the question mark over the accountability and integrity of NGOs towards donor agencies as well as the most vulnerable families.

The claim of NGOs being over-reliance on donor agencies and not having flexible implementation plan, and contingency plan came into reality, as NGOs had to wait for lengthier donor approval process, to deviate their regular budget as per emerging need within their territories. The needs and demands from the communities as well as the local government to reduce the impact of COVID was higher compared to the NGO's allocated budget. NGOs often relies on INGOs or UN agencies i.e. donor to make the decision on changing the budget from original plan. The particular funding modality limited the roles and capabilities of NGOs in serving the needy population and institution, causing gap as well as distrust between stakeholders and NGOs.

During early stages of COVID outbreak, NGOs has to face the challenge in designing and implementing the COVID specific activities, due to the lack of clear policies and guidelines from government level. In usual circumstances, NGOs can only implement the activities, approved by Social Welfare Council. Local government also usually provide their assistance to NGOs with approved project and budget only. As federal government delayed the process of having any specific guideline to assist COVID affected families or sector, NGOs had to delay their activities. Government mechanism lack digital documentation

system to track the programme and budget. With onset of COVID outbreak, the case of duplication in effort amongst the NGOs was visible at numerous areas, due to the lack of coordination between NGOs as well as with government agencies, and lack of integrated programmatic database at local government as well as federal government level. Such scenario poses the question mark over the governance and compliance of the NGO and their activities during emergency response scenario.

Mandated by the Social Welfare Council, NGOs deviated 20% of their development budget into COVID prevention and response works, addressing COVID specific needs, but with compromise over achieving the long-term objective development projects. The shift in priorities across the programmatic areas were visible in national level disbursement status as well. The assistance for health sector increased by almost five time during the pandemic period i.e. 87 million USD (2019) to 318 million USD (2020), whilst the disbursement for agriculture, transportation and local development got reduced by 60%, 50%, and 30% respectively (Ministry of Finance, 2023).

In case of the development project being carried out at multiple districts or geographical locations, donor agencies often cut down the budget from less COVID prone areas to higher COVID prone areas, creating the financial void for some of the NGOs, relying on those multi-regional projects. The reduced budget from donor agencies in aforementioned sector forced the NGOs to either change their organizational objective and engage at other thematic areas or close their operation. The small size NGOs with dedicated and specific objectives are the one to be affected the most, unless their agenda align with shifted priorities.

Challenges and Way Forward for NGOs

Continuing from the pandemic scenario, NGOs are still facing diverse challenges to recover from impact of pandemic and continue its mission and objectives. As pandemic forced donor to shift their priorities towards more COVID centric thematic areas, NGOs engaged at other sector find it difficult to get new funding opportunities. NGOs from the less COVID prone areas is getting difficulty to access financial resources for other socio-economic development initiatives within their targeted geographical coverage areas. Overall budget itself has depleted since COVID pandemic period. Donor agencies reduced the funding to Nepalese NGOs by over 40% by end of 2023, compared to that of pre-pandemic scenario (Aid Management Information System, 2024). The reduced funding allocation and

priorities from global diaspora towards Nepalese NGOs in post-pandemic scenario is serious and challenging not only to sustain NGOs in Nepal, but also to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The shifting of priorities and withdrawal of financial resources continue to reduce number of projects, further posing threats in organisational and financial sustainability.

Combatting the challenges posed by COVID pandemic could be the daunting task for NGOs. Downsizing the operational modality, cutting the unwanted areas of expenditures and emphasizing on remote management could be beneficial for temporary period. Considering the shifting of priorities, emphasizing flexible organizational vision, objectives and strategies could help NGOs to grasp any available financial resources. NGOs needs to enhance their capacity and play active role in fundraising activities, as well as coordination and communication with major donor agencies at global diaspora, that increases their potentiality of receiving small to big grants. Government of Nepal mandated private enterprises to invest in community development as part of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), which is yet to be fully tapped by NGOs. The potentiality of partnering with the private enterprises for the allocation of financial resources in social-economic development needs to be explored. NGOs needs to explore the availability of resources provisioned by government agencies, and initiate strong partnership and collaboration adopting multi-stakeholder approach, ensuring transparency and accountability.

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About Author

Author is currently pursuing Ph.D. in Development Planning, Management and Innovation from Asian Institute of Technology. Author holds decade long experience of working at NGOs and INGOs at Nepal and Myanmar in project management, monitoring and evaluation sector.