Disasters in Nepal come in waves. There are crises within crises, layers upon layers of calamities. The country sits on a pyramid of problems: poverty, inequality, exclusion, social injustices, lack of food. On top of that, for more than a year, Nepal has struggled with the pandemic.

A prolonged winter drought caused by the climate crisis recalled the worst wildfire season in living memory — Nepal’s mountains burned from November till March. Then the monsoon arrived with a bang this week, falling on the scorched slopes that could not soak up the water, forcing the runoff into rivers, washing away homes, bridges, roads and hydropower plants.

Disasters are of two kinds: natural calamities that hit without warning, and slow-moving crises.

Earthquakes, floods and landslides get all the media attention, but silent emergencies do not. There are no press briefings every evening to announce that dozens of children died yesterday all over Nepal due to malnutrition or preventable causes.

Natural disasters are not natural. Floods by themselves do not ‘wreak havoc’; they do so when houses are along their banks, and poorly built roads set off landslides. This week’s rains may have been beyond our control, but we should have been prepared for inevitable floods and landslides in high-risk zones.

Sindhupalchowk was hit by both the 25 April and 12 May earthquakes in 2015, which caused massive slope failures. Haphazard roads increased the danger, and two landslides blocked the Melamchi and Indrawati on Tuesday evening.

Both rivers burst through, and the torrent of liquid mud arrived at the confluence of the rivers at about the same time, overflowing into the new houses built on the flood plain. Since much of the sand and boulders have been mined by construction contractors, the water’s velocity was much more destructive.

Elsewhere, at least 12 under-construction hydropower plants have been badly damaged. The worst hit was a 46MW project on the Madi Khola in Kaski that was nearing completion.

None of this was unexpected. Anil Pakhale of the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Authority had warned in this paper last week that this year’s monsoon season would see above average rainfall in Nepal.

Last year was the worst monsoon season in the past two decades with 100 major landslides, nearly 300 killed and 70 missing. Most of the landslides were in Sindhupalchowk, and caused by unregulated road constructions on fragile slopes.

There was a flood of recrimination after last year’s disasters. But there has been no let-up in rampant road-building. This week, Nepal’s seven provinces passed budgets in which most of their revenue will come from quarry and sand-mining contracts.

With politicians distracted by one upmanship and local governments still micro-managed by parties in Kathmandu, it will probably be the same this year, too.

This week’s disasters will stay in the headlines for a few more days. Until the next year’s monsoon.

Kunda Dixit
Famine has hit the country, and more people are going hungry due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The outbreak has underscored the need for better nutrition and healthcare.

Childhood malnutrition in Nepal has roots in political failure, the same reason more children are going hungry during the pandemic. Malnutrition is more than the availability of food and access to clean water. It is also compounded by partitioning, casteism, and gender discrimination. It is a result of poor governance, lack of accountability and corruption.

But nothing is stopping newly-empowered local governments with technical and financial backing from the centre to now achieve results that Kathmandu’s past centralised governments could only dream of. The training of teachers on climate-smart agriculture, and landing the landscape in a way that benefits them.

Children are hungry because of poverty. Their families are poor because of state neglect. We must draw that connection between lack of food and failure to deliver by elected representatives. That is the real scandal the evening news bulletins should be highlighting.

If truth be told, in the current climate of tension, many of the roads are closed and the internet connection is poor, making it difficult to deliver the news. The government is not announcing anything, and the Ministry of Health is not providing any updates.

Two weeks after the ghastly death of a young woman in Kathmandu, the BBC reported that Nepal has not yet fully recovered from the lockdown. The country is still grappling with the pandemic, and the economy remains severely impacted.

On the other hand, the government has announced that it will provide free rice and cooking gas to the poor. However, the distribution is slow, and many people have not received their aid.

In conclusion, it is crucial to address the root causes of poverty and malnutrition in Nepal. The government must prioritize education, healthcare, and economic development to ensure a brighter future for the country's children.
HIGHEST HONORS COME WITH HIGHEST STANDARDS

We have been awarded the Diamond Status by APEX Health Safety independent audit powered by SimpliFlying for our efforts in ensuring the highest standards of hygiene and safety for our passengers.
E-vehicles prepare for post-lockdown boom

Importers rush to fill new demand for battery-powered cars after Nepal's tax reduction

Nepal’s electric car importers are preparing to meet a post-pandemic demand for electric vehicles after the government in its new budget scrapped taxes imposed last year. The new budget presented by Finance Minister Yubesh普查 on 29 May completely repealed excise duty on battery operated cars, while cutting customs duty down to the earlier 10%.

Importers of electric vehicles are now rushing to cash in on an expected rise in customer demand once the lockdown is lifted. In addition to the brands that have a head start in sales in Nepal like Hyundai, Kia, Mahindra, MG, India’s Tata Motors is planning an aggressive promotion of its electric Nexon model (pictures) after its launch in 2020.

Petrol and diesel Nexons are already a familiar silhouette in Nepal’s roads since they were launched in 2017, and Tata hopes to reap here the success it has in India with the electric version of the compact SUV.

More than 4,000 electric Nexons have been sold in India since its launch in January, with the slowdown only because of the second wave of lockdowns. This makes the Nexon India’s best-selling electric vehicle with 64% market share already.

The redesigned Nexon EV SUV with its Ziptron powertrain looks identical to the fossil version, except for its blue highlights, projector lens fog and sleeker front grill. E-Nexon scores better than their Korean and Japanese counterparts with 200 km clearing underneath (compared to 177 km in the MG, for instance).

The electric motor packs quite a punch in the torque department, giving the Nexon formidable acceleration (0-60km in 6.0 seconds) that will come in handy while overtaking a line of overloaded trucks on the Tribhuvan Highway. A petrol Nexon needs Rs 6,500 to fully top up its 41.4l fuel tank, while it will cost less than Rs 8,000 in the electricity bill for a complete charge.

The only downside of the Nexon with its 30.5 kWh battery pack is perhaps its range which, at 313km on a full charge, is slightly less than the Kia Niro (455km) and the Hyundai Kona (424km) both of which have 64 kWh batteries — but then those models cost more.

Besides the tax break, this is what is making all electric vehicles financially attractive over the long term, Nepali consumers will now find both the upfront cost and the energy savings of -e-vehicles to be much more competitive than fossil fuel cars.

According to the TATA distributors in Nepal, they have not yet announced the price of the electric Nexon, but it is suggested that it will be less than the Rs 4.6 million price tag of the petrol Nexon. Nepal has announced it will stop selling petroleum cars by 2031, and this is only because neighbours India and China have also announced that they will only make electric or hydrogen-fuelled cars by that time. Other electric cars in the market include the Kia Niro which had stopped being imported after last year’s budget cuts that took its price tag to a whopping Rs 43.5 million.

But with the new budget, revision, the price is down to Rs 7 million again. Similarly, the Hyundai Kona is priced at Rs 5.8 million, depending on the capacity, while its lithium electric sedan is Rs 6.5 million.

MG’s Chinese-made E55 is also quite popular with the budget car last year, with dozens of the vehicles stuck at customs because they arrived after the tax increase. The price of these SUVs compare well with the Niro and Kona at Rs 7 million. Other cheaper Chinese electric cars are also poised to enter the market.

The pioneer of electric vehicles in Nepal is the Mahindra e2o, and it is still the most popular for city driving with a range of 130km, a general clearance of 170mm and a price that has now come down to Rs 3.3 million for the 4-door model.

Former finance minister Yubesh普查 last year slapped excise duties on electric vehicles of 30-40% depending on their capacity, and levied customs duty of 60%. He justified it saying electric SUVs were luxury items, and the government needed to augment revenue to fight the Covid-19 pandemic.

This pushed e-vehicles out of the market with a 120% spike in prices at a time when sales had just started to pick up, and various brands of electric vehicles were gaining popularity because of their expanded range.

Finance Minister Pradhan’s move appears to be geared to reducing the petroleum import bill, and also to increase electricity consumption as Nepal’s new hydropower plants come online this year, giving an energy surplus.

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Turkish Airlines’ to Newark

Turkish Airlines commenced daily flights to Newark, New Jersey from June, making it the carrier’s 10th destination in the USA and 32nd worldwide to be connected from Kathmandu via Istanbul. It is planned to expand our route presence in North America with the opening of our New York gateway, and look forward to welcoming travelers aboard the new service to experience our world-class service, award-winning catering, and world famous Turkish hospitality,” says Turkish Airlines board chairman M Ilyer Atay.

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Germany renews support

Germany has pledged EUR 4 million to Nepal, mainly for health sector until 2023 and financial cooperation until 2025. Health gets EUR 2.7 million, and the rest for renewable energy development.

With its focus of health, sustainable renewable development and energy, Germany is strongly committed to achieving development together with the Nepali people. “We see an important role in the civil society, which is an indispensable part of any development effort in Nepal,” says German Ambassador to Nepal Roland Schneider.

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Honda CB 350 DLX in town

Spykar Trading Company, Private Limited, authorised distributor of Honda, has launched the Honda CB 350 DLX in Nepal. Chairman of the company, Saurabh Jain, launched the machine, which is priced at Rs75,000, also a YouTube video premiere.

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Aid for Education

The World Bank has authorized $60 million to improve the quality of Nepal’s higher education, scale up online learning, and expand access to academic institutions for underprivileged and vulnerable students.

The program will expand targeted scholarships to help disadvantaged students to stay in school and pursue academic programs and support emergency grants to higher education institutions in need and diaspora-afflicted areas in Nepal,” says Marion Aigle, World Bank’s Program Task Team leader.

Aid for World Bank countries’ vulnerable students: “Improving access to quality higher education and helping students acquire the skills that are in demand in the labour market will contribute to Nepal’s Covid-19 recovery and strengthen its resilience.”

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Remittance inflow up

In the months, Nepal continues to see a rise in remittances from its overseas workers by July 2021 to May 2022, compared to the same period last year. The foreign remitters told the workers abroad have sent Rs21 billion in the period, which is up 19% from last year. Despite the pandemic, and perhaps because of it, remittances to families that have lost their sources back home during the lockdown and the economic crisis.

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European Covid relief

Austria, Slovenia and Malta of the European Union have donated antigen tests, pulse oximeters, ITU masks, protective gear and other medical equipment in response to Nepal’s earlier call for support. Similarly, the UK has already sent in units from London, France, Belgium and Germany with more emergency supplies from Italy, Switzerland and Lithuania to come.

“The team from the pandemic, Team Europe has stood in solidarity with Nepal and we will continue to do so, no one is safe until everyone is,” says EU Ambassador to Nepal Roland Schneider.

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Indian Army Covid Support

Indian Ambassador to Nepal Benu Nanda Kauri handed over a consignment of medical items, Rs 971, ventilators, 130 masks and 500 PPE kits from the Indian Army to the Nepalese Army on 17 June to fight the second wave.

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Ncell revises call rates

Ncell has revised rates towards International Call between rates 15 on 20th in line with new rates. Calls to Fiji, Malta, Germany, Sweden, Norway, France, the UK, and Japan, Korea, Turkey, Lebanon, Armenia.

Ncell, which is a joint venture between Bharti Airtel and Orange of France, will now charge Rs 4 per minute for all calls with a 30-second per minute applicable rates. Earlier, the call charges for these countries ranged from Rs 4.99 per minute.

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Europen Covid relief

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What can we do till vaccines arrive?

A unique South Asian initiative with proven success in saving lives by mass masking-up

- Mushfiq Mobarak, Maha Rahman, Satchit Balsari

This op-ed is being simultaneously published in The Indian Express (India), The Daily Star (Bangladesh), Nepali Times (Nepal) and Dawn (Pakistan).

In February 2021, Covid-19 numbers started increasing again in South Asia with official daily case counts rising by over 400,000 in India, 6,000 in Pakistan and 7,000 in Bangladesh, stressing health systems. The massive surge in India seems spilled over across the border into Nepal, leading to "apocalyptic" scenes of overwhelmed hospitals.

This virus knows no borders. Countries have experienced a catastrophic global cooperation among scientists, policy makers and society. Despite a wide variation in how nations have responded to the pandemic, the most successful nations adhere to science, and attention to local context. The deadly surge in 2021 makes a regionally-coordinated, evidence-driven strategy even more critical.

The virus continues to challenge us with its mutations and new lines of attack. If we are to move at the speed of the virus, it is necessary to construct multisectoral governmental regions to devise new solutions and fragil innovations that can be applied across South Asia.

Given our shared and mostly similar social, economic and cultural contexts, local successes must find means to be amplified across the region.

India is not the only one, given the troubled history South Asian countries share. The mutual mistrust appears to have hit a new low, as SAARC has not even managed to hold its summer summit since 2014.

But today we write a positive, hopeful story about a new consortium we are involved in, with core team members from India, Pakistan, Nepal, and Bangladesh jointly developing Covid prevention strategies. The emerging consortium provides an example of how neighbours can work together for mutual benefit, despite political differences.

Every country in South Asia has struggled to ensure consistent mask-wearing to stem the spread of Covid variants, priorities, traditions, and aversions to behaviour changes are more similar across South Asia than we care to admit. These communalities mean that interventions that have been successful in changing behaviour in one place are likely applicable in other parts of the Subcontinent.

We have experienced this with Comprehensive COVID Mitigation (CLTS) campaign to solve the problem of open defecation – originally developed by Bangladesh NGO in partnership with an Indian consultant and now broadly applied across South Asia.

The Grameen Bank microcredit model was an indigenous South Asian innovation that spread rapidly. BRAC’s recent ‘Genderium’ program targeted to decrease the rate of poor women in Bangladesh was replicated with success in India and Pakistan.

India’s neighbor social protection ecosystem with Author IDs and Jan Dhan accounts serves as a model (albeit with cautionary notes) for other countries in the region.

E-government projects in Pakistan, like eVax and Citizen Feedback Model have been replicated and provide strong models to be deployed regionally and globally.

The new pan-South Asian consortium in response to Covid-19 evolved out of an experiment conducted in Bangladesh, that successfully changes social norms around mask-wearing in rural communities. We observed that a combination of No-cost distribution, offering information, reinforcing the messages in markets, mosques and other public places, and Modelling and endorsement by community leaders (NORM) leads to large, sustained increases in mask usage that persisted beyond the period of active intervention.

This four-part NORM intervention was originally examined in a cohort of 350,000 individuals across 680 villages. BRAC is implementing the model to reach 81 million people across Bangladesh.

The team is now partnering with several organisations across Pakistan, India, Nepal, and Bangladesh to start adapting the model to fit each country’s social context, and set up partnerships to pilot, implement, tweak, and learn.

The Self Employed Women’s Association (SEWA) quickly implemented the model to reach over one million members in Gujarat. An additional 3.5 million masks were shipped from Bangladesh to support SEWA’s outreach to other states. Labor’s Commissioner worked with our research team to adapt the NORM model to an urban setting, and devised new creative ideas to improve effectiveness.

For example, it has prepared to deliver masks at doorsteps using Pakistan’s postal service, and is targeting beneficiaries on the basis of billing information from utility companies. Philanthropists and private corporations are sponsoring the masks. We are re-importing some of these innovations back to India, inspiring further scale-up in India, China, UAE, Rajasthan, and Karnataka.

Effective mask promotion requires visits to thousands of village clinics, and these village clinics can be used to prepare for more effective community-based healthcare responses. To that end, a host of physicians, scientists and community-based organizations created the Swastha Community Science Alliance, committing to pragmatic, science-based protocols to manage mild and moderate cases of Covid-19 in rural India, where institutional health care access is limited.

These guidelines (available at https://science.swastha.app) were translated to training tools for healthcare workers by digital health innovators like Noors Health, making them widely available across the region.

NORM implementation teams based in Lahore, Almora, Peshawar, Hyderabad, Delhi, Kathmandu, and Delhi are learning from each other’s successes and failures. The process usually starts with the original research team sharing evidence-based insights with implementing agencies, as the implementers adapt the design, co-create localized implementation protocols, and are thrusted together in a collaborative environment across countries where each implementing team iterates while learning from others’ mistakes and successes, and all our teams are connected in an active learning system that allows us to correct in real-time.

This coalition is poised to change mask-wearing norms amongst hundreds of millions of people across all of South Asia.

The CSA is working with partners across rural, tribal belts around India, a team of physicians from India and the Indian diaspora work with local implementing partners to support design, implementation and monitoring of home-based programs and Covid-19 centre providing rigorously protocolled treatment for moderate cases, with oxygen, preening and steroids.

Combining the NORM and CSA interventions, our Masking-Treatment-Vaccination Preparation (MTV) approach offers a sensible strategy to mitigate the pandemic until universal vaccination is achieved. These are regional solutions that thoughtfully apply scientifically sound interventions to the local context.

The Covid-19 crisis has increased policymakers’ appetite for evidence-informed policy measures that can be quickly implemented to stem transmission. This drive for quick action has created some unprecedented opportunities for enhanced cross-country collaborations that are normally hampered by politics and mistrust.

We hope the consortium that first formed around mask-promotion, and now around science-based treatment approaches, that developed quickly and organically without regard to national boundaries, can serve as a model for a broader and deeper collaborative ecosystem that endures.

We need to come together to solve problems that affect all. Let the lasting legacy of this pandemic be a new era of partnership in social innovations that can benefit all South Asians.

Mushfiq Mobarak is a Professor of Economics, health and gender at the BRAC Centre and Director of the BRAC Platform on Innovation and Scale. Twitter: @mushfiq_mobarak

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nepaltimes.com

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Bardia’s wild elephants are also on the move

- Sali Ram Chaudhary in Bardia

Before Covid-19 and lockdowns, I would be guiding tourists around Bardia National Park this time of year. But the pandemic has meant empty homesteads along the Khaa Wildlife Corridor that connects wilderness areas of India and Nepal. Local villagers may have lost their income from eco-tourism, but the absence of people during the lockdown means that wild animals have reestablished their home.

Even with the restrictions on travel and searching pre-monsoon pastures of the plains of eastern Nepal, I cannot bring myself to stay indoors. I am involved with the Khaa Wildlife Corridor Homestay Management Committee, which means I used to organise jungle safaris and wildlife excursions, showing visitors what Bardia has to offer. But it is not merely a job for me — I have been romancing these forests near my home since childhood and been passionately involved in nature conservation.

On 16 June, I was on my way into the forest when I saw a herd of about 40 elephants, ranging from calves to adults, moving just half a kilometre from the village. To say it was a sight to behold is an understatement — it is extremely rare to see such a large herd of elephants close to human settlements. Just as rare as it has been to see the closely-watched herd moving across Yunnan Province in China.

Elephants in Bardia usually migrate through the Shiv Community Forest in Madhuban Municipality to the Kaziranga Wildlife Sanctuary in India’s Uttar Pradesh during September and October, and return to Nepal as the monsoon approaches. It is a rhythm dictated by tens of thousands of years of migration of the ancestors of these great herds.

Although this group was the largest I have ever seen, it is quite common to see smaller elephant herds within the Shiv Community Forest.

This year, possibly because of the lack of human movement, the herd didn’t bother to stay within the jungle corridor in their annual migration back into Nepal, but marched right through the villages. I followed the elephants along their flightless route, the diet consists of acorns, chestnuts, other hard fruit and insects, particularly termites.

Our baby Hodgson’s Flying Squirrel was found in a rhododendron forest, but according to ‘Guiding Monarchs of the World’ (2013), the general habitat of flying squirrels comprises of evergreen, deciduous to coniferous forests at elevations of up to 4,000 m. The general habitat of flying squirrels is mostly forested areas, ranging from the Tarsis to the Himalayan foothills. Their population is not known, but they are declining due to poaching for bushmeat and habitat loss. Some local people believe it is inauspicious to have a flying squirrel nest near the house, and it is unlucky to see one in the air. They are then killed or chased away with a stick.

Although listed, flying squirrels are not protected by law in Nepal, and see the least studied mammals in the country, probably because of their cryptic and secretive habits. Flying squirrels play key role in predator-prey relations, seed dispersal to pollination, but they never harm humans. Hodgson’s Flying Squirrels are listed in the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) Red List and The National Red List Series of mammals in Nepal. According to the Red List Series, besides the local Rig name, the Nepali name for flying squirrels is the same as the scientific name, but occasionally the generic name for flying squirrel is used. Every day after the first sighting in Iam, I checked up on the baby flying squirrel and was glad to see it doing well up in the nest. I am now back in Khimbuwa, but often wonder where it is now. I am glad to see its nest is quite well and has been brought down by a large monkey.

Bashu Baral is a co-author with the Small Mammal Conservation and Research Foundation in Kathmandu.

Yes, there are flying squirrels in Nepal, too

- Bashu Baral in Iam

A baby flying squirrel nesting in a Rhododendron forest is not something one sees every day in Nepal. The thrill of this recent close encounter with a rare species of the Giant Flying Squirrel in Iam was indescribable.

As a young student of the conservation biology, I am always looking for success stories of the forest in the wild. In March, just before the lockdown, I was part of a biodiversity field survey organised by Small Mammals Conservation and Research Foundation in eastern Nepal.

A three-hour bike ride north from Iam Bazar along rough roads brought us to Manabata, next to the Mai River tumbling over big boulders. We set off with team members Lifta Dalal and two local guides Main Prasad Rai and Birbal Rai.

We went on our way to set up camera traps. Passing a rhododendron forest at an elevation of 1,800 m, a nest high up in a tree caught our attention.

We went closer, but this alerted the animal in the nest. Getting closer, it was clear that it was no bird, but what could it be?

One of the local guides said it could be the panda — people here call it a ‘Peposo’. And indeed, it was a baby Hodgson’s Giant Flying Squirrel (Petaurista magnificus), looking like a cuddly teddy bear sitting in its nest.

To take a close look, I climbed a nearby tree and noticed that the baby squirrel was not exactly perturbed by my presence. But it was startled, and watched me with its dark eyes wide open. The grey was built of glancing twigs, dried leaves (food with fur and moss for cushioning. The mother squirrel might have gone somewhere to search for food, leaving the baby alone on its own.

Eventually, I got too close and the squirrel was under a huge bush. And it felt a sense of excitement so near such a rare and majestic looking baby of the least known squirrel species in the world. I took some photos, and climbed down.

Squirrels fall under the Sciuridae family in the Rodentia order, meaning that in the evolutionary past rodents and squirrels branched out from the same order. Squirrels are quite common, and in some cities they are even regarded as pests. They have a similar body, long bushy tail and arboreal habits that make them good tree climbers.

Flying squirrels are rare from the same family, and evolved as their ancestors, instead of scurrying down a tree to climb another one, found it easier to glide over. Eventually, they evolved the distinctive membrane of skin (called the patagium) between their front wrists down to the ankles.

Flying squirrels are nocturnal, as opposed to the daytime habits of other wingless tree squirrels. Their size can range from the tiny (Pygmy flying squirrel, Petaurillus Nagi), to the giant flying squirrel Petaurista (1.5 kg). Like

A Hodgson’s Giant Flying Squirrel baby nesting in a Rhododendron tree.
Despite its increasing popularity among researchers there is still a big gap in knowledge about the habits and spread of red panda across Asia. The red panda is not related to the giant panda in China, and is actually the only living member of the genus Ailurus and the family Ailuridae, even though they were earlier thought to be related to raccoons.

A recent review paper by Griffith University and University of Southern Queensland in Australia, Kathmandu University College and the Red Panda Network shows that despite red pandas being studied for over 193 years, there is still a significant knowledge gap impeding its conservation in the wild and improved management of captive populations.

Lead author of the study, Shikha Karki at Griffith University, says, “We know that the red panda is an endangered indicator species of Himalayan forests. It is also associated with livelihoods as well as sentiments of local people. It is important to have a baseline to identify what needs to be done to save red pandas.”

Despite conservation efforts, red pandas are still threatened by habitat degradation, poaching, and illegal trade. The study shows that the animals need support of local communities if they are to survive into the future. Reviewing 175 scientific articles on red pandas, the first dating back to 1827, the study found most research was focused on the biological aspect of the species and not so much the socio-cultural and environmental dimensions. Wild red pandas were less studied than captive populations, and the research was predominantly conducted in China, followed by Nepal and India.

Most of the researchers were from non-range countries, and the study felt that it was important to empower and help build the capacity of local people and institutions to enable them to assist red panda conservation as citizen scientists.

“It is critically important to have more research related to identifying and prioritising ecosystem goods and services provided by red panda habitats to the local people and ways of establishing good governance,” says Sonam Tashi Lama, co-author of the paper.

Tek Maraseni of the University of Southern Queensland, and co-author of the paper, says the study underlines the need for red panda research in underrepresented range countries, and assessment of climate change impact, ecosystem services of red panda habitat, bamboo distribution status, population estimation, and population dynamics, behaviours, and movement ecology.

As two new species of red pandas have been recognised recently, it is down to important to further validate this with studies from underrepresented habitats. Their numbers are now down to less than 10,000 in the wild across Asia, and there has been more than a 50% population decline over the last three generations.

Nepal has only about 500 red panda left in 24 districts, and 70% of its habitat lies outside protected areas in the country, mainly in community forests. Nepal has prioritised red panda research and conservation since the 1980s, but the numbers of animals is still in decline.

Tim Cedman at Griffith University, another co-author of the study, says local community need support to deter poachers, and find better alternatives to the illegal wildlife trade, especially important during the pandemic, when many people’s livelihoods are threatened.

“This senior work on red panda research and conservation provides solid direction for its conservation and research measures in the coming days,” said Rishi Phuyel, Nepalese Country Director of Red Panda Network.

Nepal’s Red Panda Conservation Action Plan is important, but we also need partners in other range countries to cooperate in expanding research and maintain habitat connectivity.”
VIRTUAL EVENTS

Reading Circles
Join us for an online reading and discussion of library Nepal’s virtual Reading Circles, a discussion on inclusivity and gender identities, and how queer authors navigate and express themselves through different mediums under the theme ‘Queerness. Gender & Sexuality’. Send an email to r808x808@yahoo.com for reading materials and the meeting link.
23 June, 6pm-8pm

Museum in Motion
‘Evoking Emptiness: Contemporary Art and Buddhist Soksia Practice’, the third edition of ‘Lumino’. Museum and online series, Museum in Motion will feature artists Ang Litim Sherpa and Chhewang Tashi and be facilitated by curator Harsha Shrivestva.
20 June

ART EXHIBITIONS

Art exhibition
Look at the Museum of Nepal’s Art’s online exhibition, Shikabaliwata ka puskarola, which will include traditional and contemporary Nepali artwork in various mediums.
23 July

Space Apps Challenge
NASA’s Space Apps challenge is 10th year in 2021, join the annual space apps hackathon with coders, entrepreneurs, scientists, designers, students, builders, artists, and technologists. Go to Nepal Astronomical Society (NASA)’s Facebook page for details about how Nepali participants can participate.
20 June

Sooriya virtual studio
Join Sooriya Wellness and yoga centre’s virtual studio for yoga sessions available to everyone for self-practice at home. Sessions are available on prior appointment. Go to the Sooriya Wellness Facebook page for details.
20 June

BOOKSHOPS

Thuprai Books
Find and get books delivered from Thuprai. The online bookshop has e-books, some of which are free, and audiobooks are available as well. Visit https://thuprai.com

Books Mandala
Get new and used books, including Buddhist literature, travel guides, fiction, and non-fiction. Visit https://booksmandala.com

Patan Book Shop
Readers of Lablup can buy necessary books at Patan Book Shop. Choose from a vast collection of fiction and non-fiction books from Nepal. Visit https://www.patanbooks.com

Book Paradise
Find fiction, non-fiction, as well as educational materials at Book Paradise. Visit https://bookparadise.com

TAKEAWAY & DELIVERY

Dhokaima Cafe
Look at Dhokaima’s menu online for takeaway. Try the Dhokaima dub sandwich, shredded pork, or get desserts and customised cakes. (01)5525113

Gelato
Nothing beats the humidity of the monsoon like ice cream. Browse the menu at Foodmandu to get ice cream from the danza makers and cream to apple cinnamon and every flavour in between.

Tasneem’s Kings Kitchen
Order Tasneem’s mouth-watering authentic Banna Muslim cuisine. Browse through the menu for favourite, Angie Vangal, and others. Call or order from Foodmandu 9811711717

Pangra Express
Experience the best at Nepal’s street food and fast food. From Pangra Express: Get the Classi Chicken Mama, spicy vegetable noodles, Shu Phalo Chicken, and the Dynamite momo. Foodmandu and Bhat Dates will deliver. 9816510265

Dechening Garden Restaurant
Dechening is among the best restaurants for Tibetan and Nepali food in Kathmandu. Look at the menu on the Bhat Date app and order Tibetan specialties, including tiny momos and Pork Dupas, Phung Sha rice noodles, and more. (981)4717488

ONLINE GROCERIES

Kirana
Get essential items, including food and beverages, meat, dairy, and baked goods, as well as spices and pet products, household items, from https://merrickana.com

Himal Mart
Get groceries delivered at home without paying additional delivery charges from Himal Mart. Details at https://www.himalmart.com

Metro Tarkari
Order fresh seasonal fruits and vegetables, as well as local items like Mars rice and potatoes from across Nepal from Metro Tarkari. Shop at https://www.metrotarkari.com

AIR QUALITY INDEX

Air Quality Index as measured between 1AM 16 June - 9AM 17 June at the US Embassy, Phara Durbar
As expected, the highs and lows can vary over the past week held the AQI within healthy limits. The rise expected most of the particulates from the air in Kathmandu, and the onlookers keeping mar shall velocities of all the roads also helped to a lot. Moreover, under the rains during last week’s meeting, the AQI had jumped to a high daily average on Friday

OUR PICK

In Stephen Fries’ acclaimed 1993 Irish comedy-drama My Dinner with Andre, Omar, a young Pakistanis living in London, is the commensal of his late, a former journalist who struggled with alcoholism. The film follows Omar’s monastic and melancholic romance with his childhood friend Andre, the leader of a group of right-wing street punks – as they talk up and take care of a lunatic named by Omar’s uncle, Stan Daniel Lorrie, speed Jeffy, Roslan Seth, and Shirley Anne Field.

YOU HAVE HIGH STANDARDS. SO DO WE!
Build back greener

The pandemic offers us the chance to tread lighter on the land and allow nature to restore itself. But most of us were too busy to find the time to do so. We have begun communicating more with family and friends. The pandemic also offers us a chance to rethink our lives, and our purpose.

We have started consuming less because we realised that we do not need as much as we thought. There have been significant changes in consumer behaviour that have been good for the planet. Because we use, and waste, less.

The world is recovering from years of damage that we were so disproportionately placing on the planet's resources. In Nepal, we have seen signs of the ecosystem starting to rebalance itself. The question is whether government policies will reflect this in the coming years.

It is terrific what Covid-19 has done to the world, but it has also shown us how to improve the planet's health, and with it, the human condition. We desperately want to get back to our everyday lives, but being isolated has reminded us that even if we go back to the way we lived, we have to be mindful of our impact on the planet.

We can rebuild the economy, but the damage humans are inflicting on nature is irreversible. The pandemic provides the chance to take active to restructure the way we live.

Anjana Rajbhandary

What would start as fever, chills, and flu-like symptoms began to lead to more severe cases of cardiac injury, respiratory failure and death. Those with pre-existing health conditions and the elderly were particularly vulnerable.

The pandemic hotspots shifted from China to northern Italy, New York, then it was Brazil and the second wave is ravaging India and Nepal. People were locked in at home for months to stop the spread, and it came at an additional cost – the rise of a mental health crisis globally.

The Covid-19 pandemic has affected everyone and every aspect of our lives. The lockdowns may have helped contain the virus, but it destabilised economies, businesses went bankrupt, people lost jobs, again exacerbating the impact on mental health in societies. The coronavirus emerged because of the over-exploitation of nature by a globalised mass consumption society. But the pandemic has allowed us to think about that, and also allowed nature to begin to restore itself.

Studies have shown that lockdowns in response to the pandemic have significantly improved the air quality in many big cities due to the shutting down of industries and fewer vehicles on the roads. From Kathmandu, the Himalayas suddenly came into view. The restrictions and lockdowns led to a decrease in economic activity, resulting in reduced air pollution and emission of greenhouse gases. Ironicaly, while the virus was attacking the respiratory system, countermeasures taken against its spread were also making it easier to breathe.

The ban on international travel also helped reduce the emission of greenhouse gases, dramatically demonstrating the path to reducing the impact of the climate crisis – the need to cap carbon dioxide emissions.

The collapse of tourism affected the economies of countries like Nepal, but it has allowed nature to regenerate. There is less waste along the trekking trails, less garbage.

Across the world, people are consuming much less than they used to. It is hard to say if this frugality will persist in the post-pandemic era, but it has set a precedent. Many of us are focusing more on our health, and have adopted better eating habits.

For nearly two months now, there is also less noise pollution. Kathmandu's streets are silent, no roar of trucks, no honking from work, and few jets overhead. Persistent ambient clamour is known to affect our physiological and physical health. With less unwanted noise, the soothing sounds of nature are more audible with bird song, frogs in ponds, and even the rustle of leaves on trees. The sound of silence, and comforting natural sounds carry many mental health benefits.

Cities attract people because of economic opportunities and their cosmopolitanism. The absence of people in these urban centres during the pandemic has allowed them to breathe, revere themselves organically – showing us that we have to tread more lightly on the environment. For once, the focus has shifted from people to nature so that it has a chance to recover from years of abuse.

All of this has come at a great price, no doubt, but Covid-19 has also shown us what we need to do for a sustainable lifestyle to reduce anthropogenic carbon and the burden on nature. If we focus away from the negative impact the pandemic has had on us, and redirect it to the nature around us, we see many positive outcomes that also have beneficial effects on our own lives.

We have started focusing more on relationships because earlier...
Nepal’s epidemic of hunger

Malnutrition among Nepali children pre-dates Covid-19, but the pandemic has made it worse.

Even before this crisis, the lack of food was already the biggest cause of childhood illness and death, and parts of Nepal have rates of malnutrition that are highest in the world. Complications due to malnutrition cause more than half the childhood deaths in the country, according to a UNICEF report. In addition to the risk of losing their lives, children with malnutrition have stunted physical and mental growth, are severely underweight, and their immune systems are compromised.

Nepal’s hunger hotspots are three districts in Purnia, Sunsari, and Surkhet in Province 2 of the far western mountains. The 2019 Nepal Multiple Indicator Cluster survey found that 41% of children in Sunsari and Surkhet Province are short for their age, and 44% of children in Province 2 are similarly stunted. The survey showed that a third of Nepal’s children show signs of stunting due to lack of food, and 12% are wasted, and 24% are underweight.

“We have found that up to 76% of children who die every year in Province 2 do so due to malnutrition, and the main reason for that is extreme poverty,” says Pushpa Parajuli at Nepal’s Family Welfare Division. “With the ongoing pandemic, and extreme poverty, we can’t solve malnutrition. And to do that those families need more land to farm, or a means of livelihood.”

But malnutrition is not just about food availability. Many children even from better-off families suffer from poor nutrition because of frequent diarrhoea caused by contaminated water, poor sanitation, and frequent illness. In October 2019, amidst much fanfare, Nepal was officially declared the first country in South Asia. But here in Ramshy village of Dhankuta district that is noticeably not true.

These 150 households from the Musahar community live in the village, and half of them have

Nepal’s local governments lead from the front

The elected village heads in Khotan join the Covid-19 frontlines

Marta KC

Silblata Devkota of Dipung Chuchchhumsa rural municipality in Khotan had been isolating at home for four days after testing positive for Covid-19 in late May when she fell unconscious. There was no one to take her to hospital.

Devkota’s relatives informed Dipung Chuchchhumsa rural municipality Chair Shubendra Rai about her situation. Rai immediately drove to Devkota’s house and took her to hospital himself.

Devkota is one of many Covid-positive residents of this village in Khotang district of eastern Nepal whom Chairperson Rai has helped this month. With the vice-chair Sapana Rai, the two leaders have been actively on the frontlines as the deadly second Covid wave that has battered the country’s urban centres swamps rural Nepal.

Out of 300 Covid-19 PCR tests done in the village, 49 came back positive last month. And as cases began to rise, the only ambulance operating within the municipality was unable to attend to the increased number of calls. So Shubendra Rai donated a PCR and turned his official vehicle into an ambulance. He now drives Covid-infected patients to hospital himself, spending more time on the road than he does at his desk.

Inaccessibility to roads in some areas of the municipality means that Rai’s vehicle sometimes cannot reach near enough for people to walk to. When that happens, Rai goes into their homes and carries them out to his vehicle himself. He has to be hands-on, he explains, in order to reduce the risk of the infected person’s family members being exposed to the virus. “I wear a PPE and masks at all times, so the chances of me contracting the virus are relatively less than when relatives come in contact with infected people while helping them,” says Rai.

Vice-chair Sapana Rai has been equally involved in the efforts, working with Shubendra Rai to provide aid to Covid-positive residents, take people to get antigen tests at the temporary Covid hospital, and arrange for isolation facilities depending on the severity of individual Covid cases.

The municipality has set up a 23-bed isolation centre with supplementary oxygen. “Asymptomatic individuals are told to isolate at home,” explains Shubendra Rai, “while those who show serious symptoms are kept in this isolation facility.” The two village leaders have also been coordinating to send officially Covid-19 patients for treatment to Kathmandu, Bhaktapur or Chaitali.

Testing has also been ramped up across each tole to manage the spread of the virus before the situation gets out of hand. In fact, as health workers go door to door conducting antigen tests, Rai is usually right alongside them. “I have been accompanying health workers to keep the morale up,” he says.

So far, 14 patients in the municipality have recovered from the disease during the second wave. Khotang is among the few districts in Nepal not under prohibitory orders. As such, the local government has advised Dipung Chuchchumsa residents to stay home unless strictly necessary to go outside.

Additionally, they have tightening security measures, putting out an order that requires anyone entering the municipality from outside to have a negative test report.

The local government has also been actively pushing out campaigns on Covid prevention. “We have been providing support to Covid-positive individuals while simultaneously simultaneously running awareness programmes across the municipality,” says vice-chair Sapana Rai.

Meanwhile, constant exposure to the virus has meant that Rajendra Rai has not come in close contact with his own family in a month. He spends his days working and distributing when he gets home from work. “I come back late, take my meals in a separate room, and don’t venture into the kitchen or where his wife cooks,” he says.

Rai believes in leading from the front. “Their families are not these kind of people to give out orders to others while we stay in a bubble of safety,” he says. “We were elected to serve the people. If we unite now to fight this virus, we will be brighter days ahead.”
malnourished children. None of them have proper latrines, with villages using nearby fields. The village pond is used for drinking, washing, bathing and cleaning utensils, as well as a buffalo water.

But Ramdaiya was declared open defecation-free two years ago after distributing toilets to all the words. No latrines were built.

Jit Narayan Joshi is daily wage labour, and has a family of seven but no land. His two-year-old son is acutely anaemic, and has all the symptoms of severe malnutrition: frequent diarrhoea, swollen stomach and skeletal limbs. “I don’t know what’s wrong with my son, only the gods knows,” he says.

Assistant health worker Amna Yadav says the child is underweight and is mentally retarded. She says the father earns Rs400 a day but spends half of it on alcohol, the rest goes to buy food, but it is not enough for the whole family.

Pregnant, hungry, pathetic children, caste and gender discrimination make a dangerous combination in these villages. As a result, most girls are married before puberty.

By the time the severely undernourished girls are in their mid-teens, they have already given birth to their first child – making it risky for both mother and baby.

The young mothers have never been taught about taking care of their health, or that of their children. Most do not know the kind of diet and supplements that pregnant and lactating mothers need, and even if they did, cannot afford them.

The Nepali government is supposed to provide R400 per pregnant family as a ‘nutrition allowance’. But the families in Ramdaiya in Dharsana and Wandsenwara in Mohottari interviewed for this report had not even seen that pittance amount for the past two years because they did not know how to work the system.

The government also implemented a Multi-sector Nutrition Plan to revitalize a successful program that saw dramatic strides in the last 20 years in raising family food intake the first two decades before the progress stalled. But the plan has got tangled up even more under Nepal’s new federal structure.

If things were not serious enough, the COVID-19 pandemic has set back even the few strides Nepal had made in tackling malnutrition. According to the Nepal Planning Commission, last year’s pandemic-induced lockdown pushed 4% of Nepalis back below the poverty line.

A recent Johns Hopkins School of Public Health study concluded that severe malnutrition during the pandemic could kill up to 7,000 children under five a year in Nepal due to insufficient food caused by lost family incomes. This is already visible at the community level. Nutrition Rehabilitation Centres across Nepal is seeing an alarming rise in severely malnourished cases, much higher than the yearly average.

“We recently admitted five cases of children underweight with severe malnutrition, we rarely used to see such children,” says Karuna Yadav at a Nutrition Rehabilitation Centre in Jajarkot. “And these are just cases that come to us, we have not even conducted campays or gone house-to-house yet.”

There are 21 centres like this one in Jajarkot that treat severe malnutrition across Nepal, but they are not easily accessible to poorer families, who usually live far out of the way. The UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) require Nepal to reduce wasting to less than 5% by 2030. Shocking needs to be well below 15% in 10 years to meet the global target. Even the little progress Nepal has made in this regard is now jeopardized by the pandemic.

Says Keshav Parajuli of the Family Welfare Division: “Given the inter-generational nature of malnutrition, we are focusing on what we call the 1,000 golden days after birth by ensuring supplementary food and creating awareness.”

But it is easy to see that malnutrition is a structural characteristic that has deep political and socio-economic factors that are rooted in poor governance, corruption and fragmented culture (inequalities). A piecemeal approach that just addresses malnutrition, sanitation, environment and development must be replaced with more accountable national, provincial and local government. But given the chronic political instability and lack of political will, that is a tall order.

Nepal nutrition policy expert Atmaram Pandey: “Nepal doesn’t lack resources, but they are taken up by a faulty development model that wastes it all on view towers and unnecessary roads. Nepal’s chronic malnutrition can only be reduced with a more responsive state that generates jobs so the poorest have more money to buy food for their children.”

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Follow Maharjan, Dipak Ghimire if you wish to know how to nutritious and healthier children in Nepal. Where children in most families suffer from chronic malnutrition, malnutrition is a reason for the malnutrition. Maharjan, the club has been growing and what the experts recommend for this chronic problem remains an open secret. Girikanchi is aired on Dristhti Channel 13 every Monday evening at 8:30pm.

Half of Nepal’s lost jobs

More than half of Nepal’s employed people have lost their jobs in just a month, according to the result of a nationwide survey.

Agriculture and tourism were the top sectors most affected by the lockdown. While those depending on cash crops would lose significant income which ultimately affected the socio-economic wellbeing of all children and their families.

Most families may have been forced to reduce food intake and essential expenses, including nutrition and education for children. About 50% of the families reported not receiving any support to stave off the hardship.

Have you been in your family’s food bill in the last month?

3 out of 10 expect to reduce jobs in the last month

Using the results of the tracking survey, UNICEF Nepal is implementing an emergency cash transfer scheme in response to the emerging needs of more than 10,000 children. But overall the picture of the ongoing situation is not very promising.

The survey shows that the health, education and welfare of children in families depending on daily wages and those who have lost income and jobs are being made extremely difficult. UNICEF Nepal has taken the government’s decision to expand its Cash Transfer Program to 30% of vulnerable households.

The survey showed that the lockdown has been so strict that it has had a significant impact on children, and there has been little or no government response. It shows the need for universal social assistance to children in need.
Anti-corruption vaccine

Politics, being the world’s oldest profession, has been honed into a fine art — and nowhere more so than in Nepal. What is less well appreciated is the contribution some of our politicians have made to elevate the stature and prestige of Nepali politics to the level it has attained at this point in time.

What has also not got as much attention is the vital role that corruption has played, and continues to play, in politics. Without it the wheels of government would grind to a halt. After all, graft lubricates the rusty machinery of the bureaucracy, greases the process of deal-making, and allows the country to drag along despite being, for all practical purposes, a failing state.

Nepal’s consistently high ranking in the Ease of Doing Business Index is proof of the role that malfeasance has always played in allowing willful decision-making on shaky investment proposals, speeding up bargaining, demurring a clear chain of command that goes right to the top, and enforcing a one-window policy that cuts through red tape to facilitate under-the-table transactions.

However, now that Nepal is graduating from Least Developed Country status to a Least but not Least Developed Country by 2025, we will be bound by international treaties to clean up our governance apparatus. It is a pity that we have fixed what ain’t broke, but we will reluctantly have to shed antilides to corruption. To this task, we have to roll our sleeves and grid up our sleeves, and there is no room for complicity. 2025 is only two and half years away, and time is of the essence if we are to move higher up in the Transparency International index, even if it means bribing them to do it.

By now, we have tried just about everything to stop corruption, but we have been half-hearted. We passed laws to outlaw bribes, but that just drove the business underground. We set up the CCAA, but had to investigate the investigators. We sent our taxmen on junkets to Singapore so they could learn a thing or two about clean government, but they returned with 5 duty-free bottles of Old Smuggling each, and bribed their way through the Metal Free X-ray machines at the airport. We gave them salary hikes, but that just jacked up their costs. Now, with advances in genetic engineering, there is hope. Complete genome sequencing allows us to pinpoint the exact genes for greed. Politicians genetically susceptible to pursuading public funds can now be detected before they stand for elections, and can be debarred from contesting public office.

Also, since we have bit a dead-end on Covid vaccines, we might have better luck with getting the international community to demand anti-corruption vaccines so we can irreveribly members of the executive and legislative branches, as well as the judiciary. The media will also be on the priority list, since we are a high-risk group at the frontlines.

KleptoVax will come in 2 doses. The first one is an antibody to petty bribes, graft and general crookishness. The second dose allows the body to develop antibodies against nepotism, cronyism and Mafioso. It is only after 70% of politicians get jabbed will they attain herd immunity.

Since there is great demand for KleptoVax in neighbouring countries, the government will have to buy it directly from manufacturers. The delay is due to a dispute over a non-disclosure agreement on kickbacks.