



**Mennonite
Central
Committee**

Needs Assessment Report: Impact of COVID on Vulnerable Communities in Nepal

August 2020

Health workers in Jahada Rural Municipality, Morang, administer COVID tests using protective equipment donated by MCC Nepal and local partner, BICWS.



Introduction

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the new coronavirus, COVID-19, a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. The virus was initially slow to spread to Nepal. However, positive cases are now increasing more rapidly, with nearly 40,000 cases reported as of September 1, 2020. While 99% of those who test positive are asymptomatic and to date 250 have died, there are concerns about the capacity of Nepal’s hospitals to respond to the pandemic as cases continue to rise. The Government of Nepal proactively responded to the pandemic by instating a strict nation-wide lockdown that began March 24 and lasted 120 days – in which borders were sealed and everything except essential food and medical services was banned – followed by waves of lockdowns and restrictions of varying degrees. Implications of lockdown have included restrictions on travel and transportation; closure of schools, businesses and restaurants; shutdown of Nepal’s tourist industry; and loss of labor jobs, particularly among migrant workers.

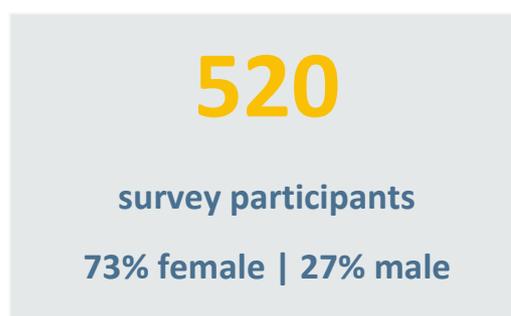
Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), a global relief, development, and peace organization, has worked in Nepal since 2009. The vision of MCC Nepal is greater dignity and opportunity for marginalized people by accompanying local partners to develop and implement programs based on the priorities of the communities they serve. In addition to its on-going community development programs, MCC has supported initial COVID relief materials via local partners.

Rationale for Rapid Needs Assessment

The purpose of the needs assessment is to assess the social and economic impacts of the COVID pandemic and lockdown on the communities in which MCC’s partners work. The analysis provided in this report will improve the capacity of MCC and locally-based partners to pivot current community development activities as needed and prioritize future programming.

Methodology

A rapid needs assessment was conducted via a quantitative survey among 520 participants in MCC-supported projects across 3 districts: Morang, Dhading and Lalitpur. For each MCC-supported project, survey respondents were randomly selected from project participants, with sample sizes based on a >90% confidence level and <10% margin of error.



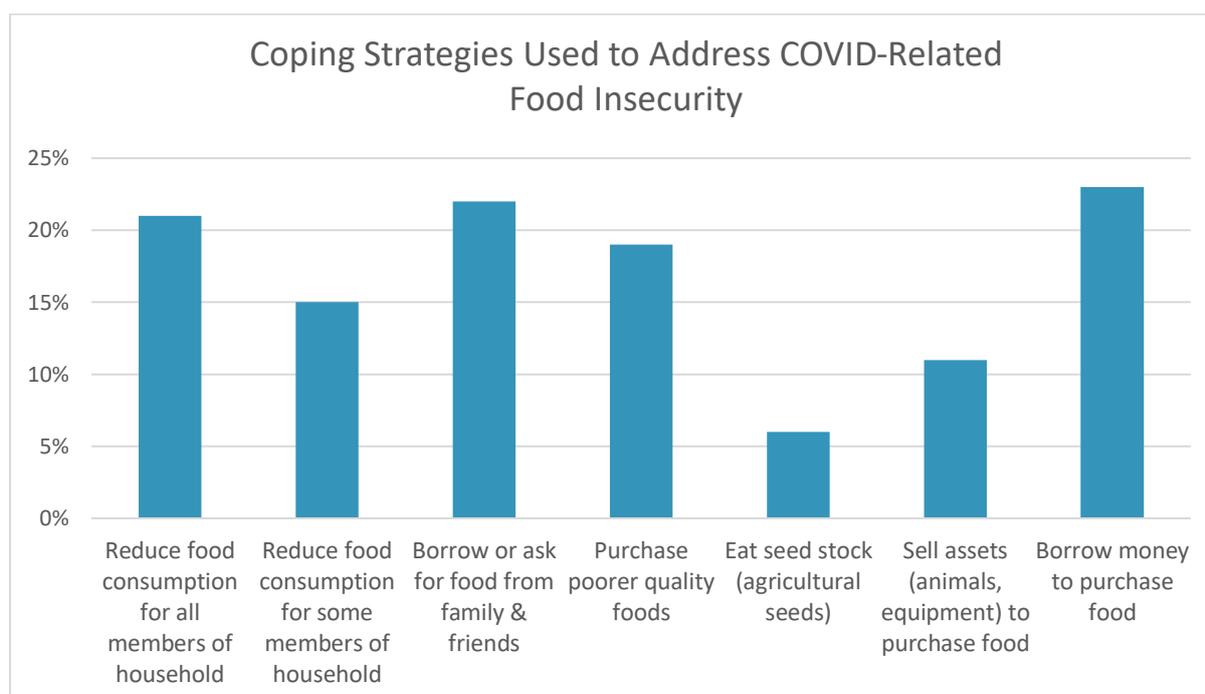
Data was gathered by MCC partners’ field staff who hold the closest relationships with project participants. Surveys were conducted either over the phone or in person, per local guidance. Data was collected via Kobo Toolkit, with responses to survey questions inputted by phone app then uploaded for MCC’s assessment and analysis.

Surveys were conducted in MCC partners’ working areas: Brethren in Community Welfare Society (BICWS) in Jahada Rural Municipality (RM), Morang; Hilly Rural Development Organization of Northern Morang (HRDON) in Letang RM, Morang; KOSHISH Mental Self Help Organization in Lalitpur; Rural Institute for Community Development (RICOD) in Mahankal & Bagmati RMs, Lalitpur; and Shanti Nepal in Benighat-Rorang, Gajuri, Gangajamuna & Rubivalley RMs, Dhading.

Impact on Food Security

While lockdowns significantly reduce the risk of COVID transmission, they also have a critical economic impact, especially on already vulnerable populations. Impacts on household income levels and ability to access adequate food have been immediately felt in Nepal.

Among respondents, 51% report that their household food consumption practices have changed as a result of COVID. The most common of these dietary changes include eating less protein (33%), eating less fresh fruits and vegetables (30%), eating less frequently (30%), eating smaller portions of food (28%), and purchasing lower quality foods (27%). In order to cope with increased food insecurity, participants are using the following strategies:



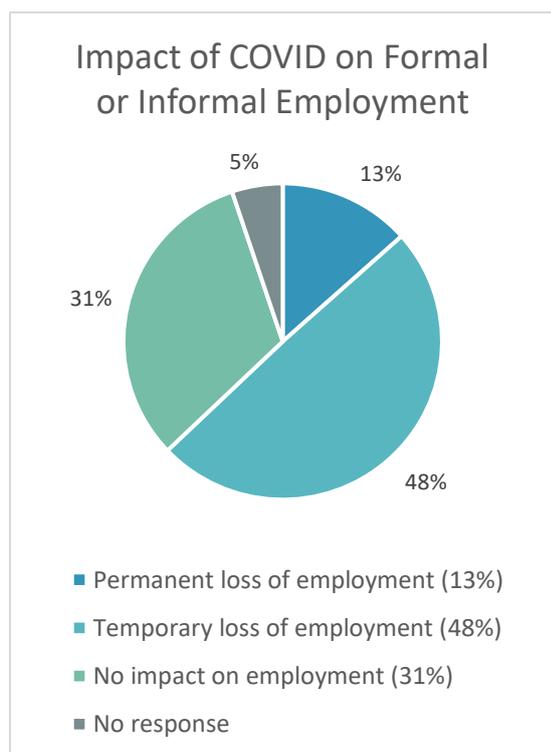
Lockdowns and restrictions on movement have resulted in less food available in local markets. Among respondents, 41% reported that there has not been adequate food available to purchase, especially animal proteins (36% of respondents report a shortage), lentils and legumes (36%), rice (32%) and fruits and vegetables (31%).

Increased food insecurity is also a result of the increased cost of food goods (due to restrictions in transportation and sealing of Nepal's border). Significantly, 87% of respondents report that the costs of some or all food items have increased, with 55% reporting an increase of more than 25% compared to normal prices.

87%
report an increase in the
cost of food items

While many local governments and civil society organizations have provided short-term food aid to vulnerable households, continued collaboration between public and private stakeholders is necessary to ensure adequate food availability.

Impact on Household Income

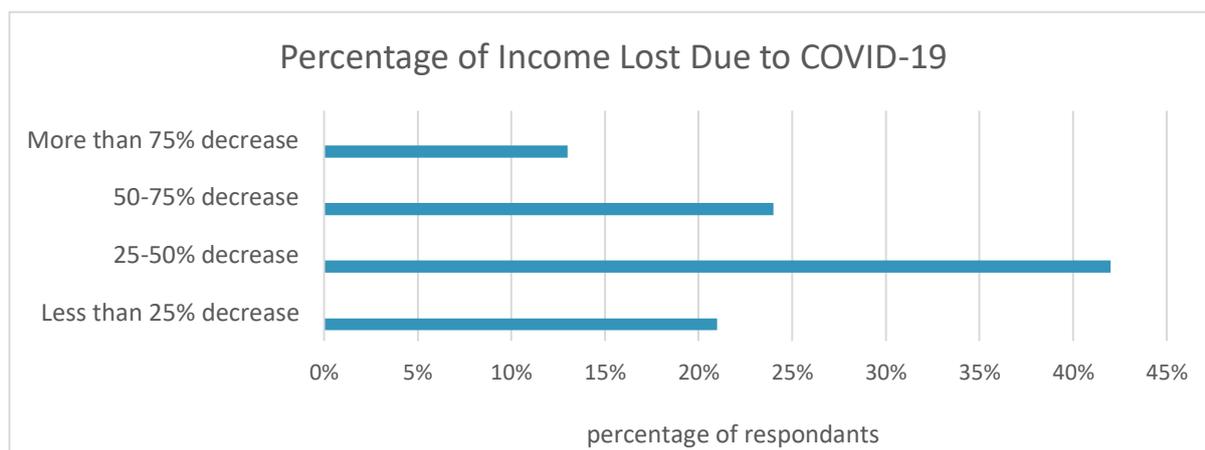


Of critical concern is the fact that 76% of households report a decrease in income during COVID. Among them, 79% report a decrease in income of more than 25%.



There are several reasons for this significant reduction in income. First, a majority of respondents have lost their regular form of formal or informal employment. Secondly, while most respondents are rural smallholder farmers who rely on subsistence agriculture or semi-commercial production for their livelihoods, 18% normally receive remittances from family members who

have migrated to India or abroad for work. Of these, 88% report that remittances have decreased as a result of COVID layoffs or pay cuts, with nearly half reporting a decrease of more than 50%.



Restricts on movement make it very challenging for farmers to earn income from crop production: 59% of participants have experienced difficulty accessing the agricultural inputs they need, including fertilizer (48%), pesticides (42%), seeds (42%), and farm tools/machinery (24%). In addition, 73% of those whose livelihoods are dependent on agriculture have had difficulty getting their foods to market, primarily because of travel restrictions (76%) and/or lack of access to transportation (63%).

The needs assessment reveals that maintaining access to markets should be prioritized in order to minimize the economic impacts of COVID, particularly on the lives of rural farmers.

Capacity for Reducing Risk of COVID

Among the preventative measures to reduce the risk of COVID, the WHO recommends frequent hand washing, mask wearing and social distancing. Access to adequate health services is also an urgent need if or when COVID begins spreading more rapidly in Nepal's rural areas.

Among respondents, 72% have a water tap at their own home, while 24% share a communal tap with neighbors and the remaining 3% either purchase water or get it through other means. Thus, nearly all respondents have nearby access to water for hand washing.

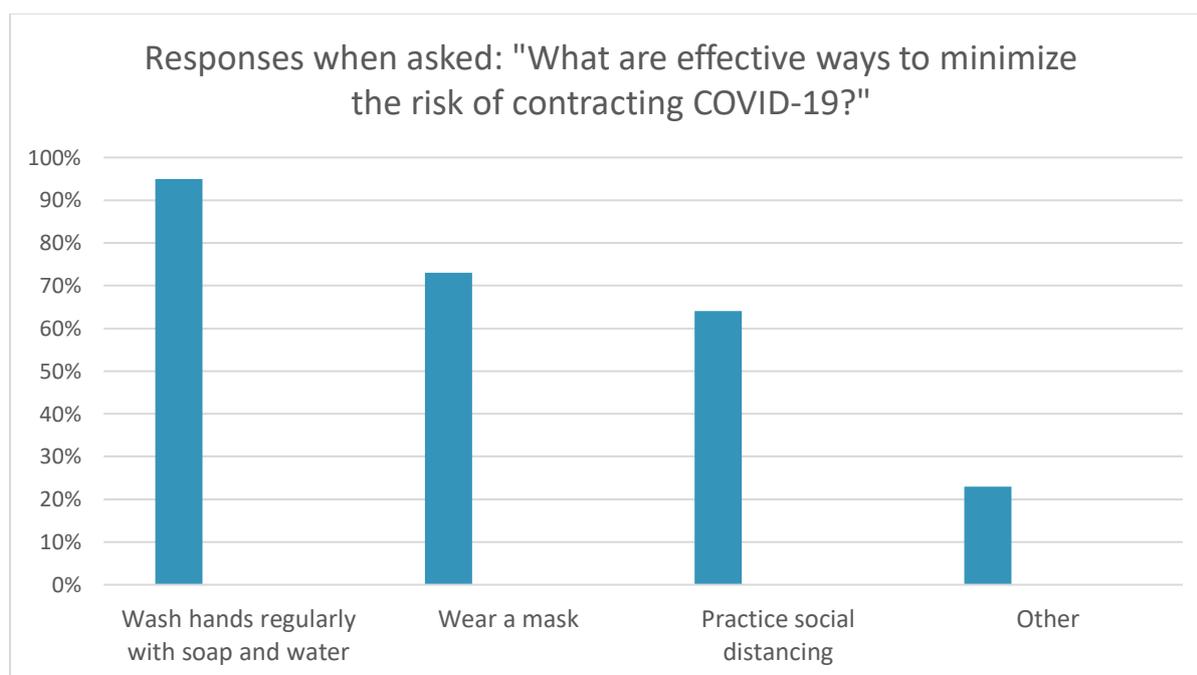
While 65% have a health center in their village, only 7% responded that they could be treated for COVID symptoms at their nearby health center: a significant concern for those in remote areas who may not be able to access larger COVID treatment centers in urban centers.

28%

**do not have a water tap
for hand washing
at their own home**

Central and local level governments, civil society organizations and the private sector have collaborated to actively promoted awareness about COVID prevention throughout Nepal, primarily through radio, TV and phone messaging. Messaging emphasizes a "SMS" approach: sanitation, masks, social distancing.

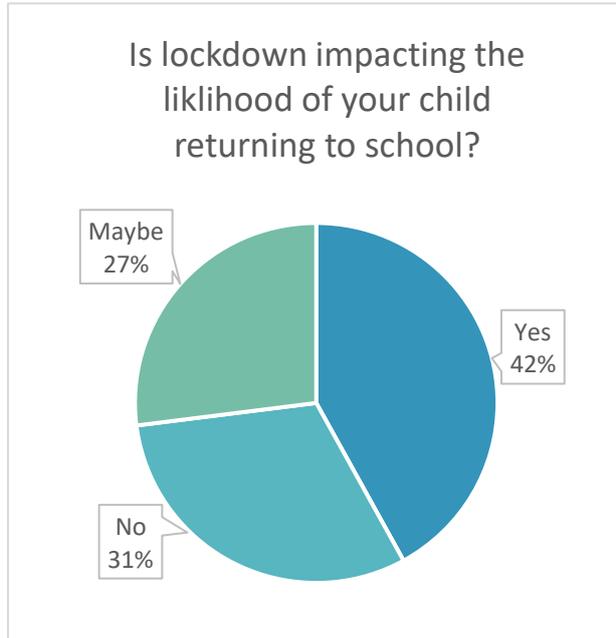
When asked an open-ended question about how to minimize the risk of contracting COVID-19, survey respondents gave the following answers:



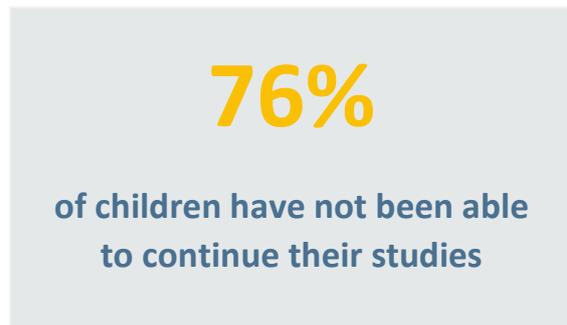
From this data it is evident that sufficient awareness about hand washing has spread to rural areas. However, there may be a need for more messaging about the preventative measures (masks and social distancing) that align with recent research on COVID transmission through breathing infected particles in the air.

Impact on Children's Education

Among respondents, 449 have school-age children. Of these, 76% of their children have not been able to learn from home or continue their studies since schools were closed in March. These parents indicated that their children are experiencing difficulties not being in the classroom.



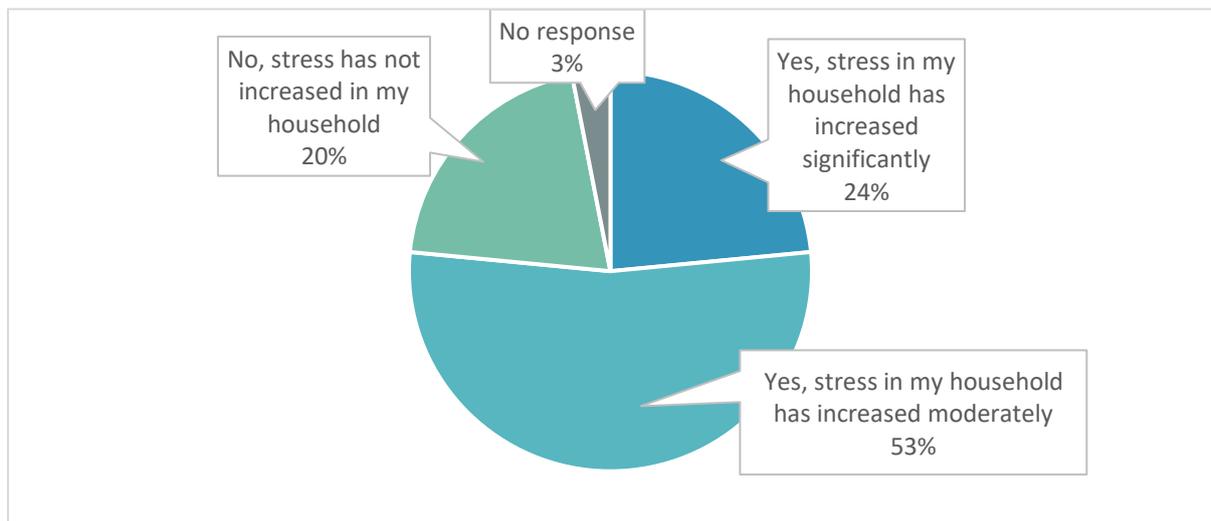
Perhaps most striking is the fact that 69% of parents say that extended school closures will likely or possibly impact their children's ability to resume studies when schools do re-open. Every effort should be made to support safe and effective alternatives for students to continue their education in some capacity.



Impact on Stress and Household Conflict

Globally, there have been reports of increased instances of psychological distress, household conflict, domestic abuse, trafficking and child marriage during lockdown. Awareness about and access to resources for mental health, conflict mediation, and assistance for those experiencing abuse are especially critical during lockdowns and periods of intense stress.

Within households, 21% report that COVID has increased conflict. In some cases (for 59% of respondents) there are local services available for conflict mediation, while others are not sure if help is available to them. COVID has increased stress for a majority of respondents:



Summary of Significant Findings

- Some vulnerable households in MCC-supported working areas have received temporary food relief support, but there is a growing risk of food insecurity with 51% of households reporting that they have had to change their food consumption habits due to COVID.
- Restrictions on movement of people and goods, while intended to protect citizens, have had a massive impact on local economies, with 76% of respondents reporting loss of income due to COVID.
- Only 7% of respondents have a nearby health facility where they could go for COVID treatment if they test positive and experience symptoms.
- Children are among those most vulnerable to the impacts of lockdown, with 76% reporting that they have had no support to continue their studies since schools closed in March.
- The 77% of survey respondents reporting increased stress due to COVID and 21% reporting increases in household conflict indicate the toll that the pandemic has taken on people's mental health, social well-being and access to support services.

Recommendations

Based on the experience of the MCC team and partners, and the findings of this assessment, the following recommendations may shape MCC-supported programming for the duration of the pandemic and should be further explored, as relevant to each partner's unique context:

Health and Safety

- Implement programming safely and responsibly through individual or small group interactions (using masks and social distancing) rather than larger group trainings in order to comply with government mandated protocol and reduce the risk of COVID transmission.
- Emphasize awareness about the spread of COVID through the air, the need to wear masks and maintain social distancing, and to avoid indoor gatherings and crowded places.
- Maintain regular collaboration with municipality health sections to ensure health posts have adequate protective equipment and facilities for isolation and quarantine.
- Communication about where community members should go if they begin experiencing COVID symptoms should be clearly passed to project participants.
- MCC and partners should actively work to correct rumors and misinformation about COVID that contribute to people's anxiety.

Food Security and Livelihoods

- Work closely with local government bodies, agricultural cooperatives and other stakeholders to ensure smallholder farmers can access markets for selling agricultural goods and purchasing inputs. The limited availability of imported goods, fertilizers and pesticides during the pandemic may be an opportunity to promote locally grown and/or organic produce.
- Maintain regular follow-up with project participants in person or via phone to ask about household food security; while some families in MCC partners' working areas have

received temporary food relief, continued collaboration with municipalities is necessary if further food distributions are needed. Food distributions should include protein and nutrient-rich foods as there are more often shortages of these items in local markets.

- Prioritize entrepreneurship and job creation, especially for those who lost their jobs, with an emphasis on youth who had migrated abroad for work and have since returned home.

Children's Education

- In collaboration with local education offices, there is an urgent need to identify and implement effective options for primary school students who do not have access to internet and other technologies to continue their education from home.
- Ensure local schools have access to the printed materials for at-home learning that have been jointly developed by the Ministry of Education and development partners. Explore the possibility of supporting at-home learning through recruiting short-term volunteers for individual and small group support.
- The combined risks of children's long-term absence from school with increased levels of stress and violence may make children especially vulnerable to early marriage, trafficking and sexual exploitation. COVID awareness activities should be accompanied by awareness about child protection and safeguarding measures.

Psycho-Social Wellbeing

- Maintain regular communication with project participants over the phone or, when possible, through at-home visits. Ensure that participants have a safe space to share.
- Network with locally based public and private service providers who support those experiencing violence or abuse of any kind. Share information about these services and hotline numbers with project participants.

COVID Response in Nepal

The Government of Nepal's Ministry of Health and Population is leading the country's response to COVID in collaboration with UN and bilateral agencies, international development partners and INGOs. Likewise, civil society organizations including local NGOs are playing an active on-the-ground role in spreading awareness, identifying needs and advocating for necessary supports.

Food relief is the most common government scheme that has supported those most impacted by COVID, such as day laborers. The federal government provided protocol for food relief, with guidelines for selecting participants and amounts of food supplies (30kg rice, 3kg lentil, 2kg salt, 2L oil, 2kg sugar, 4 bars soap) to feed one family for two weeks. However, food relief packages in MCC partners' working areas varied by municipality. Local governments have also been active in spreading COVID awareness and safety messaging. Some municipalities have planned additional schemes, such as providing agricultural subsidies or supporting returnee migrant laborers, although in most cases these schemes have not yet started.

All municipalities have established local quarantine centers for returnees from India and those whom the government has repatriated from abroad. Health facilities have also been equipped with PPE, masks, gloves and sanitizer to ensure safety. Again, the level of preparedness in quarantine centers and health facilities varies significantly from one municipality to the next.

MCC's Response

The economic impacts of COVID are felt not only in Nepal but throughout the world. As a result, MCC's typically stable sources of income have been affected, resulting in decreased budgets across programs. Despite budget reductions, MCC is actively working alongside partners in Nepal to access or reallocate funds in order to meet critical needs associated with COVID.

Thus far, COVID-specific immediate relief responses supported by MCC via partner organizations (who have been working in close collaboration with local governments) include food relief, distribution of hygiene kits, and donation of protective equipment to health and quarantine centers. These activities were approved by the Government of Nepal's Social Welfare Council through the submission of two amendments to MCC's Project Agreement with the SWC.

MCC is committed to continue walking alongside partners as, together, we assess the impacts of COVID in each unique context within Nepal, and shift project plans accordingly to support those with the greatest vulnerabilities.

