



STRATEGIC RESPONSES ON COMBATING COVID-19 PANDEMIC IN BHUTAN

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ABSTRACT

COVID-19 which is a global public health emergency of current time has been creating big impact to the social and economy welfare across globe despite its far-reaching casualties since 2019. There are growing concern with surges in the cases, casualties, and economic recession because of this global pandemic. Times, efforts, and resources have been pumped to the actions including early detection, isolations, care, and vaccines or medicines against COVID-19. This study which is focused on Bhutan is a qualitative research that made use of authentic secondary data. It was established in the form of published records from government report, media, and website along with relevant literatures as the base reference resources. Small country Bhutan has its own story to tell. Its conditions and impacts as visible are not that alarming as expected by this deadly global pandemic. Bhutan has more of success story to share in case of its strategic approaches with holistic planning and effective implementations in its actions towards the control and combating COVID-19 which have proven to be successful. The favorable outcome from this study is a realistic goal can be fulfilled with collective plans and actions in times of needs.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, strategic action, high risk, collective plans

INTRODUCTION

One of the greatest pandemics of times hit the wellbeing of society and economic. Towards latter part of December 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) was alerted of this virus making its significance in Wuhan City of China and later WHO named it as COVID-19 (MoH, RGoB, 2020). It was on 30th January 2020 the WHO declared COVID-19 as a Public Health Emergency which is of International Concern (WHO, 2020). It was a rough journey with a series of ups and down in all walks of life. There were intervention and approaches that were initiated and implemented over a year, starting from controlling strategies to vaccine development and its implementations. This has certainly been one of the threatening global health crises of the time as people have been going through series of trauma starting from fear, losing job, lockdown stress, vaccine thirst, mental wellbeing, and many mores (Mofijur, M., et.al., 2020, Bruin, K. D., et.al., 2020, and Nista, F.,

2020). Efforts are taken through initiatives to track the impacts the pandemic has created, and deeper research are initiated for understanding as well as preparedness (Chen, S., et.al., 2020, Mofijur, M., et.al., 2020, and Pak, A., et.al., 2020)

Bhutan being a small developing country with a population of merely 0.75 million located in between two greater economy China and India do have similar stories and impacts to be share. Despite being a small developing country, the strategies and interventions that were implemented till time is worth sharing for better outreach. But the drive for innovative approaches and actions will always be a priority based on case by cases so that right and meaningful strategies can be incorporated in a timely manner.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The objective of this study is to understand the strategic interventions made by Bhutan in its



action on COVID-19 pandemic, which has impacted the socioeconomic as well as welfare of the society. Such case would be very useful in policy interventions approach for combating pandemic and help as a guiding measure to plan actions.

METHODOLOGY

Study made use of the secondary data from the published sources and literature review to explore and highlight the critical outcome of the research. Research is qualitative in nature and was backed with relevant statistics to come up with the findings and conclusions.

Overview Of Covid-19 Pandemic

Record maintained with World Health Organization (WHO) reflected the 1st case of Covid-19 was reported on 31st December 2019 from a city of Wuhan, China. There on the casualties in terms of infections as well as casualties keeps adding each passage of time. As of 25th March 2021, the global record cross billion cases of confirmed cases with millions of deaths. Also, the better side of it is that as of same date the global vaccination against this pandemic reaches to billions vaccine doses (Data retrieved from WHO).

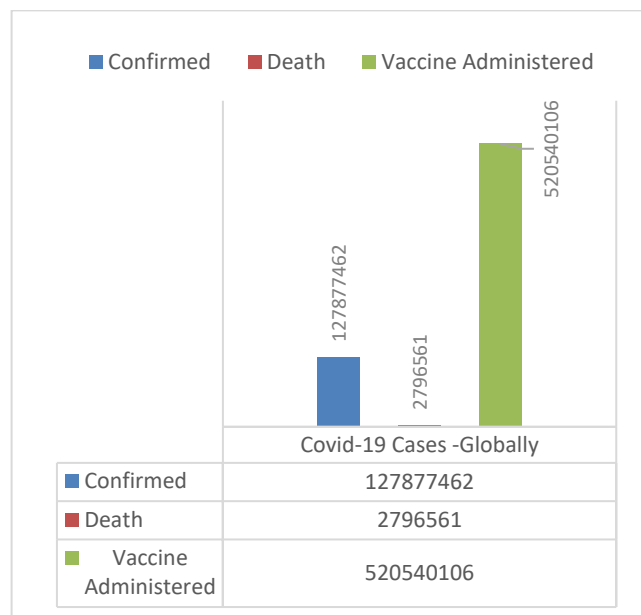


Figure 1: Covid-19 cases globally (As of 31st March 2021)

Similarly, in case of Bhutan, as of 31st March 2021 the record maintained by ministry of health as well as the government of Bhutan stands as follow (Data retrieved from MoH, RGoB).

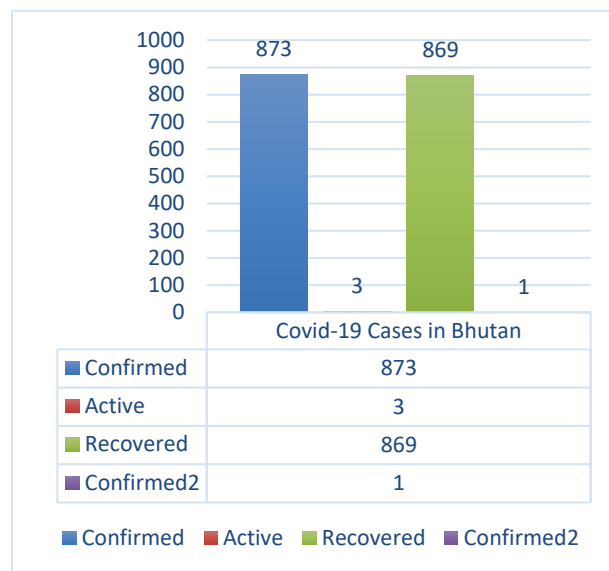


Figure 2: Covid-19 cases in Bhutan (As of 31-03-2021)

Covid-19 Pandemic in Case of Bhutan

Bhutan recorded the first case of covid-19 at 11pm of 5th March 2020 from one of the travelers who entered Bhutan through the state of Assam, Guwahati, India. Prior to entering Bhutan, the patient was touring India since 21st February 2021 and has entered to Bhutan on 2nd March 2020. Prior to the detection of the case, the patient has visited a couple of places starting from Paro, Thimphu to Punakha. By then Bhutan was already prepared and equipped with required amenities to handle the pandemic (Kuensel, 2020).

Bhutan has been actively putting strategic actions on combating this pandemic and its major impacts to society and economy. The efforts and actions proved to be worth reflecting and based on the statistics as shown in the figure 2 above, Bhutan recorded as high as 99.542% recovery rate and a death of merely 0.001% making one of the greater examples in such pandemic control actions. It is also quite significant that the data suggested from the following figure where the



pandemic cases in gender distribution is male dominated in case of Bhutan (MoH, RGoB, 2021).

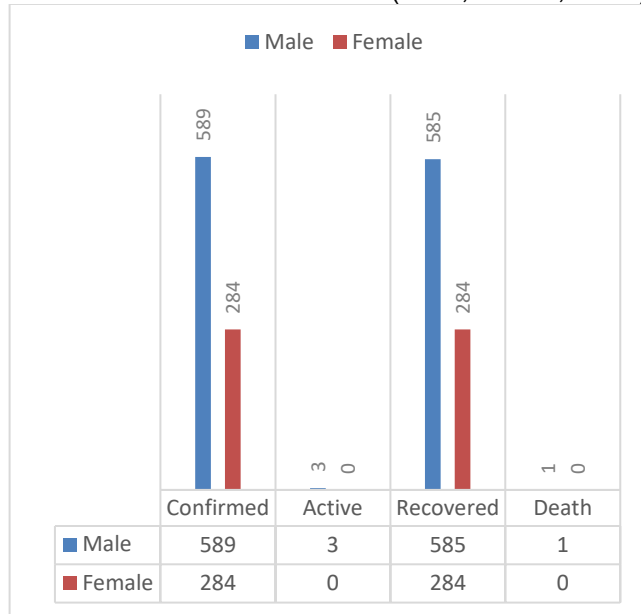


Figure 3: Covid-19 cases in Bhutan (As of 31-03-2021)

Bhutan prioritizes in provision and support for the safety return of the Bhutan citizen living abroad and facilitating the travel arrangements. This happened to be one of the main sources of imported cases of COVID-19 positive cases statistics. On top of it, there are provisions in bringing specialize construction workers from India in recent time resulting few additions of COVID-19 positive cases in the country. Majority of cases that have been detected in Bhutan are from the facility quarantine facilities, making the strategic control measure more conducive. There are limited instances of the secondary transmission cases in Bhutan that has been recorded so far (Tshokey, T., et.al., 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Critical strategic action taken by Bhutan

Bhutan remains flexible and vigilant in preparedness for the COVID-19 and has been constantly based its response plan/action on whatever emerging evidences (Tshokey, T., et.al., 2020). The Royal Center for Disease Control (RCDC) located at Thimphu, Bhutan remains as

focal point in terms of surveillance, investigation and preparing response (Gyem, K., et.al., 2020). Some of the promising strategies that Bhutan implemented are as follow [MoH RGoB (2020-2021), RGoB (2020), BBS (2020-2021), MoFA RGoB, (2020), and PMO, (2020-2021):

- Development of guidelines and standard operating procedures (SOPs) along with training specially in critical care and other services was initiated since early January 2020.
- The fever screening systems at a Paro International Airport and other entry points across country was initiated in 2nd week of January 2020.
- In the same timeline, the monitoring of the medical conditions of 8000 plus tourist in the country with the establishment of flu clinics in major locations.
- Fast-tracked recruitment of 140 health professional which includes doctors, nurses, and technicians to effectively manage the pandemic.
- Detail contact tracing, testing along with mandatory quarantine for primary and secondary of the COVID-19 positive patient initiated since the detection of cases in the country since early March.
- The mandatory quarantine of 14 days at designated facility has been initiated since 16th March 2020 for all travelers that are entering after declaring their travel history at any point of entry in Bhutan. Along with it the issuance of passports for any category has been suspended.
- The mandatory quarantine of 14 days at designated facility has been increased to 21 days from end of March 2020 to have better approaches for extreme cases possible though in average the incubation period for COVID-19 ranges from 2 to 14 days.
- The first nationwide lockdown started on 11th August 2020 due to a COVID-19 positive case detected outside the quarantine facility. Massive surveillance and screening of people residing in the



region as well as the route connecting the impacted region has been initiated.

- With a cases of COVID-19 positive detection on 20th December 2020 at capital city (Thimphu), the restrictions of inter-dzongkhag such as territory to territory travel has been enforced by the government since 22nd December 2020.
- The second nationwide lockdown started on 23rd December 2020 following a COVID-19 sporadic positive cases from multiple flu clinics and assurance of local transmission. The efforts were intended to do detail contact tracing and facilitating the necessary test to control further penetration to the localities.
- Activation of online registration for COVID-19 vaccination on voluntary basis and initiation of mass COVID-19 vaccination since 27th March 2021 based on the auspiciousness of the day as per Bhutanese Calendar.

To ensure that the strategies and actions are implemented in full strength and in efficient manner, few interventions as listed below have been initiated in Bhutan.

- Initiation and activation of COVID-19 taskforce in each District (i.e., region) which is headed by Dasho Dzongda (i.e., administrative head of the region) supported by the sector heads of the area.
- Initiating and rolling out COVID-19 focal person across country, COVID-19 government portal, COVID-19 systems (user manual)
- Development and implementation of COVID-19 apps (i.e., Stay Home apps, Druk Trace apps, National Day Lucky Draw apps etc) and relevant posters.
- Sealing of the borders and strict patrolling and monitoring of boarder.
- Druk Gyalpo's Relief Kidu from the His Majesty of King for the people impacted by COVID-19.
- Activation of National Toll-Free Number for strategic sections working towards the

actions on COVID-19 including that for fire, police, electricity, disaster and many more.

- Stopping public gatherings, games and sports, closure of schools and offices, business establishments and travel restriction at time of needs.
- Facilitation for home delivery of essential goods including medicine during nation-wide lockdown.
- Initiation and executions of mass vaccination for common cold across country before offshoot for cold season.
- Initiation of zone system along with restricted time driven movement within zone during the lockdown phase.
- Region wise COVID-19 coordination office who are responsible for strategic planning and actions of the activities related to COVID-19 in the regions.
- Continuous facilitation of escorting service and movement of vehicles engaged in supply and delivery of essential goods.
- Closure of offices, schools and shops in different phases and stages of COVID-19 preparedness activities based on case-to-case situation.
- His Majesty continuous visit to high-risk regions and other parts of country for guidance, moral support and check and balance of actions.
- Initiation of zoning country into High Risk (those region in belts of boarder) and low/medium risk region on case by case. Still today, there is need for mandatory 7 days of facility quarantine if one needs to move from High Risk to Low Risk regions.
- Active usage of national medias, local medias as well as official social medias platform for faster dissemination of information related to COVID-19.
- The religious body cross the country performing series of religious activities for the welfare of societies from COVID-19.



In nutshell, what was quite significant in case of Bhutan actions towards combating COVID-19 are as follow:

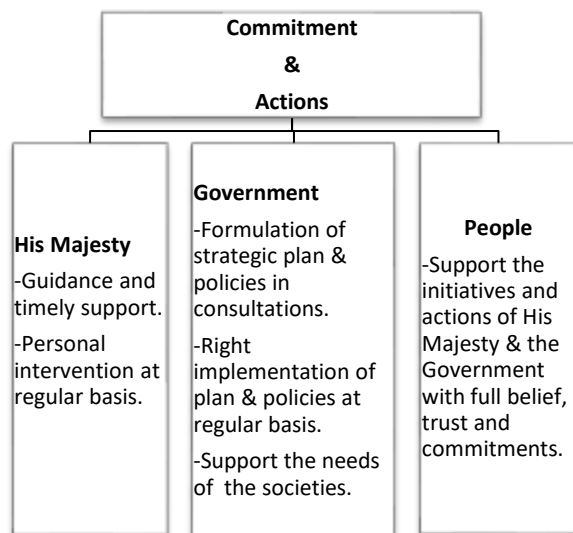


Figure 4: Strategic Model of Bhutan in combating COVID-19

Role played by every section of the society is crucial in mitigating the wider impacts of COVID-19 pandemic which otherwise will have its stronghold and bring about unpleasant situations in the society. The contributing roles from all people in their own capacity and action are widely a promising driver of positive outcomes.

Bhutan has been successful in controlling of COVID-19 for more than a year after its detection in global scenario as well as in case of Bhutan too. This is mainly due to the strategic planning and actions which prove much effective, and the people supported all the actions with full faith. The move has been continuously inspired by the grace of His Majesty personal and timeless commitments in efforts of ensuring the role of active participations by all through his multiple visits to affected localities including high risk boarder regions for comfort, supports, guidance with check and balance. There is also evidence of most favorable strategic plans and actions that government has initiated in consultations with relevant stakeholders at the right time before the COVID-19 makes its stronghold in the region. The statistics highlight the success in control of this pandemic through collective efforts of the people of

Bhutan. The critical intervention as summarize in case of Bhutan are:

Moreover, the move for mass vaccination in Bhutan for the COVID-19 was initiated from 27th March 2021. In this initiative the government support and will provide the vaccination for all the eligible people (i.e., above 18 years and case by case for medical history patient) and is expected to cover to all within a stretch of one week time (MoH, RGoB, 2020). This would be another milestone and actions that Bhutan has initiated in current times.

CONCLUSIONS

Even a global threatening pandemic like COVID-19 can be fairly handled if people from all walks of life come together in times of needs. This is evidence which can be derived from the small country. Bhutan, which has been one of the successful countries in combating COVID-19 till date through its inclusive strategic plans and actions. The belief of togetherness can make impossible as possible is what Bhutan has shown to the world in its tireless actions in current pandemic times, without many impacts to its society as well as economy. The move for nationwide lockdown as an when there is significant record of positive cases in the community and the planned relaxation based on situational analysis seems to have huge contribution on this outcome.

It is significant to notice that Bhutan being a small developing country with less than a million-population sandwiched between two greater countries, India and China have pull its selves with supports from all societies in a move towards combating this deadly pandemic that has caused unexpected casualties across globe. Still the threat and challenges are quite high when there are continued surges of cases in the neighbouring country.

The prospect of strategic planning, implementation, and management of the measures through collective efforts can be seen as one such success stories during the difficult times of pandemic faced globally as an action towards COVID-19 pandemic. Meaningful interventions in timely manner will always be the best solutions and it can be learned from the examples of many countries including Bhutan which has been proven to be successful.



RECOMMENDATIONS

Pandemic situations can bring multiple social as well as economic impacts in a region/nation/globally. COVID-19 is one such pandemic which created big socioeconomic impacts that is continuing to affect across the globe. Through this research, it is evident that measure like strategic actions which are dynamics based on case-by-case situations can always prove handy in responses against such devastating pandemic cases too.

It is recommended that the strategic actions in combating COVID-19 must be enhanced through collective contributions and efforts from the learning of every implementation measures. With the gravity of COVID-19 variants reported across globe in recent times, country like Bhutan must enhance its surveillance measures along with its preparedness measures so that it can combat the battle against the wider threats of COVID-19 pandemic in days to come.

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