

Coping Strategies of Nepalese Migrants During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Japan

在日ネパール人のコロナ禍における対処戦略

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Abstract

This article examined the coping strategy of Nepalese following the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan. Prolonging the pandemic period, appropriate policy for migrant workers should be a crucial issue for developing a multicultural society in Japan. This research aimed to contribute to giving basic information for policymaking by clarifying the reality of how Nepalese tackled with COVID-19 pandemic. The field survey was conducted in Fukuoka prefecture where the number of Nepalese rapidly increased. The survey results emphasized that economic impact was no homogeneity and the coping strategy depended on social context.

Keywords : COVID-19 pandemic, Coping Strategy, Migrant Workers

1, Objective

This study examined the coping strategies of Nepalese migrants following the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan. The literature review highlighted that migrant workers faced huge difficulties, including unemployment, income decline, and life insecurity, during the COVID-19 pandemic. Overall, migrant workers tend to be socially vulnerable. Social confusion caused by the pandemic amplified the structural issues faced by migrant workers worldwide. A similar situation was observed in Japan.

Many previous studies have focused only on the short-term impact of COVID-19, with the surveys conducted in 2020, immediately after the beginning of the pandemic. With the prolonged pandemic period, implementing appropriate policies for migrant workers is important for many countries, including Japan. This study aimed to provide basic information for policymaking by clarifying the reality of how the Nepalese tackled the COVID-19 pandemic. The field survey was conducted in Fukuoka prefecture, where the number of Nepalese migrants has rapidly increased. The survey results emphasized that the economic impact was not homogeneous, and the coping strategy depended on the social context.

This paper consists of five sections. After the Objective, the second section presents a literature review of

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the current situation of migrant workers during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting that Nepalese migrants faced several economic difficulties in Japan. This section also mentions that they tended to tackle unexpected external shocks through social capital, using the experience of Nepal's 2015 earthquake. The third section describes the outline of the field survey and the survey results. The economic impact following the COVID-19 pandemic and Nepalese coping strategies differed according to their social status, despite all the migrants staying within Fukuoka prefecture. Nepalese restaurant owners and cooks faced severe income decline, while Nepalese students and permanent staff of Japanese companies were less impacted. Section four analyzes the reasons for these differences using coding methodology. It clarifies that Japanese language skills and local social networks influence migrants' coping strategies. Lastly, section five summarizes the arguments and outlines the policy implications.

2, Literature Review

Migrants and COVID-19 around the World

Since the beginning of 2020¹, the world has been disordered with COVID-19. As of January 7, 2022, approximately 300 million people were infected and 5.46 million had died owing to the virus². In several countries, people are still suffering from social turmoil even though much progress has been made in the development and administration of vaccines³.

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of migrant workers worldwide had reached 270 million (World Bank, 2020). Many of these migrant workers faced various difficulties during the COVID-19 pandemic. These difficulties can be grouped into two perspectives.

First, the migrants live in an environment susceptible to new viruses. While there are no official statistics indicating a higher infection rate in foreign workers compared with others, it is common for three to five workers to share a single room, and such crowded living spaces provide fertile conditions for the virus to spread. A huge infection cluster was found in a migrant dormitory in Singapore (Okamoto, 2021), for instance.

Second, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in social and economic challenges for migrant workers, including unemployment, reduced income, insecurity, lack of access to adequate medical services, and mental distress (Guadagno, 2020; World Bank, 2020). In India, migrant workers faced significant unemployment, insecurity, and unprotected work during the COVID-19 pandemic. The situation was worse in rural areas compared to urban areas (Sengupta and Jha, 2020). A similar situation was faced by Bangladeshi migrant workers (Karim, Islam, and Talukder, 2020).

Lack of access to appropriate health services, economic vulnerability, and life insecurity are not new issues for migrant workers, but rather structural problems in many countries. The COVID-19 pandemic has amplified

¹ Wuhan City, China, was locked down on January 23, 2020.

² WHO. Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard (<https://covid19.who.int/>) (Accessed on January 9, 2022.)

³ As of January 4, 2022, a total of 9,118,223,397 vaccine doses have been administered globally. (WHO Coronavirus (COVID-19) Dashboard (<https://covid19.who.int/>) (Accessed on January 9, 2022.)

these issues. The host country accepts migrant workers because of its economic needs; hence, its GDP should theoretically decline when foreign workers returned home following the COVID-19 pandemic (Kozlosvsky et al., 2020). Despite this, crisis response measures have not included migrant workers in many countries (Guadagno, 2020)⁴. However, effective measures to combat COVID-19 should include migrant workers (Chamie, 2020).

Migrants in Japan

While Japan maintains a policy stance not to accept “foreign migrant workers,” its population began to decline after reaching 128.54 million in 2015 (United Nations, 2019) and has been predicted to continue declining⁵. To fulfil the strong labor demand in the industrial sector, foreigners entered Japan with several types of visas, including student, trainee, and family visas, to engage in unskilled work, resulting in an increase in the number of foreigners. From 2.03 million in 2012, the total number of foreigners in Japan increased to 2.88 million in 2020.

The number of Nepalese in Japan was 95000 in 2020, which is lesser than the numbers in China (778000) or Brazil (208000)⁶. However, the growth rate of the Nepalese migrant community was 398.7% from 2012 to 2020, while China recorded 119.3% and Brazil 109.5% in the same period.

Table 1 Number of Nepalese in major Japanese cities

	2012	⇒	2020	Increase
				(%)
Tokyo	8,802		24,832	282.1
Aichi	2,387		9,175	384.4
Osaka	951		4,130	434.3
Fukuoka	1,567		7,455	475.7
Total	24,071		95,982	398.7

(Source) Statistics on foreign residents in Japan from the Immigration Service Agency of Japan.

Table 1 shows the number of Nepalese people living in major cities in Japan. While Tokyo had 24,832 by 2020, accounting for the largest proportion, Fukuoka had the highest growth rate in Nepalese migrants. This means that the number of Nepalese in Fukuoka increased more rapidly compared with Tokyo or Osaka⁷.

⁴ Woods et al. (2020) highlighted that COVID-19 amplified nationalism in several countries. This could explain why migrant workers were last for COVID-19 countermeasures.

⁵ The United Nations predicted that Japan's population will decline to 105 million by 2050, and 86.9 million by 2075.

⁶ Statistics on foreign residents in Japan by the Immigration Service Agency of Japan (https://www.isa.go.jp/en/policies/statistics/toukei_ichiran_touroku.html) (Accessed on January 9, 2022)

⁷ Two reasons were found for the rapid increment of Nepalese in Fukuoka. Firstly, it was said that obtaining a visa was easier in Fukuoka than in other areas. Secondly, Fukuoka was known as a comfortable city to live among the Nepalese (RYU 2017).

COVID-19 in Japan

In Japan, the first case of COVID-19 infection was confirmed on January 22, 2020⁸. As of January 8, 2022, the total number of infections stood at 1.79 million⁹. In Fukuoka prefecture, the first case of infection was found on March 26, 2020. The total number of infections was 75,332 on January, 2022¹⁰.

The Japanese government has implemented various measures to curb the spread of COVID-19. A state of emergency was announced several times, expected to be the most effective means of control. It required restaurants to shorten their business hours, which caused economic difficulties for owners and workers. By the end of 2021, the emergency declaration had been announced four times in Fukuoka prefecture¹¹.

Foreign residents faced various difficulties following the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan, including reduced income, loss of employment, and language barriers in the medical field (Sudo et al., 2020; Shimizu, 2021; Ogino, 2020). Bhandari et al. (2021) listed 14 issues that the Nepalese community faced during the COVID-19 pandemic based on an interview survey, such as financial shortfall, difficulty in paying rent and tuition fees, and loss of wages. COVID-19 amplified the difficulties faced by foreign persons.

In addition to official support from the central government, NPOs supported foreign residents with a brochure on COVID-19 in several languages (Koto-Shimada et al., 2020). Local governments also provided effective information on infection prevention and countermeasures in several languages, including easy Japanese on their websites.

Although social turmoil was expected to end within a short period at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the reality was different. With a protracted COVID-19 pandemic, the phrase “with corona” has become commonplace in Japan. To prevent earlier mistakes that transformed COVID-19 into a disaster, long-term measures with comprehensive perspectives were emphasized (Guadagno, 2020). Literature reviews focused on the short impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic because most studies were conducted under the first or second wave of infection in 2020. It is natural for people to adopt strategies and actions to address difficult circumstances. Basic information regarding the actual coping strategies used to deal with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will assist in considering appropriate support measures for foreign residents in Japan.

Coping Strategy

A coping strategy can be defined as a tactic closely related to the idea of survival and threat (WHO and EPA, 1998). The term of “Coping strategies” is mainly used in international cooperation for disaster prevention as a method to deal with external shocks, such as disasters, in fragile living environments in

⁸ Press release from Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, January 22, 2020. (https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/newpage_09043.html) (Accessed on January 9, 2022.)

⁹ Press release from Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, January 8, 2022. (https://www.mhlw.go.jp/stf/newpage_09043.html) (Accessed on January 9, 2022.)

¹⁰ Fukuoka Prefectural Office website. (<https://www.pref.fukuoka.lg.jp/contents/covid19-hassei.html>) (Accessed on January 10, 2022.)

¹¹ The first period was from April 7 to May 14, 2020. The second covered January 8 to February 28, 2021. The third one was from May 12 to June 20, 2021, and the fourth was from August 20 to September 30, 2021.

developing countries. Coping strategies should depend on social context. For instance, in the case of floods in Bangladesh, reducing expenditures, selling assets, and borrowing were found to be effective coping strategies. Loans for purchasing food and other expenses were recognized as the most important strategy (Ninno et al., 2003).

Various Nepalese coping strategies after the April 25, 2015 earthquake were found effective. The earthquake epicenter was Gorkha District, the central part of Nepal, and the earthquake intensity was recorded at a magnitude of 7.8. It affected approximately 8 million people, and caused economic damage worth 25.4 billion Nepalese rupees (250 million USD) (Molen, Sharma, and Acharya, 2016).

During the recovery period, the affected Nepalese people coped by taking loans, withdrawing savings, increasing remittances from family abroad, and strengthening social mutual aid within the same caste (Raut, 2021). Social capital was found to be the most important factor in coping and recovery (Chatterjee & Okazaki, 2018). Social capital was particularly used to combat weak governance, spot support by aid agencies, and a lack of effective information (Singh and Dhungel 2021).

Research Question

Two research questions were formulated based on the literature review: “What economic impact did the COVID-19 pandemic have on Nepalese migrants in Fukuoka?,” and “How did they deal with such an impact?”

3, Field Survey

Survey Outline

A field survey was conducted in two steps: a questionnaire survey and a semi-structured interview survey. The questionnaire survey was conducted from November 1 to 12, 2021. This study aimed to capture an outline of the economic impact of COVID-19, and the coping strategy of the Nepalese community in Fukuoka. The questionnaire was created in English and translated into Nepali with the cooperation of the Nepalese in Fukuoka¹². This was mentioned in Google Forms. Its URL was distributed to the Nepalese in Fukuoka on the Facebook page of the Non-Resident Nepalese Association (NRNA).

In total, 158 responses were obtained. Table 2 lists the number of participants within several social categories. The responses included 92 Nepalese students (58.2%), 11 Nepalese restaurant owners (7.0%), 25 Nepalese restaurant cooks (15.8%), six permanent staff of Japanese companies, and 24 other categories.

¹² Two translators were selected with the criteria of English capacity.

Table 2 Number of participants in various social categories

Social Category	Sample	(%)
Student	92	58.2
Nepalese Restaurant Owner	11	7.0
Nepalese Restaurant Cook	25	15.8
Permanent Staff of Japanese Company	6	3.8
Others	24	15.2
Total	158	100.0

(Source) Field Survey

Eighteen samples were selected for a semi-structured interview survey based on the responses in the first step. It aimed to understand the details of the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the coping strategies of the Nepalese. The categories were identified based on the participants' reality¹³. The interview survey was conducted from November 8 to 19, 2021.

Survey Findings

To capturing the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the survey focused on the income decline of the Nepalese. Table 3 shows the extent of income decline between April 2020 and September 2021 compared to the previous year for different social categories. Among the students, 54.3% showed an income decline of "0% to 25%." Restaurant owners were evenly split between an income decline of "0% to 25%" and "25% to 50%." Similarly, 66.7% of restaurant cooks reported "25-50%" income decline, while 64.0% of the permanent staff of Japanese companies showed "0-25%" decline. The table indicates that the economic impact of COVID-19 differed for the Nepalese residents of Fukuoka according to social status.

Table 3 Income decline within various social categories

Social Category	0-25%	26-50%	51-75%	76-100%	Sample
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	
Student	54.3	31.5	10.9	3.3	92
Nepal Restaurant Owner	45.5	45.5	9.1	0.0	11
Nepal Restaurant Cook	33.3	66.7	0.0	0.0	6
Permanent Staff of Japanese Company	64.0	24.0	8.0	4.0	26
Others	79.2	4.2	4.2	8.3	24
Total	58.2	28.5	8.9	3.8	158

(Source) Field Survey

Table 4 describes various Nepalese coping strategies for dealing with economic shocks. A total of 58.7% of students took loans, and 42.4% cut their daily expenditures. Among restaurant owners, 63.6% utilized loans and 27.3% received subsidies from public institutions. For restaurant cooks, withdrawing savings was the

¹³ There are no official statistics of the number of Nepalese in each category in Fukuoka. According to NRNA, students account for approximately 50% of the community, restaurant owners make up 15%, restaurant cooks also make up 15%, and permanent staff of Japanese company account for 10%.

most common strategy (66.7%). A total of 48.0% of the permanent staff of Japanese companies reduced their daily costs, and 32.0% took loans. It is thus clear that coping strategies depend on the social category.

Table 4 Countermeasures for income decline among different social categories

Social Category	Loan	Savings	Cost Cut	Subsidy	Sample
	(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)	
Student	58.7	7.6	42.4	0.0	92
Nepal Restaurant Owner	63.6	0.0	0.0	27.3	11
Nepal Restaurant Cook	33.3	66.7	0.0	0.0	6
Permanent Staff of Japanese Company	32.0	12.0	48.0	8.0	26
Others	20.8	8.3	37.5	16.7	24
Total	48.1	10.1	38.0	5.7	158

(Source) Field Survey

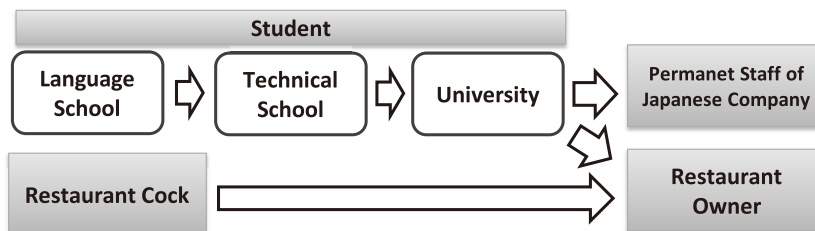
4, Analysis

The field survey found that the economic impact of COVID-19 and coping strategies were different based on social status even among people of the same nationality (Nepalese) living in the same area (Fukuoka). Analytical work has focused determining on the reasons for these gaps.

Analytical framework

At the beginning of the analytical work, Figure 1 shows the career paths of Nepalese in Fukuoka. There are two main routes taken by Nepalese to develop their careers. The first is the educational institution route, along which Japanese language schools are the first step. After graduating from language school, individuals went to technical schools and universities. The success story at the end of this route involved obtaining a permanent job at a Japanese company, or owning a Nepali restaurant after completing their university education. The second method was to develop a career at a Nepalese restaurant. These individuals come to Japan as cooks, and work at several restaurants for approximately 10 years or more. Subsequently, some of these cooks can become restaurant owners.

Figure 1 Common career path of Nepalese in Fukuoka



Source Created by author based on data analysis

The length of stay depends on the career path stage. Table 5 lists the arrival period of the Nepalese in Japan. 84 students arrived in Japan between 2015 and 2020, whereas nine restaurant owners came to Japan before 2015. In the case of restaurant cooks, the same number can be found in the period of “before 2015” and “2015–2020.” Fourteen permanent staff members of Japanese companies entered Japan before 2015. These data support the career paths shown in Figure 1.

Table 5 Arrival period in Japan of different social categories

Social Category	~ 2015	2015-2020	2020 ~	Total
Student	8	84	0	92
Nepal Restaurant Owner	9	2	0	11
Nepal Restaurant Cook	3	3	0	6
Permanent Staff of Japanese Company	14	11	0	25
Others	17	7	0	24
Total	51	107	0	158

(Source) Field Work

The length of stay is related to individuals’ Japanese language skills and their social networks in Japan. This study analyzes how language skills and social networks affected the economic impact and coping strategies of Nepalese migrants during COVID-19.

Analytical Work

Interview results with representative samples from each social category were analyzed. First, we focused on a sample student, Mr. A. Mr. A experienced “0% to 25%” of income decline from April 2020 to September 2021, compared with the same period in the previous year. He came to Japan in 2017, and was in his second year of university during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the interview, he said the following:

I had a part-time job at a lunch box factory four days a week before the COVID-19 pandemic. However, since February 2020, the number of working days has decreased to three days a week. The number of working days changed because of the demand for lunch boxes.

I was very afraid of my economic situation, so in June 2020, I borrowed 200,000 yen of emergency loan from the Social Welfare Council. After that, I borrowed 150,000 yen of comprehensive support funds from the Social Welfare Council three times since July. The total loan amount reached JPY 650,000. I obtained loan information from a Nepalese friend. (Interview on November 19, 2021).

The lunch box factory was one of the major part-time jobs for Nepalese students. Besides factory jobs, working at convenience stores and restaurants were also common part-time student jobs. The restaurant sector was heavily influenced by COVID-19 because of government regulations. However, the food factory and retail shop sectors were not. This was the reason that the economic impact was relatively less for students than

other social categories.

Mr. A accessed the loan scheme in June, even though he faced economic difficulty in February. It took a certain number of months to take action for recovery. This is a common phenomenon among Nepalese students. One interview revealed how a student took a loan from a public institution even though his economic shock was comparatively small, owing to his pessimistic tendency.

The Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare established an emergency loan scheme, including emergency loans and comprehensive support funds, to mitigate the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on vulnerable people. The Social Welfare Council is a public institution under the ministry mandated to provide such funds. The target of this scheme included foreign residents. The scheme was initiated in March 2020. No collateral or interest was required. Since Mr. A's Japanese language skills were mediocre, he depended on the Nepalese community to obtain effective information for surviving the COVID-19 pandemic. This was one of the reasons it took him time to access this scheme.

The second case focused on was that of restaurant owner Mr. B. Mr. B closed his restaurant from April 11 to May 7, 2020, based on local government regulations. After completion of the closing period, his restaurant concentrated on "take-away business," owing to the restrictions on full operations. According to him,

Restaurant sales dropped by approximately half compared with the previous year. However, I received a subsidy from a public institution in April immediately after the scheme was introduced. Information about this subsidy was obtained from a tax accountant. In April 2020, I borrowed 5 million yen (interest rate, 0.3%; repayment period, seven years) from the Bank of Fukuoka. The borrowed funds were utilized as working capital. (Interview on November 13, 2021)

Mr. B came to Japan in 2009, and enrolled at a Japanese-language school. After completing his language education, he moved to a technical school. In 2017, he opened his own restaurant, after graduating from technical school. Owing to his advanced Japanese language skills, he requested that the interview be conducted in Japanese. Mr. B faced considerable economic impact from the government regulations requiring him to close his restaurant. However, he accessed the subsidy scheme¹⁴ because of the effective information from his tax accountant, a Japanese business partner. His advanced language skills and social networks within Japanese society saved him from severe financial predicaments.

The third case focused on restaurant cook, Mr. C. He arrived in Tokyo in 2015, and began working in Nepalese restaurants as a cook. He moved to Fukuoka in 2016, where he also obtained employment as a cook

¹⁴ Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare introduced a subsidy scheme to support restaurants and shops whose operations were restricted by government regulations on May 1, 2020.

at a Nepalese restaurant. His Japanese language skills were not notable, even though he has been staying in Japan for six years. Based on his request, the interview was conducted in Nepali.

I returned to Nepal from March to July 2020 because I worried about my family's situation during the COVID-19 pandemic. I returned to Japan in July, when the number of working days decreased by one to two days per week. Since our salary was calculated on a daily basis, our monthly salary decreased by approximately 50%.

My friend borrowed a loan from the Social Welfare Council, so I tried to do the same. However, I could not meet the application deadline. I borrowed a total of 360,000 yen from three Nepalese friends in Japan in 2020 to fulfill my daily expenditures. (Interview on November 17, 2021).

Government restrictions on restaurant operations heavily affected the income of restaurant cooks because of the reduction in the number of working days. It was unfortunate that Mr. C could not access the government loan scheme; furthermore, it was untrue that the Social Welfare Council stopped accepting applications¹⁵. He was given incorrect information by his Nepalese friend.

Finally, the case of the permanent staff of a Japanese company, Mr. D, was analyzed. He arrived in Japan in 2014, and went through the education route. After graduating from technical school, he got a job at a hotel. Owing to his excellent Japanese skills, the interview was conducted in Japanese, based on his request.

During the outbreak of the new coronavirus, I worked at a hotel in Fukuoka. Before the pandemic, I worked five to six working days per week. However, from March 2020, it decreased to three to four days. As a result, my income dropped by approximately 25%.

In August 2020, I borrowed a loan of JPY 300,000 from the Social Welfare Council. I was informed about this loan by a Nepalese friend in Japan. In addition, I made efforts to cut spending, such as "changing mobile contract", "selecting or swapping ingredients carefully," and "reducing recreational activities." (Interview on November 17, 2021)

While Mr. D received a monthly salary from his company as a permanent staff, his overtime pay was cut following the COVID-19 pandemic, reducing his income. Although he worked at a Japanese company, his social network was largely Nepalese.

Figure 2 shows the reasons why the economic impact of COVID-19 and coping strategies differed among the different social categories. An income shock due to COVID-19 was found in the restaurant sector because

¹⁵ Interview with Social Welfare Council Office in Fukuoka on December 2, 2021.

of government regulations. This was why Nepalese restaurant owners and cooks suffered more compared to students and permanent staff of Japanese companies. Furthermore, the coping strategies employed were influenced by individuals' Japanese language skills and their social networks. Nepalese restaurant owners and permanent staff of Japanese companies had advanced language skills, allowing them to form good social networks within Japanese society. This helped them access external financial resources such as loans and subsidies.

Figure 2 Analytical Map

	Student	Restaurant Owner	Restaurant Cook	Parmanent Staff
Economic Impact of COVID-19	Less	Much	Much	Less
Length of Staying Japan	Short	Long	Short	Long
Skill in Japanese	Low	High	Low	High
Social Network with Japanese Society	Small	Large	Small	Large
Coping Strategy	Delayed access to loan scheme because of dependence on Nepalese community for information	Quick to access external resources with a social network in Japanese society	Delayed access to loan scheme because of dependence on Nepalese community for information	Cope using self-effort and utilize external resources as necessary, while having a stable income

(Source) Author Made

5, Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and the coping strategies of the Nepalese following it in Japan by conducting fieldwork in Fukuoka. The economic impact was not homogeneous across the Nepalese community, differing among social categories, largely due to government restrictions on the restaurant sector. The coping strategy was influenced by the social context. Students and restaurant cooks took certain months to take recovery action because of their poor Japanese language skills, and their small social network within Japanese society. On the other hand, restaurant owners accessed loans and subsidies immediately after the economic impact occurred, because of their advanced Japanese language skills and social networks. Permanent staff of Japanese companies highlighted the need to cut daily expenditures and access external financial resources. Every social category highlighted the utilization of social capital to deal with the economic difficulty, which is consistent with the literature review. However, this study clarified that the scope of social networks varies by social category, even among people of the same nationality.

Policy implications from this research include the need to diversify channels for policy implementation based on social context. Every local government provides information on infection prevention and vaccination schedules to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic on their websites. They mention information not only in several languages, but also in simple Japanese. They implicitly assume that people of the same nationality had the same needs of support. Based on the results of this study, however, the local government is required to have a direct connection with each nationality, and detailed support according to their status of residence.

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