

COVID-19 AND INFORMAL LABOUR IN CONSTRUCTION: A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS OF WEBINAR DISCUSSIONS

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ABSTRACT

Many countries after a remarkable spike in COVID-19 cases, opted to lockdown and quarantine curfew that restricted the movement of people. Construction is one of the main sectors experiencing a clear impact due to COVID-19. As a significant growth driver of the economy, the domestic construction industry employs nearly one million of the population directly in various trades. Unfortunately, almost every project has been severely hampered. It is, therefore, prudent to address the impact of the pandemic on construction labour at the outset and end of the crisis to prepare for any future challenges or opportunities that it may undergo. This study aims to investigate the effect of COVID-19 on the construction industry's survival and possible measures to be taken in both the short and the long run. This paper summarizes using a narrative analysis of the key takeaways of 15 webinar discussions on the COVID-19 impact and outlook of the construction sector in Sri Lanka. The impacts and fallouts have been addressed by key industry personnel. The study found the most prominent impacts of COVID-19 are the suspension of projects, labour impact, and job loss, time overrun, cost overrun, and delay in payments. The findings of this study shed light on the consequences of the sudden occurrence of a pandemic and raise awareness of the most critical impacts which cannot be overlooked. The findings also help project stakeholders prepare for any future worst-case scenarios.

Keywords: Construction labour; COVID-19; Informal labour; Labour crisis; Pandemic.

1. INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of COVID-19 has enormously affected almost every participant in the construction industry, be them contractor, consultant or client. Since the supply chains have been disrupted, there is a potential of cost over run (Bailey *et al.* 2020; Robertson, 2020). Due to the recent travel restrictions, managing workforce is a challenging task. Increased health, safety and environmental issues led for higher expenses to the contractor (Turrini, 2020). Labour shortages, governmental restrictions including ban on gatherings and the contractor's personnel, or suppliers are either ill or under quarantine, are the situations causing critical delay and inability to meet the initial deadlines (Shorter and Nairac, 2020; European International Contractors, 2020). The demand for middle income apartments are likely to be offset by the current and expected economic downturn (PWC, 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, the situation drastically deteriorated first by the

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shortage of material supply. Following the spread of the virus, many countries started implementing several measures to reduce the movement of people, and that has mainly affected the progress of construction work because it requires on-site work. Globally, millions of employees lost their jobs. In the construction industry, almost every tradesman lost their jobs and most of the small enterprises are not able to pay salaries during lockdowns. The literature about the pandemic is still scarce, especially in the construction industry sector. Hence, it is crucial to investigate the impact of the pandemic in the construction industry with reference to the impact on labour. This research depends largely on the opinions expressed by the key industry personnel via webinar discussions recently taken place in electronic media.

2. LITERATURE SURVEY

COVID-19 has been spreading drastically all over the world and is considered by the World Health Organization (WHO) as a pandemic (WHO, 2020). It has had far-reaching severe consequences. All the business activities have been shut down except for a few vital projects which are necessary to support the health system and safety of the people. Relatively, it has limited the business operations and companies have shifted to Work-From-Home (WFH) concept. However, in the construction industry, all the workers inevitably need to nearly work on-site either to perform activities or to monitor whether the work is done correctly (Financial Times, 2020). This is basically how the construction industry is different from other industries. Hence, it is crucial to appreciate how the construction industry addresses this unforeseen situation. Several studies have attempted to investigate the impact of COVID-19 on the economy and industrial sectors. A study by Fernandes (2020) addressed the economic impact of the pandemic outbreak on the economy of 30 countries and found that the gross domestic product (GDP) is likely to be hit by 3-6% or might fall by 15% in some countries.

The study revealed that the service-oriented economy is negatively impacted, and jobs are at risk and the countries that depend on foreign trade are likely to be affected the most in their GDP. Another study by Ayittey *et al.* (2020) shows that commerce, tourism, and trade are the most impacted sectors. Nicola *et al.* (2020) reported that the restrictions implied by the authorities had reduced mobility causing many industries to shut down the business operations. Ivanov (2020) studied the effect of the outbreak on the supply chain and found that almost every economic sector has been impacted negatively and it may take a longer time to recover. Harari (2020) also expressed that the COVID-19 pandemic is the biggest crisis of the generation, and it may take years to recover and action must be taken decisively to subsidize and plan new strategies to avoid the travail of humankind. Chalam (2020) found that the Indian real estate sector has been severely affected and declination has been considerably recorded. Helm (2020) also pointed out that the total lockdown caused by COVID-19 has severely curtailed economic activities. The construction industry with no exception has been severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since the supply chains have been disrupted, it has been difficult to complete on time and there is a potential for cost overrun (Bailey, 2020; Robertson, 2020). Due to the recent travel restrictions and uncertainty around travel locally and globally, managing the workforce is a challenging task. Increased health, safety, and environmental issues lead to higher expenses for the contractor (Turrini, 2020). Labour shortages, governmental restrictions including a ban on gatherings, and the contractor's personnel or suppliers

being ill or in quarantine, are the situations causing critical delay and inability to meet the project deadlines (Shorter, 2020; Osha, 2020). Delays in the completion of projects are partly due to the interruptions in the supply chain as voluminous raw materials are manufactured in China. Negative cash-flows, delays in the supply chain, and low investor confidence create a more problematic situation within the industry (William, 2020; European International Contractors, 2020).

As European International Contractors stated, the uptake of cross-border projects will require a higher- administrative burden as quarantine periods across the world vary in length. COVID-19 affects key cost components of construction projects (material and labour), and these challenges to on-going project delivery, companies' liquidity, and whole business models (Jayalath, 2020). Further, sub-contractors are unable to perform. Equipment rental companies are starting to face problems with equipment left on inoperative sites. The bankruptcy of smaller companies, contractors, subcontractors, and design professionals are frequent (European International Contractors, 2020). Disputes with main-contractors and sub-contractors, back-to-back force majeure claims under concession agreements to avoid liquidated damages are some of the complexities that arise (European International Contractors, 2020). As mentioned, force majeure clauses often list specific events such as earthquakes, earth slips, Tsunami, etc. Many such clauses will include in the list under Acts of God, which would not, however, seem to describe or encompass a global pandemic such as COVID-19 (Jayalath, 2020). Meanwhile, the liquidity crisis of companies with a high level of debt and low cash reserves, insolvency issues will linger the stakeholders to more disappointment (Deloitte, 2020). A significant increase in claims for delays or increased costs is because of the COVID-19 outbreak (Jayalath, 2020).

The Sri Lankan experience is not that far from global observations. The lockdown and curfews have restricted the distribution and retail of cement and dry mortar goods across the island (Economy next, 2020). The handover dates were postponed. Hence, suppliers were in a dilemma as the operating costs are increasing through, increases in, raw material costs, logistics, and expenditure related to special hygienic facilities (Economy next, 2020). The guidelines of Epidemiology Unit - Ministry of Health - Sri Lanka, stated that contractors need to supply all the hand hygiene facilities, facial masks, and other relevant personal protective equipment (PPEs) at the workplace, which may cause an additional cost. In Sri Lanka, several high-rise building projects have slowed down owing to the delay in the procurement of materials from China and the curfew. Lockdowns in China also adversely affected the industry as Chinese contractors undertake many construction projects in Sri Lanka (PWC, 2020). Thus, large-scale public sector construction activities may be suspended temporarily (Colombo Page, 2020). As such, the Sri Lankan construction supply chain was massively impacted due to the lockdown of China.

3. RESEARCH AIM AND OBJECTIVES

The aim of this research is to inspire dialogue among the decision-makers around the issue of informal labour in the construction industry during the COVID-19 pandemic. The objectives are to harness the outcome of a series of webinar discussions that took place within the period of March 2020 to April 2020 from both retrospective and prospective practical analysis, reveal the challenges that are currently being faced by industry personnel and recommend actions for implementation. More specifically, the discussion will consider not only the challenges in terms of labour dynamics induced by

the COVID-19 crisis, but also the opportunities the pandemic presents for these pertinent processes in the construction industry.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A literature review was carried out using research papers and technical articles that appeared in open free access sources on the internet since January 2020 where the spread of COVID-19 became evident and declared a pandemic by the WHO. A thorough review of webinar outcomes that are in the public domain was undertaken to identify various issues at the contracting firm level. Webinars are a frequent online qualitative research approach. For example, webinar delivery platforms as a tool for collection of qualitative data are popular because of ease of use and cost-effectiveness (Mandy *et al.*, 2019). Wen Ni Tiong *et al.* (2020) confirmed that data derived from webinar sessions are consistent with the quantitative results, and the potential of its uses as a new research tool to collect quality observation data. Out of a series of COVID-19 webinar recordings freely available in the internet, the selection of webinar recordings has been based upon the topic of the webinar discussion and stake of the professional organization has in disseminating construction labour data. 19 webinar sessions that address some of the key issues arising from the pandemic, were purposely selected. These include the lessons to be learned and sharing best practices to benefit construction and infrastructure firms over the challenging months ahead. All sessions were free to attend and were hosted on the Zoom webinar platform the profile of which is given in Table 1.

Table 1: Profile of the webinar discussions

Webinar	Organizer and Date	Theme of Focus Group Discussion
1	FIDIC, April 8, 2020	COVID-19: and its impact on contracts, supply and labour, activities on site and dealing with force majeure
2	RICS Sri Lanka, April 27, 2020	COVID-19 and the impact of real estate market in Sri Lanka; free webinar session ii. focused on vertical living, urban resilience, and re-emergence of the construction industry
3	RICS UK, May 1, 2020	Ensuring construction site safety and project continuity during COVID-19
4	FIDIC, May 5, 2020	COVID-19: how lockdown is enabling more digital and remote working
5	FIDIC, May 7, 2020	COVID-19: managing employment relationships, employees and health & safety requirements
6	BASL, May 10, 2020	Impact of COVID-19 in the sphere of labour law and industrial relations in Sri Lanka
7	FIDIC, June 3, 2020	Coming out of COVID-19: What will the 'new normal' look like and how will we get there?
8	IESL, July 7, 2020	The impact of COVID-19 on construction and infrastructure development: path to recovery and progress
9	AIQS, August 22, 2020	Post COVID-19 construction operations and employment management strategies for the construction industry in Sri Lanka and an overview of the middle east

Webinar	Organizer and Date	Theme of Focus Group Discussion
10	PAQS, August 27, 2020	Pandemic claims and resolutions for quantity surveyors
11	PAQS, September 23, 2020	Surviving post covid new norms for young professionals
12	PAQS, September 27, 2020	Status of construction industry and the effects of COVID-19 pandemic
13	IQSSL, Nov 23, 2020	Impacts of COVID-19 pandemic on the construction industry
14	CPWR-NIOSH-OSHA, Feb 25, 2021	Protecting construction workers: guidance on mitigating and preventing the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace
15	FIDIC, March 2, 2021	Working together in the new normal

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 provides the key findings from the webinar content.

Table 2: Key outcomes of webinar discussions

Webinar	Experience/Impact	Alternative/Recommendation
01	The labour crisis created by the COVID-19 pandemic has increased global unemployment by almost 25 million.	Retaining of employment, with deducted salaries for those who have been made to stay at home instead of terminating them.
02	The impact is profoundly severe in the case of seasonal labour such as in domestic construction	Due to the nature of the industry, most of the value additions are done on-site. It would be ideal to shift to a phased-out approach to implementation that allows the necessary time (in the initial phases) to gather first-hand information about project characteristics, personnel, and cultural nuances so that the delivered solution can be tailored appropriately.
03	Most informal economy workers have suffered massive damage to their capacity to gainfully engage in some form of income earning.	Companies require a stimulus package as a short-term measure to ensure wages to employees for months experiencing no work.
04	Working from home is not possible unless computer facilities, software, essential hard copies, soft files, etc. are provided to the employees.	Arrangements must be made by the authorities to provide computer facilities, an uninterrupted network, and other essential facilities.
05	The biggest risk seems to be the continuation of work and accommodation in line with social distancing measures.	Working arrangements that reduce onsite labour congestion is the only option.

Webinar	Experience/Impact	Alternative/Recommendation
06	Delays are stemming from a shortage of craftspeople due to shelter-in-place restrictions and delays occasioned by shortages of government workers available to perform inspections, issue permits, etc	Online approval methods may be feasible in some cases.
07	In certain jurisdictions, the hardship may allow parties to seek relief based on an exceptional and unpredictable change of circumstances that affects the businesses.	Under many laws, parties must continue to exhaust all reasonably available means to continue performing their obligations, notwithstanding the existence of a force majeure event.
08	Employment protection has been threatened and the loss of income and businesses has threatened the business continuity.	Both the EPF and ETF contributions to be continued during this time – guaranteeing continued social security. Establishments must be allowed to prorate payments according to the number of hours worked by each employee.
09	Computer servers, electronic items, manufacturing tools, testing equipment, and documents idle in offices, sites, and workshops would be damaged or destroyed due to non-maintenance. Also, there can be damages to important data due to overheating, rats, and termite attacks.	Allowing, with some control, at least a technician and the owner must be present to minimize losses. It is better to implement a work schedule on a roster basis to ensure no damages due to non-maintenance/operation of tools and equipment
10	The construction supply chain is highly impacted, generating project slippage and/or extra costs. Enhanced focus on worker safety and increased cost pressure could accelerate the move to offsite construction methods. The efficiency and controlled environment of factory production can help in leveraging labor costs and in optimizing project schedules.	It is important to increase competitiveness among the engineering and construction companies in terms of improving the balance between site work, office engineering and factory assembly, etc. Meanwhile taking migratory actions is inevitable. Apps can help keep a track of workers' locations while on the job, in full compliance with privacy regulations, so management can quickly identify potential exposure to the virus.
11	The epidemic and the predictions of environmental changes are bound to reset the status quo.	The industry may need to be more flexible and ready to effect structural changes: We need to commence a dialogue and identify weaknesses and recommend adjustments and/or re-orientation.

Webinar	Experience/Impact	Alternative/Recommendation
12	The unprecedented loss of productivity among workers because of distancing requirements, new safety protective gear requirements, and safety procedures-all in addition to the sick and quarantined workers who are absent.	In the short term, it's going to be phased out working arrangements while focusing on other key areas like improvement of business processes, eliminating non-value adding activities, reducing wastage, and driving workforce with KPIs and training and development.
13	Site congestion is inevitable in building projects than road and infrastructure projects	It is always important to adhere to government directives to maintain discipline at the ground level. Health and safety protocol is imperative.
14	Informal traders are particularly impacted by social distancing rules and have less access to clean water and sanitation. Additionally, with 60% of women across Sri Lanka employed in the informal sector, COVID-19 threatens their economic self-sufficiency from plying their trade and contributing to the livelihood of their household.	Produce necessary policy measures to enhance social protection coverage and support mechanisms to protect informal workers if they lose their livelihoods while emphasizing the nature of women labour
15	First, informal workers often work in economic sectors that carry a high risk of virus infection. Among others, waste recyclers, street vendors and food servers, construction workers, transport workers, and domestic workers are particularly at risk to contract with COVID-19.	In response, many low and middle-income countries have started implementing measures for those in the informal sector and self-employed workers. Policy responses include cash transfers as well as the deferral or reduction of loans, rents, or utility bills for low-income people for the duration of the pandemic.

The fact that the construction as an economic subsector is an informal labour sector has been reiterated in almost every webinar session. Informal workers mean those who work in jobs that are not registered with local authorities or covered by formal working arrangements. This kind of labour does not fall within the tax net, nor eligible for basic social security. During the COVID-19, the informal economy workers faced a lot of issues such as the impact of lockdown and other containment measures. They have no permanent working arrangements or areas, and they faced a challenge to affect by COVID-19 because of the non- arranged work ethic and without the occupational safe workplaces. As Shorter (2020) and Osha (2020) reiterated that governmental restrictions including ban on gatherings, and the contractor's personnel or suppliers being ill or in quarantine, are the situations causing critical delay and inability to meet the project deadlines. All the webinar discussions emphasized this matter. As such, informal economy workers got an economically and socially challenged life. In Sri Lanka, two million workers are employed informally in the construction sector but there is limited research on how they have been affected due to COVID-19.

The webinar discussions have shed some new thoughts on how to cope with construction labor issues during the pandemic. Retaining of employment with deducted salaries, introducing phased-out approach in sequencing work in hand, offering a stimulus package as a short-term measure of survival, working arrangements that reduce onsite labour congestion work schedule on a roster basis to ensure no damages due to non-maintenance/operation of tools and equipment, apps that help keep a track of workers' locations while on the job, eliminating non-value adding activities, reducing wastage and among the temporary measures to ease out the current situation. Policy responses include cash transfers as well as the deferral or reduction of loans, rents, or utility bills for this information labour. One of the common perceptions encountered across all the webinar sessions is the importance of a policy directive specific to construction labour management.

While the construction industry begins to find the new normal, the findings will help in strategizing the way forward in near future and navigate the COVID-19 downturn. In nutshell, while informal employment is universally characterized by a lack of social protection, exposure to occupational health and income risks for informal workers is determined by the specific physical and social environments of their workplaces. Efforts to improve the economic status of informal workers should consider the contexts in which informal work takes place to develop tailored interventions for informal workers.

5. CONCLUSIONS

As COVID-19 crisis worsens, its effects on construction industry in Sri Lanka became a key issue and priority. A number of webinar sessions has been organized by professional entities that have some kind of stake in taking care of the wellbeing of the industry. Much attention has been paid to the question of its consequences and the remedial measures available to navigate and ease out the labour crisis. The biggest risk seems to be the site congestion and the difficulty to maintain social distancing measures due to the very nature of the industry. Hence, it is high time the professionals and industry regulators together revisit the circumstances and work out a strategy to work 'in harmony with COVID-19' for a less interrupted construction legacy throughout the country. The findings of this research are introductory to the construction industry stakeholders and policymakers. However, some of the findings can be used to understand the impact of the unforeseen and uncontrolled pandemic on construction-related other industries and other sectors in general. This will help improve the plans to cope with any encountered circumstances.

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