Dear friends,

The way forward in the time of the pandemic - Update July 12

Schools in Nepal are closed. SMD has been closed since March 24, when the government imposed a lockdown. The National Board exams for Grade 10 have been cancelled. The government finally cancelled the Grade 11 exams. Education authorities are still dithering about the Grade 12 finals. All our other children (Class 9 and under) finished finals before the lockdown started.

We have no idea when schools will be ordered to reopen. At any rate, full operation will be impossible for SMD. We are too crowded for quarantining and social distancing. We have decided that the younger children (Class 7 down) will stay in their villages, where they are safer.

The children went home suddenly so parents were not expecting that they would have to feed and clothe them. We have been making contact with the villages to assess needs. With a view to providing material support we are asking:

* were the villagers able to do their spring planting?  
* do our kids’ families have enough food for the time-being?  
* have you started to eat the food that was stored for winter?  
* do SMD children have enough and appropriate clothing and footwear?
There is a good awareness of corona virus transmission - the mobile phone companies are carrying public service announcements about corona virus and hygiene. People are practicing social distancing and villages have even set up hand washing stations - but there is no soap in some districts. We mean to meet this need as soon as movement is permitted and have discovered that rittha (रिठ्ठा - ‘Rittha’ in Nepali) soap nuts can be used for washing hands/bodies/clothing. Soap nuts are grown and available in Nepal, so there is the added advantage of making employment in this hard-hit country.

We are offering classes in the villages for the children who will be staying at home. We are using the monasteries, community halls and schools (they’re empty). Children will meet with some of our older students, to keep everyone’s interest keen and so the small ones don’t lose their early learning. Some districts have telephone towers - so we are trying to set up wifi connections if the signals are strong enough.

We are continuing to pay full salaries to our staff for as long as we can. Many of our staff have returned to their home villages and when the lockdown is lifted, we expect more will go home.

We don’t know when the government will tell schools to open but when that happens, bringing all the children down from the mountains poses life and death challenges:

* the virus has not made its way into all 77 districts. See map here -
  * https://kathmandupost.com/covid19
* so far, it isn’t in the highest villages where our kids come from
* there will be increased danger in coming down to the Kathmandu Valley. The first several days of trek pose no risk, but there is risk when the children reach the road-heads (more populated areas) and in the last leg of the trip, when they get into a bus - we are very worried about that
* we are thinking we may bring the children down village by village - and have disinfected vehicles meet them to bring them to SMD
* we would have to quarantine the children for 14 days - we don’t have the room at SMD to quarantine everyone
* monsoon started early, so the trail are already slippery and landslides have started

This is how SMD will operate in the near future:

**Helping our older students**

* Grades 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12) and those who are studying General Medicine to become Health Assistants (paramedics).
* They will come back and be quarantined at SMD, then continue their education
* Will bring them down village by village (to limit transmission of Covid)
* And will meet them at the roadhead with a disinfected vehicle.
* When they reach SMD, they will be quarantined for 2 weeks, with temperature checks AM and PM
* After quarantine, they will be integrated into SMD’s dorms
* Once they are in the school, there will be going out and no outsiders coming in
Helping the children in the villages
  * After we assess the needs (food, clothing) then we will work on getting the goods into the villages when movement is allowed.

We will organize classes in some central areas in the mountains
  * We are assessing the learning needs
    * Wifi availability
    * Text books and supplies needed

In Kathmandu

Online Classes
  * SMD teachers are teaching online classes for those students who can access the internet.

Families Needing Food Relief
  * Nelha Sangmo (our medical worker) finished needs assessment
  * Global Dental Relief globaldentalrelief.org has provided funding for families who are having trouble putting food on the table.
  * On June 11, Nelha Sangmo and Tsewang Dorje B022 and SMD disbursed relief packages containing: lentils, rice, oil, whole wheat flour and a vegetable, enough to feed a family of 3 - 5 for a week at a little over $12/week.

We will continue to do our best to help the children in our care, and to support our staff to the best of our ability and we look forward to the day when the SMD family can be together.

Principal Wangchuk Tenzin and Director Shirley Blair