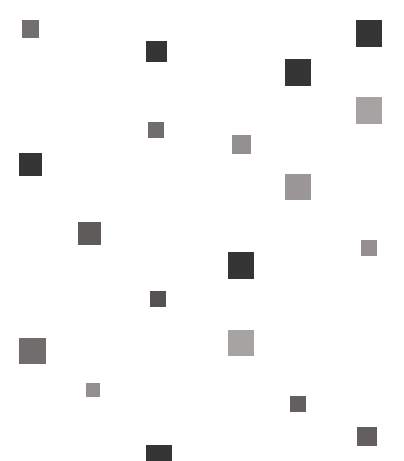


A Report on Southeast Asian Community Responses in COVID-19 Times

University of the Philippines
Center for Integrative and Development Studies
Program on Alternative Development
(UP CIDS AltDev) and Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung



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A REPORT ON SOUTHEAST ASIAN COMMUNITY RESPONSES IN COVID-19 TIMES¹

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INTRODUCTION

As the whole world reels under the impact of the unprecedented health crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been little attention on its effect on grassroots communities and marginalized sectors. This is particularly important given the haphazard and erratic manner of some governments to contain the contagion given a situation where health systems are confronted by serious challenges in their readiness to confront a crisis of these proportions. While national reports are documented and macro numbers are often reported, there is a need to look more closely at underprivileged sectors and communities.

This report documents what marginalized communities in a select number of Southeast Asian societies are engaging in and how they respond to the pandemic. The results are varied, conditioned on the location, existence of community and sectoral organizations, and levels of social solidarity and collective consciousness.

¹ This Report is being submitted to the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung as part of a project looking into the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic by marginalized communities and the state in Southeast Asia. It is an updated study with major revisions and additions that substantially builds on an unpublished earlier and preliminary version that was posted by the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) at <https://cids.up.edu.ph/covid19portal/altdev-sea-grassroots-covid19-responses/> on April 2020.

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SOUTHEAST ASIAN SITUATION AND STATE RESPONSES

For the region, the response from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been muted and devoid of any concrete, unified, and coordinated response. Other than an online conference of Foreign Ministers in early April 2020 which approved the establishment of a still-to-be-realized Covid-19 Response Fund there has been no high-level concerted effort that belies the regional grouping's highly publicized and projected image of a unified and people-caring ASEAN.³

Later it was revealed that the response fund would have to be accessed through loans from external donors like China, Japan, and South Korea. As the civil society-led ASEAN Peoples' Forum (APF 2020) pointed out in its Joint Statement of November 5-7, 2020: "ASEAN official responses have been largely token and uncoordinated. Country-based stimulus programs have been inadequate and inefficient."⁴ Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic is "weakening an already fragile regional cohesion in the face of growing domestic and geopolitical tensions," prompting "each ASEAN member state to go its own way" and curtailing regional diplomacy.⁵

Concerns have been raised about the state of human rights in Southeast Asia during COVID-19 times.⁶ Troubling patterns include (1) "reduced preparedness" due "to poor leadership and governance" thus putting lives of citizens at greater-than-necessary risk," (2) weaponizing COVID-19 and using the pandemic as "an opportunity to crack down on dissenters and restrict fundamental freedoms" and deepen authoritarian rule, and (3) using the crisis "as an excuse to amass power."

A United Nations policy brief reports that, while Southeast Asia, with the exception of Indonesia and the Philippines, is seen to have effectively managed the pandemic, the impact on the regional economy and social situation has been severe and could be long-lasting.⁷ The region-wide economy is expected to contract by 0.4 percent in 2020, 289 million informal workers will have their livelihoods destroyed, more families will be pushed into poverty, and remittances from overseas workers will decline by 13 percent (US\$10 billion). The World Bank confirms the UN projections for Southeast Asian economies showing that nine of eleven country economies will contract by a minimum of approximately 0.8 percent to a maximum of 8.2 percent (See Table 1). Thailand and the Philippines will be the worst performers with negative growth rates of approximately 8.2 percent and 7.2 percent respectively. Meanwhile the only two economies that will grow will be Vietnam and Myanmar albeit with lower projections than previous years' performance.

³ Jim Gomez, "Asean ministers endorse new covid-19 response fund." The Diplomat. April 10, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/asean-ministers-endorse-new-covid-19-response-fund/>

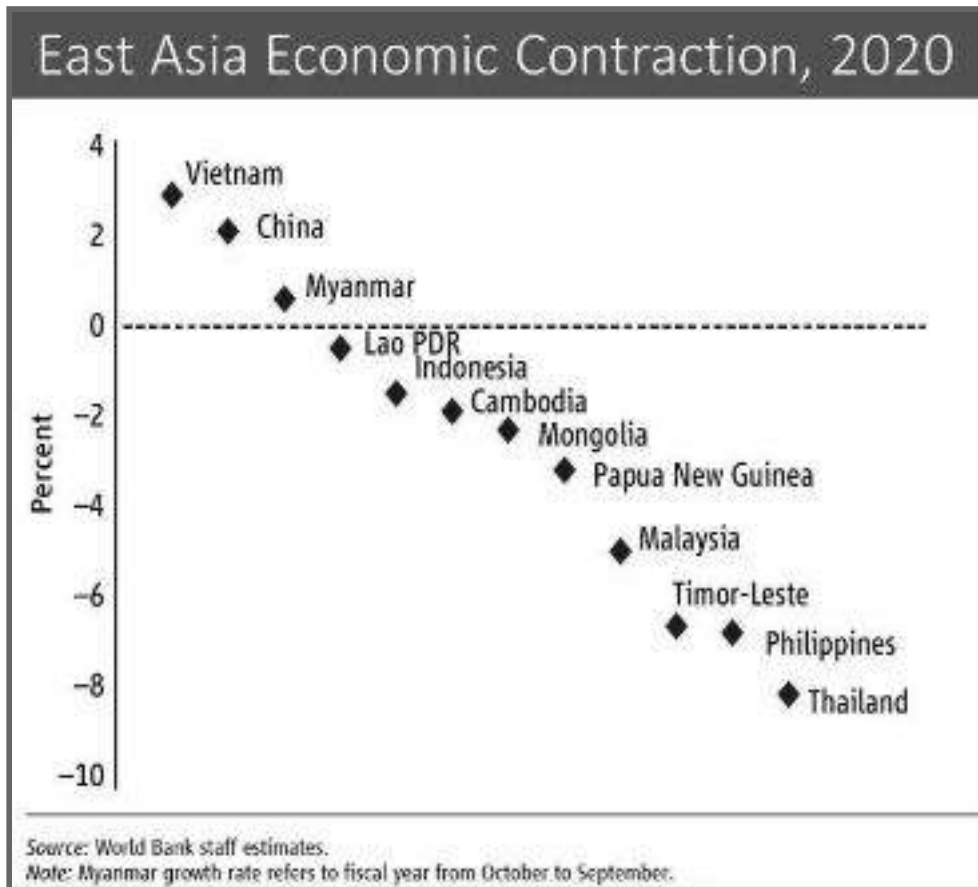
⁴ Asean Peoples' Forum, Joint Statement on "Southeast Asian Peoples' Solidarity for an Inclusive, Cohesive, and Responsive Community," November 5-7, 2020, Hanoi, Vietnam. Typescript.

⁵ Michael Vatikiotis, "COVID-19 exposes ASEAN's fragility," Nikkei Asia. 11 November 2020. <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/COVID-19-exposes-ASEAN-s-fragility>

⁶ Olivia Enos, "Promoting values in Southeast Asia especially during Covid-19," The Heritage Foundation. May 20, 2020. <https://www.heritage.org/asia/commentary/promoting-values-southeast-asia-especially-during-covid-19>

⁷ Tom Allard, "Southeast Asia poverty to surge in 'socio-economic crisis': U.N." Reuters. 31 July 2020. <https://news.yahoo.com/southeast-asia-poverty-surge-socio-023013653.html?>

Table 1



CITIZENS' SENTIMENTS

A Blackbox survey of citizens' sentiments in 23 countries as to how their leaders in government, business, community, and media have responded to the Covid-19 crisis included six Southeast Asian countries - Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand (See Table 2).⁸ Of the six, Vietnam and Malaysia were favorably assessed with cumulative scores of 77 percent and 58 percent respectively. The four others scored unfavorable cumulative ratings of below 50 percent thus: Philippines, 49 percent; Indonesia, 48 percent; Singapore, 48 percent; and Thailand, 36 percent.

In terms of national leadership, Vietnam scored a high 82 percent with Malaysia barely making it to the favorable section with 59 percent. The Philippines had 45 percent, Singapore had 41 percent, Indonesia with 37 percent and Thailand ending at the bottom with only 22 percent. The Southeast Asian business leaders fared even worse with only Vietnam having a favorable perception of 64 percent. Malaysia and the Philippines tied with 37 percent, Indonesia had 29 percent, Singapore with 25 percent and Thailand, again, last with 19 percent.

⁸ "The World in Crisis: A Global Public Opinion Survey Across 23 Countries (Summary Report). May 2020. Thanks to Filomeno Sta Ana III for pointing out this survey in his May 24, 2020 column in Business World. <https://blackbox.com.sg/everyone/2020/05/06/most-countries-covid-19-responses-rated-poorly-by-own-citizens-in-first-of-its-kind-global-survey>.

At the community level, there was some improved perception but not much. Vietnam was at the top with a favorable rating of 66 percent while everyone else had negative perceptions. Malaysia had 43 percent, Indonesia followed with 39 percent, Philippines and Thailand tied with 36 percent, and Singapore was last with 35 percent.

The picture, however, shifts when perceptions of media leadership are assessed. All six countries had highly favorable ratings led by Vietnam with 95 percent, followed by Malaysia (93 percent), Singapore (92 percent), Indonesia (87 percent), Philippines (78 percent), and Thailand (72 percent).

Table 2

Survey of Southeast Asian Citizens on Responses to COVID-19 (%)					
Country	National Leadership	Business Leadership	Community Leadership	Media Leadership	Cumulative Scores
Vietnam	82	64	66	95	77
Malaysia	59	37	43	93	58
Philippines	45	37	36	78	49
Indonesia	37	29	39	87	48
Singapore	41	25	35	92	48
Thailand	22	19	36	72	36

Source: Blackbox Global Opinion Survey May 2020 ⁹

The current rush to procure vaccines against the COVID-19 pandemic has again seen ASEAN member governments exerting individual efforts with virtually no regional coordination or joint cooperation.¹⁰ As of 29 December 2020, some countries like Brunei, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Indonesia have already secured contracts with vaccine manufacturers like Sinovac, Pfizer, AstraZeneca, Medigem, and Arcturus. Indonesia has already administered nine million doses since November while Laos has been trialing Russia's *Sputnik V* vaccine. Singapore and Vietnam, meanwhile, are also working to develop their own vaccines. The Philippines, Cambodia, and Myanmar-Burma, however, have lagged behind in securing access to vaccines. Recently, a scandal broke out in the Philippines with admissions that some Cabinet members and the Presidential Security Group have received the vaccine without any authorization from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

⁹ The Singapore-based Blackbox Research "carried out an online nationally representative survey of n=12,592 across 23 countries, aged between 18 to 80 with a statistical margin of error of 3-6 per cent. The survey was conducted between 3 April to 19 April."

<https://blackbox.com.sg/everyone/2020/05/06/most-countries-covid-19-responses-rated-poorly-by-own-citizens-in-first-of-its-kind-global-survey>.

¹⁰ Dezan Shira & Associates, "COVID-19 Vaccine Roll Outs in ASEAN and Asia – Live Updates by Country," ASEAN Briefing, 29 December 2020.

<https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/covid-19-vaccine-roll-outs-in-asean-asia-live-updates-by-country/>

GRASSROOTS COVID-19 RESPONSES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

THE PHILIPPINES

ALYANSA NG MGA SAMAHAN SA SITIO MENDEZ, BAESA HOMEOWNERS ASSOCIATION, INC. (ASAMBA)

Experiences of communities living in the urban margins are usually undocumented and largely ignored by mainstream media. In the past and in the present, they have seized opportunities to reclaim spaces and resources and to fight for their rights. This is evidence that the urban poor are capable agents and are not idle players waiting for government support or subsidy. There are exceptional possibilities and alternatives that the poor can do in the face of worsening urban poverty and complex socio-economic issues like the economic and health crises brought about by the pandemic. Despite anxiety and uncertainties, the homeowners of ASAMBA in Quezon City, Philippines, have devised their own ways of mobilizing effectively in response to the COVID-19 health crisis. This brief case study draws from stories of ASAMBA members and illustrates their creativity and resilience.

“Biglaan ang ECQ, maraming nagutom kaya nag-food rationing kami,” (The ECQ was sudden. We immediately distributed food rations because many went hungry) said ASAMBA President Eduardo “Eddie” Roldan. After the Philippine government declared the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) across the country in mid-March 2020, ASAMBA leaders convened an emergency meeting to discuss the urgent actions in response to the public health crisis. Mindful of the debilitating effects of COVID-19 on one hand and exercising courage drawn from their collective agency, histories, and struggles on the other, the entire ASAMBA leadership mobilized to act as community front liners amid the pandemic.

Immediately, a group of women leaders proceeded to their village’s portals to strictly monitor the movement of every resident (*bantay sa gate*). They made sure that people are staying home, *walang tambay sa labas* (no one is loitering) and physical distancing is practiced. Some officers volunteered to retrofit the ironworks of their second gate. These gatekeepers constantly reminded residents to wear face masks and carry their identification cards (IDs) when entering or leaving the community. Otherwise, they would not be allowed to enter. They also screen non-residents entering the community. For important public announcements, they maximized the use of a public address system with seven (7) speakers (*trompa*) surrounding their whole community.

ASAMBA supplemented this gatekeeping with their own social protection measures. Other community leaders quickly deliberated and decided to release a portion of their organization’s savings for the procurement and distribution of immediate food needs (especially rice) to all their members. It was actually ASAMBA which initiated the first and second waves of relief operations within their community from their own funds, not the local government. Experience has taught them that relief goods from the government take time to reach them. They had to act, otherwise their members would starve. Meanwhile, through partnerships with various civil society organizations and other organizations, ASAMBA was able to secure resources such as food packs.

In the months that followed the lifting of the ECQ in Metro Manila, mobility restrictions became more relaxed and many among the workforce have been allowed to go back to work. In the absence of free mass testing, the whole community has become more exposed to the virus. In July, ASAMBA monitored two (2) COVID-19 cases within their neighborhood who were employees of private companies. Both have reportedly recovered. At the beginning of August, four (4) more asymptomatic cases were identified. Since there were no reported cases within the community during the ECQ period (although this observation was in the absence of mass testing), the community concluded that these residents were infected when they began to return to their workplaces.

The threat of contracting COVID-19 created an atmosphere of distress. People are fearful that their own barangay might soon be included in the list of the city's COVID-19 hotspots that may eventually result in another painful lockdown, a necessary preventive measure that they know, however, would not be complemented with sufficient social services needed during a public health crisis. ASAMBA residents continue to worry about their health situation that is compounded by the increasing problem of food insecurity, unemployment, lack of livelihood opportunities, and the no-work-no-pay status of the workforce settled there.

Given the prolonged quarantine period with no assurance of a recovered economy in the coming months, ASAMBA members started to set up their own livelihood shacks in front of their houses while others resumed the paid household work from neighbors (e.g., doing the laundry). A few have also tried online selling like Mina. Since biking has become the alternative means of transportation, Mina is into online retail of bicycle parts while her son delivers them to online buyers within their reach. Her only wish is for the country's trade and industry department to reconsider the proposal to tax small-time sellers such as herself whose incomes are barely sufficient for her family needs while still in quarantine.

Ka Linda added that the one positive outcome is the circulation of money within their community. With residents buying food and other basic necessities from the neighborhood, this scheme allows them to patronize one another's product and appraise everyone's skill like specialty cooking, food preparation, and online selling. She mentioned that vegetable urban gardening has also found a revival. This has somehow solved their problem about their lunch or dinner's main course (*pang-ulam*).

The children's education is another cause for worry. They believe that the Department of Education's decision to begin classes by September is premature. Moreover, the shift to blended learning did not consider the situation of the poor. Eddie explained: "*Uunahin ng mga pamilya ang pagkain kesa sa cellphone o gadget.* (The poor families' priority is food security instead of cellular phones or gadgets needed for online learning.) He estimates that in the ASAMBA community alone, around 50 percent of the school children will drop out this school year. For those who have enrolled, there might still be drop-outs in the middle of the term when classes resume.

Eddie discussed, "*Yung nanay, hindi niya maasikaso ang mga bata dahil magbabantay at maglalako pa siya ng paninda niya. Ang tatay, 3 days na lang ang pasok. Magbabayad pa ng renta sa bahay. May mga kaso na ng renters na umuwi na ng probinsya dahil sa kakulangan ng budget para panggastos sa pamilya at pambayad sa renta ng bahay.*" (The mother cannot attend to this home-based education of her children because she has to peddle her goods for a living. The father only has 3-day work these days. There is the house rent that has to be paid.

There have been cases of families deciding to return to the province due to lack of budget for household expenditures including rent.)

Amid this prolonged health crisis, ASAMBA has not wavered in providing service to its community. It has done so primarily through collective action and volunteerism. This has not only allowed them not to be overly reliant on dole-outs from the government, but it has also allowed them to respond to various issues in the community. To sustain this initiative, ASAMBA has religiously collected Php20.00 monthly dues from its members and households who are considered renters and sharers. Other sources include parking fees from those with motor vehicles. ASAMBA's COVID-19 response demonstrates their autonomy and ability to self-govern. This has made them flexible in addressing immediate concerns of their community and less reliant on government dole-outs.

ASAMBA is confident that while their organization can successfully undertake alternative social measures among their members to help prevent the spread of a highly infectious disease, they also need to remind the government of its responsibility in providing social services especially universal health care.

ASAMBA has thus joined the call for free mass testing in Quezon City, citing that other cities have implemented this practice. This demand was pushed by the increasing number of COVID-19 cases in the city and the increasing susceptibility of the urban poor sector to this virus with no access to adequate health care. ASAMBA also asked the government to revive the schedule of vaccinations to the new-born that was suspended during the quarantine period.

For Eddie, Mina and Ka Linda, if there is any redeeming factor in the quarantine period, it is the opportunity for the members to be closer to one another. Now, they have tested their collective capacities to perform to the best of their governance skills. And it pushed them further to new heights of self-discovery of what they can achieve as a peoples' organization. Overall, the pandemic has surfaced the underestimated capacities of grassroots communities who will endeavor selflessly in addressing the community's needs owing to their deeply ingrained perspectives and practices based on solidarity, cooperation, and sharing of resources.

MAIGTING NA SAMAHAN NG PANLIPUNANG NEGOSYANTE NG TOWERVILLE (IGTING)

Igting or *Maigting na Samahan ng mga Panlipunang Negosyante ng Towerville Inc.* is a social enterprise which sells quality garment products and provides custom sewing services.¹¹ In 2014, Igting began as a livelihood project of CAMP Asia, Inc., a non-government organization and subsidiary of CAMP International. As a platform for income generation and community empowerment, Igting aims to provide work opportunities to residents of a resettlement area in Towerville, San Jose Del Monte, Bulacan, Philippines. Many of the residents were informal settlers who were compelled to relocate due to urban development projects of the government or whose dwellings were devastated by typhoons and floods. Ninety-eight percent (98%) of the members are women. Igting specializes in sewing custom-made uniforms, men and women's apparel, bags, and pouches. Igting sewing center is located at Lot A-2 Upper Quarry, Brgy. Minuyan Proper, San Jose Del Monte, Bulacan.

In the case of Barangay Minuyan Proper, residents were only allowed to go out of the confines of the community during Wednesday and Saturday. This rule appears to be designed for middle-class families who usually have enough money to buy their basic necessities in bulk and can therefore consistently schedule their trips to establishments outside their houses around this restriction. For the members of Igting, this rule is too constraining considering their tight socio-economic conditions. They also observed that the implementers of the rule subjected them to processes of interrogation which are “unnecessary and cumbersome.”

For mothers who largely depend on their earnings from Igting for their daily necessities, the COVID-19 pandemic caused them enormous economic distress. As such, they had been looking forward to receiving the food packs and cash aid under the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) of the government. But because of long delays of government relief efforts, they had to rely on their other social support systems such as the relief program of the employers of their spouses/children and money transfer from relatives to put food on the table.

Three weeks after the declaration of the Community Quarantine, the first of the three rounds of food packs from the local government arrived. It contained five (5) kilos of rice, eight (8) cans of sardines, and four (4) packs of instant noodles. Meanwhile, the first (Php 6,500.00) of the two payouts of the cash aid was made in the third week of May. Members of Igting agreed that the barangay could still improve their procedure for the implementation of the social amelioration measures. In terms of processing the cash aid, the residents were asked to be in long queues, drenched in the heat of the sun, just to submit their accomplished forms to the barangay hall.

For the distribution of family food packs, the barangay picked “block leaders” who were tasked to come up with a list of names of beneficiaries. However, the identification process for food packs seemed arbitrary and subjective, instead of carefully considering the eligibility requirements of the potential beneficiaries.

¹¹ Maigting na Samahan ng mga Panlipunang Negosyante ng Towerville, Inc. 2017. *Profile of Igting*. Bulacan: Philippines.

Compromised livelihood

The lifeblood of social enterprises is the regularity of job orders from their clients. For Igting, a huge volume of their monthly income comes from subcontracting. While precarious work due to fluctuations in work orders from their clients are a perennial challenge, this problem has been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. When the community quarantine was implemented, the impact of the pandemic was not immediately felt because the members were still finishing orders from their clients. When the orders were accomplished, their production ceased leaving the members uncertain and anxious about their daily subsistence. The suspension of work was hard for all the members of Igting because their daily earnings were a major, if not the only, source of income for their household.

Coping with the crisis

After a month of halting operations, CAMP Asia approached Igting to produce 100,000 face masks to be given as donations to various non-government organizations (NGOs). This act of support by CAMP Asia was deeply appreciated by Igting members. As they resumed their operations, Igting members came up with a list of occupational safety and health measures which were strictly enforced and carefully followed by the members. Every day, members of Igting produce at least 6,000 face masks. A piece rater may earn from Php 300.00 to Php 900.00 per day depending on how fast he/she works. In the following weeks, CAMP Asia had two subsequent orders of about 60,000 and 45,000 facemasks, respectively. Igting is also currently planning and learning to sew Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs) as another product to offer their clients. Igting has likewise received subsidies from the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) to sustain their operations. However, at the same time, the officers of Igting started to worry again as they were about to finish producing the facemasks and no new job order was in sight.

Preliminary recommendations

Based on the shared experiences and insights of the key informants, the following recommendations may be considered:

1. Local government units and their personnel should follow and implement the proper procedures on community quarantines and social amelioration measures in a way that is sensitive to the socio-economic conditions of vulnerable groups and communities.
2. As complement to the government relief efforts, private firms and employers should be encouraged to continue to provide their own relief program for their employees.
3. Family food packs must not be junk food but should contain nutritious food.
4. For DTI, while subsidies to social enterprises (e.g., providing materials for the production of goods) are helpful, it is also necessary to directly link social enterprises to potential clients and buyers.
5. For state agencies and private firms, one way to help social enterprises to survive is to buy their locally made products instead of relying on imports from other countries.

AYTA-MAG-INDI COMMUNITY OF PORAC, PAMPANGA

This report recounts the experiences of indigenous peoples of Barangays Camias and Planas highlighting how existing pandemic-related policies further exacerbate the already marginalized status of indigenous peoples in Philippine society. Barangay Camias is located in the ancestral domain of the Ayta indigenous peoples (IP) and is mainly governed by Ayta leaders. It comprises around 700 Ayta families. Barangay Planas, on the other hand, is the post Mt. Pinatubo eruption relocation site where about 400 Ayta families are residing. Not too far from their relocation, the area they occupied was called the Katutubo Village to delineate them from the non Ayta residents (mostly “Kapampangans” or natives of Pampanga) of the Barangay.

The community first learned of the declaration of Luzon wide community quarantine from the mainstream news and social media outlets. They tried to build their understanding of the pandemic from the fragments of information they got from these sources. Nonetheless, the community leaders, upon hearing the news of the pandemic and the declaration of the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), took the initiative to put up checkpoints to screen and monitor the entry of non-residents. They also discouraged the Aytas from leaving their communities unless extremely necessary.

Without timely and relevant information on the pandemic, the Aytas were left on their own to understand the pandemic given the past experiences and knowledge that had been passed on to them by their ancestors. To augment their indigenous knowledge, they have asked the younger generation, who are more familiar with the use of modern technology, to research on pandemics. By utilizing their indigenous knowledge coupled with efforts to gather further information from more mainstream sources, they try to find ways to prepare themselves against the ill effects of the pandemic to their community.

Health and medical support from the government

The only support group the Ayta Mag-indi peoples can count on in their community are the Ayta Barangay Health Workers who are themselves not fully informed about the pandemic. “They can take your blood pressure and temperature. And they will advise you to rest and not work when sick,” said Benny Capuno, Ayta Mag-indi Cultural Master. However, their ability to physically visit the community has been limited since the quarantine measures were imposed. Prior to the pandemic, the higher-ranking health official in the community’s health center, a midwife, used to pay regular visits. But this has stopped upon the declaration of the lockdown. Visits only resumed recently after the province had been placed on General Community Quarantine (GCQ) status. When asked what service the midwife gave during her visits, the Aytas said that she simply distributed milk to identified malnourished children and gave Vitamin A supplements to both young and adults.

They have become aware of the health protocols being implemented related to the effort to stop the spread of the disease. And as much as they want to comply with these protocols when outside their homes, they do not always have the resources nor means to do so. In the context of a community quarantine where their mobility has been restricted and many establishments have temporarily closed down, sourcing protective equipment such as masks has been a challenge. In response, leaders from both barangays innovated to produce their own face masks. Likewise, they have also begun to gather leaves from medicinal plants which, based on their indigenous knowledge and experiences, can serve as disinfectants. They admitted

however that wearing face masks is not yet a popular practice among the community members especially when they are in their homes, or in their ancestral domain, where they felt safe from the virus.

Non-health support from the government

Despite pronouncements from the national government of sufficient and guaranteed “ayuda” (assistance) for communities under quarantine, the assistance proved to be elusive. Furthermore, there were firsthand experiences where local officials withheld some portion of the aid (such as rice). Apart from this issue, the delivery of aid was, in general, slow. In Barangay Camias the assistance from the municipal government only came in mid-April 2020. But as the Aytas cynically expected, it came in the repacked rice and distributed to the community members at a mere 3 kilograms for each household. No further information came as to when or whether more assistance would be sent. There were other forms of assistance that came from the government, albeit late.

Social Amelioration Program

The Department of Social Work and Development (DSWD) gave out forms for the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) for vulnerable families. In Katutubo Village, only 27 forms (out of 448 residents) were allocated for the IP community. The tribal chieftain tried to negotiate with the barangay chieftain to at least provide for half of the IP families in the barangay, to no avail. This meant that over 90 percent of IP families in Katutubo Village were left out of the longed-for promise of assistance by the national government.

In light of the many families that were left out in the two government programs mentioned above, the Ayta Mag-indi leaders were happy to hear that more assistance would come from DSWD. But this excitement soon died down when they received only 70 packages of hygiene kits from the agency. Mindful not to be accused of being ungrateful and hard to please, the leaders expressed appreciation for all assistance that were given. But since the hygiene kits came only four months after the lockdown was announced, their problems now went far beyond mere hygiene concerns.

The Ayta refused to be rendered helpless amidst their dissatisfaction and grievance over the inadequate support and assistance provided by government institutions. Rather, they have sought means to collectively address these gaps to uphold and protect the interests and rights of their community. For instance, as had been done in past disasters, the Ayta Mag-indi community, through their leaders, have taken unto themselves the responsibility of appropriating, distributing, and using the funds mobilized by various donors.

Further marginalization and widening of societal divide

The insensitivity to the needs of the Ayta Mag-indi community manifest in the government programs discussed above. This, in many ways, reinforces experiences of discrimination by the indigenous community. Further discrimination also occurred with the spread of misinformation on the pandemic. Early into the news of the pandemic spreading, the non Aytas (“unat”) of Pampanga were reportedly spreading the rumor that the COVID-19 virus came from the indigenous peoples as they too eat bats, where the virus is reported to have emanated in China. The Ayta Mag-indi felt the impact of this discrimination whenever they are in the lowland areas

as non Aytas openly avoid having close contact with them. On the other hand, they too also have reservations in making contact with outsiders as they believe they are more prone to the infection which they do not want to carry back to their community.

Many Ayta Mag-indi families have decided to retreat to the mountains ("*umatras sa bundok*", as they would say) believing that it is a safer place for them and a more sustainable source of staples such as root crops, among others. Where food security is a major concern of the national government in the lowlands, the Ayta Mag-indi are confident that they will never go hungry in the land of their ancestors. Apart from food security, they also believe that the mountains are a safer place for anyone having still luscious forest growth, which serves as a barrier to any form of virus or bacterial infection. They believe that the leaves of the trees in these forests absorb the harmful elements even before they get in contact with humans.

LUMAD AND BAKWIT SCHOOL

In the Philippines, indigenous peoples (IP) continue to be sequestered to the fringes of society, receiving a minuscule share of the government's social provisioning despite their crucial role in preserving and enriching the environments of their ancestral domains. Historically, due to the shortfall of state services in their communities, IP groups have taken it upon themselves to cultivate alternative practices that cater not only to their needs but also to improving their lifeways, thus paving the way for their own vision of development.

As an example, the Lumads (as they call themselves in southern Philippines), which comprises of thirty-five (35) non-Muslim ethnic groups in Mindanao, have built clinics and schools to serve their communities in lieu of long-distant government hospitals and schools. Before, only one out of ten Lumad children knew how to read, write, and count. To combat the alarming incidence of illiteracy and its dangerous consequences, religious groups, along with human rights organizations and IP advocates, built community schools where Lumad people of all ages could learn literacy and numeracy.¹² Many of the Lumads welcomed these schools and soon helmed their establishment and development.

During the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) imposed by the Philippine government, the Lumads have been burdened by haphazard policies that limit their movements, disrupting their daily lives. This has been especially difficult for the Lumads whose communities are being militarized and those who are in evacuation. Securing food and other basic necessities has become a challenge to many tribal communities. The worst part is that the Lumad has been forced to return to their still militarized ancestral lands, lands which they have temporarily fled from due to state violence.

Despite the hostility and violence from armed state elements, the students, teachers, and staff of these alternative tribal schools continue to campaign for the Lumad youth's right to education. Constant dialogue with government units and organizations and other forms of engagements such as protest actions have been and will be held when possible—following minimum health standards, of course. Lumad schools included in their public political campaigns issues faced by other sectors, such as the recent passage of the controversial Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020, whose vagueness renders the Lumad, being environmental and human rights defenders, as targets of (further) state hostilities.

Evacuees in bakwit schools in Metro Manila, who cannot go home to their ancestral lands in Mindanao because of both militarization and the community quarantines across the country, have been involved in activities in the recent months that contribute to their welfare as indigenous students and to their public campaign in general.

Remedial classes. Before the pandemic hit the Philippines, preparations were being made for the moving up ceremonies in Lumad schools and the first ever graduation of Grade 12 students in the bakwit schools. These efforts were aborted when President Duterte ordered what became a five-month nationwide lockdown, barring students from finishing the school year and finally going home to the communities they hope to serve once they finish their studies. Given that the school year has ended and that volunteer teachers cannot enter the school premises of the bakwit schools, remedial classes on literacy and numeracy and intermediate reading

¹² Save Our Schools Network (SOS). 2019. *Save Our Schools: History and Background*. Primer.

comprehension were conducted so that the students could enter the next school year all at the same level. Older students, mostly at the Senior High School level, are also assigned to assist younger learners in peer-to-peer storytelling and book reading activities.

Donation drives. Faced with the difficulty of securing basic necessities, the Save Our Schools Network has been organizing donation drives to keep bakwit schools afloat. For the first few months of the pandemic, the drives focused on the provision of vegetables, fruits, rice, and other healthy foods for the evacuees. Toiletries, first aid, and medical kits were also solicited both from drives and institutions and public offices willing to donate. Since July, the donation of hobby materials like books and musical instruments were also encouraged.

Cultivating skills and hobbies. The environment of isolation and the constant disturbing news about their families and communities being harassed have posed big challenges to the mental health and welfare of many of the students. Different activities that cultivate skills and hobbies were conducted not only to “distract” the children from emotionally taxing dangers outside the school but also to provide them temporary comfort. These include intramurals-like sports events, beadwork, art-related activities such as drawing and painting, and learning musical instruments.

Psychosocial support. Some students suffered a more alarming deterioration of their mental and emotional health. Their anxieties are mostly directed at the safety of their families and communities, the possibility of going home, and the upcoming school year. To address this, psychosocial support from allied health and children’s welfare organizations were conducted, equipping the children psychosocial knowledge to help themselves and their schoolmates.

Alliance work. Besides psychosocial support, the organizations within and outside the Save Our Schools Network engaged in varied activities that seek to cull donations. These include free film screenings and arts and craft commissions. Students and youth formations also volunteered for the Network, providing writing and graphic design services for the campaigns of the bakwit schools.

Despite these challenges, the Lumad schools in Mindanao and bakwit schools across the country are exhausting means to reach out and spread awareness regarding the experiences of indigenous communities in Mindanao. This is in the hopes that more people will choose to stand with the Lumad in protecting, even reclaiming, their ancestral lands for the continued survival of their communities and youth

BANTAY KALUSUGAN PAMPAMAYANAN (BKP)

The *Bantay Kalusugang Pampamayanan* (BKP) traces its roots starting from the relocation of urban poor communities from Metro Manila, to a relocation site in Toweverville, San Jose del Monte City, Bulacan in 2012. The foundation of BKP may be traced from the community work of CAMP Asia. Through a partnership with CAMP Asia, the community was able to establish a health clinic. Aside from the clinic, an emergency transport system (ETS) was also set up as a component of the health project spearheaded by CAMP Asia. While BKP began as a project of CAMP Asia, it has since evolved into a community-based and volunteer-led organization of health advocates. On June 30, 2018, BKP was formally launched as a community health organization. Starting from 88 Members, the BKP now has more than a thousand members within the community (BKP 2018). The structure of the BKP had the following committees: health, monitoring, health education, rescuers, and an ad hoc committee comprising the secretariat.

During the ECQ, BKP members found it difficult to earn a living. Most, if not all, were dependent on their daily income to meet their basic necessities. Survival issues were further compounded by the slow and ineffective delivery of social services from the government. Despite the fears brought by the COVID-19, BKP members were resolute in continuing their role as community-based health advocates. This entailed the continued provision of services to their fellow community members during the pandemic. These services included the several activities such as checking, monitoring, and documenting the health of its community members, particularly their blood pressure, sugar level, and temperature. Serious conditions were immediately referred to the nearby health center.

As mentioned earlier, BKP has performed these monitoring activities prior to the pandemic. However, amid the onslaught of COVID-19, BKP members saw it necessary to remind their members to monitor residents showing any symptoms associated with COVID-19. If they exhibit such symptoms, the cluster leaders were instructed to inform the health center immediately. BKP's health monitoring activities were key in minimizing the spread of the virus. Complementing BKP's health monitoring activities was its health education activities, which they further intensified in response to the pandemic. During the early stages of the pandemic, BKP was active in providing preventative pieces of information to the residents of Towerville. Due to mobility restrictions and physical distancing guidelines, BKP pivoted to digital technologies to coordinate and contact BKP members.

Beyond its health-related activities, BKP was also at the forefront of providing relief operations for their members during the government-imposed lockdown. Through its relief activities, BKP was able to provide some form of assistance to its members. Since May 2020, BKP has been able to provide relief packs to its members at least four times. Relief packages include various food items, disinfectant, and face masks. BKP also re-launched its weaving project to augment household incomes of its members. Through this project, BKP members were able to sell their products in their local marketplace and the workers continued to receive their allowance.

Amid the pandemic, BKP has not wavered in providing relief and health services to the residents of Towerville. They have done so through collective action and tapping into social networks that they have built prior to the public health crisis. Despite this, BKP admits that they can only do so much. However, this limitation did not deter them. Instead, they reflected that

there is a need to strengthen their capability to better respond to crisis situations like the one presented by COVID-19. In the meantime, there is an urgent need to scale-up their health monitoring. BKP saw the need to get access to COVID-19 tests in order to guide and inform their health-related advocacies and interventions in the community. However, the cost of these tests remains a significant roadblock for BKP. The organization has also yet to maximize their social media accounts for information dissemination and to promote their health advocacies remotely.

The story of the BKP members during the pandemic serves as an eye-opener on how devastating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic really is. While a necessity, the imposition of the ECQ has caused members of the urban poor communities to lose their sources of income and livelihood. Moreover, not all were able to receive help from the government in their most vulnerable situation. Nevertheless, the BKP persevered to continue its task of watching the health of the community. It was also at the forefront of securing the needs of their community – in terms of health, relief operations, and livelihood. Despite these, they still need help in terms of accessing vital services to allay the fears of everyone in the community.

THAI-BURMA BORDER

MAE TAO CLINIC (MTC)

What can be worse than being a stateless person in this global health crisis? In a group discussion, Dr. Cynthia C. Maung described the dire situation of the migrants and refugees in the Thailand-Burma border as they continue to face the adverse effects of the pandemic. Dr. Maung is one of the many displaced peoples who fled from her homeland when state suppression of the pro-democracy movement reached its peak in 1988. She initiated the establishment of Mae Tao Clinic located in Mae Sot, Thailand, upon realizing the need to provide immediate medical attention among injured refugees.

Movement of people along the Thai-Burma border occurs due to the need for employment, healthcare, and education. People in these areas have limited access to services, as they are both geographically and economically isolated. Moreover, some people are undocumented and are not under registration from any government, rendering them stateless.

Today, Mae Tao Clinic is actively providing primary healthcare services. However, half of their total patients have decreased significantly due to the restrictions in mobility and the closure of both sides of the Thai-Burma border. In March 2020, the Thailand government declared a state of emergency to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. The authorities have decided to extend it until January 2021, according to Dr. Maung. She said that this is because the number of total cases in Burma/Myanmar continues to increase, with reported cases ranging from 1,200 to 1,500 daily.

Meanwhile, the enhanced health protocols have negative consequences to the livelihood of migrant workers at the border. Many have lost their jobs because of the restrictions widely imposed not only in Thailand but also in Burma/Myanmar. Most people in this area who want to go back to Thailand to continue working cannot do so because of the lack of legal documents to prove their citizenship.¹³

Meanwhile, the Children's Development Center (CDC) and the other migrant learning centers managed by MTC at the border remain closed. The Thai Ministry of Education has not given permission to open them as of 30 September. On the contrary, schools in Thailand have started opening in June.

Children living in this area have become even more marginalized. Based on Dr. Maung, the Thailand government released 44 criteria before the school can be allowed to reopen to students. It includes having a local COVID-19 committee, requiring all teachers to be tested, and a 14-day temperature check on children, among others. The community in Mae Sot part of the border has complied with these criteria.

"There are 9,000 children who are registered already," argued Dr. Maung. "[We] did the temperature check, planned for the public prevention measures, all teachers have been tested, but until now, the school [the Migrant Learning Center] is not allowed to be opened yet. All other schools are open except the migrant schools."

¹³ UP CIDS-Program on Alternative Development. (2020). *A Preliminary Report on Southeast Asian Community and Grassroots Responses in COVID-19 Times*. Quezon City: UP CIDS.

When asked whether there has been any form of consultation with the Thailand government on the population border regarding these regulations, Dr. Maung answered, *"In Mae Sot area, there has been a long relationship between the Ministry of Education and the Migrant Center. They form the Migrant Coordination Education Center. [The] focal [person] must contact all migrant learning centers. They have a regular meeting on COVID-19 response and further security."* She further explained that typically, non-government organizations (NGOs) are invited when there are discussions and consultations about the restrictions. However, there are sensitive border-related issues that must be addressed. The border in Mae Sot has been the home of many traders from different races, including the Chinese. It has contributed to the local economy for many years. Nonetheless, migrants, in general, are becoming even more marginalized. Hence, these issues affect the extended closure of migrant learning centers in Thailand.

With regard to the situation at the Mae Tao Clinic (MTC) and its response to the pandemic, Dr. Maung reported how it began to enhance their health protocols, screening, and setting up of isolation areas for patients under investigation (PUI) soon after the declaration of the public health emergency.

"We also started coordinating with our community organizations, teachers, and other health institutions, especially, one of the NGOs affiliated with the Mae Tao University... So, we started working with the organizations in which we can get technical support. Together with them, we developed our procedure and protocol for screening, surveillance, and referral guidelines, including the case management for PUI cases." Mae Tao Clinic (MTC) has maximized its referral system because, according to Dr. Maung, there was no clear agreement on keeping COVID-19 patients between the government, hospital, and NGOs at the instance that COVID-19 cases arise in their facility. Therefore, if there are positive cases in MTC, it has to immediately consult and respond.

Moreover, one of the challenges that MTC continues to face is the inadequacy of funding sources, which all started in 2017 when many of their international donors ended their partnership with MTC. Hence, MTC refers their patients to government hospitals in Thailand. Nevertheless, it maintains its primary healthcare services such as vaccination and minor illnesses while referring its emergency obstetrics patients and HIV patients to their networks. Dr. Maung mentioned how their community volunteer negotiates with government hospitals to receive HIV patients. She said there are some 200 patients that MTC is uncertain whether or not the government hospital will support these patients.

"Mae Sot Hospital does not keep patients for a long period. So, we have to work with them in caring for long time patients. We have to re-arrange the beds, and the number of staff and their shifting time. We set up COVID work... We have to enhance our screening and surveillance and help keep patients in their isolation area. We have to make sure that all food, accommodation, clothing, toilet and everything are safe, and we are safe as well." In her concluding statement, Dr. Maung said, *"There is a limitation to physical contact, but people can still communicate with each other...Regular communication is essential [to make] sure that social cohesion remains. There needs to be understanding of people. Not everybody has to be afraid. [There should be] more opportunity for health promotion for a multi-sectoral approach so that people will become more confident in protecting themselves."*

BURMA/MYANMAR

THANDAUNGGYI WOMEN'S GROUP

COVID-19 Policy in Myanmar and the Karen State

Myanmar confirmed its first case of COVID-19 in March. Daily life has been interrupted by strict public safety measures imposed by both the Myanmar government and by ethnic armed organizations (EAOs) in their respective territories. While the official number of positive cases in the area remains relatively low, local transmissions have been rising especially recently. It might even be unlikely for the state to conduct widespread testing, especially on migrant workers from Thailand and China who returned to Myanmar.

Members of the parliament associated with the Tatmandaw, or the military government, even proposed a measure to convene the security council to address the situation. However, this was rejected by the Speaker of the Parliament, averting potential problems related to the responses to the crisis. At the same time, the civilian government led by State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi heads two new committees that steer local regional governments and civil society to enforce COVID-19 measures.

Given the overlapping and sometimes even contradictory COVID-19 policies of the Tatmandaw and EAOs, locals need to navigate the varied forms of rules and regulations.

Crisis across sectors

Community-wide lockdowns, widespread quarantining, curfews, international border closures, and domestic travel restrictions in Myanmar have adversely affected the income and food security of the peoples of the Karen State. Agricultural work comprises the livelihoods of many communities in Karen. The COVID-19 crisis and the lockdown measures that came with it decimated local markets and interrupted the transportation system, weighing down crop prices. The pandemic, which hit during harvest periods, has worsened people's access to their farms and other forms of livelihoods.

Stringent COVID-19 prevention measures also disrupt the everyday life of locals. Waves of arrests related to public safety violations have hit the countryside and border areas, further worsening the people's access to jobs, farms, and markets. This militaristic and punitive form of governance is not at all dissimilar to what other countries in Southeast Asia have been experiencing.

Migrant workers seem to have drawn the shortest straw. More than a thousand Myanmar nationals who lost their jobs due to COVID-19 have been returning with great unease. Besides the restrictions on mobility that levy a burden on returning migrants, many of them have already been suffering with problems on income and debt even before the pandemic hit. Since the pandemic, others saw their debts worsen.¹⁴

¹⁴ IOM. 2020. "IOM Myanmar. COVID-19 Response. Situation Report 11. 6 August 2020." [IOM Myanmar COVID-19 Response Sitrep 11 \(6 August 2020\).pdf \(reliefweb.int\)](#)

The burden on women

While COVID-19 impacts everyone across the gender spectrum, women in particular face added burdens due to the pandemic. The challenges of domestic work, income-generating work, and community work constitute the triple burden on women.

As families are usually at home the whole day, women have been levied additional domestic and hygiene-related tasks to prevent infection. The blurring between home and work under the pandemic has exacerbated insecurity, on the other hand. Fighting among family members and neighbors have become common. Documentation of domestic abuse and intimate partner violence has been rising as well.

Due to social expectations, and sometimes by choice, women in Myanmar and the Karen state lead health awareness campaigns, charity work, and community resource generation. While socially obligated, more women engage in community efforts only to recognize that food insecurity, income losses, and the rising anxiety of communities contribute to increased domestic violence at home and in the localities.

Community and women's organizations are calling for government-led initiatives such as cash transfers to households, massive food distribution, transparency in the selection of beneficiaries of support, and the prioritization of women-headed households for loan programs and unconditional cash transfers.¹⁵

The women of Thandaunggyi

Despite this crisis, the Thandaunggyi Women's Group in the Karen State in Myanmar continues to spearhead initiatives that promote women's role in furthering the wellbeing of their communities. The Thandaunggyi Women's Group in Karen was established in 2008 to promote peace through the economic and political empowerment of women. To support campaigns towards peacebuilding and community collaboration, the Group is involved in coffee production and organic farming, through which women are able to earn for themselves or for their families.

During the earlier period of the strict community quarantine, all the coffee and fruit harvests of the women farmers in the Group in Karen have been put to waste because of the absence of buyers. The Group is currently working as a member of the COVID-19 response committee in their town. Due to the influx of returning migrants passing through the state, community volunteers have set up quarantine facilities in nearly all towns and they are working round the clock to contain the virus.

Restrictions and lockdowns were major obstacles to the Group's operations, and yet the women of Karen persisted. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, they engaged nine villages and five wards. Provisions that were given to the communities include facemasks, hand gels, and some food for quarantine centers. While such community work is expected of women, that they organize themselves into organizations such as the Thandaunggyi Women's Group reveals their acknowledgement of their collective strength and their capacity to govern.

¹⁵ Saferworld UK. 2020. "Gender and COVID-19: economic impacts in northern Karen State, Myanmar."

Health awareness programs for those hardly reached by government agencies and even EAOs were conducted alongside charity work, which do not only assist communities but also empower them. In a COVID-19 prevention and control event, quarantine centers received some food and materials from the Group. These include the townships of Thandaunggyi, 13 Miles, Laketho, Bawgale, and Pyae sa Kham. Sectors of the community that the Women's Group prioritized included youth, women, and elderly. As of the moment, there are five townships under quarantine.

The efforts of the Thandaunggyi Women's Group and of other women's and grassroots organizations in the Karen state offer possibilities to what COVID-19 prevention and isolation could be. Knowledge of *gendered* socio-economic impacts must be the backbone of gender-responsive pandemic responses. Given that organizations like the Thandaunggyi Women's Group have already begun effective health and charity programs to alleviate the situation not only of their own women farmers but also of other disenfranchised communities, we could say that the grassroots, once organized, are well suited to helping the design and implementation of recovery plans. As in the case of the Karen state, the peoples know and govern themselves best.

INDONESIA

KONFEDERASI PERGERAKAN RAKYAT INDONESIA (KPRI)

At the end of 2020, the Indonesian archipelago remained at the top of the list of Southeast Asian countries with the highest number of COVID-19 cases. The country seems to be far from flattening the curve in favor of reopening the economy, despite the government's efforts to contain local transmission by implementing physical distancing and enforced partial lockdown policies in several cities. It has already suffered economic recession for the first time in two decades as its economy shrank 5.32 percent and 3.49 percent in the second and third quarters respectively due to this global pandemic.

With no signs yet of progress from sliding down from the top rank of COVID-19 cases in the region, the Indonesian government was criticized for its slow response when it failed to act swiftly during the critical periods of the pandemic. There were inefficient strategies for mobilizing health resources. Indonesia's geographic disparity between the eastern and western parts of the nation, coupled with a weak health infrastructure, exposed the inequalities of peoples' access to public health care facilities, making it nearly impossible to implement quick, efficient, and effective strategies on the allocation of health resources. This is fundamentally due in part to the deficit of community participation in the emergency health responses. Community systems that are central to Indonesia's collective society were not sufficiently operationalized to help develop better strategies for identifying the specific and urgent needs of communities and the vulnerable sectors.

Indonesian President Joko Widodo recently announced free access to COVID-19 vaccinations for Indonesians once vaccines are procured and immunization takes place. However, this pronouncement confronts the challenges of bureaucracy, corruption, vaccine refrigeration, infrastructure, and logistical hurdles due to its geographic limitations.

Grassroots initiatives

Meanwhile, organized Indonesian grassroots communities have been the first to effectively respond to this global health crisis at the community or local level. Member organizations of the Konfederasi Pergerakan Rakyat Indonesia (KPRI) both in the rural and urban areas mobilized their respective communities to secure food when widespread mobility restrictions along with health protocols were enforced. The KPRI's peasant federation, Serikat Petani Pasundan (Pasundan Peasant Union) harvested their farm produce in Pasundan (West Java) and distributed freely a significant portion to KPRI members in Bandung. KPRI which also operates a community-owned coffee shop in Jakarta temporarily closed the space to transform it into a 'central solidarity place' for the relief operation and donation drive, and the production of naturally-made hand sanitizers that were freely shared with the community.

In Central Jakarta, despite the threat of COVID-19 infection, members of Komunitas Pemuda Pergerakan Tomang (Youth Movement Community) in Petamburan initiated urban farming together with the local residents to collectively secure their own food during the pandemic. The youth complemented this with the active operation of the community children's library considering that these kids needed to continue to learn and play while locked down inside their community.

These are but only a few of the initiatives that KPRI members on the ground have been doing during COVID-19 times. However, in the midst of this health crisis, KPRI and the other marginalized communities in Indonesia were caught by surprise with the passage of the Omnibus Law on Job Creation, a controversial new law that is believed to have been railroaded in the absence of a comprehensive public consultation when the peoples' physical mobility was highly restricted. This policy immediately ushered a nationwide protest which demonstrated the capacity of KPRI and other grassroots movements to continue their political expressions of dissent despite the rising COVID-19 cases in the country and government restrictions on social gatherings.

Urgent and creeping challenges during the pandemic

On October 5, Indonesian lawmakers abruptly passed the Omnibus Law. In response, labor groups and peasant unions under KPRI led their respective constituents in a three-day national protest to expose the adverse implications of the Omnibus Law, a repressive policy that is observed to be a push by Indonesia's oligarchs and their big corporations for their political and economic interests.

One of the Law's champions is President Widodo who rather saw this as a key to averting the global economic downturn and to boosting the country's dwindling economy. The law is expected to streamline business regulations and eradicate red tape which are seen as impediments in doing good business in the country. It is said to provide a conducive business climate which enhances market flexibility and improves the country's international competitiveness. Its trajectory of market enhancement is expected to encourage direct foreign investment and subsequently bring Indonesia back to its glory as Asia's rising giant and Southeast Asia's largest economy.

But for KPRI and the Indonesian civil society, while this law is expected to primarily benefit the banks and export-oriented industries, it dismisses the growing concern over the consequent displacement of an already insecure labor force and the disenfranchisement of workers' rights. While the law purports to be part of a wider project to bolster Indonesia's extractive industry (which will benefit a handful of political elites), it will only allow for massive deforestation, land rights abuses, and reverse recent successes in reducing forest loss. It will likewise dilute regulations on foreign investment by removing the three-year maximum duration of contracts and removing workers' protection by cutting their severance benefits. What also triggered public outrage is the revision of no less than 70 existing laws in the guise of hastening economic reforms.

The Indonesian public have further rejected the rosy promises surrounding this law that is anchored on neoliberal principles of deregulation and liberalization. In fact, the reported incidents of violent dispersal of protesters, and the arrest and detention of hundreds of people did not silence the people in the midst of a global pandemic. These protests of peoples' movements in Indonesia were able to gather international solidarity as shown in the various support statements of civil society groups in the region.

Endnotes

Statement of Solidarity with the Indonesian People against the Anti-People Omnibus Law

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Statement: Confederation of Indonesian People's Movement (KPRI)- President Must Revoke Job Creation Law!

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REPORTS FROM THE GRASSROOTS AND COMMUNITIES

This Southeast Asian report produced by the Program on Alternative Development, University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS AltDev) is based on accounts and stories solicited from and filed by partner organizations from the community, grassroots, and basic sector levels in the Philippines, Indonesia, Myanmar, and the Thai-Burma border.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on grassroots communities and marginalized sectors in Southeast Asia has been varied and uneven. This depended on location, the state of community and sectoral organizing, and the levels of social solidarity and collective consciousness. In general, urban communities are the worst hit while rural areas are less affected. Most daily wage and contractual workers have been retrenched or put on indefinite leave without pay. The hardest hit are informal workers such as home-based workers and vendors who have seen their incomes deteriorate badly or totally disappear.

Organized communities, on the other hand, are able to mitigate the effects of the health crisis while some livelihood projects even continue including agricultural production in farming areas and women's social enterprises. The highest level of self-reliance and food security can be found in collectively-owned and collectively-managed lands where sustainable development and agro-ecological methods are practiced, incomes are equitably shared, and basic needs are addressed. In several cases, however, the lockdown and stringent quarantine measures still hamper the ability of direct producers from accessing raw materials and markets – leaving agricultural produce unsold and spoiled. In such cases, access to food and other basic necessities and health protection still become a problem.

Local associations also take the initiative of enforcing safety and health guidelines among their members and neighbors. Those involved in enterprise activities have creatively shifted to the production of personal protection goods such as face masks and hand sanitizers for income generation. In the spirit of solidarity, these are sometimes distributed for free to those in need. Civil society organizations and other support groups have also been helpful in assisting communities in responding and attending to the immediate needs of their residents and members. They link producers with direct buyers in urban areas and bring to the proper authorities the plight of those who are most in need of help. National and regional organizations are also busy documenting grassroots efforts in order to provide valuable lessons within and beyond national borders.

While there have been government amelioration responses, such as food aid and cash allotments, these have been inadequately, unevenly and unequally distributed. Patronage politics sometimes determine who gets support. Many poor communities are less able to access aid as they are mainly out of the radar of official monitoring and data collection, e.g., the absence or lack of government-issued identification cards. But even those who receive aid are confronted with other unmet needs such as maintenance drugs for seniors.

All over Southeast Asia, those involved in the informal sector economy and migrant workers have received the least support, if at all. And as the pandemic continues, government funds are slowly running out – resulting in increased hunger incidence among the poor and economically disadvantaged. Other mitigating measures by national governments include tax breaks and suspension of interest payments on loans, but it is doubtful whether these are well

implemented and benefit those who need them the most. In some areas, emergency short-time employment was initiated by the government but was limited and scarce.

Donations from some private sectors have been coming in, partially making up for government inadequacies. For instance, a September 2020 survey by the Social Weather Stations (SWS) reveals that the number of Filipino families who experienced involuntary hunger during the height of the pandemic reached a record-high 7.6 million (30.7 percent) which was almost double the number in April 2020. With information and communication almost completely reliant on the internet and social media, those with inadequate or no access to these technologies have been further disadvantaged. This infringes on the right to timely and accurate information that would properly guide the peoples' responses to the pandemic. Online information, however, has to be filtered carefully as health-related "fake news" have also proliferated.

Some Southeast Asian governments resort to draconian measures to enforce guidelines - relying on security forces such as the police and the military to get people to follow rules. In some cases, these have resulted in human rights violations such as warrantless arrests, manhandling, illegal detention, and killings of violators from the poor sectors. Some mass protest actions from organized communities have experienced the heavy hand of the state. Meanwhile, known violators from the privileged classes such as high government and security officials and rich families are hardly sanctioned or are given the "kid gloves" treatment.

The sudden and sweeping imposition of quarantine and lockdown measures have resulted in individuals and families stranded in places where the prohibitions have caught them. Migrant workers, for one, are unable to return to their homes, especially those who need to cross national borders which have now been sealed. Within countries, with all public transportation suspended, some have had to walk hundreds of kilometers for days to get home to their families. Stateless peoples and undocumented workers along the Thai-Burma border suffer more than others.

Indigenous peoples (IPs) rely on their traditional sources of food, nutrition, health care and home-grown farm products through hunting and gathering. They, however, sometimes suffer discrimination from lowlanders who accuse them of being disease carriers because of their unique diet, e.g., wild animals such as bats. In ancestral lands that are closely monitored by security forces, some IP communities have been prevented from gathering food, medicine, and firewood. Other IPs have also been stranded in lowland areas due to the lockdown. Those who have been relocated away from their ancestral lands due to peace and order concerns or as migrant workers face even more difficult situations. A positive development, however, is the continuation or revival of ancient and traditional farming practices that are environmentally friendly and coupled with community-bonding and unifying cultural practices.

The lockdown has seen a rise in domestic violence against women and girls on top of the triple burden on them of domestic work, income-generating work and community work. Women's groups have criticized Southeast Asian governments' lack of attention to women's and girls' needs and have called for more specific and contextual approaches. They have decried the violence, discrimination and harassment of women in COVID-19 times. In Cambodia, women engaged in sex and entertainment work and in the garment manufacturing industry have also been affected with many of them migrants who have been stranded in their former places of work. Also marginalized are LGBT communities and individuals whose gender choices are unrecognized whether in the formal or informal economy.

Not all government initiatives are discriminatory, selective or largely ineffective. Perhaps the best instances of productive state-people interactions are in Vietnam and Timor Leste which rely on social mobilization and cooperation rather than draconian disciplinary measures. In Vietnam, farmers' unions have donated funds to the national budget and distributed food packages and health protection equipment. In both these countries, COVID-19 cases are low with few fatalities. There are, however, some reports that non-poor but equally suffering sectors have not been receiving assistance.

For poor and disadvantaged families in both urban and rural areas and for those in the informal economy, access to education is sometimes gained through alternative learning systems (ALS) via daycare or skills training centers or special courses. Under lockdown and extreme quarantine measures, this opportunity has been put on hold for an indefinite period. Their teachers are also disadvantaged as their wages have stopped. Online classes, however, have limited effectivity as access to the technologies are either non-existent, intermittent or highly unreliable.

Also worrisome is the absence of any reports from the grassroots of widespread COVID-19 testing taking place among their members, neighbors, and their communities as a whole. This deficit is particularly disturbing given national reports of testing being stepped up for greater numbers of residents. While there is debate on what is the best form of testing and questions have been raised on its usefulness, the experience of other countries show that testing is one important measure to stem the spread of the disease.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The most obvious policy change that Southeast Asian governments need to undertake is to establish collective and truly cooperative efforts in addressing social and economic problems. ASEAN has to end its decades-long doctrine of leaving it up to each country to undertake measures to address problems that are common to their respective peoples or have impacts that transcend national borders.

With most ASEAN countries tracking authoritarian and semi-authoritarian governance systems, the people are left out of decision making and prevented from contributing to important policy decisions. This leads to undemocratic institutions and practices that leaves marginalized sectors helplessly bearing the brunt of a crisis, particularly in the current pandemic situation. ASEAN governments must therefore adopt a “whole of society” approach rather than the more dominant trend of a “whole of government’ approach.

With few exceptions, the fragility of Southeast Asian health systems in particular and social protection in general have exposed regional societies to the worst effects of the COVID-19 virus. The lack of social protection and inadequacy of public social services, i.e., health, housing, education, public transportation, etc., are due mainly to a flawed development model that prioritizes economic growth over providing social benefits for the people. In the post-pandemic era, this model needs to be overturned and corrected.

Governments in Southeast Asia need to arrest the growing trend of social inequality amid economic growth. The region has been tagged as one of the most unequal in the world. The pandemic, therefore, offers an opportunity to address long-running Southeast Asian inequalities while confronting the COVID-19 menace. Measures could include a wealth tax on the richest families and individuals and stricter regulatory mechanisms to curb monopolies and the power of giant conglomerates.

Support must be extended to and greater incentives and subsidies provided for micro, small, and medium industries as the bulwark of the modern economy. This will ensure a more equal distribution of income and wealth and promote employment to greater numbers of workers.

Labor rights must be upheld including the right to organize, to engage in collective bargaining and to strike for better working conditions and higher wages. Labor contractualization in all its forms must end and more attention be paid for informal workers. International covenants on workers’ rights must be strictly implemented at all times.

The United Nations General Assembly has declared 2019-2018 as the UN Decade of Family Farming. In Southeast Asian rural areas, therefore, small farming household-based production must be supported and granted subsidies, particularly for increasing food production and attaining self-sufficiency. This will ensure food security for the rest of the population. Laws and policies that promote the land rights of small producers should be upheld. In this connection, the ancestral rights of Southeast Asia’s indigenous peoples must be legally protected and their traditional food production systems be developed and supported.

Lastly, governments must institute legal mechanisms that acknowledge and respect the right of civil society organizations, social movements, and peoples’ organizations to exist as separate

and autonomous pillars of society that have their own alternative visions and programs for a just, peaceful, and equitable society. The alternatives that these organizations offer must be accorded the proper venues for public discussions and debate that involve all sectors of society.

Conclusion

It is apparent from both the reports from the grassroots and local levels and the regional survey cited above that the formal institutions of modern societies have floundered and lost credibility as they fail to contain the social and economic fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic. On the other hand, it would also appear that despite pressing challenges and difficult hurdles, the communities and sectors that have seemingly weathered the worst and have coped with the less-than-ideal situation and have been more resilient are those who are organized and/or have instilled within themselves the core values of solidarity, community, self-help, and cooperation.

This does not, however, relieve governments and its institutions of their ultimate responsibility of providing the maximum social protection by way of addressing in a substantial and equitable way the multiple and interconnected problems of health, employment, financial assistance, and guaranteed incomes for their peoples. Ultimately, Southeast Asian governments have to be evaluated in terms of their ability to focus their responses towards the most vulnerable and marginalized sectors of society.