



**GLOBAL SOLIDARITY SERIES**

**Lessons learned from Covid-19:  
TRANSFORMING A  
GLOBAL CRISIS INTO  
GLOBAL SOLIDARITY?**



**ROSA  
LUXEMBURG  
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SOUTHEAST ASIA  
MANILA OFFICE



# Lessons learned from Covid-19: TRANSFORMING A GLOBAL CRISIS INTO GLOBAL SOLIDARITY?

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# FOREWORD

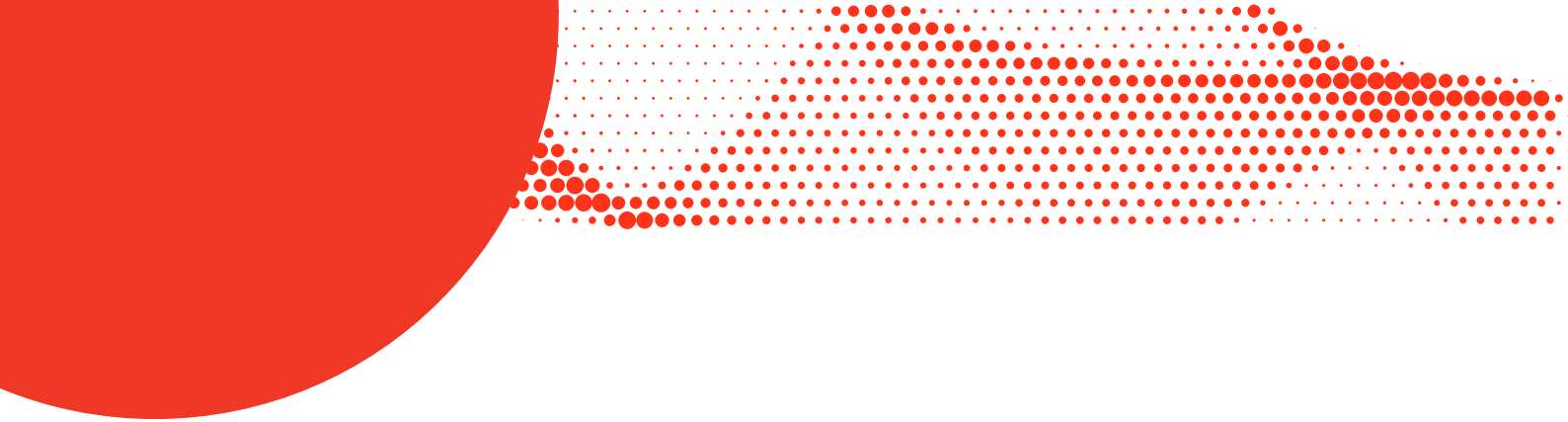
The series of articles that we in the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung's Regional Office Southeast Asia in Manila would like to introduce here under the title "Lessons Learned from COVID-19: Transforming a Global Crisis into Global Solidarity?" first came into being at the start of the global pandemic in the summer of 2020. At the time, the world seemed to be coming apart at the seams. The planet appeared shaken not only by a virus that presented a danger to the health of billions of people around the world, but also because of the effects of authoritarian rulers like Trump, Bolsonaro, and Duterte, who used the health crisis to expand their authoritarian power networks and, at least in the Philippines, were not afraid to use disinformation and military force against the civilian population to maintain their positions of power.

All told, in addition to the rise of a new authoritarianism in many countries in both the Global South and the Global North, we are also witnessing a trend toward greater social inequality, deepening social divisions, an increasingly dire economic crisis, and an intensifying climate crisis.

The latter—the global increase in and intensification of environmental catastrophes—hit people particularly hard during the pandemic. In the summer of 2021, for instance, disastrous flooding meant that the Ahr valley and other places in Germany achieved tragic worldwide recognition.

A typhoon struck regions of the Philippines very hard in December 2021, causing a human and economic catastrophe. Four months after that calamity, some areas are still devastated, with airports remaining closed to civilian flights, digital networks still damaged, and provisions—including fresh water—yet to be secured for many people and animals, alongside many other problems. Perhaps of particular note—and sadly characteristic of the country's situation in general—was the fact that almost the very first thing that President Duterte had to say about the adversity facing his compatriots was to state that due to the economic crisis caused by the pandemic, the treasury was broke, and therefore no economic help from the government should be expected. The widespread astonishment and horror among broad swathes of the populace led to a nationwide call for "solidarity", which the president's rivals attempted to take advantage of with an eye toward strengthening their own interests in the elections the following year. Typhoons have always haunted the countries of Maritime Southeast Asia due to their geographic exposure and have hit them hard in the past, although they are now intensifying significantly due to climate change and inflicting increasingly serious damage regardless of other hardships caused by a pandemic or other difficulties. And as has so often been the case in the Philippines (as it is now), initial assistance did not come exclusively from state institutions, but also and to a great extent from non-governmental aid organizations, both local and international. Responses to the typhoon have also been shaped by the aid that has been organized at the community level since the start of the pandemic, based on an understanding of solidarity and the insight that we, as people in a crisis like this, are all the same boat (or at least could find ourselves in the same boat). Mutual aid resulting from religious conviction, but also from political considerations, is often understood as "solidarity" in our region, even across geographical borders.

In the contexts described here, questions arise as to what the term "solidarity" actually describes. What different meanings and functions can concepts like "solidarity", "international solidarity", "global solidarity", or "solidarity aid" assume, and for what and in whose interests are they invoked? One insight that we in the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Manila office have gained from observing the ways that state and non-state actors have dealt with the pandemic is that there is value in looking behind these terms and debating how political actors act (or do not act) in a particular context or when they refer to notions of solidarity.



For example, when infection rates rose quickly in Europe and almost simultaneously in Maritime Southeast Asia almost two years into the pandemic due to an even more contagious variant of the COVID virus, the term “solidarity” was used in the Global North to refer to the more or less widespread willingness to be vaccinated. For us in the Global South, and particularly in the Philippines, the state used its conception of solidarity to rationalize passing rigid public safety measures, such as confining children to their homes: on the basis of a governmental decree, children could not attend kindergarten or primary school starting in March 2020. Those facilities were closed in the first “hard lockdown” in the Philippines and schoolchildren started receiving “modular instruction”. In addition, for the first two years of the pandemic, children were effectively prohibited from leaving their houses, apartments, or lodgings. Although children can once again go outside and be seen in public—on the streets, in parks, in stores, and so on—two years after these measures went into effect, it is nonetheless already becoming apparent that those measures, justified as “solidarity”, have had serious negative consequences for a large portion of Filipino society and will continue to do so into the future.

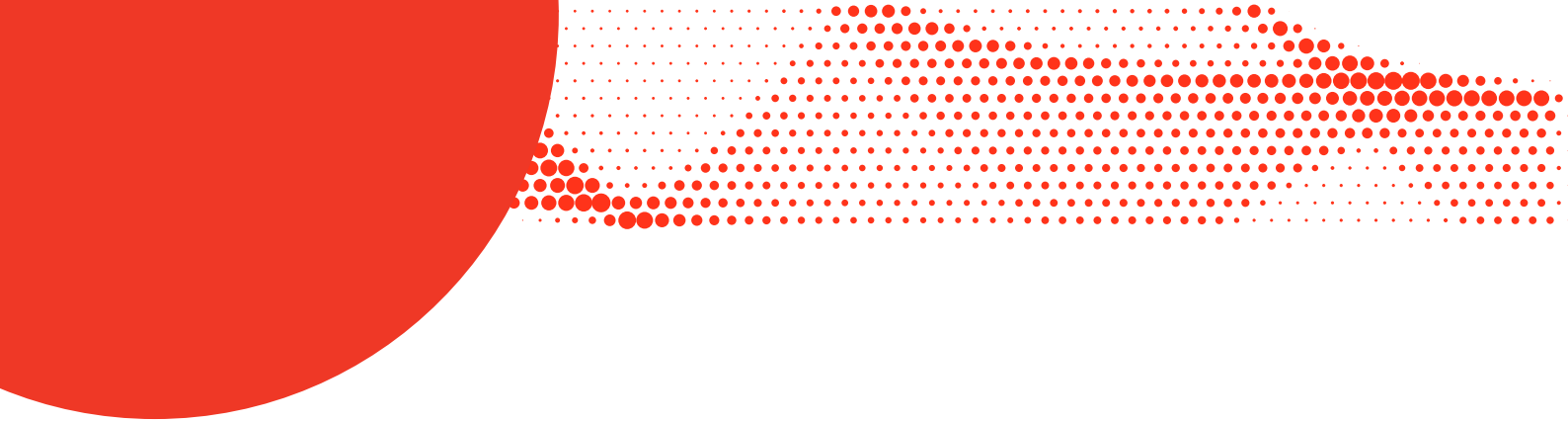
Examples from the world of work that have been or are currently being invoked as examples of solidarity include “short-time work” (Kurzarbeit), which was introduced in Germany. In the Philippines, by contrast, it is simply called “no work, no pay”. Unemployment has increased drastically, which in practical terms has shrivelled demands to safeguard employees’ rights to the point of insignificance. There is also the fact that most of the Philippines’ working population has worked and continues to work in the informal economy. After long-lasting, difficult lockdowns, informal workers have in many cases lost their income, their homes, and their entire existence.

A similar picture emerged as a result of the steps that were taken in Indonesia during the pandemic. Like the Philippines, that country’s economy is heavily dependent on domestic and international tourism, a sector that has always employed many people on an informal basis. Whole villages and communities lost their livelihoods due to closures caused by the pandemic. In parts of the country, tourism has been so badly damaged that nobody knows how long people will need to rebuild to the point that they can more or less make a living from it again.

The series of articles that follows shows that, based on their own particular understanding of solidarity, people in the Philippines, Indonesia, and across geographic borders in the Global North and the Global South support one another with material goods, communal kitchens, and the like as well as with information about health protection and their rights. This kind of solidarity has helped people survive the pandemic, and for this reason it is obvious that this understanding of solidarity is highly valuable for many people, including progressive, left-wing actors in the Philippines and Indonesia.

At the same time, leftist political actors have also been working to highlight the context in which this exemplary solidarity operates, namely the oppressive governmental policies that disregard the interests of the precarious segments of the population. Drawing attention to these actions through political analysis is a means to an end: the goal is to strengthen a movement that is searching for alternatives and striving for social-ecological transformation. If it succeeds in linking a conception of solidarity based on “mutual aid in adversity” with a critical analysis of the prevailing conditions across geographic borders, then we may be able to contribute to a global conception of solidarity and develop alternatives for a transformation on that basis.

The collection of papers in this series contains reflections and analyses from the Philippines and Indonesia, the two countries in the Southeast Asian region which, with more than a million cases and tens of thousands of deaths, alongside joblessness and hunger, are the worst-affected by COVID-19. The accounts from the papers collected here document the impact of COVID-19 in these countries beyond statistics. By collecting empirical data



from communities on the ground, the authors have exposed how governments have failed their people during this pandemic. Through documenting the underfunded and ill-prepared healthcare and education systems, the curtailment of civil liberties, and the allowing of workers, women, and other vulnerable groups grappling with a lack of access to food and resources to suffer, it became clear that people were doubly imperilled—first by the virus and second by their governments’ haphazard responses to it.

This pandemic has caused great loss and suffering but not without lessons learned and opportunities to create a better society presented. It has revealed that oppressed people, particularly in the Global South, are connected by a common thread of suffering as a result of living under neoliberal and repressive conditions. Their stories of persistence and resistance reveal a shared narrative anchored in the strengthening of people’s movements and aspirations for global justice. For what is justice for one nation without justice for all? Rosa Luxemburg herself believed that a better world can be achieved when people unite, embracing diversity and harnessing local knowledge.

We hope that that the perspectives on solidarity offered in this series will be used by social movements, civil society organizations, educators, and activists as starting points for a discussion of ‘new internationalism’ as an approach to the continuing struggle for global human rights. Now more than ever, we need to talk about alternative ways to transform our society into one where social justice and equality become the ‘new normal’.

**In solidarity,**

Liliane Danso-Dahmen

Ayi Kaario

Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Southeast Asia Manila Office



## **LESSONS LEARNED FROM COVID-19: TRANSFORMING A GLOBAL CRISIS INTO GLOBAL SOLIDARITY?**

is published by Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung

4th Floor Dusit Thani Manila, Ayala Center, 1223 Makati City, Philippines

[www.rosaluxmanila.org](http://www.rosaluxmanila.org)

Editorial deadline: August 2022

A German version of this study was published in May 2023

Editing/Proofreading: Gegensatz Translation Collective

Layout/Production: Nonie G. Florenda

This publication is part of the Rosa Luxemburg-Stiftung's political education work.

It is distributed free of charge and may not be used for electoral campaigning purposes.



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# DUTERTE, COVID-19, AND POPULIST-AUTHORITARIANISM IN THE PHILIPPINES: Contentions and contradictions

By: Verna Dinah Q. Viajar

At the start of the pandemic, many predicted that even in a post-pandemic world, things would never be the same again. The sheer enormity of the global health crisis exposed in sharp relief issues of economic and social inequality, the apocalyptic impact of human activity on the environment, and the importance of community solidarity over material consumption globally.



Progressive organizations gather for an independence day protest in 2020 against the anti-terror bill. (Photo: Verna Viajar)

*In dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, the Duterte government's response was too little in terms of preparation, too late to stop local transmission, and excessive in terms of lockdown enforcement. The Philippines has had the strictest and longest lockdown in Asia, yet COVID-19 infections steadily increased from June 2020 until the surge in March 2021. This shows that lockdowns, without strong health interventions, are ineffective at stopping transmission of COVID-19. Instead of swiftly addressing the loss of lives and livelihoods, the government tightened its authoritarian grip on power. This paper examines the contradictions and contentions of Duterte's sustained populism in the context of growing authoritarian tendencies in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. Utilizing a Gramscian perspective and critical theories on neoliberalism, populism, and authoritarianism, this paper analyses the increasing inequalities, neoliberal policies, and fascist tendencies of the current Philippine political economy.*



## Introduction

In March 2020, one year after the COVID-19 pandemic was finally recognized as a major public concern that caused a public health crisis and economic devastation, the Philippines is still battling to control the virus. A new surge of COVID-19 infections beginning in mid-March 2021 resulted in the government instituting lockdowns from 29 March until 4 April 2021.<sup>1</sup> By April 2021, as the daily count of COVID-19 infections had risen to almost 10,000, the all-too-familiar lockdowns and restrictions, called 'community quarantines' by the government, returned in full force.

After several months of gradually easing community quarantine restrictions, the policy announcements that restrictions would continue until May 2021 brought forth renewed frustrations. From the outset, the Duterte government's response to the virus was inadequate. The administration's measures were enacted too late to stop local transmission; there was far too little preparation by relevant government bodies to respond to a crisis like the pandemic and the state was notoriously excessive in enforcing lockdown measures against citizens.<sup>2</sup> The Philippines enacted the strictest and longest lockdown in Asia.<sup>3</sup> However, the steady increase of COVID-19 infections since June 2020 showed that lockdowns, without strong public health interventions, such as free mass testing and a swift vaccination program, are ineffective at stopping the transmission of COVID-19.

Instead of swiftly addressing the loss of lives and livelihoods, the government tightened its authoritarian grip on power.<sup>4</sup> Social media platforms and mass media outlets were flooded with criticisms of the government's incoherent institutional actions, double-standard enforcement of quarantine policies, and highly militarized response to the pandemic. However, Duterte received high popularity ratings in a survey conducted in September 2020.

This paper discusses Duterte's journey from populism to authoritarianism in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, utilizing a Gramscian perspective to analyze the increasing inequalities, neoliberal policies, and fascist tendencies of the current Philippine political economy. This paper utilizes critical theories on neoliberalism, populism, and authoritarianism to interrogate the contradictions and contentions of Duterte's sustained populism in the context of growing authoritarian tendencies. Using critical theories on populist authoritarianism, this paper analyses Duterte's increasing bent towards authoritarian rule through the lens of the Gramscian notion of hegemony.

## The COVID-19 Virus: A Series of Unfortunate Events

Presently, the Philippines continues to battle a rising number of COVID-19 infections despite declarations from the government that everything is under control when compared to other countries.<sup>5</sup> However, the numbers say otherwise. Data from Johns Hopkins University shows that as of May 2021, the Philippines ranks 25th among countries with the highest number of COVID-19 cases and 28th-highest for number of COVID-19 deaths globally.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Nick Aspenwall, "Manila Locks Down as Covid-19 Cases Surge in the Philippines", *The Diplomat*, 29 March 2021, available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/03/manila-locks-down-as-covid-19-cases-surge-in-the-philippines>.

<sup>2</sup> Verna Dinah Q. Viajar, "Unravelling Duterte's Iron Hand in the Time of COVID-19", IRGAC, Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, 22 July 2020, available at: <https://www.irgac.org/2020/07/22/unravelling-dutertes-iron-hand-in-the-time-of-covid-19/>.

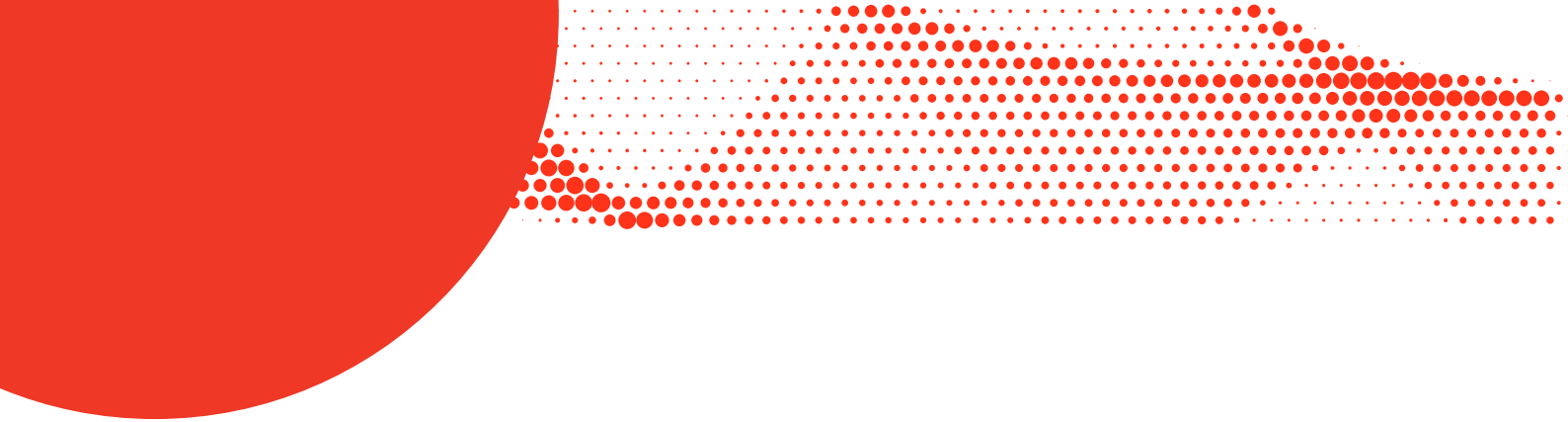
<sup>3</sup> CBCP Laiko, "PH has the Strictest Lockdown in Asia, but ineffective vs. Covid-19", CBCP Laiko, 11 May 2020, available at: <https://www.cbcplaiko.org/2020/05/11/philippines-lockdown-is-the-strictest-in-the-region/>.

<sup>4</sup> See, Aie Balagtas, "Rodrigo Duterte Is Using One of the World's Longest Covid-19 Lockdowns to Strengthen His Grip on the Philippines", *Time*, 15 March 2021, available at: <https://time.com/5945616/covid-philippines-pandemic-lockdown/>.

<sup>5</sup> "Duterte: PH 'doing good' on Covid-19 response compared with other countries", *CNN Philippines*, 4 May 2021, available at: <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2021/5/4/Duterte-PH-COVID-19-response-.html>.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*





In the Southeast Asia region, among the ten member countries, the Philippines is second only to Indonesia, which has the highest number of COVID-19 infections and deaths with 1.6 million total cases and around 45,000 deaths.<sup>7</sup> The Philippines total number of cases, as of 3 May 2021, is at 1.062 million, with 69,466 active cases and 17,525 deaths, according to the COVID-19 tracker of the Department of Health.<sup>8</sup>

In March 2021, to ease the pressure on the healthcare system—reminiscent of the 2020 lockdowns—restrictions on transportation, business operations, public services, and movement of people across borders were once again enforced through a variety of gradations of ‘community quarantines’. The strictest form of community quarantine is the enhanced community quarantine or ECQ,<sup>9</sup> characterized by full restrictions on movement of people (with exceptions for those buying food and medicine), suspension of public transportation, closure of schools, minimal economic activity, imposition of curfews, and closure of both city and provincial borders.

Succeeding forms of community quarantine include the ‘modified ECQ’ or MECQ (a 30–50 percent opening up of economic activities and movement), ‘general community quarantine’ or GCQ (a 50–75 percent opening up), and the ‘modified GCQ’ or MGCQ, which is the most relaxed form of lockdown. For one whole year, the Philippines has moved through these different forms of restrictions without really effectively controlling the spread of COVID-19.

One year into the pandemic, and COVID-19 continues to rage on, particularly in the developing world. The pandemic horror that India has experienced in May 2021 provided a stark example of the extent to which lives can be lost when the virus remains uncontrolled due to government neglect and incompetence. Arundhati Roy stated that the “system hasn’t collapsed”<sup>10</sup>, claiming that the healthcare system in India was non-existent to begin with. Roy claimed that it was the government that had failed, adding that perhaps “‘failed’ is an inaccurate word, because what we are witnessing is not criminal negligence, but an outright crime against humanity”<sup>11</sup>. As of early May 2021, India had registered more than 20 million total cases of COVID-19 and 222,000 COVID-19 deaths.<sup>12</sup> In response to this, Roy wrote that things “will settle down eventually. Of course, they will. But we don’t know who among us will survive to see that day. The rich will breathe easier. The poor will not”.

Since last year, harsh social restrictions used to contain the spread of COVID-19 have been instituted both in the developed and the developing world. However, for people in the developing world, pandemic restrictions mean hunger for the millions of informal workers relying on freedom of movement to earn their livelihoods. Suspension of work and transportation means job uncertainty for the millions of hourly-paid precarious workers in the Philippines and in many parts of the developing world. The pandemic has exposed the unequal impact of restrictions on the poor.<sup>13</sup> The rich have houses to comfortably quarantine in, as well as cars to freely travel in without violating social distancing rules. The poor need to leave their houses to find food for their families and avoid being suffocated by the summer heat. The harsh enforcement of quarantine restrictions in many developing countries also exposed how some states around the world are exploiting the need for lockdowns and quarantines “to intensify patterns of violence that are already normalized in policing”<sup>14</sup>. Many governments were caught

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Department of Health Covid-19 Tracker. 2020. <https://www.doh.gov.ph/covid19tracker>,

<sup>9</sup> Catalina Ricci S Madarang, “From ECQ to modified ECQ and modified GCQ, what do these phases mean?” Interaksyon, 14 May 2020, available at: <https://interaksyon.philstar.com/politics-issues/2020/05/14/168523/from-ecq-to-modified-ecq-and-modified-gcq-what-do-these-phases-mean/>.

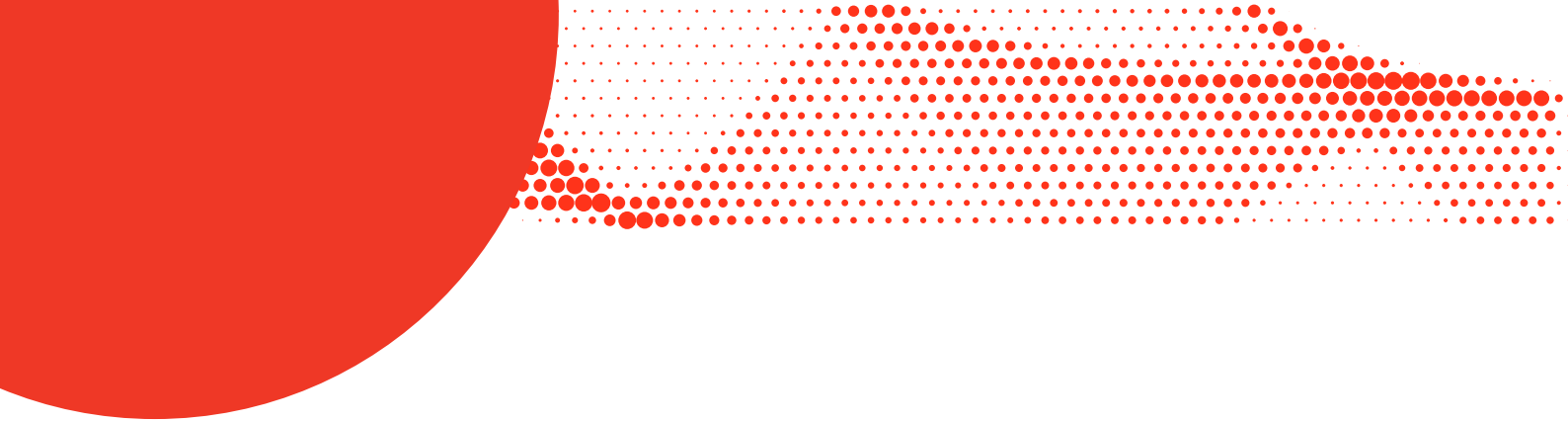
<sup>10</sup> Arundhati Roy, “We are witnessing a crime against humanity’: Arundhati Roy on India’s Covid Catastrophe”, The Guardian, 28 April 2021, available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2021/apr/28/crime-against-humanity-arundhati-roy-india-covid-catastrophe>.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid

<sup>12</sup> Ibid

<sup>13</sup> Arun Kundnani, “From Fanon to ventilators: Fighting for our right to breathe”, Transnational Institute, 7 May 2020, available at: <https://www.tni.org/en/article/from-fanon-to-ventilators>.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid



unaware as the pandemic laid bare the societal inequalities both between and within nations. States with weak public healthcare systems caused by neoliberal policies, such as privatized healthcare, are grappling to save lives in this contagion and are confronting unprecedented economic, political, and humanitarian crises.

### **The Pandemic Response: A Tragedy of Errors**

It is 2020 all over again. A year ago, in May 2020, Nikkei Asia reported that the Philippines had the “strictest lockdown in Asia, but [it has been] ineffective vs. COVID-19” and that at that time, the Duterte government had “brought down public mobility by 85% in transit stations; by 79% in retail and recreation; and by 71% in workplaces”<sup>15</sup>. However, the report further stated that the harsh lockdowns have not been effective at stopping transmission and instead, have been used to consolidate Duterte’s authoritarian rule.<sup>16</sup>

The strictest lockdown, the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ), was imposed island-wide in Luzon from 15 March 2020 until 15 May 2020.<sup>17</sup> It was then extended until June 2020. After easing the community quarantines, a two-week strict lockdown was imposed once again in August 2020. Alternating community quarantines, such as localized ECQ, MECQ, GCQ, and MGCQ were enforced until the end of the year with no end in sight. For the whole year, the confusing assortment of community quarantines meant there were suspension of classes in schools, curfews, checkpoints, policies banning anyone under 15 years old and over 60 years old from going out, limitations on transportation services, and further limitations on the opening of restaurants, gatherings, and other economic activities.

The Philippine economy contracted by 9.5 percent due to the pandemic restrictions, the worst economic constriction since World War II.<sup>18</sup> The Philippine economy was also the worst performer when compared to the ten other Southeast Asian economies.<sup>19</sup> As of 5 May 2021, the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) reported that close to ten million Filipino workers had lost their jobs after one year of the pandemic.<sup>20</sup> Moreover, the 9.8 million Filipinos who have lost their jobs after a year of protracted lockdowns and continuing restrictions are lacking adequate support from the government.<sup>21</sup> The Duterte government’s uninspired vaccine procurement and vaccination program has caused prolonged suffering for many.

The lockdown policy of harsh penalties and arrests of quarantine violators was heavily criticized, especially as there were more people apprehended for violating the community quarantines than tested for coronavirus. In mid-April 2020, more than 120,000 people were apprehended for violation of community quarantines by the police and the military but only 70,000 were tested for coronavirus.<sup>22</sup> On 29 April 2020, the United Nations rebuked the

<sup>15</sup> CBCP Laiko, “PH has the Strictest Lockdown in Asia, but ineffective vs. Covid-19”, CBCP Laiko, 11 May 2020, available at: <https://www.cbcplaiko.org/2020/05/11/philippines-lockdown-is-the-strictest-in-the-region/>.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> The political and economic centre of the country, the National Capital Region (NCR), is located in the island of Luzon.

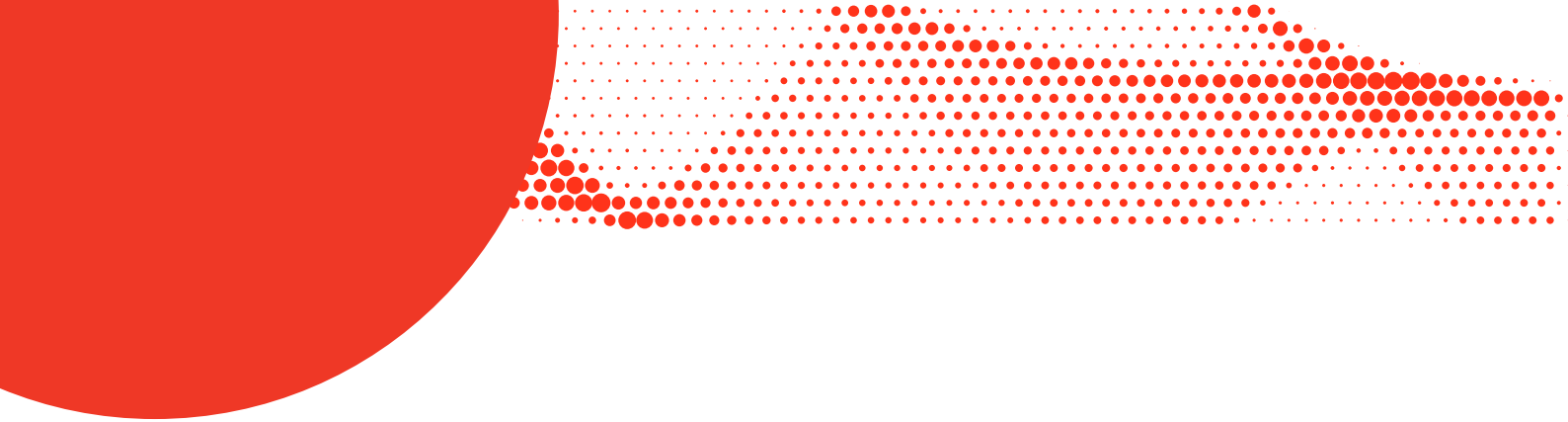
<sup>18</sup> Beatrice M. Laforga, “Philippine GDP shrinks by record 9.5% in 2020”, BusinessWorld, 29 January 2021, available at: <https://www.bworldonline.com/philippine-gdp-shrinks-by-record-9-5-in-2020/>.

<sup>19</sup> Beatrice M. Laforga, “Philippines to be SE Asia’s worst performer this year”, BusinessWorld, 11 December 2020, available at: <https://www.bworldonline.com/philippines-to-be-se-asias-worst-performer-this-year/>.

<sup>20</sup> Ted Cordero, “PSA: 9.82M Filipinos laid off from March 2020 to March 2021 – PSA”, GMA News, 6 May 2021, available at: <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/money/economy/786448/psa-9-82m-filipinos-laid-off-from-march-2020-to-march-2021-psa/story/>.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid

<sup>22</sup> Paul John Caña, “Philippines Tops List of Most People Apprehended for Quarantine Violations in the World”, Esquire, 2 May 2020 at: <https://www.esquiremag.ph/politics/news/philippines-tops-list-of-most-people-apprehended-for-quarantine-violations-in-the-world-src-report-a00289-20200502?fbclid=IwAR0kgWli8Rs5dsbFU8g1jirN-kn4knHSTJYjEnsp0KMRchCn3cNplqZz254>.



Philippines for its “highly militarized response” to lockdown violators.<sup>23</sup> The strict enforcement and harsh penalties were encouraged by Duterte himself. In one of his late-night press statements, Duterte warned that anyone caught violating the restrictions would be shot.<sup>24</sup> In April 2020, after a month of strict lockdowns, there were more people arrested for quarantine violations than people who tested positive for COVID-19.<sup>25</sup>

In July 2020, in the middle of the pandemic, the Duterte government enacted the controversial Anti-Terrorism Act, broadening police powers over ‘suspected terrorists’—a term that was expanded to include activists and critics of the government.<sup>26</sup> At present, the law is being challenged by various sectors of society both on the streets and in the halls of the Supreme Court. Moreover, on 5 May 2020, as a means to restrict critical views on the government’s pandemic response and through the instigation of Duterte, the House of Representatives or the Lower House of the Congress of the Philippines voted to withhold the franchise of the major broadcast network ABS-CBN.<sup>27</sup> The broadcast network had earned the ire of the President during his campaign period and was perceived to be critical of the Duterte government and its incoherent response to COVID-19. Before the year ended, the International Criminal Court also found substantial evidence that crimes against humanity were committed during Duterte’s bloody war on drugs which began in 2016.<sup>28</sup>

Fast forward to mid-March 2021 and to a surge in the number of infections, which by reaching 6,000 cases every day was putting a strain on the weak healthcare system. Even after the two-week lockdown imposed from 29 March to 4 April 2021, hospitals were at a breaking point by 19 April 2021 with intensive care units (ICUs) at 84 percent capacity, beds in COVID-19 wards at 70 percent capacity, and isolation beds at 63 percent capacity.<sup>29</sup> By the end of April 2021, the lockdown measures or modified ECQ had been extended and continued to limit movements and gatherings of people, as well as economic activity.<sup>30</sup> Curfews and checkpoints continued to be enforced. According to a report by Reuters, these restrictions that aimed to curb the spread of COVID-19 have “taken a painful toll on the Southeast Asian economy, which suffered its worst contraction on record due to the pandemic last year”<sup>31</sup>. Since last year, many have criticized the Duterte government for forgoing a medical and health emergency approach in response to the pandemic and instead responding in a militarized and authoritarian fashion.<sup>32</sup> Discontent has also grown on social media regarding the government’s incompetence in handling the devastating effects on people’s lives, health, and livelihoods caused by the still-raging COVID-19 pandemic.

With the lack of coordinated food and financial assistance from the government, people responded with

<sup>23</sup> Julia Mari Ornedo, Ornedo, Julia Mari, “UN rebukes Philippines’ ‘highly militarized response’ to ECQ violators”, GMA News, 29 April 2020, available at: <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/736111/un-rebukes-philippines-highly-militarized-response-to-ecq-violators/story/>.

<sup>24</sup> Lynzy Billing, “Duterte’s Response to the Coronavirus: ‘Shoot Them Dead’”, FP, April 16, 2020, available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/16/duterte-philippines-coronavirus-response-shoot-them-dead/>.

<sup>25</sup> Paul John Caña, “Philippines Tops List of Most People Apprehended for Quarantine Violations in the World”, Esquire, 2 May 2020 at: <https://www.esquiremag.ph/politics/news/philippines-tops-list-of-most-people-apprehended-for-quarantine-violations-in-the-world-src-report-a00289-20200502?fbclid=IwAR0kgWli8Rs5dsbFU8g1jirN-kn4knHSTJYjEnsp0KMRChCn3cNplqZz254>.

<sup>26</sup> Julie McCarthy, “Why Rights Groups Worry About the Philippines’ New Anti-Terrorism Law”, NPR, 21 July 2020, available at: <https://www.npr.org/2020/07/21/893019057/why-rights-groups-worry-about-the-philippines-new-anti-terrorism-law?t=1620157667547&t=1643193735222>.

<sup>27</sup> Ralf Rivas, “NTC orders ABS-CBN to stop operations”. Rappler.com, 5 May 2020, available at: <https://www.rappler.com/nation/259974-ntc-orders-abs-cbn-stop-operations-may-5-2020>.

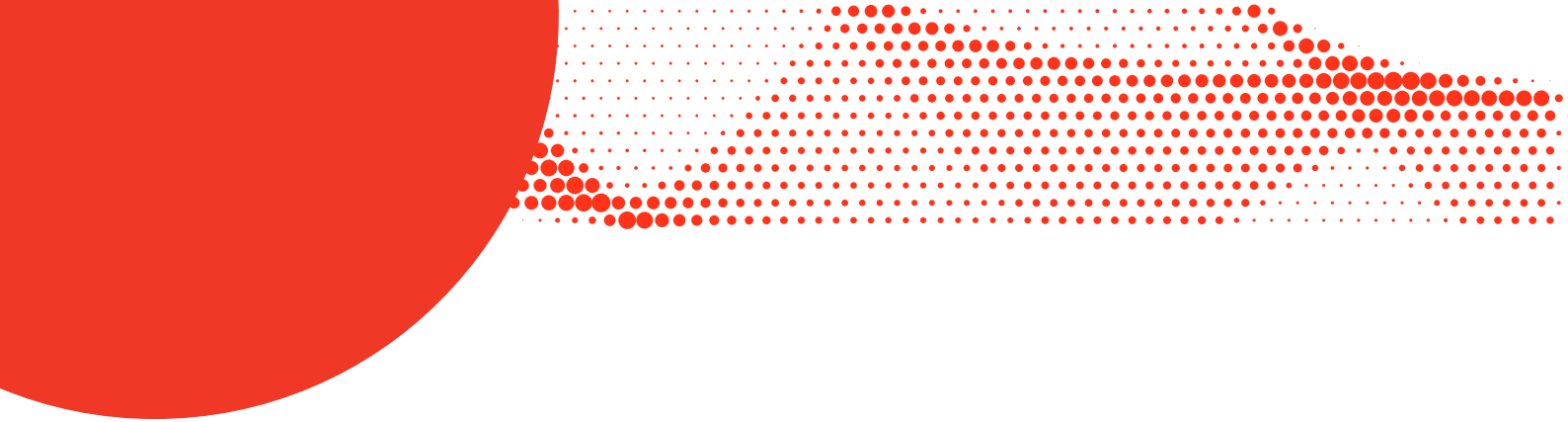
<sup>28</sup> Jason Gutierrez, “Court Finds Evidence of Crimes Against Humanity in the Philippines”, The New York Times, 15 December 2020, available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/15/world/asia/philippines-duterte-drugs-icc.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Neil Morales and Karen Lema, “Philippine hospitals struggle to cope as more severe Covid-19 wave hits”, Reuters, 20 April 2021, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippine-hospitals-struggle-cope-more-severe-covid-19-wave-hits-2021-04-20/>.

<sup>30</sup> Karen Lema, “Philippines extends limits on movement, gatherings to curb Covid”, Reuters, 28 April 2021, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/philippines-extends-limits-movement-gatherings-curb-covid-2021-04-28/>.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid

<sup>32</sup> Therese Reyes, “The Philippine Gov’t Banned Rallies, So Protesters Threw a ‘Party’ on Independence Day Instead”, Vice World News, 12 June 2020, available at: <https://www.vice.com/en/article/935ada/philippine-government-independence-day-rallies-protests>.



community pantries which sprouted up across the country. These community pantries are free and aim to help the many hungry, jobless, and frustrated Filipinos. The community pantries started with a small wooden cart full of food, parked on the side street of a village in Quezon City, with a sign that said: “Maginhawa Community Pantry. Take what you need. Give what you can”<sup>33</sup>. The free community pantry took off from there, growing into a national movement of mutual aid among Filipinos in dire straits. Thousands of community pantries have been established in an effort to provide both free food to those in need and a place for people to donate what they can. However, the Duterte government was quick to denounce the community initiative as being organized by communists. Duterte himself dissuaded people from using the free goods which community pantries provided.<sup>34</sup> This expression of solidarity, which has taken on a life of its own and is now a national movement, came on the heels of a government that neglected to provide much-needed food and financial assistance for many who were suffering due to the lockdown restrictions.

The pandemic has exposed the weak healthcare system in the Philippines and the lack of preparation of the country’s healthcare institutions to address the COVID-19 pandemic. Driven by neoliberal policies focused on privatization, 60 percent of hospitals in the country are privately owned while only 40 percent are public hospitals. Based on a Department of Health report,<sup>35</sup> there are 1,071 licensed private hospitals and 721 public hospitals, of which only 70 are operated by the Department of Health, while the rest are run by local government.<sup>36</sup> A majority of these hospitals, 56 percent, are classified as ‘Level 1’ healthcare facilities with limited capacities, similar to infirmaries. There is also an uneven distribution of healthcare facilities wherein the most technologically advanced are concentrated in metropolises. Healthcare workers such as nurses are also concentrated in big cities because the opportunities of being employed in big hospitals or to work abroad are greater. Last year, the government needed to hire more than 8,000 healthcare workers to meet the demands of the pandemic but were not able to attract significant amounts of healthcare professionals.<sup>37</sup> Low wages coupled with hazardous work discouraged many from taking up the offer. In a fit of pique and to alleviate the pressure on the healthcare system due to lack of health workers, Duterte banned the deployment of nurses abroad from May 2020 until November 2020.<sup>38</sup> In March 2021, the Department of Health announced that they have allocated “PHP548 million for the hiring of 7,613 health workers for January to June this year amid the renewed surge of COVID-19 infections”<sup>39</sup>. During the pandemic year, the Department of Health adopted a policy that the hospital is the last line of defense and that the home is the first line of defense. People infected with COVID-19 are advised to quarantine at home and to avoid putting strain on the weak healthcare system and should only go to the hospital when they have trouble breathing.<sup>40</sup>

## **From Populism to Authoritarianism: Contentions and Contradictions**

After more than 200 days of lockdown, the year 2020 closed with an economic flatline and the worst contraction

<sup>33</sup> Michael Beltran, “How a Community Pantry Sparked Movement of Mutual Aid in the Philippines”, The News Lens, 21 April 2021, available at: <https://international.thenewslens.com/article/149976>.

<sup>34</sup> JC Gotinga, “Food pantries for hungry Filipinos get tagged as communist”, Aljazeera, 24 April 2021, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/24/food-pantry-for>.

<sup>35</sup> See Microsoft Word - final NOH for layout\_Sept27\_chap1to4.docx (doh.gov.ph).

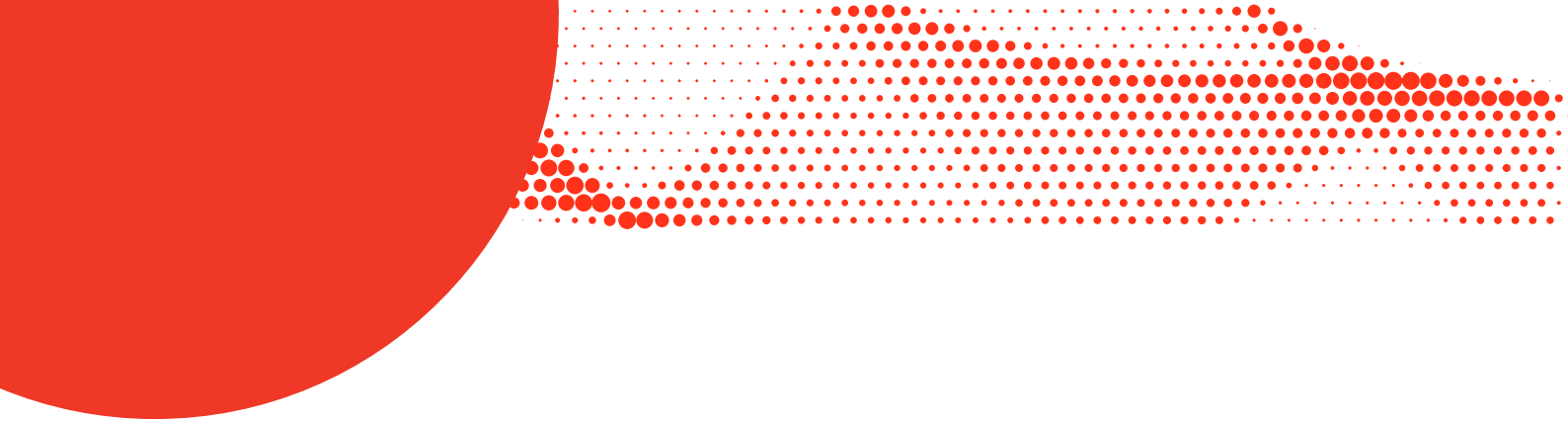
<sup>36</sup> Manila Times, “At a glance: The Philippine health care system”, The Manila Times, 26 April 2018, available at: <https://www.manilatimes.net/2018/04/26/supplements/at-a-glance-the-philippine-health-care-system/395117/>.

<sup>37</sup> Philippine Daily Inquirer, “Only few takers of gov’t offer of nursing jobs”, Inquirer.net, 26 August 2020, available at: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1327087/only-few-takers-of-govt-offer-of-nursing-jobs#ixzz6uTe1xzpVW>.

<sup>38</sup> Ferdinand Patinio, “PH deployment ban on nurses abroad stays: DOLE”, Philippine News Agency, 14 August 2020, available at: <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1112250>.

<sup>39</sup> Catherine Gonzalez, “DOH allots P548M to hire 7,613 health workers”, Inquirer.net, 25 March 2021, available at: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1411403/doh-allots-p548m-to-hire-7613-health-workers#ixzz6uTg8m2xz>.

<sup>40</sup> (Interview with medical doctor, April 2020).



among all the countries in Southeast Asia. However, in the midst of the pandemic, Duterte's ratings for trustworthiness rose to 91 percent, according to Pulse Asia, a private polling firm that conducted a survey in September 2020.<sup>41</sup> Whilst many distrust the pollster's findings, the report boosted the morale of the Duterte camp despite rising criticism. The survey came out despite growing opposition towards the government's COVID-19 response and this period became defined by a series of unfortunate events and a tragedy of errors.

With sustained popular support, Duterte continued to consolidate the ranks of the military and the police, as well as securing the loyalty of newly formed and old political dynasties. Duterte is often characterized as a popular and charismatic leader, reminiscent of the likes of Narendra Modi in India and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. In an opinion piece written by Richard Heydarian on the "populist tragedy" of India, Brazil, and the Philippines, Heydarian suggests that these three countries similarly could not provide "sophisticated, systematic empirically-driven public policy responses" to control the spread of COVID-19.<sup>42</sup> Similarly, Walden Bello positioned Duterte as a beleaguered strongman and incompetent when faced with COVID-19, stating that the pandemic "has exposed the gross incompetence of a small-town mayor with few qualifications for higher office flung to the presidency by an electoral insurgency"<sup>43</sup>. In his book, *Counter Revolution: The Global Rise of the Far Right*, Bello discusses the Duterte phenomenon as a counter revolution of the liberal democratic order and Duterte as a fascist original. Based on Duterte's policy responses to the pandemic, a crisis of his political moment, this paper argues that Duterte's mode of governance embodies authoritarian leadership with fascist tendencies.

Many have offered analytical approaches such as an institutional approach, personality analysis, or a counter-revolutionary approach as lenses through which to understand Duterte's form of authoritarianism.<sup>44</sup> Another approach uses Antonio Gramsci's concepts of hegemony and fascism. This paper utilizes a Gramscian theory of power to discuss the authoritarian bent and fascist tendencies present in Duterte's COVID-19 policy response.

Conceptualizing authoritarianism always leads back to the question of power. There are different kinds of power: coercive power or behavioral control over another; power through agenda-setting, such as control of information, through the mass media, and through the processes of socialization; power that is shaping perceptions and preferences; and power that is shaping context and conduct. The conventional view of authoritarianism is described in Juan José Linz's influential 1964 article "An Authoritarian Regime: The Case of Spain" wherein Linz described four qualities of authoritarian political systems: (a) limited political pluralism; that is, regimes that place constraints on political institutions and groups like legislatures, political parties, and interest groups; (b) a basis for legitimacy based on emotion, especially the identification of the regime as a necessary evil to combat easily recognizable societal problems such as underdevelopment or insurgency; (c) minimal social mobilization, most often caused by constraints on the public such as suppression of political opponents and anti-regime activity; and (d) informally defined executive power with often vague and shifting powers.

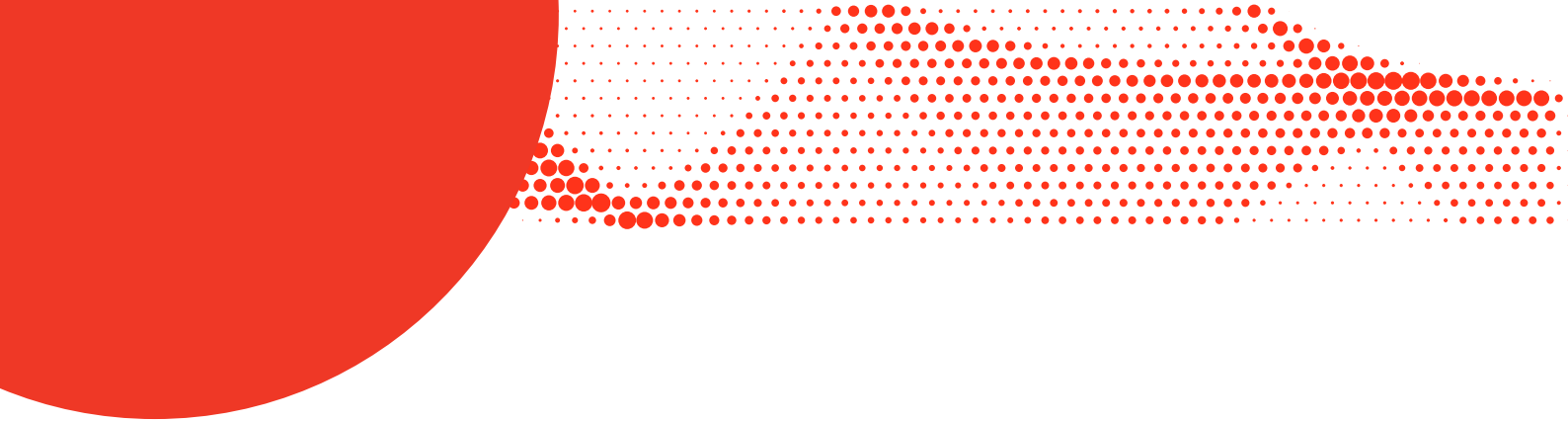
As the pandemic revealed, Duterte's authoritarian leadership is thoroughly expressed in his collusion with the military and the police, which legitimizes the use of state violence to enforce harsh COVID-19 restrictions, repress dissent and critics, and suspend civil and political rights to maintain a grip on power. The harsh and inconsistent

<sup>41</sup> CNN Philippines Staff, "Duterte approval rating rises to 91% amid pandemic, Cayetano suffers drop – survey", CNN Philippines, 5 October 2020, available at: <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/10/5/Duterte-approval-trust-rating-COVID-19-September-2020-Pulse-Asia-survey.html>.

<sup>42</sup> Richard Heydarian, "Populist tragedy: India, Brazil, PH", *Inquirer.net*, 4 May 2021, available at: <https://opinion.inquirer.net/139909/populist-tragedy-india-brazil-ph>.

<sup>43</sup> Walden Bello, *Counterrevolution: The Global Rise of the Far Right*, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2019.

<sup>44</sup> Curato, N. (ed.), *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte's Early Presidency*, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2017.



pandemic guidelines, which were justified as law-and-order imperatives, were used to consolidate power—in the executive, judicial, and legislative senses—towards one man. The health crisis highlighted two authoritarian characteristics of the Duterte regime. Firstly, the lack of people’s participation in crafting the pandemic policy responses or participatory governance, and secondly the use of coercive power via naked violence (killings) or threats of violence towards violators of the COVID-19 restrictions, justified through twisted legal mechanisms that support impunity. Surprisingly, Duterte’s populism remains strong but follows the demobilized populism model wherein the people are restricted from participating in policy formulation and decision-making.<sup>45</sup>

This paper argues that Duterte’s authoritarian attributes are expressed through two aspects: (a) the narrowing of freedoms and democratic spaces such as civil, political, and human rights, of communities and social movements; and (b) the demobilization of people’s participation in determining the future of their communities. The narrowing of freedoms under Duterte, such as the freedom to dissent and to express political views, contributes to the death of pluralism as we know it. A recent survey conducted by the Social Weather Stations (SWS) and released in March 2021 found that “65% of Filipinos perceive it is dangerous to publish anything critical to the administration”.<sup>46</sup> Likewise, being a communist in the Philippines is a crime and might literally lead to death at the hands of state forces. The “red-tagging” of activists has increased during the pandemic, as the police target activists connected to the Maoist Communist Party of the Philippines and its affiliated legal political organizations. However, police and military intelligence lack a sophisticated understanding of different political orientations among the broad Left movement and therefore are also “red-tagging” all vocal, dissenting, and progressive Left activists. On 7 March 2021, now termed ‘Bloody Sunday’, police raided the offices of civil rights groups who were red-tagged by the military, and killed nine activists.<sup>47</sup>

When analyzing Duterte’s authoritarian attributes, it is important to dissect the implications of authoritarianism on the following five dimensions: (a) the role of the state military and police; (b) the impact on state institutions i.e., Congress, political parties, and electoral bodies; (c) towards the media; (d) how the economy is being transformed or untransformed during authoritarian times; and (e) on repression of dissent and people’s resistance.

Briefly, this paper elaborates on the relevant dimensions that shape the authoritarian bent of Duterte’s government. First is the role of the military and police and how they exercise power and control to sustain authoritarian policies. The military and the police are highly influential within the Duterte government. Around 59 ex-military personnel are included in Duterte’s executive cabinet.<sup>48</sup> The policies against communist movements and the war on drugs are the government’s top priorities and a long-term source of major frustration for the military and the police. Based on our history of military and police interventions in politics, as they were politicized during the Marcos dictatorship, successive Philippine presidents have to appease the military and police when they take office. In the period following the Marcos dictatorship, the military staged more than a dozen coups in an attempt to wrest power from civilian authority during Corazon Aquino’s presidency.<sup>49</sup> The military and the police withdrew their support from former president Joseph Estrada which led to his ousting in January 2001 in a series of protests

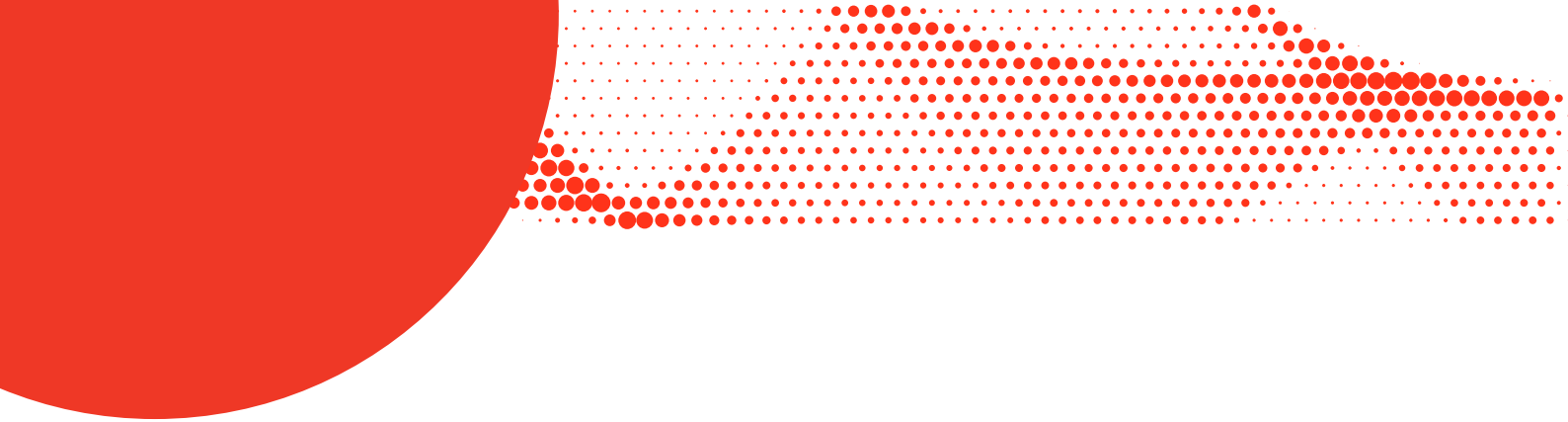
<sup>45</sup> Joel Rocamora, *Impossible is not so easy: A life in politics*, Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Neil Arwin Mercado, “65% of Filipinos believe it’s ‘dangerous’ to publish anything critical of administration — SWS”, *Inquirer.net*, 19 March 2021, available at: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1408893/sws-65-of-filipinos-believe-its-dangerous-to-publish-anything-critical-of-administration#ixzz6uTne7aUe>

<sup>47</sup> Raul Dancel, “‘Bloody Sunday’: At least 9 killed in raids against civil rights groups across the Philippines”, *The Straits Times*, 7 March 2021, available at: <https://www.straitstimes.com/asia/se-asia/bloody-sunday-at-least9-killed-in-raids-against-civil-rights-groups-across-the>

<sup>48</sup> Fe Zamora and Philip Tubeza, “Duterte hires 59 former AFP, PNP men to Cabinet, agencies”, *Inquirer.net*, 27 June 2017 available at: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/908958/duterte-hires-59-former-afp-pnp-men-to-cabinet-agencies>.

<sup>49</sup> Reuters Staff, “TIMELINE: Recent coups and attempted coups in the Philippines”, *Reuters*, 29 November 2007, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-philippines-unrest-idUSSP3116220071129>.



known as the People Power Revolution II.<sup>50</sup> Estrada was later incarcerated and convicted of corruption. Duterte showed the most extreme kind of appeasement by integrating the police and military into the government.

The second dimension is the impact of authoritarian policies on the state and state institutions under an authoritarian model, which structurally weakens the political, economic, and social institutions affected by increasing corruption and the meritless appointments of Duterte loyalists. The incompetence and the lack of scientific or technical expertise of Duterte's appointees in government offices was particularly exposed by the COVID-19 crisis. Under Duterte, the executive branch continues to seek control of the legislative and judicial branches of government. There is a continuous attempt to consolidate state institutions and force the government to accept Duterte's policies, power, and principles.

The third dimension is that media outlets who are critical of Duterte are under attack. On 5 May 2020, in the middle of the pandemic, the Philippines' largest broadcast network, ABS-CBN, was shut down by Duterte via his supporters in Congress.<sup>51</sup> Maria Ressa, the CEO of Rappler, an online media outlet that is critical of Duterte, is currently facing multiple libel cases instigated by Duterte's associates.<sup>52</sup> In contrast, the government-operated media outlet People's Television Network has been strengthened and infused with fresh money and technology.

A fourth significant dimension is the economy, which can be transformed or remain stagnant during authoritarian times. The Philippine economy under Duterte is in free fall. Debt has ballooned during the pandemic, and dependence on investment and now vaccines from China is increasing. The economy was hit hardest by the harsh lockdowns and continuing community quarantines that lasted over a year. The devastation of the Philippine economy will be felt in the coming years, bringing hardships to many Filipinos and further increasing existing inequality in the country. Furthermore, workers remain unprotected against the virus and that unemployment, as of March 2021, is at an all-time high of 9.8 million according to the PSA.<sup>53</sup> The Department of Labor and Employment reported that around 4.5 million Filipino workers have lost their jobs during the pandemic, contributing to the highest unemployment rate in 15 years.<sup>54</sup> Interestingly, Duterte remains hands-off in reforming the neoliberal economic structures of the country that aim to address inequality. While Duterte primarily spews rhetoric which vehemently opposes the oligarchy controlling the country, he remains submissive to neoliberal economic masterminds when running the economy. Furthermore, his government focuses on allotting greater funds for its anti-communist agenda to be implemented at the village level.<sup>55</sup>

Finally, there is the dimension of the people's resistance in the face of state repression. Critiques of Duterte's pandemic response and authoritarian policy actions, like the Anti-Terrorism Act,<sup>56</sup> have been steadily rising both

<sup>50</sup> Addie Pobre and Cathrine Gonzales, "Looking back at EDSA II: The political paths of Estrada and Arroyo", Rappler, 17 January 2017, available at: <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/158523-look-back-edsa-ii-joseph-estrada-gloria-arroyo/>.

<sup>51</sup> In October 2021, Ressa won the Nobel Peace Prize in recognition of her struggle for freedom of the press.

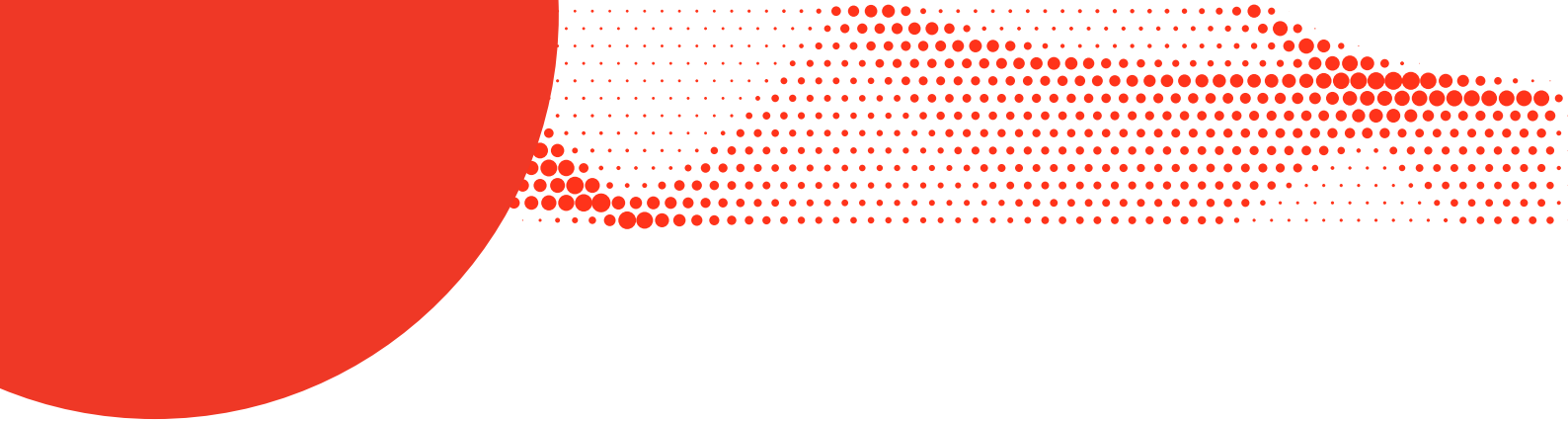
<sup>52</sup> Ted Regencia, "Maria Ressa found guilty in blow to Philippines' press freedom", Aljazeera, 15 June 2020, available at: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/15/maria-ressa-found-guilty-in-blow-to-philippines-press-freedom>.

<sup>53</sup> Ted Cordero, "PSA: 9.82M Filipinos laid off from March 2020 to March 2021 – PSA", GMA News, 6 May 2021, available at: <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/money/economy/786448/psa-9-82m-filipinos-laid-off-from-march-2020-to-march-2021-psa/story/>.

<sup>54</sup> Ben Vera, "4.5 million Filipinos jobless in 2020; highest in 15 years", Inquirer, 9 March 2021, available at: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1404612/4-5m-filipinos-jobless-in-2020-highest-in-15-years>.

<sup>55</sup> CNN Philippines Staff, "P19B NTF-ELCAC fund stays in Congress-approved budget", CNN Philippines, 10 December 2020, available at: <https://www.cnn.ph/news/2020/12/10/P19-billion-NTF-ELCAC-stays-Congress-ratified-budget.html>.

<sup>56</sup> The Anti-Terrorism Act (ATL) of 2020 drew massive opposition and many groups challenged the law at the Supreme Court. The ATL contain provisions that threaten human rights and freedom of expression by enabling an appointed group of individuals to surveil, identify, and detain for 24 days suspected terrorists. See: Sebastian Strangio, "Philippine Supreme Court Upholds Majority of Controversial Anti-Terror Law", The Diplomat, 10 December 2021, available at: <https://thediplomat.com/2021/12/philippine-supreme-court-upholds-majority-of-controversial-anti-terror-law/>.



online and offline during the health crisis. Opposition is mounting against the Duterte administration as, one year after the first lockdown was declared, the virus remains uncontrolled, and the vaccination program is being implemented in slow motion amidst the longest and strictest lockdown in the world. Duterte's weekly late-night pre-recorded TV speeches focused more on expressing anger towards his critics,<sup>57</sup> spewing hate at communists, women, and drug addicts, and defending his failure to stop China from occupying Philippine waters.<sup>58</sup>

Cracks and inconsistencies from competing forces within the Duterte camp are beginning to show from within the Duterte government.<sup>59</sup> Last year, calls for Duterte's resignation over the incompetent pandemic response trended on social media.<sup>60</sup> People's demands via social media for transparency and competence have forced the government to backtrack on some of its controversial pandemic policies.<sup>61</sup>

The broad protest movement—including the business sector, workers, professionals, students, religious groups, and progressive and leftist organizations—even collaborated and organized in order to remove Duterte's propaganda trolls from social media sites.<sup>62</sup> Many analyses found after the 2016 presidential elections that Duterte's social media campaign machinery utilized an organized online army of trolls to spread disinformation and attack his opponents online. This was confirmed by a study from the University of Oxford which identified an online troll army used to spread propaganda for Duterte and attack his opponents online. The study revealed that Duterte's campaign spent USD 200,000 or PHP 10 million to hire trolls as "cyber troops who use a variety of strategies, tools and techniques to shape public opinion".<sup>63</sup> Around 28 countries were included in the study wherein certain political parties and electoral candidates organized a social media campaign to spread propaganda and target opponents online using hate speech, verbal abuse, and harassment. During the pandemic, social media also became a medium used to criticize the Duterte government and its incompetent pandemic response, the war on drugs fiasco, and other policy stances and statements, such as on China's incursions into the West Philippine Sea (WPS).<sup>64</sup>

In early 2021, a broad coalition of mainstream and progressive organizations formed 1Sambayan (One Nation),<sup>65</sup> an alliance to counter the early campaigning of Duterte's daughter as a presidential candidate for 2022. The national coalition plans to field a candidate to run against Duterte's camp in the 2022 presidential elections. Among the political and social actors in this opposition movement are grassroots people's movements, liberal

<sup>57</sup> Bong Lozada, "De Lima: Duterte rant vs Makabayan bloc 'damage control' for pandemic response shortcoming", Inquirer.net, 2 December 2020, available at: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1367291/de-lima-duterte-rant-vs-makabayan-bloc-damage-control-for-pandemic-response-shortcoming#ixzz6uU5NqlaS>.

<sup>58</sup> Nicole-Anne Lagrimas, "Duterte admits he's 'inutile', won't go to war vs. China over claims", GMA News Online, 27 July 2020, available at: <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/topstories/nation/748685/duterte-admits-he-s-inutile-won-t-go-to-war-vs-china-over-claims/story/>.

<sup>59</sup> Dwight de Leon, "DILG's contradicting statements on community pantry permit sow confusion", Rappler, 20 April 2021, available at: <https://www.rappler.com/nation/dilg-officials-contradicting-statements-permits-community-pantries-confusion/>.

<sup>60</sup> Sofia Tomacruz, "Coronavirus response: Online outrage drowns out Duterte propaganda machine", Rappler, 24 April 2020, available at: <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/coronavirus-response-online-outrage-drowns-duterte-propaganda-machine/>.

<sup>61</sup> Vanne Elaine Terrazola, "Review of motorcycle barrier for pillion riding pressed", Manila Bulletin, 20 July 2020, available at: <https://mb.com.ph/2020/07/20/review-of-motorcycle-barrier-for-pillion-riding-pressed/>.

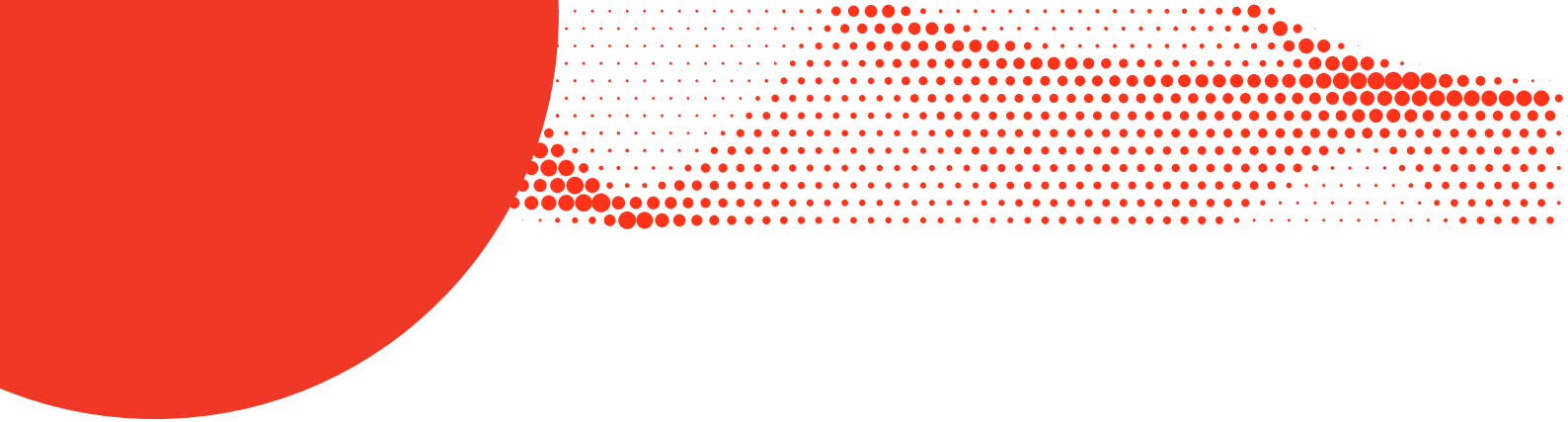
<sup>62</sup> Chi Almario-Gonzalez, "Unmasking the trolls: Countering attacks in social media", ABS-CBN News, 24 January 2017, available at: <https://news.abs-cbn.com/focus/01/23/17/unmasking-the-trolls-countering-attacks-in-social-media>.

<sup>63</sup> Mikas Matsuzawa, "Duterte camp spent \$200,000 for troll army, Oxford study finds", Philippine Star, 24 July 2017, available at: <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2017/07/24/1721044/duterte-camp-spent-200000-troll-army-oxford-study-finds>.

<sup>64</sup> T.J. Gacura, "Celebs, personalities, netizens slam Pres. Rodrigo Duterte for forgetting his promise about WPS", LionheartTV, 6 May 2021, available at: <https://www.lionhearttv.com/celebs-personalities-netizens-slam-pres-rodrigo-duterte-for-forgetting-his-promise-about-wps/> (msn.com)

<sup>65</sup> Gabriel Pabico Lala, "Labor leader: 1Sambayan is 'breath of fresh air', but needs broad public participation", Inquirer.net, 19 March 2021, available at: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1409102/labor-leader-says-1sambayan-breath-of-fresh-air-but-needs-inclusive-mass-participation#ixzz6uUSO43f2>.





democratic groups, neglected political groups, i.e., former vice-presidential candidate Jejomar Binay's group, and anti-Duterte celebrities, alongside others hoping to counter Duterte's populist magic.

### **A Gramscian Perspective on Duterte's Authoritarian and Fascist Tendencies**

Duterte is a product of the country's historical moments. The trends that led to his rise to power can be traced back to the unfinished (first) People Power Revolution and subsequent decades of the Marcos dictatorship. To understand Duterte's populist yet authoritarian leadership, Antonio Gramsci's discussion of fascism and hegemony may be instructive.<sup>66</sup> Gramsci's usage of hegemony refers to leadership or dominance, and the power of ideas, values, and beliefs in a particular historical moment over a particular political-economic context. In looking at Duterte's authoritarian leadership with fascist tendencies, Gramsci's notion of hegemony seems appropriate. Hegemony is about "political leadership based on the consent of the led, a consent which is secured by the diffusion and popularization of the world view of the ruling class".<sup>67</sup> Gramsci's struggle in fascist Italy led to an understanding of the conditions of his time and a rational analysis of irrational political moments. Gramsci's analysis reflected the struggle to understand how people can support an irrational fascist political movement and was geared towards finding counter-hegemonic strategies and actions.<sup>68</sup>

Duterte was the 'dark horse' of the 2016 presidential elections, propelled by popular discontent over ineffective liberal democratic institutions. His supporters mainly came from the new middle class, those that had benefitted from recent economic growth, and from working abroad. They sought quick solutions to everyday issues such as crime and horrendously congested cities. In part due to frustrations over the dominance of the politically-correct or intellectual crowd and persistent socio-economic inequalities, Duterte swept the electoral stage with the slogan "change is coming". In his campaigns, Duterte promised to single-handedly solve all problems of crime, corruption, and drug abuse, in just a few months in office. Regardless of Duterte's promises appearing too good to be true, more than 16 million Filipinos believed his rhetoric and were entertained by his self-styled bravado and charismatic language. However, after five years in office, the persistent problems Duterte promised to eradicate remained and even intensified, such as in the case of corruption, drugs, crime, and congestion. A shrewd warlord and politician, Duterte became the bane of the fractured elite who previously had benefitted from the now-challenged liberal democratic system. Many local political analysts were left with questions about Duterte's rise to power, wondering if this was a historical accident or a chance occurrence in the Philippine march to political development? Was it the unfinished Philippine People Power Revolution that produced populist leaders like Estrada and Duterte?<sup>69</sup> Was Duterte's electoral victory a reflection of a protest vote against a liberal democratic system that tolerated increasing inequality despite economic growth? Was the rise of Duterte perhaps part of a worldwide trend toward authoritarian populist leaders?

Duterte's rise to power is reminiscent of the Gramscian perspective of revolutionary politics, that a political

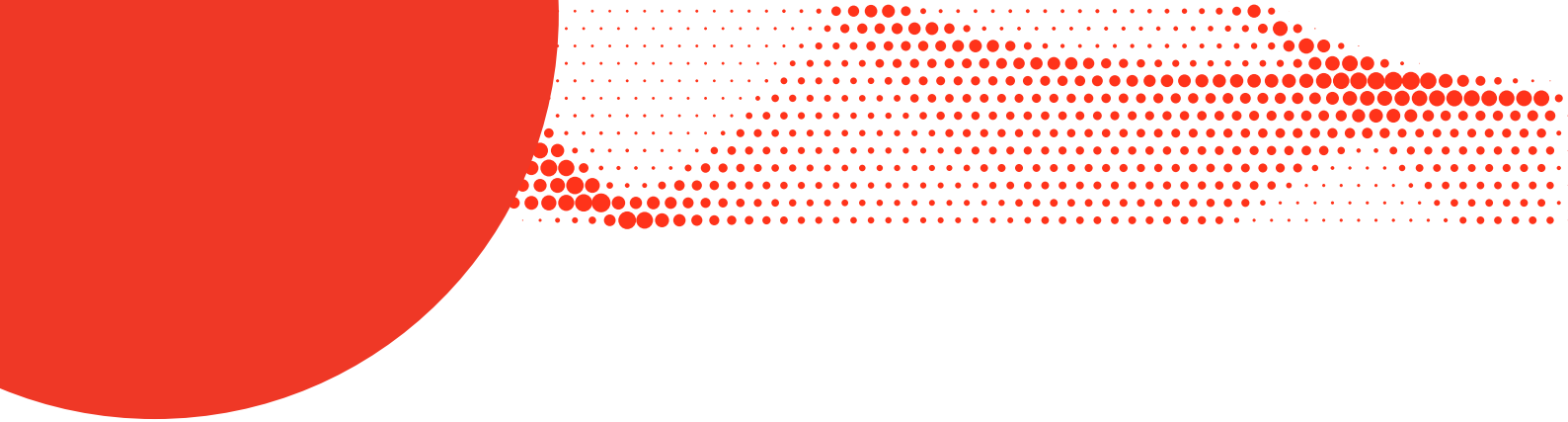
<sup>66</sup> Walter L. Adamson, "Gramsci's Interpretation of Fascism", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 41, no. 4, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980, pp. 615–33, available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2709277>.

<sup>67</sup> Bates, Thomas, "Gramsci and the Theory of Hegemony", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Apr. - Jun., 1975, Vol. 36, No. 2 (Apr. - Jun., 1975), pp. 351-366.

<sup>68</sup> Walter L. Adamson, "Gramsci's Interpretation of Fascism", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 41, no. 4, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980, pp. 615–33, available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2709277>.

<sup>69</sup> Joseph Ejercito Estrada, a former actor, served as President from 1998 to 2001, when he was ousted from office due to corruption cases. Indicted for corruption in 2007 and sentenced to lifetime imprisonment, Estrada was later pardoned by former president Gloria Arroyo. Estrada became Mayor of Manila City in the 2010 elections and was then defeated in the 2016 elections.

<sup>70</sup> Walter L. Adamson, "Gramsci's Interpretation of Fascism", *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 41, no. 4, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980, pp. 615–33, available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2709277>.



moment pregnant with change is when a hegemonic crisis occurs.<sup>70</sup> According to Gramsci, a hegemonic crisis happens when the ruling class fails to completely dominate or use force to dominate, for example via wars, until such a time that a broad mass puts forward demands and seizes a particular political moment.<sup>71</sup> In such a hegemonic crisis, the political field becomes open and “violent solutions ... represented by charismatic ‘men of destiny’” may provide an alternative in order to achieve a “static equilibrium during a hegemonic crisis”.<sup>72</sup> Without any strong challenge from other social forces, such as moderates or the conservative elite, Gramsci likened the change towards fascism as Caesarism, which “refers to a political intervention by some previously dormant, or even previously unknown political force capable of asserting domination and thus of restoring a static equilibrium during a hegemonic crisis”.<sup>73</sup> In this political moment according to Gramsci, the fascist takeover may emerge, through “the sudden creation of a single heroic figure, or it may be the gradual and institutionalized outcome of a coalition government”.<sup>74</sup> Drawing from this, one questions whether the transition to liberal democracy in the Philippines is not liberal enough. Did it fail to achieve hegemony for political and civil society? The discord between political forces and the incompleteness that cannot birth a new political situation have produced a vacuum, and a charismatic leader with fascist tendencies has emerged to fill that void.

### **Populist Authoritarianism in the Global North and South**

International media depicts Duterte as comparable to other populist leaders such as Donald Trump in the United States, Narendra Modi in India, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in Turkey, Vladimir Putin in Russia, and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil. Similarly, persistent questions abound over whether, due to the crisis of neoliberalism and liberal democracy, there is an authoritarian bent in both the Global North and Global South.

Since the 1980s, the dominance of neoliberal policies brought about by Reaganomics and Thatcherism have propelled the dominance of capital markets and systematically weakened labor organizations, orientating ideas and culture towards competition and consumerism. Under neoliberalism, the markets became unfettered leaving many immiserated. The emergence of populist strongmen leaders, coupled with populist rhetoric, fueled conceptual debates on the concept of authoritarian populism. In the West, populist rhetoric as exemplified by Trump leans towards right-wing conservative perspectives and is therefore anti-immigration, suspicious of liberal values and establishments like human rights, skeptical of intellectualism and science such as climate change, and encouraging of racism. The term authoritarian populism was first used by Stuart Hall to characterize Thatcherism in the 1970s but the concept has since evolved and broadened.<sup>75</sup> Whilst Hall contextualized the concept in Europe, the concept of authoritarian populism in this instance applies to the widespread rise of contemporary authoritarian populist leaders and its meaning has since broadened.

Authoritarianism as a concept refers “to seek[ing] social homogeneity through coercion” and “populism” refers to “defining a section of the population as truly and rightfully ‘the people’ and aligning with this section against a different group identified as elites”.<sup>76</sup> Thus, putting the two terms together, authoritarian populism refers to: “the pitting of ‘the people’ against ‘elites’ in order to have the power to drive out, wipe out, or otherwise dominate

<sup>71</sup> Ibid

<sup>72</sup> Walter L. Adamson, “Gramsci’s Interpretation of Fascism”, *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 41, no. 4, University of Pennsylvania Press, 1980, pp. 615–33, available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2709277>.

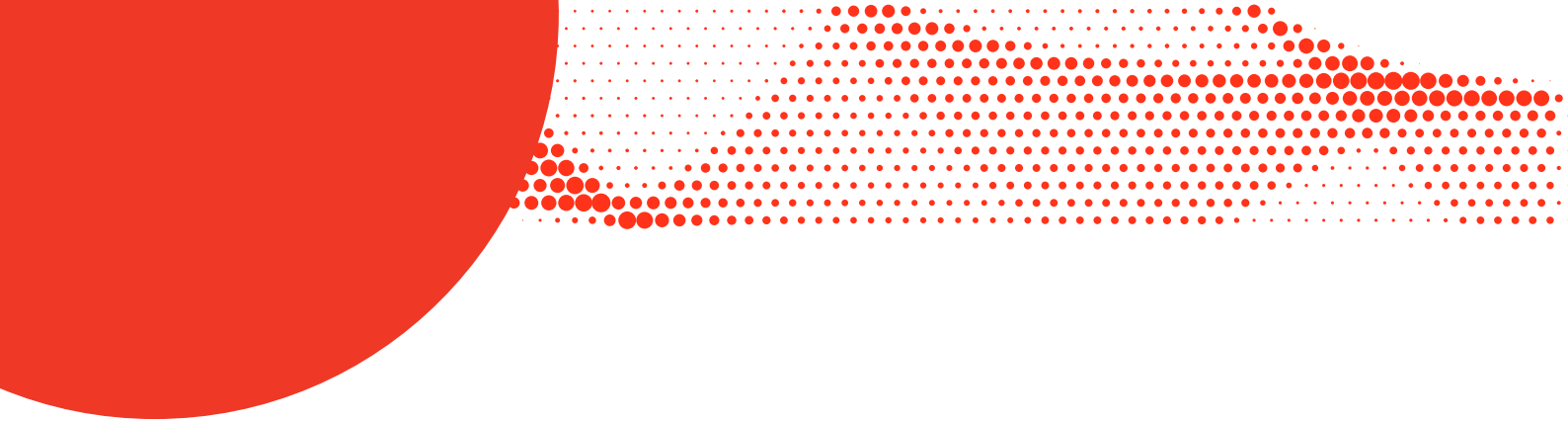
<sup>73</sup> Ibid

<sup>74</sup> Ibid

<sup>75</sup> J Morelock (ed.), “Introduction: The Frankfurt School and Authoritarian Populism – A Historical Outline”, *Critical Theory and Authoritarian Populism*, London: University of Westminster Press, 2018, pp. xiii–xxxviii.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid, p. xiv.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid, p. xiv.



Others who are not ‘the people’”.<sup>77</sup>

However, populist authoritarian challenges against mainstream “liberal social and cultural norms” expressed through “multiculturalism, universal human rights and multilateralism”<sup>78</sup> have been linked to the rise of far-right politics characterized by “nationalist, racist and xenophobic tendencies”.<sup>79</sup> Blake Stewart, in his article “The Rise of Far-Right Civilizationism”, argues that the surge of reactionary and “far-right wing politics” emanate from “elite far-right actors” and intellectuals from North America and Europe, former colonial powers, as a reaction to “economic crisis and social anxieties produced by globalization”.<sup>80</sup> The rise of contemporary populist leaders in the West has been traced back to 2002, when Jean-Marie Le Pen won the first round of presidential elections in France, and Pim Fortuyn led his party to the Dutch Parliament with an anti-immigrant platform.<sup>81</sup> Since then, increasing support for right-wing political parties led by populist authoritarian leaders has alarmed centrist and leftist movements in Switzerland, Sweden, Denmark, Hungary, and Poland.<sup>82</sup> More recently, Donald Trump won the 2016 elections in the United States and in 2019, Boris Johnson became Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. A common denominator among the populist leaders in the West is their anti-immigrant rhetoric and policy actions laced with xenophobic tendencies.

Pippa Norris explored contradictions in the standard explanation on the rise of populism, noting that it is often seen as the product of extreme inequality and the mobilization of the socially excluded, however, populist authoritarianism has also arisen in affluent countries in the West. The rise of populist authoritarianism thus “can be explained as a cultural backlash in Western societies against long-term, ongoing social change”.<sup>83</sup> Due to the rise of populist authoritarianism in Europe, in 2016 British polling company YouGov surveyed 12 European countries on how susceptible their populations were to authoritarian populist ideas and politics. Germany scored the lowest among countries in Western Europe with 18 percent, France had 63 percent, Britain 48 percent, and Italy 47 percent.<sup>84</sup> In response to the survey, German newspaper Die Welt reported that the support for authoritarian populism in Germany remain confined to the far-right wing political party, Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), unlike in other European countries surveyed.<sup>85</sup> YouGov and Die Welt both stated that support for populist authoritarianism in Germany can be found among older, averagely-educated Germans and among more men than women.

Populist authoritarianism also swept across Latin America, notably Venezuela and Brazil, and has also reached Asia, notably with the cases of Duterte in the Philippines, Modi in India, and Xi Jinping in China.<sup>86</sup> Populist authoritarian regimes are not new in Asian countries such as Cambodia, Indonesia, and Thailand, which have reshaped the meaning and forms of democracy. Unlike that of the West, the rise of authoritarian populist leaders

<sup>78</sup> Blake Stewart, “The Rise of Far-Right Civilizationism”, *Critical Sociology*, vol. 46, nos. 7–8, pp. 1207–20, available at: <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/0896920519894051>.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p1208.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p1208.

<sup>81</sup> Pippa Norris, “It’s not just Trump. Authoritarian populism is rising across the West. Here’s why.” *The Washington Post*, 11 March 2016, available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2016/03/11/its-not-just-trump-authoritarian-populism-is-rising-across-the-west-heres-why/>.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*

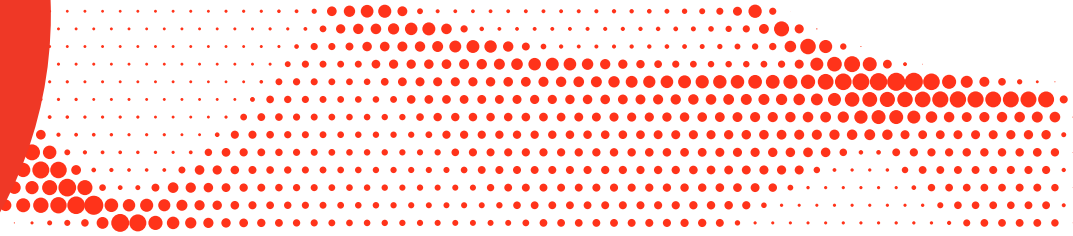
<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> Adam Taylor, “Germany may be European stalwart against authoritarian populism, survey suggests”, *The Washington Post*, 21 November 2016, available at: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/11/21/germany-may-be-european-stalwart-against-authoritarian-populism-survey-suggests>.

<sup>85</sup> Adam Taylor, “Germany may be European stalwart against authoritarian populism, survey suggests”, *The Washington Post*, 21 November 2016, available at:

<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/11/21/germany-may-be-european-stalwart-against-authoritarian-populism-survey-suggests>.

<sup>86</sup> J. Kurlantzick, “Asia’s Rising Populists Could Be More Dangerous to Democracy Than the West’s”, *World Politics Review*, 18 December 2017, available at: <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/insights/23842/asia-s-rising-populists-could-be-more-dangerous-to-democracy-than-the-west-s>.



in Asia can be traced back to 1997 in the aftermath of the Asian financial crisis. Relevant to note in the context of Asia would be the debate on “illiberal democracies” as defined by Fareed Zakaria.<sup>87</sup> These are “democratically elected regimes, often ones that have been re-elected or reaffirmed through referenda, are routinely ignoring constitutional limits on their power and depriving their citizens of basic rights and freedoms”.<sup>88</sup>

In the context of Europe, Giovanna Campani and Mojca Pajnik raised the question of whether populists are threats to democracy, because while confronting the European Union, populist forces also call for genuine representative democracy and present themselves as “true democrats” who articulate the people’s real needs and issues.<sup>89</sup> Significant in this discussion is the definition of populism according to Ernesto Laclau in light of the concept of hegemony that “populism can be the right or the left, presenting different constructions of the people competing in the aim of hegemony”.<sup>90</sup>

### **Post-Pandemic Prospects: Inequalities, Neoliberalism, and Authoritarianism**

One year on, the COVID-19 pandemic continues to wreak havoc on millions of lives and livelihoods around the world. As the virus has ravaged every continent on the planet, it has caused economic devastation, political instability, and a massive global humanitarian and health crisis for both developed and developing countries. Economies are shattered, millions have lost their jobs, and many have been thrown into unprecedentedly precarious economic conditions.

In the Philippines alone, almost ten million workers lost their jobs, and this number continues to increase.<sup>91</sup> Economic production and demand slowed down during the pandemic. This meant millions of work hours lost, businesses folding, and workers’ families experiencing anxiety over where to get their next meal. The Spanish Flu, which occurred one hundred years ago in 1918, lasted for two years and infected one fifth of the world population, killing between 70–100 million people. As the COVID-19 pandemic reaches its second year, discussions on how to speed up the end of the pandemic through vaccinations and how to overcome the devastation being felt during the pandemic are accelerating. According to Bello, this time the race to end the pandemic and the “Race to replace a dying neoliberalism” are intertwined.<sup>92</sup> Bello contends that there are three lines of thinking and possible scenarios in response to the devastation of the Covid-19 pandemic. The first is neoliberals, positing that these are extraordinary times, but that capitalist structures of production and consumption remain sound. The second is the search for a ‘new normal’ which involves redesigning the workplace, instituting stronger healthcare systems, and digitalization. However, Bello perceived that a third opportunity was created by the pandemic: the transformation of the whole economic, yet politically inadequate and ecologically unviable system. In the Global North, the alternative recovery proposal the Green New Deal—which proposes to address environmental devastation and achieve social goals, such as sustainable job creation and the reduction of income inequality—is gaining ground. Thus, the global Left may still offer a viable and consolidated alternative in the post-pandemic world.

If the strategy to end the pandemic is a vaccination drive aimed at attaining herd immunity, it is working for rich

<sup>87</sup> Zakaria, Fareed. “The Rise of Illiberal Democracy.” *Foreign Affairs* 76, no. 6 (1997): 22–43. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20048274>.

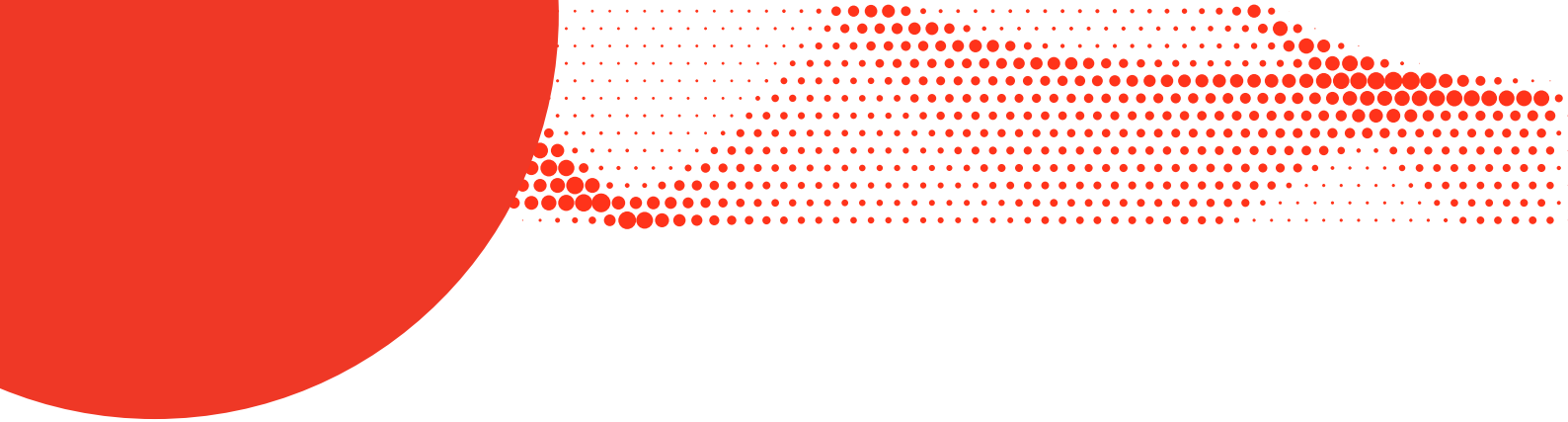
<sup>88</sup> G. Campani and M. Pajnik, “Democracy, post-democracy and the populist challenge”, *Understanding the Populist Shift: Othering in a Europe in Crisis*, G. Lazaridis and G. Campani (eds.), London: Routledge, 2017, pp. 179–96.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>91</sup> Ted Cordero, “PSA: 9.82M Filipinos laid off from March 2020 to March 2021 – PSA”, *GMA News*, 6 May 2021, available at: <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/money/economy/786448/psa-9-82m-filipinos-laid-off-from-march-2020-to-march-2021-psa/story/>.

<sup>92</sup> Bello Walden, “The race to replace a dying neoliberalism. The world’s prevailing socio-political models aren’t going to survive this pandemic. What’s going to replace them?” *Foreign Policy in Focus*, 13 May 2020, available at: <https://fpif.org/the-race-to-replace-a-dying-neoliberalism/>.



countries which bought the vast majority of COVID-19 vaccines. However, it is not working on a global scale. To state that access to vaccines is uneven and lopsided would be an understatement. The World Health Organization (WHO) reported that as of March 2021, “Global COVID vaccine inequality is becoming more grotesque every day”.<sup>93</sup> As of 6 May 2021, more than 1.23 billion vaccines have been administered and about 8.1 percent of the global population vaccinated.<sup>94</sup> However, people from high income countries account for the majority of the vaccinated and people are vaccinated about 25 times faster in high income countries when compared to those with the lowest incomes.<sup>95</sup> As of April 2021, more than 40 percent of vaccines went to rich countries, comprising about 11 percent of the global population, while just over one percent went to low-income countries. Inequality in vaccine access and distribution is real and is “economically and epidemiologically self-defeating”, according to the WHO.<sup>96</sup>

New COVID-19 variants are emerging in less vaccinated populations. Found mostly in low-income countries, new variants can threaten the health security of countries with more vaccinations. As Dr Tedros, WHO Secretary-General states, “as long as the virus continues to circulate anywhere, people will continue to die, trade and travel will continue to be disrupted, and the economic recovery will be further delayed”.<sup>97</sup> The development of new vaccines to counter the endless cycle of new variants generated by of vaccine inequality will increase the overall cost of recovery from COVID-19 for both high- and low-income countries.

Among the major stumbling blocks of shoring up the supply of COVID-19 vaccines are patents which prevent the sharing of vaccine technology with developing countries. In a recent reversal of policy, US President Joe Biden announced that he will support the waiving of intellectual property rights on COVID-19 vaccines and will support negotiations on COVID-19 vaccine-sharing with the World Trade Organization (WTO).<sup>98</sup> The WTO’s Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement includes compulsory licenses for medicine exports, however the agreement<sup>99</sup> in relation to public health contains the proviso that intellectual property rights can be waived during a global health crisis, which the COVID-19 pandemic qualifies as.<sup>100</sup> To protect their pharmaceutical companies, the US, EU, Japan, Brazil, Australia, Canada, UK, Switzerland, and Norway have initially blocked the proposal for a COVID-19 vaccine TRIPS waiver for developing countries. However, proponents of the waiver have argued that most of the COVID-19 vaccine development and research comes from public funds and not from the private funding of pharmaceutical companies. In the race to save lives in this pandemic, everyone is in the same storm but in different boats.

The inequalities highlighted by the pandemic—such as the lack of vaccine equity and the uneven impact of suffering or social protection—raises important questions about the neoliberal global economic order and the rise of right-wing authoritarian populist leaders. Patent rules and intellectual property rights under the neoliberal rules of the

<sup>93</sup> See Global COVID vaccine inequality 'becoming more grotesque every day,' WHO warns | Euronews.

<sup>94</sup> Bloomberg Vaccine Tracker. “More than 1.29 Billion Shots Given: Covid-19 Tracker”, Bloomberg.com, May 9, 2021. More Than 1.29 Billion Shots Given: Covid-19 Vaccine Tracker (bloomberg.com)

<sup>95</sup> Randall, Ted. “Prognosis: The World’s Wealthiest Countries Are Getting Vaccinated 25 Times Faster”, Bloomberg.com, April 9, 2021. World’s Wealthiest Countries Are Getting Covid Vaccinated 2,400% Times Faster - Bloomberg

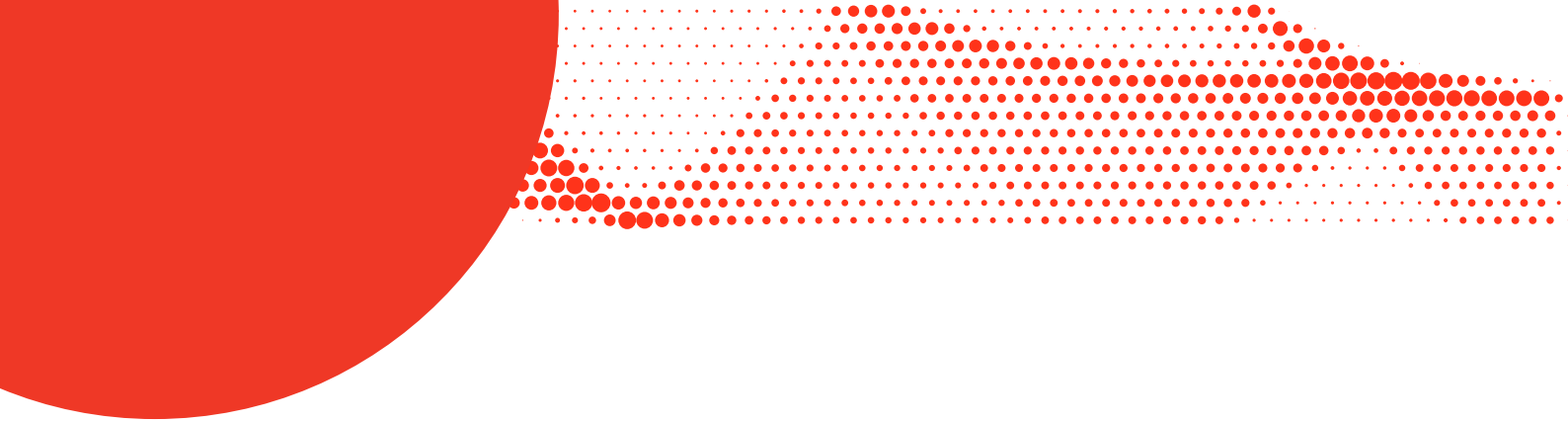
<sup>96</sup> Euronews with AFP, “Global COVID vaccine inequality ‘becoming more grotesque every day,’ WHO warns”, Euronews, 22 March 2021, available at: <https://www.euronews.com/2021/03/22/global-covid-vaccine-inequality-becoming-more-grotesque-every-day-who-warns>.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Andrea Shalal, Jeff Mason, and David Lawder, “US Reverses stance, backs giving poorer countries access to COVID vaccine patents”, Reuters, 5 May 2021, available at: <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/biden-says-plans-back-wto-waiver-vaccines-2021-05-05/>.

<sup>99</sup> World Trade Organization, “Trips and Public Health”, undated, available at: [https://www.wto.org/english/tratop\\_e/trips\\_e/pharmpatent\\_e.htm](https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/trips_e/pharmpatent_e.htm).

<sup>100</sup> Médecins Sans Frontières, “WTO COVID-19 TRIPS waiver proposal”, available at: [https://msfaccess.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/MSF-AC\\_COVID\\_IP\\_TRIPSWaiverMythsRealities\\_Dec2020.pdf](https://msfaccess.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/MSF-AC_COVID_IP_TRIPSWaiverMythsRealities_Dec2020.pdf).



WTO continue to hinder the transfer of technology and knowledge to developing countries, preventing them from being able to manufacture COVID-19 vaccines on their own. India, as a case in point, is known as the “pharmacy of the world”<sup>101</sup> but due to its commitment to export most of its vaccine production to the developed world, is still battling rising COVID-19 infections and shortages in vaccine supply. Populist authoritarian leadership has not transformed the unequal neoliberal structures on a national level in India, Brazil, or the Philippines, even though populist authoritarian politicians won elections in these countries with promises of change. Duterte’s criticisms of the West only led him to an unequal relationship with another superpower, China, without a transformation of the structural inequalities present in neoliberal economic policies.

At the start of the pandemic, many predicted that even in a post-pandemic world, things would never be the same again. The sheer enormity of the global health crisis exposed in sharp relief issues of economic and social inequality, the apocalyptic impact of human activity on the environment, and the importance of community solidarity over material consumption globally. As countries race towards a fourth industrial revolution, technological or digital inequalities have also emerged. A post-pandemic future raises questions about the widening of global inequality and the legitimacy of neoliberal policies which have decimated global public health in exchange for profits and the glorification of the free market.

## **Conclusion**

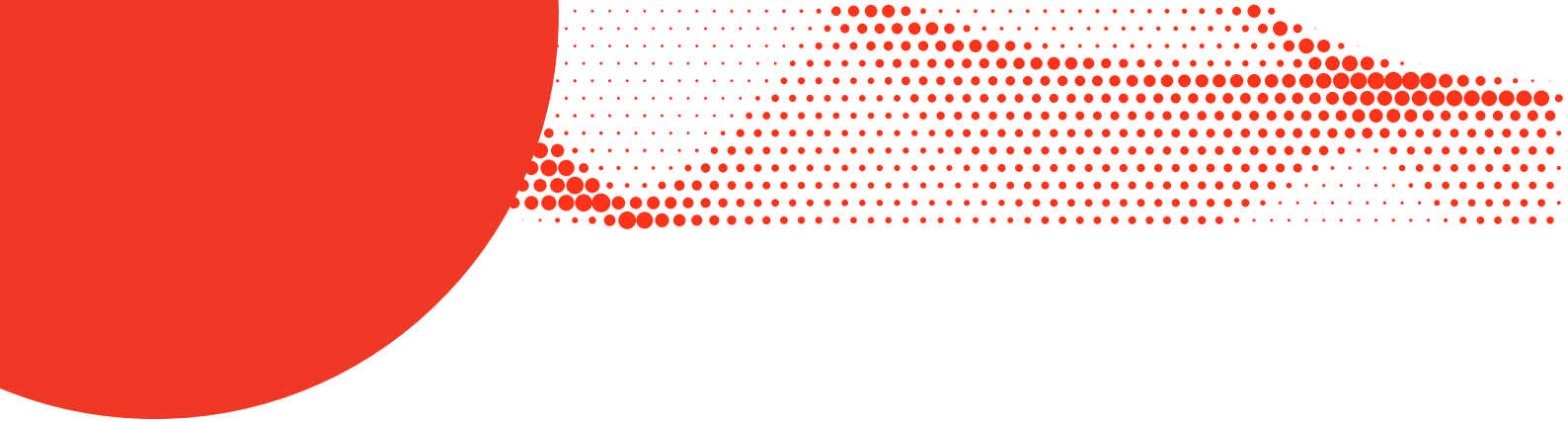
More than one year into this global crisis, proposals long suggested by the Left and progressive movements have become more legitimate and the reasons for them more apparent. Early in the pandemic, people learned the deadly inescapable effects of something as small and invisible to the eye as a virus. They learned that COVID-19 does not discriminate and infects regardless of wealth, power, and material possessions.

However, whilst everyone is ravaged by the same storm, not everyone is in the same boat. Some boats have more social protection than others. The uneven development of countries has subjected people in the developing world to immense suffering, without proper healthcare and without work. The pandemic has shown the stark inequalities present in life under neoliberal economic policies, which are predicted to worsen as soon as the worst of the health crisis is over.

Among the important lessons learnt from this harrowing experience are that: (a) neoliberal economic policies, such as privatization of healthcare, cannot address a public health crisis of this magnitude; (b) neoliberal policies do not come out of thin air but are intentionally driven by social forces with the ideological interest of subsuming the social dimension of the economy to the dominance of the market and capital interests; and (3) populist authoritarian governments are not effective in combating the pandemic because they demobilize people’s participation in pandemic response in their communities.

The curtailing of democratic freedoms in Duterte’s COVID-19 response constrains innovative and participative programs that could combat the crisis at the community level. Vibrant local and community-based solidarity and support during the pandemic can help to establish global solidarity. The phenomenon of community pantries in the Philippines and the global call for vaccine equity are examples of movements towards people-to-people solidarity. Democratic governments whose ears are tuned to their peoples’ voices can better respond to these

<sup>101</sup> Aashish Chandorkar, “When the Pharmacy of the World Needs Prescriptions Itself”, Bloomberg, 14 April 2021, available at: <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-04-13/india-s-double-challenge-the-pharmacy-of-the-world-needs-prescriptions-its>.



calls and lead the efforts towards building a more equitable post-pandemic world. In the case of the Philippines, the Duterte government has failed the test of its democratic resilience during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Duterte's brash brand of leadership contributes to the current polarization of the country's political and civil society. Culturally, Duterte has upended long-held Filipino values and belief in solidarity, community, and respect. Duterte has circumvented liberal policies, violated human rights, and hindered women's empowerment, all of which Filipinos have come to embrace over the last 40 years. Family ties and friendships have become strained over Duterte's polarizing and hateful stances, his poisonous statements against his critics, his brutal and militarized policies, such as the killings of drug addicts and suspected communists, and his unconstitutional restrictions on human rights and other freedoms. Duterte's mode of governance and policy responses during the COVID-19 pandemic exposed his authoritarian leadership and fascist tendencies. These were expressed through the narrowing of freedoms and democratic spaces for people's civil, political, and human rights, and the demobilization of people's participation in determining the future of their communities.

Duterte's popularity remained intact during the pandemic due to the equation of his strong-arm pandemic response with decisive leadership, positioning him as someone who can get things done, and done quickly. However, Duterte's brand of leadership cannot compensate for the shortage of vaccines for developing countries like the Philippines and the inequality of global vaccine distribution. Duterte's populist authoritarian leadership, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, can be linked to the global rise of far-right ideas and values, such as nationalism, xenophobia, misogyny, and racism as seen both in the West and elsewhere. Whilst Duterte is a product of Philippine political economic development, his authoritarian yet populist leadership echoes a global challenge to neoliberal globalization which has created a hegemonic crisis of liberal democratic structures.

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## WORKERS FIRST: The Nagkaisa Labor Coalition's COVID-19 Response in the Philippines

By: Benjamin Velasco

Under the banner of the common struggle against military dictatorships and authoritarian populists, Nagkaisa was able to forge unity not just among local groups but also with international organizations. In this, the defense of civil liberties and democratic rights is bound up with the protection of labor rights and workers' interests.



Members of labor groups affiliated to Nagkaisa raise the three-finger salute in a solidarity action for the people of Burma/Myanmar. 11 February 2021. (Photo: Yuen Abana of Partido Manggagawa)

*This paper examines the demands, activities, tactics, and alliances forged by the Nagkaisa (United) Labor Coalition as Duterte's authoritarian COVID-19 response led to an unprecedented economic crisis in the Philippines. The work of Nagkaisa has been among the most successful efforts to unite organized labor in the last decade. The coalition pushed for a response that prioritized workers' rights and campaigned to forward the narrative that economic recovery is dependent on the protection of the labor sector. Nagkaisa's advocacy met only marginal success in terms of overturning government policies however, and the real test is in organizing the revival of workers' activism. Nagkaisa's efforts demonstrate the importance of forging working-class unity in the fight for labor rights and welfare in exceedingly difficult circumstances and, furthermore, reveal the imperative for international solidarity in the fight against the global turn to authoritarianism.*



## Introduction

In 2019, in a bid to control the spread of the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) in the Philippines, the government of President Rodrigo Duterte imposed one of the longest and strictest lockdowns globally. While it may have helped curtail community transmission, the closure of businesses and restrictions on mobility shut down a large section of the economy, including the informal sector. The inevitable result was a massive rise in unemployment and severe economic hardship. While everyone was affected by the COVID-19 lockdowns, the impact was felt disproportionately by workers, the poor, the working class, and women working in both formal and informal economies.

Prior to the pandemic and even amid a decade and a half of economic growth and a rise in labor productivity, the working class was already being squeezed by wage stagnation. The spread of precarious employment, especially in the formal economy, was a key factor in depressing wages and benefits for workers. Deficits in decent work pushed a segment of the working class who had enough skills and savings to migrate in search of work. Thus, the hardships brought about by the lockdown were keenly felt in working class areas and poor communities.

Still, the COVID-19 pandemic by itself is not to blame for immiserating a large swathe of the population. Similarly-positioned countries in Southeast Asia, such as Vietnam, successfully managed to control the pandemic without their economies taking a severe hit from state-imposed lockdowns.<sup>1</sup> Thus, specific policy responses to the pandemic are a key factor in the divergent outcomes for societies and economies in Southeast Asia and elsewhere.

For example, the scale of infections and deaths in the Philippines and Indonesia are comparable and both countries suffered from economic recession due to lockdowns.<sup>2</sup> A particularly authoritarian response to the pandemic in the Philippines was the direct cause of the economic hardship of the working class. The prestigious Lancet medical journal described the response in the Philippines and elsewhere as “medical populism” for forgoing a scientific public health response to the COVID-19 pandemic and instead prioritizing a law and order response which led to serious cases of abuse of power and the repression of civil liberties.<sup>3</sup>

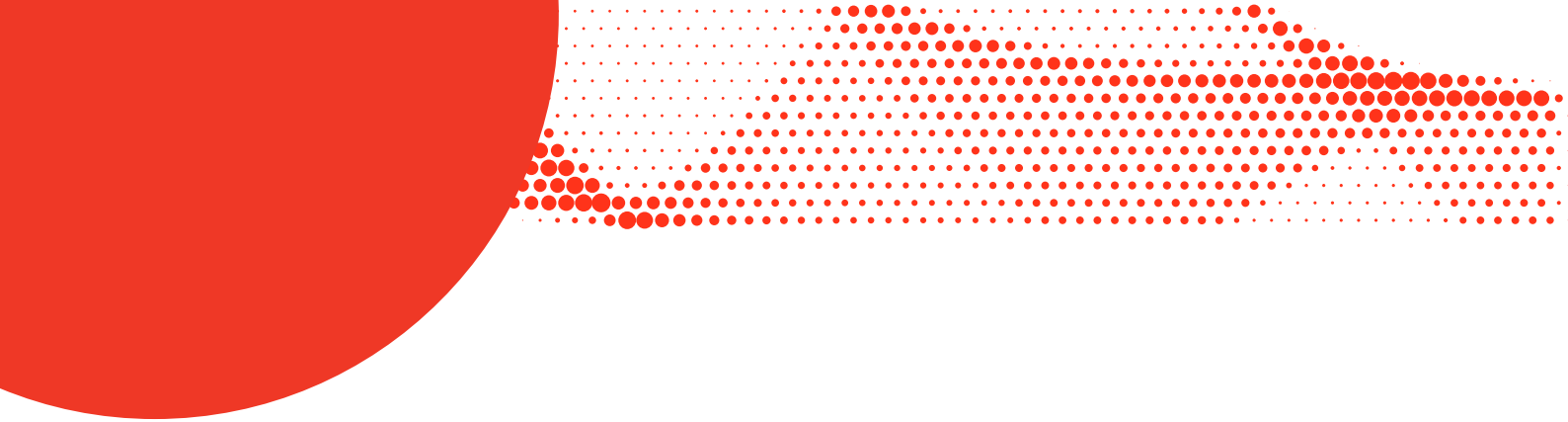
In the face of what amounts to an economic crisis, social movements in the Philippines—and the labor movement in particular—advocated for an adequate response that takes as its starting point the rights and welfare of the vulnerable in society. The Nagkaisa Labor Coalition created campaigns that centered on a ‘workers first’ agenda for responding to and recovering from the impacts of the pandemic.

Nagkaisa is arguably the most successful labor unionization project in recent Philippine history. Formed in 2012, it unites some 40 labor groups and institutions including the major labor organizations. In the last five years, Nagkaisa was primarily active in pushing for restrictions on non-standard employment among workers. In his 2016 campaign for the presidency, Duterte infamously promised to abolish contractualization or endo, the local term for non-standard employment. The Nagkaisa Labor Coalition’s profile was raised by challenging the administration on its promise to end endo. The experience strengthened the coalition, preparing it for developing its advocacy in

<sup>1</sup>Y. N. Lee, “This is Asia’s top-performing economy in the Covid pandemic — it’s not China”, CNBC, 27 January 2021, available at: <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/28/vietnam-is-asias-top-performing-economy-in-2020-amid-covid-pandemic.html>.

<sup>2</sup>C. Gonzales, “PH had highest new COVID-19 cases in Southeast Asia during surge — ex DOH chief” Inquirer.net, 8 May 2021, available at: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1429072/ph-had-highest-new-covid-19-cases-in-southeast-asia-during-surge-ex-doh-chief>

<sup>3</sup>G. K. Cabico, “‘Medical populism’ puts Philippines at 66th of 91 nations in COVID-19 suppression”, Philstar, 23 September 2020, available at: <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/09/23/2044587/medical-populism-puts-philippines-66th-91-nations-covid-19-suppression>.



the time of COVID-19.

Still, Nagkaisa faced different and difficult terrain when organizing advocacy and resistance in the midst of a protracted lockdown and rising authoritarianism. Thus, in addition to the demands and agenda that Nagkaisa proposed, it is worthwhile to interrogate the alliances and tactics that the coalition engaged in while navigating the changing landscape of politics during the pandemic. Finally, given the global turn to authoritarianism, it is relevant to study the role played by international solidarity in Nagkaisa's response.

### **Framework and Methodology**

To understand the dynamics of Nagkaisa's advocacy for a 'workers first' response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the concepts of social movement unionism and the power resources approach will be used as investigative lenses. These two contemporary frameworks have proven useful in understanding and conceptualizing union renewal. While the two concepts are distinct, there are overlaps in the ideas and actions proposed by advocates of social movement unionism and the power resources approach.

Social movement unionism starts from an analysis of the predicaments facing unions. It is generally accepted that participation in unions and other workers' organizations has declined, as they face difficulties due to workplace changes and economic shifts under neoliberal globalization. Therefore, union decline has been attributed to both the external challenge of globalization and an internal inability to adapt to such changes. In order for the revitalization of unions to take place, it is posited that they need to generate strategic leverage against external challenges and to remodel organizational capacity to better respond to internal weaknesses.<sup>4</sup>

A union's strategic leverage is described as the degree of its influence outside of its own structure and organization. Factors affecting a union's strategic leverage include: the structure of industries, employers' attitudes towards unions, labor markets, the nature of technology and work organization, labor law and social legislation, and the state of regulation of labor policy and availability of networks.<sup>5</sup>

Meanwhile, organizational capacity concerns a union's ability to transform intention into organizational action. Among the important aspects that are relevant to organizational capacity are union structure, elected officers, staff, volunteer positions, and a human resources system.<sup>6</sup>

These propositions of social movement unionism correspond with a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis of unions. An examination of a union's strategic leverage reveals opportunities that must be maximized and threats that must be mitigated. A study of a union's organizational capacity exposes the strengths which should be maximized and the weaknesses that should be remedied as soon as possible.

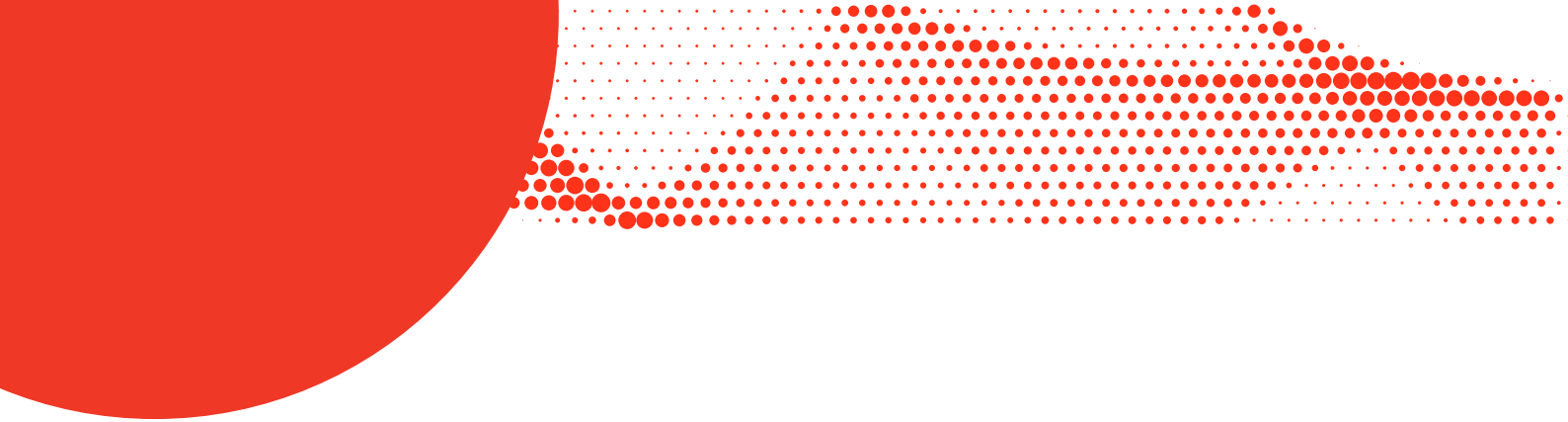
According to advocates of social movement unionism, there are two models of unionism: servicing and organizing.<sup>7</sup> A servicing union is focused on delivering services to its existing members. This type of union is criticized as being

<sup>4</sup>M. E. Aganon et al., *Revitalizing Philippine Unions: Potentials and Constraints to Social Movement Unionism* (Friedrich Ebert Stiftung and UP SOLAIR, 2008).

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.



too narrow in scope as it limits union activities to the provision of benefits to members. A narrow servicing union leads to passive members who remain beneficiaries of their union without agency.

In contrast, an organizing union emphasizes membership participation in all aspects of union life and because of this, members become active within it. They are empowered and exercise agency as unionists. Furthermore, the perspective of an organizing union is expansive as it seeks to recruit and expand its membership, even as it seeks community allies outside of its ranks.

Social movement unionism asserts that unions which remain servicing ones fail at confronting the challenges of globalization and thus must transform into organizing unions to aggressively overcome the constraints of globalization. While a combative union can be both a servicing and organizing union, it cannot be solely a servicing one.

An organizing union is able to fully exploit both its strategic leverage and organizational capacity. Proponents of social movement unionism insist that this can be done in a variety of ways. Some important ways include: increasing membership involvement and activism; developing union democracy; instilling an organizing orientation, both within the workplace and beyond; forging networks with groups inside and outside of the union movement; fostering the spirit of solidarity and internationalism among workers; and defining an expansive union identity and purpose.

Revitalizing the union starts with refining the identity and purpose of the organization. The membership and leadership must be motivated by the ideal and vision of being part of a social movement, not just a local union. The narrowness of local unions comes from a business union approach. In business unionism, the union identity and purpose are limited to job control within a particular workplace. In contrast, the social movement union's identity and purpose extends to concerns about the whole working class, including its different sections.

The power resources approach comes from the realization that unions are not simply victims of external forces like globalization or the shift from manufacturing to services. Instead, unions have the opportunity to make strategic choices. According to Stefan Schmalz, Carmen Ludwig, and Edward Webster, a union can "defend its interests by collective mobilization of power resources".<sup>8</sup> The definition of power is based upon Max Weber's assertion that power is "the probability that one actor within a social relationship will be in a position to carry out his own will despite resistance".<sup>9</sup>

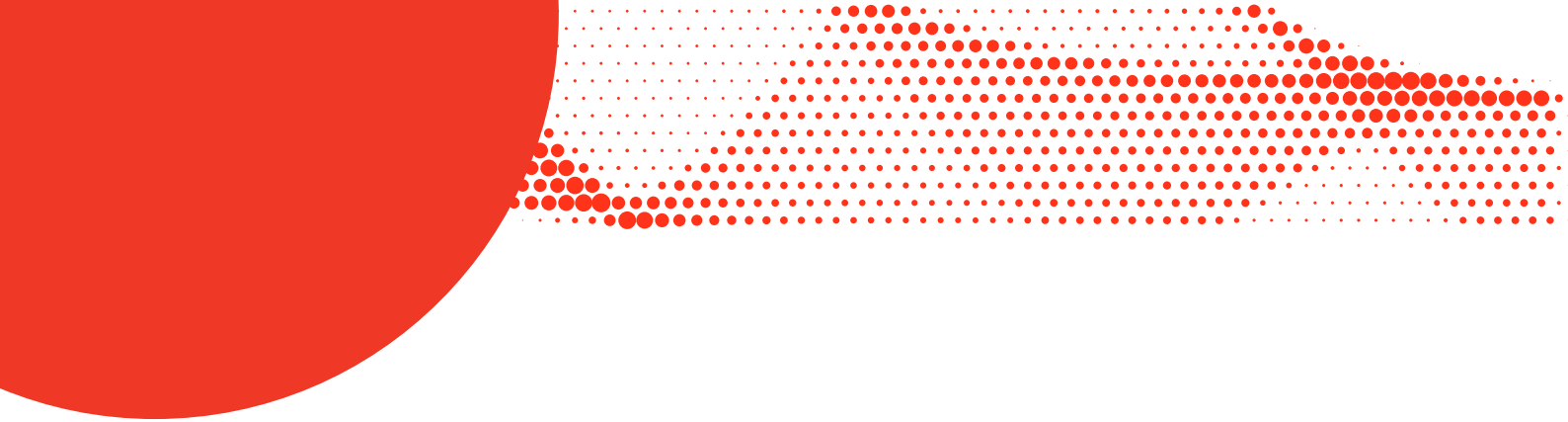
The key question, then, is clear. What are the power resources available for unions with the goal of renewal? Four kinds of power resources for unions are posited: structural power, associational power, institutional power, and societal power.

Structural power refers to the leverage created by the workers' position in the production process, or in the supply chain. Workers can have structural power even without collective representation such as a union or a formal organization. Workers can also create workplace bargaining power by disrupting work at the point of production.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>8</sup>S. Schmalz, C. Ludwig, and E. Webster, "The Power Resources Approach: Developments and Challenges", *Global Labour Journal*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2018, p. 113, available at <https://mulpress.mcmaster.ca/globallabour/article/view/3569/3157>.

<sup>9</sup>M. Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology* (New York: Bedminster Press, 1968), p. 53.

<sup>10</sup>Schmalz, Ludwig, and Webster, "The Power Resources Approach".



Associational power arises from the ability of workers to organize collective representation through trade unions, workers' associations, workers' councils, and labor parties. The key indicator of associational power is union membership and union density. However, associational power is not just contingent on quantity but also on quality, such as the union's material and human resources, organizational efficiency, member participation, and internal cohesion. These categories are reminiscent of the organizational capacity proposed in social movement unionism.<sup>11</sup>

Meanwhile, institutional power is a result of previous victorious struggles on the basis of strong structural and associational power.<sup>12</sup> This is expressed in institutional protection, rules, and processes. Institutional power has a two-fold nature: it gives workers their rights but also restricts their power to act. Still, rights and protections that are institutionalized have a long-term and lasting impact. Thus, despite employers' sharp turn to both union avoidance and union busting since the advent of globalization, freedom of association is recognized nationally and internationally as a legacy of institutional power.

Finally, societal power arises from coalitions and alliances by workers with other sectors and can come from coalitional power or the ability to build networks with others.<sup>13</sup> Thus the union movement can forge connections with other social movements like environmental groups, women's networks, NGOs, student groups, and churches. Another source of societal power is discursive power. This refers to the ability of unions to favorably influence public opinion. Hegemony is a term that is synonymous with discursive power.

This paper argues that the activities, advocacies, and campaigns of Nagkaisa during the COVID-19 pandemic show elements of both social movement unionism and the power resources approach.

The data for this study was gathered from an analysis of documents, interviews with key informants, and participant observation. The documents examined include internal sources from Nagkaisa, such as minutes, statements, papers, and press releases. Other documents include external sources such as news stories about Nagkaisa's activities. Four key sources were interviewed for this project: Josua Mata, Rene Magtubo, Wilson Fortaleza, and Judy Miranda. All of them are convenors of Nagkaisa. The author assisted Nagkaisa and some of its constituent groups in a personal but limited capacity during the period covered by the study. Thus, the author was able to observe first-hand the activities of Nagkaisa as it responded to the challenges posed by the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns. The analysis of documents, interviews with key sources, and participant observation provided a direction for the data and findings of the study.

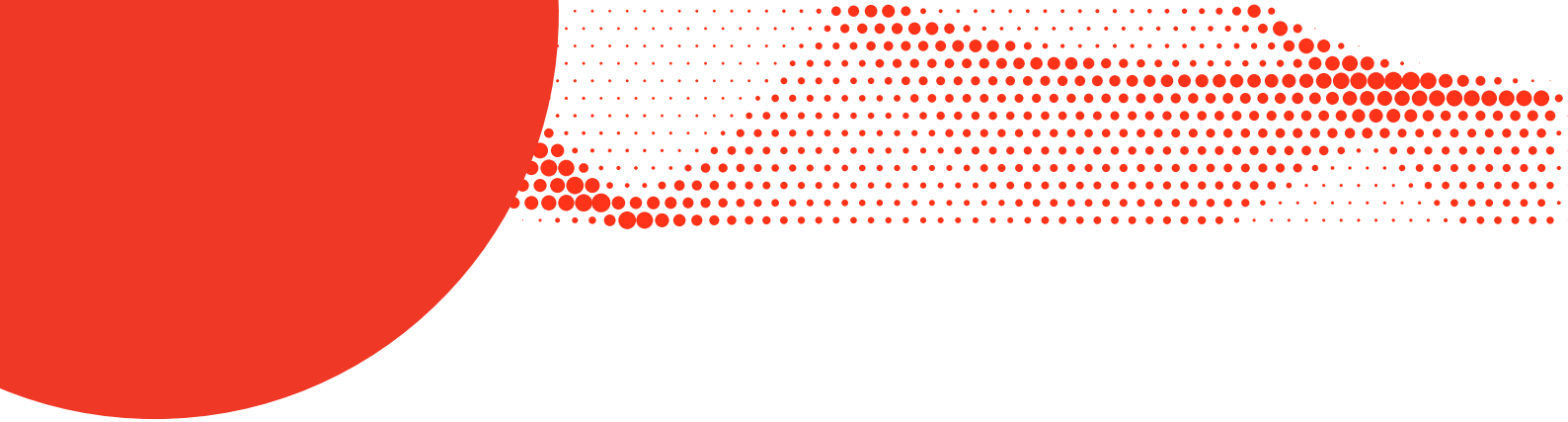
### **Movement against Duterte's Authoritarian Response to COVID-19**

Even before he assumed office in 2016, critics of Duterte had already warned of the threat to liberal democratic governance posed by his authoritarian bent. In fact, Duterte was particularly open that under his administration the war on drugs would be waged through violent means. Indeed, a wave of killings of alleged addicts started as soon as the 2016 elections were concluded, before Duterte formally assumed office.

<sup>11</sup>ibid.

<sup>12</sup>ibid.

<sup>13</sup>Schmalz, Ludwig, and Webster, "The Power Resources Approach".



Concurrently, Duterte made populist promises, the most prominent of which was his pledge to the labor sector to abolish contractualization. Early in his administration, he declared himself a socialist, appointed five nominees from the outlawed Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP) to his cabinet, and maintained friendly relations with leftist parliamentary deputies from the Makabayan bloc of party-list groups.

However, as Duterte's rule unfolded, his authoritarian tendencies clearly dominated and his alleged populism was exposed once challenged. He vetoed the proposed Security of Tenure Act that would have restricted employers' ability to engage in non-standard employment. The veto was at the behest of united capitalist groups. Peace talks with the CPP later collapsed. Duterte ruled with an iron fist, silencing his vocal critics such as Senator Leila de Lima and Supreme Court chief Maria Lourdes Sereno. On the southern island of Mindanao, martial law was imposed for a year and a half. A slew of repressive legislative proposals like re-imposing the death penalty and lowering the age of criminal liability were tabled, however they did not find success in parliament. While more than 12,000 deaths have been documented as a result of the war on drugs, Human Rights Watch believes the number of deaths is significantly higher.<sup>14</sup>

The Duterte administration's perspective that the war on drugs is a question of law and order instead of a public health concern was visible in the government's response to COVID-19. However, despite early calls to ban flights from China once the first case was detected in the country, the state response was delayed by a month. One week after the first case of confirmed local transmission, the government went into overdrive and ordered the first national lockdown, which was imposed on 15 March 2020. The police and the military were widely deployed to implement severe restrictions on mobility and impose the 'stay at home' protocol. The COVID-19 task force appointed by Duterte was headed and populated by retired generals and did not include a single epidemiologist.

People who were found violating quarantine rules were arrested. However, in a glaring double standard in the application of the lockdown rules, so-called VIPs who flagrantly transgressed quarantine rules, an incumbent senator, the presidential spokesperson, and a pro-administration social media influencer all escaped punishment. The contrast was so outrageous that a group of prominent business owners wrote a public letter condemning the double standard.

It was during the height of the lockdown—with civil liberties effectively suspended and the right to peaceful assembly on the streets banned on the pretext of social distancing—that the Duterte administration clamped down harder on political rivals. The media network ABS-CBN was shut down by the non-renewal of its operating license. Vocal government critic Maria Ressa from the online news outlet Rappler was arrested for cyber libel and then released on bail. Several protests were dispersed, protesters were arrested, and a new more draconian anti-terrorism law was enacted.

All of these incidents made obvious Duterte's authoritarian governance both in general and in response to the pandemic in particular. It was precisely the law and order framework of the response that led to the severe and extended lockdown and, indirectly, to the failure to contain the pandemic. The cost of the governments' inept response was a deep economic recession and the consequent impoverishment of the working class. In contrast, neighboring countries such as Vietnam, whose initial response to COVID-19 was founded on a public health paradigm, escaped the worst economic impacts of the pandemic.

<sup>14</sup>"Philippines: Duterte's 'Drug War' Claims 12,000+ Lives", Human Rights Watch, 18 January 2018, available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2018/01/18/philippines-dutertes-drug-war-claims-12000-lives>.



## Sufficient Aid for All

The strict lockdown, initially affecting Metro Manila, then the rest of the main island of Luzon, and finally the whole of the country, led to losses of paid formal and informal work for a significant proportion of the working class. Essential workers in the healthcare sector and food industries continued to go to their workplaces. A section of workers transitioned to working at home. The levers of government bureaucracy remained operational either in frontline services or working from home. The official number of unemployed at the height of the lockdown during the second quarter of 2020 was 7.3 million.<sup>15</sup> This is clearly an underestimation given the limited definition of who is officially unemployed. However, this figure shows the grave situation of the labor market at that time.

Immediately after the government declared the first lockdown in the middle of March, Nagkaisa proposed that aid must be provided to affected workers by both employers and the government. Nagkaisa asked that employers provide paid leave to workers who were furloughed due to mobility restrictions. Concurrently, the group called on the government to provide a PHP 10,000 monthly subsidy or the prevailing minimum wage—whichever was higher—to workers who lost their jobs for the duration of the lockdown.

Nagkaisa launched a high-profile campaign around these demands, summarized by the phrase “ayudang sapat para sa lahat” or “sufficient assistance for all”. The group issued statements to the media and sought out representatives in Congress who could be allies to Nagkaisa’s demands. Nagkaisa held dialogues with Senator Risa Hontiveros and Representative Stella Quimbo. While several solons<sup>16</sup> had proposed bills in the House of Representatives for a host of fiscal measures in response to the pandemic, Quimbo was the only one who openly discussed Nagkaisa’s proposals.

The government turned a deaf ear to calls by Nagkaisa and other progressive groups. Instead of mandating employers to aid their workers who were temporarily out of work, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) merely encouraged them to grant assistance. However, most employers simply left their workers to fend for themselves because of their ‘no work, no pay’ principle. A number of employers advanced bonuses owed to workers, such as the ‘thirteenth month pay’,<sup>17</sup> which is usually paid out in December in time for Christmas. Some employers provided aid in cash or kind to their employees. Examples of participating companies are big conglomerates like Ayala Corporation, Jollibee, Megaworld, and Phinma.<sup>18</sup> Employers also allowed workers to utilize paid leave which quickly ran out as the original two-week lockdown was repeatedly extended. Very few employers provided paid leave for their workers, among the exceptions was Philip Morris Fortune Tobacco Corporation, which is a large profitable company with a strong union.

DOLE and later the Social Security System (SSS) implemented a targeted aid distribution program for formally employed workers displaced by the lockdown. The beneficiaries were supposed to be workers in micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) who were on forced leave. DOLE’s COVID-19 Adjustment Measures Program (CAMP) provided a one-time PHP 5,000 grant to beneficiaries. The number of beneficiaries was limited to 1.4

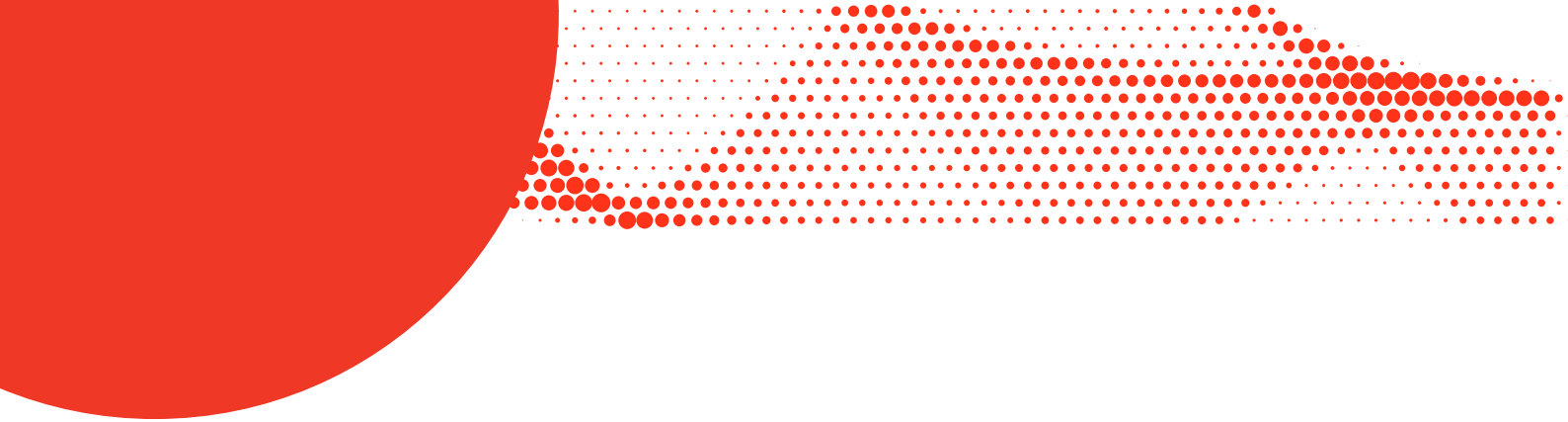
<sup>15</sup>R. Rivas, “PH unemployment at all-time high with 7.3 million jobless in April 2020”, Rappler, 5 June 2020, available at: <https://www.rappler.com/business/unemployment-rate-philippines-april-2020>.

<sup>16</sup>The term commonly used for lawmakers in the Philippines.

<sup>17</sup>This is a legally mandated benefit for workers, regardless of status, who have completed at least one month of work in a year.

<sup>18</sup>“LIST: Aid from Philippine companies during coronavirus pandemic”, Rappler, 23 March 2020, available at: <https://www.rappler.com/business/255591-aid-philippine-companies-coronavirus-pandemic/>.





million formally-employed workers.<sup>19</sup> The program generated a lot of complaints as only a minority of furloughed workers received assistance. The system was also open to abuse and arbitrariness as employers were given the right to apply on behalf of their workers and DOLE had the discretion to approve beneficiaries. According to Rene Magtubo, in at least one instance, the owner of a restaurant in the industrial area of Cavite forced his workers to fork over the CAMP benefits that they received. When some of them filed complaints with the help of the Labor Party, or Partido Manggagawa (PM), the employer promptly fired them. A case for illegal dismissal is pending against the employer.

In response to widespread complaints of a lack of assistance, the government arranged a second round of aid for formally-employed workers called the Small Business Wage Subsidy (SBWS). This time, the beneficiaries were identified through the list of employees registered with the SSS. With a bigger budget of PHP 16.4 billion, more workers were supposed to benefit, however it still fell short of reaching all the workers who had been placed on forced leave. Additionally,, the amount given to each worker was larger than PHP 5,000 but in no case exceeded the limit of PHP 8,000. Some 2.1 million SBWS beneficiaries were given two months' salary worth of subsidies.<sup>20</sup>

Similarly, the government rolled out an aid program for the informal sector called the Special Amelioration Program (SAP) which was designed to provide a PHP 5,000 cash grant to 16 million families. The program was supposed to target the poorest of the poor. Payment was made in two tranches, distributed through a list provided by the Department of Social Welfare and Development in coordination with local governments.

The distribution of SAP was marred by bureaucratic inefficiency and widespread abuse. The list of beneficiaries was subject to political discretion. Local government organizations were stretched to breaking point through having to provide services for a large number of beneficiaries. Long lines of people waiting in the sweltering heat of summer became commonplace. In a number of incidents, distribution was so inept that health protocols, such as social distancing, were not observed.

Nagkaisa had foreseen such an issue and had called for a PHP 10,000 universal subsidy to be granted to all workers, formal and informal, who were affected by the lockdown. The group argued that a universal, rather than a targeted system of aid provision would eliminate discretion, abuse, and gridlock.

However, the government's finance managers were so concerned with a ballooning deficit that they would not approve universal aid. The government's misguided frugality resulted in mass suffering. As the lockdown continued, the number of people experiencing hunger ballooned from 4.2 million people reporting hunger in the second quarter of 2020<sup>21</sup> to 7.6 million by the end of the year.<sup>22</sup> Ironically, this was despite a decrease in the number of officially unemployed workers from 7.3 million at the height of the lockdown to 4.5 million by the end of the year.<sup>23</sup> A number of factors can explain this ominous trend, one being that the recovery in documented employment

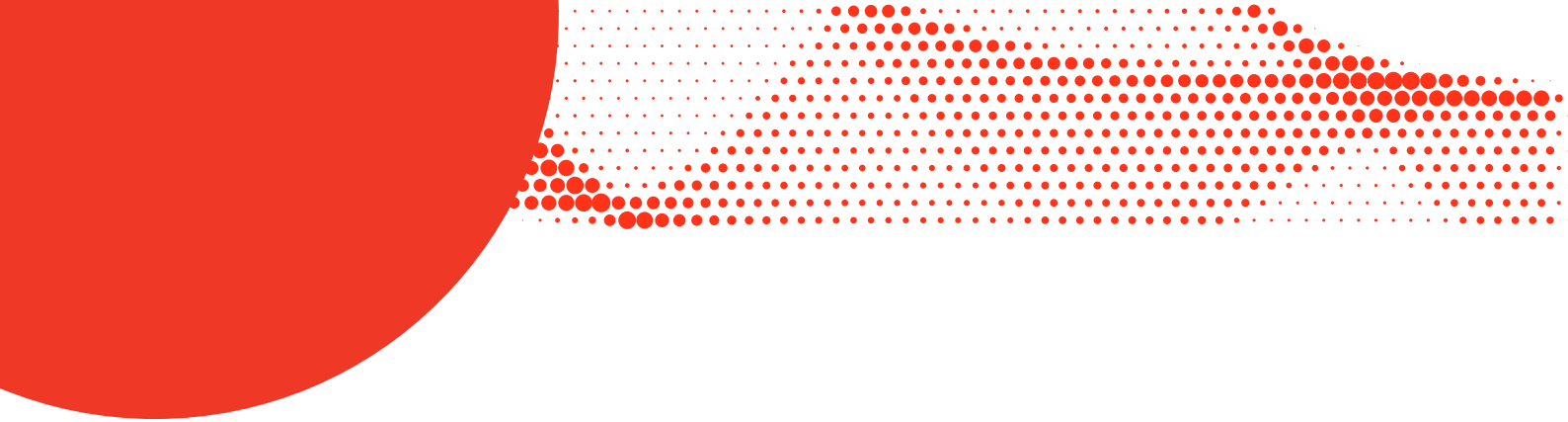
<sup>19</sup>"Formal workers have until December 11 to apply for govt. assistance — DOLE", CNN Philippines, 10 December 2020, available at: <https://www.cnn.ph/news/2020/12/10/dole-camp-application-deadline.html>.

<sup>20</sup>Department of Finance, Republic of the Philippines, "DOF releases P16.4-B subsidies to 2.1-M SBWS beneficiary-workers", 17 May 2020, available at: <https://www.dof.gov.ph/dof-releases-p16-4-b-subsidies-to-2-1-m-sbws-beneficiary-workers/>.

<sup>21</sup>"SWS survey reveals 4.2 million families suffered involuntary hunger amid COVID-19 pandemic", CNN Philippines, 22 May 2020, available at: <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/5/22/sws-survey-four-million-families-involuntary-hunger-covid-pandemic.html>.

<sup>22</sup>K. Aguilar, "7.6 million families hungry in past 3 months, highest hunger rate since 2014 — SWS", Inquirer.net, 27 September 2020, available at: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1340772/7-6-million-families-hungry-sets-phs-highest-hunger-incidence-since-2014-sws>.

<sup>23</sup>B. O. de Vera, "4.5 million Pinoy jobless in 2020", Inquirer.net, 4 December 2020, available at: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1367928/4-5m-pinoy-jobless-in-2020>.



was on the basis of people shifting from formal to more vulnerable informal employment. After months of forced leave, a large number of people also dropped out of the workforce entirely. Inflation also worsened as supply chains were disrupted by mobility restrictions and by a series of strong typhoons in the latter half of 2020. Finally, the increase in hunger was also an outcome of insufficient and unimaginative aid provision by the government. Nagkaisa's demand for sufficient universal aid could have resulted in a different outcome.

### **A Safe Return to Work**

Complementing Nagkaisa's demand for sufficient aid for all was the call for a safe return to work. By the second half of 2020, employers' demands for the recovery of the economy and the re-opening of businesses became stronger. No doubt they were concerned that the risk of financial loss was greater than the risk of a surge in COVID-19 infections.

In a statement released for May Day in 2020, the PM argued that "Workers returning to their jobs [is] key to restarting the economy. But the government and capitalists are more concerned with a return on investments and less about the safety of workers. Unfortunately, even workers are tempted to risk their health and safety rather than face hunger due to joblessness".<sup>24</sup>

The earliest establishments to be allowed to operate were factories in export-processing zones, call centers, and other companies providing outsourced services. It was obvious that the government and employers wanted these lucrative sectors of the economy to resume operations as soon as possible.

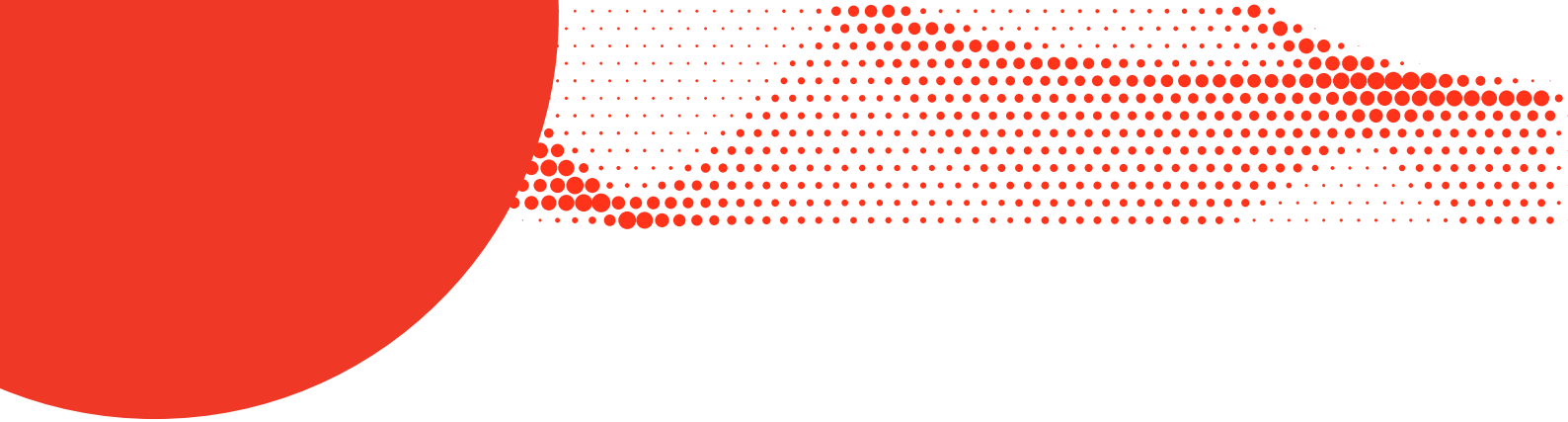
Early in the lockdown, the government issued two sets of guidelines for the implementation of mandatory occupational health and safety protocols for establishments that were continuing to operate. The guidelines were rudimentary, providing rules for the observance of minimum health protocols such as social distancing within factories and offices, provision of health checks and disinfectants, formation of safety committees, and mandating that the cost of swab tests be shouldered by employers.

In practice, the implementation of these basic safety rules and guidelines was lacking, as it was obviously costly for employers who were already facing losses due to the lockdown. For example, unethical employers forced workers to get tested out of their own pockets. Furthermore, workers could not complain as the complaint and dispute resolution mechanisms were suspended according to the guidelines set out in DOLE Department Order 213.<sup>25</sup>

Aside from the problem of unethical employers, the guidelines were discriminatory. To cite one example, the guidelines merely encouraged, rather than forced employers to provide shuttle services for employees who were commuting to work on location. In the absence of public transportation—which was banned at the start of the lockdown and was only gradually reintroduced—workers had to fend for themselves. In order for them to have a job and an income, workers would walk or cycle to and from their workplaces. This put women workers in export processing zones and call centers—who work in night shifts—in vulnerable situations. Judy Miranda told stories

<sup>24</sup>"Workers First in the New Normal", Partido Manggagawa, 2 May 2020, available at: <https://partidomanggagawa2001.blogspot.com/2020/05/workers-first-in-new-normal.html>

<sup>25</sup>DOLE, "Prescribing Guidelines in the Prescription of Actions and the Suspension of Reglementary Periods to File Pleadings, Motions and Other Documents", 5 May 2020, available at: [https://www.dole.gov.ph/php\\_assets/uploads/2020/05/DO-No.-213-20-\\_prescribing.pdf](https://www.dole.gov.ph/php_assets/uploads/2020/05/DO-No.-213-20-_prescribing.pdf).



of women workers walking home in groups to lessen the risk of gender-based violence and attacks in the street.

Nagkaisa proposed that employers who ask their employees to work on location should be mandated to provide transportation services. To facilitate this, the group asked that *jeepneys*<sup>26</sup> and buses, which had been prevented from operating as part of the lockdown, be contracted to ferry workers to and from work. This call provided a solution to demands for the safe return of workers to work and the call for assistance for displaced public transport workers, specifically hundreds of thousands of jeepney drivers. The National Confederation of Transport Workers' Union (NCTU), an affiliate of Sentro ng mga Nagkakaisa at Progresibong Manggagawa (SENTRO), successfully campaigned for this demand on the basis of 'fair transition' and won two rounds of funding from the government's budget for 2020 and 2021 to pay for service contractors. The NCTU's alliance with the transport advocacy group Move As One Coalition and partnership with champions like Senator Hontiveros proved crucial in securing this victory.

The call for mandatory shuttle services and service contracts for jeepneys and buses was part of Nagkaisa's demands package under the rubric of a safe return to work. The package of demands included mass testing, free personal protective equipment (PPE), hazard pay, and full insurance coverage for workers who contract COVID-19. The group insisted that the more reliable Reverse Transcription Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test be utilized in testing and not the antigen tests preferred by the government and employers. Finally, Nagkaisa insisted workers must have the right to refuse to work without fear of being penalized in cases where health and safety is compromised.

Nagkaisa looked for allies to amplify its demand for a safe return to work. It found a champion in Senator Hontiveros who sponsored a bill in the Senate entitled "Balik Trabahong Ligtas", which translates to "A Safe Return to Work".<sup>27</sup> The salient provisions of the bill mandate health insurance coverage for all workers, regardless of employment status, who are required to physically report for work. It also grants flexible sick leave for employees who are infected. The additional sick leave will be on top of any existing leave benefits workers may have. The bill was filed before 1 May 2020 when the large numbers of workers in qualified industries under the less restrictive 'general community quarantine' were due to return to work. As of the end of 2021, the bill remains pending and has little chance of being enacted due to the start of the election campaign period in 2022.

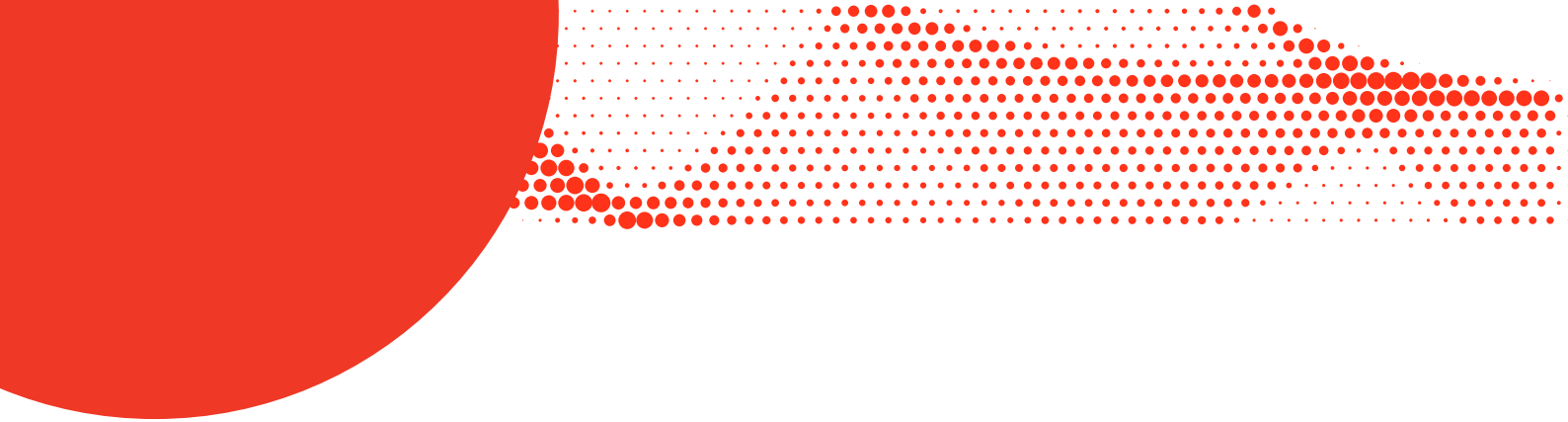
### **A Humane Instead of Militarized Response**

A third pillar of Nagkaisa's COVID-19 response was advocacy for a humane instead of a militarized implementation of mobility restrictions and 'stay at home' orders. From the early days of the lockdown, Nagkaisa warned the government against treating the pandemic as an issue of individual discipline. Nagkaisa called for a COVID-19 response that was predicated on it being considered a public health concern. This was of course part of an overall narrative that put workers' welfare and rights at the front and center.

This forewarning was a result of the group's analysis of the authoritarian bent of the Duterte administration. Similar to how Duterte framed drug addiction as a problem of law and order instead of a public health issue, the COVID-19 response was also constructed on a militarized basis. The first day of the lockdown saw checkpoints

<sup>26</sup>A popular form of Philippine bus transport, usually converted from jeeps.

<sup>27</sup>Senate of the Philippines, "Hontiveros bats for mandatory life and add'l health insurance for all workers during health emergencies", 30 April 2020, available at: [http://legacy.senate.gov.ph/press\\_release/2020/0430\\_hontiveros1.asp](http://legacy.senate.gov.ph/press_release/2020/0430_hontiveros1.asp).



established throughout Metro Manila. Essential workers commuting to work were held in bottlenecks as they ran the gamut of police and military barriers just to get to their workplaces. There were arrests of ordinary Filipinos who were trying to eke out a living during the lockdown. The repression of poor Filipinos who ran afoul of the COVID-19 restrictions was immediate but the militarized pandemic response later proved to be useful against political rivals of the administration.

Suppression of mass protests and critiques of the administration grew as the pandemic raged on and the lockdown continued. Two weeks into the lockdown, dozens of residents of informal settlements living in the center of Quezon City staged a protest along the EDSA, the main thoroughfare traversing Metro Manila. Police immediately dispersed the rally and arrested 21 impoverished residents who were demanding assistance.<sup>28</sup> The government immediately provided aid to the depressed community but the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF), which was in charge of the COVID-19 response, opposed the early release of the arrested residents. No doubt, these actions were motivated by the desire to nip any possible mass unrest in the bud.

With mass protests effectively prohibited, a new anti-terror law was pushed through in Congress. Among other shortcomings, the new law allows the warrantless arrest of suspected terrorists, which are vaguely defined, and extends the period of detention to 24 days.<sup>29</sup> The new law repealed the previously enacted Human Security Act and removed important safeguards and oversights in the old legislation.

The political opposition, human rights groups, and various social movements and groups, including Nagkaisa, expressed their outrage at this new law. Nagkaisa held pocket rallies and motorcades with other groups near the ABS-CBN compound. On 16 July 2020, Nagkaisa filed the ninth petition against the Anti-Terrorism Act before the Supreme Court.<sup>30</sup> Two days after the filing, the Anti-Terrorism Act took effect. In December 2021, the Supreme Court ruled that except for two parts, the Anti-Terrorism Act was constitutional.<sup>31</sup>

The cancellation of the franchise agreement of the media giant ABS-CBN was also pushed through Congress at the height of the pandemic and at a time when protests were difficult to organize. The media network had angered Duterte by declining to air his political ads during the 2016 elections and airing negative ads against him. Duterte had threatened to shut down ABS-CBN before the pandemic but apparently, the lockdown presented the perfect opportunity.

Nagkaisa stood firmly against the shutdown of ABS-CBN even as it called for a pro-worker franchise renewal agreement.<sup>32</sup> Senator Hontiveros again was the lone ally of Nagkaisa as she reiterated the demand for a pro-worker franchise in Senate deliberations on the issue. The union representing ABS-CBN employees was an affiliate of SENTRO. For years, ABS-CBN was hounded by labor cases over contractualization and complaints that workers were being misclassified as talent or independent contractors, which was rampant in the broadcasting industry.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>28</sup>R. Talabong, "Quezon City residents demanding help amid lockdown arrested by police", Rappler, 1 April 2020, available at: <https://www.rappler.com/nation/residents-quezon-city-protesting-help-coronavirus-lockdown-arrested-by-police-april-1-2020>.

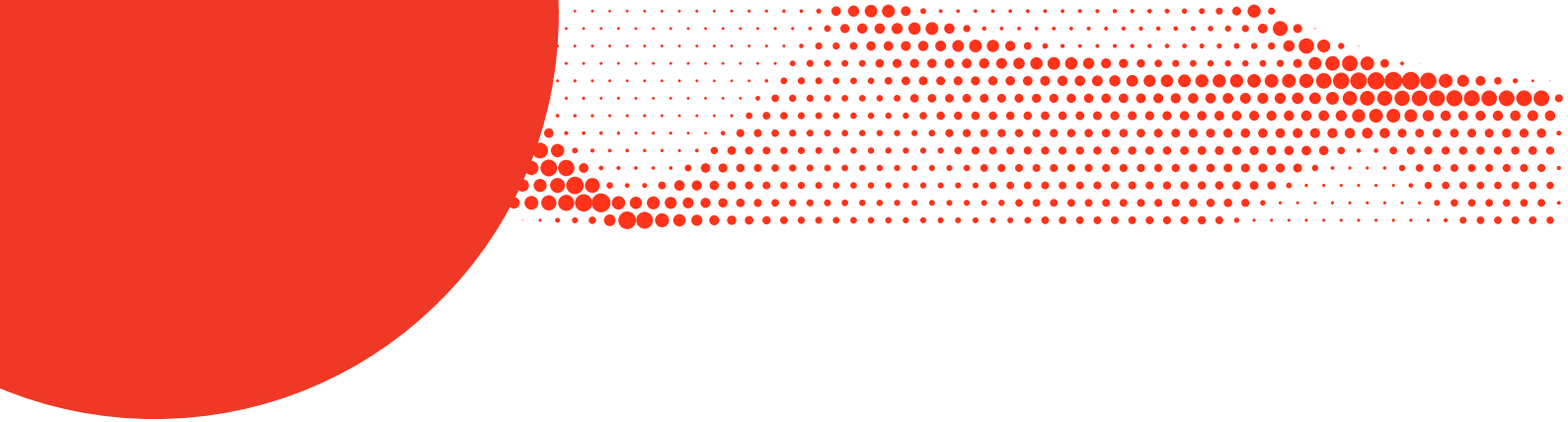
<sup>29</sup>L. Buan, "EXPLAINER: Anti-terror law's IRR on delisting, warrantless arrests", Rappler, 17 October 2020, available at: <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/explainers/anti-terror-law-irr-delisting-added-condition-warrantless-arrest-no-house-arrest-bailable-crimes>.

<sup>30</sup>L. Buan, "Labor groups file 9th petition vs anti-terror law, slam 'guilt by association'", Rappler, 16 July 2020, available at: <https://www.rappler.com/nation/labor-groups-file-petition-vs-anti-terror-law-july-2020>.

<sup>31</sup>"Supreme Court strikes down two parts of Anti-Terrorism Act", CNN Philippines, 9 December 2021, available at: <https://www.cnn.ph/news/2021/12/9/anti-terrorism-act-unconstitutional-supreme-court.html>.

<sup>32</sup>F. Luna, "ABS-CBN shutdown will worsen state of unemployment — labor group", Philstar, 25 February 2020, available at: <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/02/25/1995939/abs-cbn-shutdown-will-worsen-state-unemployment-labor-group>.

<sup>33</sup>J. R. M. Antiquerra, "ABS-CBN labor dispute leads to mass termination", Center for Media Freedom and Responsibility, 2 August 2010, available at: <https://cmfr-phil.org/media-watch/abs-cbn-labor-dispute-leads-to-mass-termination/>.



The pro-worker provisions in the proposed renewal of ABS-CBN's franchise agreement would have mandated the regularization of its workforce.

On 5 May 2020, ABS-CBN ceased operations as its franchise agreement had expired a day before following its non-renewal by the House of Representatives which was dominated by administration legislators. The shutdown of ABS-CBN precipitated an internal conflict within Nagkaisa. The coalition publicly criticized the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines (TUCP) Party-list representative Raymond Mendoza for voting against the renewal of the franchise agreement, a reversal of his earlier stance for a pro-worker franchise agreement, which was the position of Nagkaisa and also of the TUCP labor center.<sup>34</sup> However, the public disagreement did not lead to an organization crisis for Nagkaisa. The maturity and consolidation reached by Nagkaisa was evident in this incident.

### **Fighting Union Repression**

Nagkaisa construed the shutdown of ABS-CBN and the enactment of the Anti-Terrorism Act not just as attacks on the civil liberties of Filipinos but also as transgressions against the fundamental rights of workers. Thus, while it was obvious that state repression was targeted at the political opposition, it could also be deployed against a restive working class. Moreover, not only were workers threatened by the iron fist policies of the government but also by the capitalist class which was weaponizing the pandemic to erode labor standards and rights.

The Nagkaisa convenors were united in stating that a pandemic of rights violations was inflicted upon workers by employers. Workers were put on forced leave for months on end without pay or any assistance. Salaries were delayed. Benefits were not paid. Establishments shut down without paying separation benefits and social security contributions. Unions were busted. Employers refused to negotiate contracts. Collective bargaining agreements were not implemented. Unionists were red-tagged.<sup>35</sup>

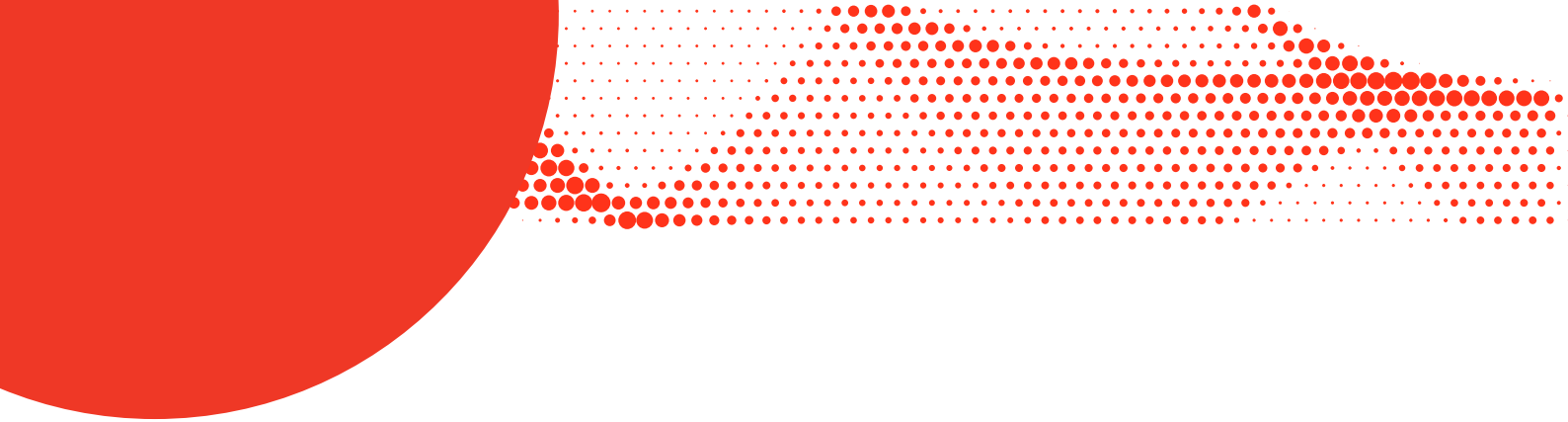
Within three weeks of the lockdown, the picket line of the workers of Sejung Apparel, a garment exporter located in the First Cavite Industrial Estate, was dispersed by a joint force of local police, barangay tanods,<sup>36</sup> and security guards. The strikers were threatened with arrest for allegedly violating quarantine protocols. The dispersal transpired on the night of Black Friday when legal assistance and labor solidarity would be very difficult to organize. The factory was unceremoniously shut down in December 2019, before the onset of the pandemic, without granting workers their last salary, thirteenth month pay, severance, or other benefits. In fact, the closure was a union-busting maneuver as, months before, the workers had voted for union representation and the union had already proposed to engage in collective bargaining negotiations.

Union busting by employers and union repression by the government was rampant. In the Mactan Export Processing Zone in Cebu, commonly called MEPZ by workers, grievances over the lack of employer assistance, extended forced leave, and mass layoffs, on top of the traditional issues of low pay and excessive production quotas, led to a surge in unionization and the explosive growth of the MEPZ Workers Association. In the latter half of 2020, SENTRO was able to form five unions in the largest garment factories in the MEPZ.

<sup>34</sup>"Rage grows over 'painful stab at press freedom' with ABS-CBN franchise denial", Inquirer.net, 12 July 2020, available at: <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1305624/rage-grows-over-painful-stab-at-press-freedom>.

<sup>35</sup>Also known as red-baiting, it is the practice of accusing leftist leaders and activists of being members or sympathizers of the Communist Party of the Philippines.

<sup>36</sup>Village watchmen, considered to be police auxiliary units who work for the police, and who are armed with batons or knives rather than guns.



However, the management of First Glory, a garments factory in the MEPZ, immediately moved to bust one of the unions by firing 300 workers, including almost all of the union officers and most of the union members. This led to an impromptu protest by the terminated workers. On 30 November, the First Glory union commemorated Bonifacio Day<sup>37</sup> by marching to the gates of the MEPZ. Five leaders of the labor rally were arrested, including the union's president. They were charged with violating the city ordinance and quarantine protocols.

Police inflicted injury with impunity on critics and protesters. In Metro Manila on 20 November, a protest by Foodpanda delivery riders against arbitrary changes in the ratings used by the app was harassed by police. One protester was arrested but was immediately released.<sup>3</sup> Months later, on 4 March, women export processing zone workers staged a rally at DOLE's national office to complain about the mass dismissals, illegal shutdown, and non-payment of salaries and benefits. Despite the presence of a DOLE official, police tried to confiscate tarpaulins and sound systems brought by the women workers for the protest. The same modus operandi of harassment and dispersal was implemented by the police at Nagkaisa's commemoration of International Women's Day in Plaza Miranda, a public square in Manila that is frequently used for protests.

The red-tagging of unionists worsened as the lockdown wore on. A campaign for hazard pay, COVID-19 assistance, and other pandemic related issues by the SENTRO affiliated Coke union in Pampanga, led to the firing of three union leaders. When members held a protest en masse against the union busting move, they were arrested and detained by the police. Furthermore, they were red-tagged.<sup>39</sup>

According to Nagkaisa convenors, in the face of workers' unrest over employers' unethical actions and police impunity, DOLE exercised social distancing with the labor movement. Throughout the pandemic, the coalition had repeatedly asked for dialogues and meetings with DOLE to resolve worker grievances and discuss labor demands. DOLE officials declined physical meetings citing health concerns. However, they postponed online dialogues as well.

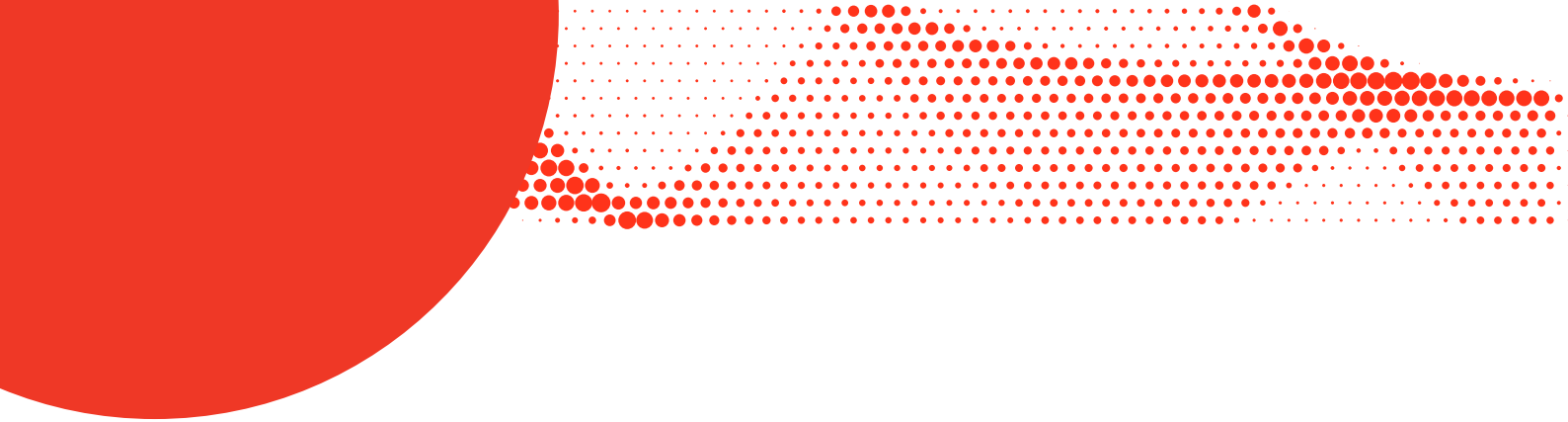
Without consulting representatives from the labor force, DOLE released a series of controversial advisories and orders during the pandemic that opened loopholes for employers to circumvent labor standards. For example, Labor Advisory (LA) 17 allowed employers to reduce wages and benefits due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The advisory stipulated that any diminution must be the result of mutual agreement. In reality, many employers implemented this unilaterally and as most establishments were unorganized, workers had no power. Furthermore, even in organized workplaces, the LA 17 gave capitalists the confidence to rebuff unions and refuse contract negotiations.

Another contentious rule was the DOLE Department Order (DO) 213, issued on 6 May 2020, which suspended the dispute resolution mechanism and the filing of complaints for the duration of the lockdown. The DO 213 left workers defenseless as the pandemic of rights violations surged. At a time when capitalists were using

<sup>37</sup>A national holiday commemorating the birth of Andrés Bonifacio, a working-class leader of the independence struggle.

<sup>38</sup>J. Santos and T. Cordero, "Foodpanda riders protest alleged unfair labor practices in front of DOLE office", GMA News Online, 18 November 2020, available at: <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/metro/764627/foodpanda-riders-protest-alleged-unfair-labor-practices-in-front-of-dole-office/story/>.

<sup>39</sup>"Philippines: Unions accuse Coca-Cola of using COVID-19 as pretext to target & dismiss union leaders; Company denies allegations", Business and Human Rights Resource Centre, 7 July 2020, available at: <https://www.business-humanrights.org/en/latest-news/philippines-unions-accuse-coca-cola-of-using-covid-19-as-pretext-to-target-dismiss-union-leaders-company-denies-allegations/>.



the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse to run away from their obligations to their employees, the government implemented social distancing rather than social dialogue. The labor movement loudly objected to DO 213 and LA 17. Three months after the promulgation of DO 213 and as a result of determined lobbying by the labor movement, it was finally repealed and replaced by the DOLE Department Order (DO) 214 which reinstated the dispute resolution system, acceptance of complaints, and also union petitions for certification elections.

The rescinding of DO 214 was among the few victories achieved by Nagkaisa specifically and the labor movement in general. Another successful demand was the withdrawal by DOLE of an initial proposal to defer the grant of thirteenth month pay for 2020. Josua Mata added nuance to this victory suggesting it was only partly due to Nagkaisa's effort and more aptly, the result of the widespread outrage of workers as expressed on both mass media and social media.

Evidently, Nagkaisa's ability to translate most of its demands into victories was encumbered by the effective prohibition of mass actions during the pandemic. On the one hand, this was enforced by the police who repeatedly used COVID-19 protocols as an alibi to crack down on dissent. On the other hand, workers found it difficult to mobilize in mass protests due to mobility restrictions and health concerns.

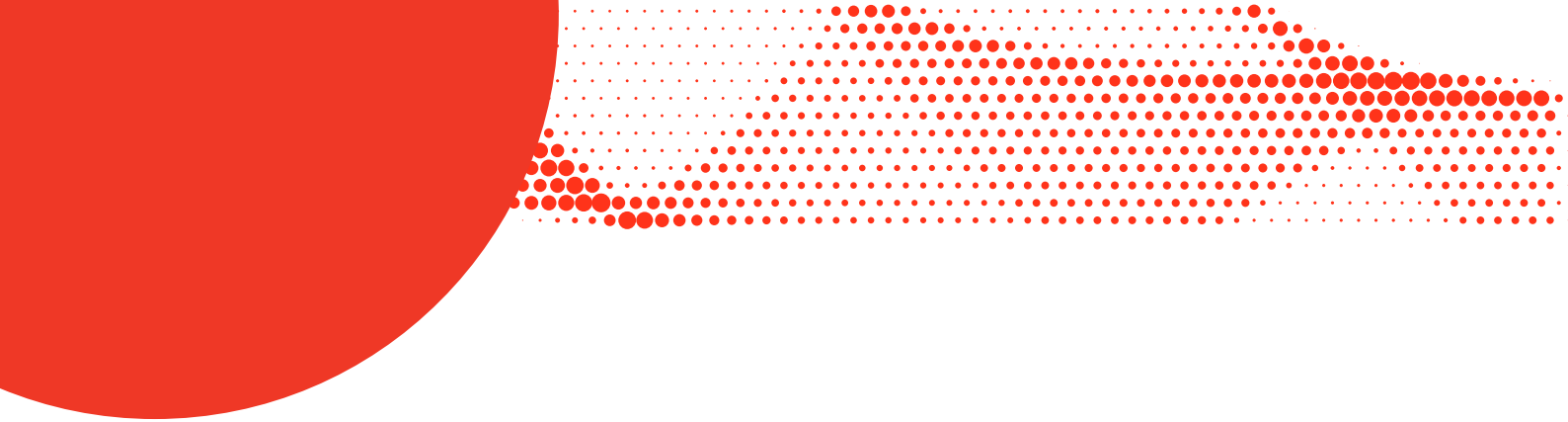
Local struggles did break out, as shown by the mass protests at First Glory and Coke. However, the police, aiming to prevent the spread of an epidemic of resistance, were quick to suppress workers' militancy. Nagkaisa also launched pocket protests. The first physical mass action it conducted was at the 12 June celebration commemorating Independence Day held in the grounds of the Commission on Human Rights. This was followed by a joint protest with other labor groups and social movements on the occasion of President Duterte's annual State of the Nation Address. The scale of these protests was small compared to the traditional pre-pandemic mass actions.

### **Industry Organizing and Struggles**

Still, despite all the difficulties presented by the COVID-19 pandemic and the state's authoritarian response, the situation also offered opportunities for Nagkaisa. The unresolved grievances of workers became the basis for organizing and educating a new generation of class-conscious unionists. A key tactic utilized by Nagkaisa was organizing industry alliances and mobilizing around common struggles.

One of the sectors most affected by the lockdown was the education sector as teaching shifted to online interaction and instruction. Public education workers were only marginally financially impacted as the government paid wages and benefits in full during the pandemic. Even so, working conditions radically changed due to the abrupt transition to the new learning modality. In contrast, staff and faculty in private educational institutions bore the brunt of both the financial and academic fallout of the pandemic. They were forced to work-from-home and as they were not deemed to be engaged in full-time work, suffered pay cuts. Regular faculty could still teach full-time but they faced larger class sizes online. These were among the major challenges confronting employees in private education.

A coalition of unions in private schools called the Council of Teachers and Staff of Colleges and Universities in the Philippines (COTESCUP) raised demands for the sector. Formed during the campaign against the K-12 basic education reform implemented in the previous administration of President Benigno Aquino, COTESCUP became



the voice of private education workers during the pandemic. The group called for a stop to mass layoffs and pay cuts and called for respecting workers' voices in setting academic standards in online education.<sup>40</sup>

Nagkaisa members, PM, and the Alliance of General Unions, Institutions and Labor Associations (AGUILA) started networking with COTESCUP aiming for joint advocacy on education demands during the pandemic. AGUILA's affiliate unions in the De La Salle schools became active in COTESCUP, which strengthened the organization and amplified its advocacy. During the pandemic, the Coalition of La Salle Unions and Associations became formalized, although it also worked within COTESCUP.

COTESCUP started regularly meeting online. It launched a successful webinar to propagate its demands among its membership. The group also forged relationships with legislators who could champion their demands. Through Nagkaisa, Senator Hontiveros became acquainted with COTESCUP and an alliance was formed. Senator Hontiveros was instrumental in inserting a pro-worker provision into the Bayanihan 2 Law that appropriated additional funds for the COVID-19 response. The provision mandated that schools which received government subsidies could not retrench employees for a period of three months. The successful lobby was a concrete outcome of cooperation between Nagkaisa and COTESCUP and it served as a model for Nagkaisa's direct industry organizing.

One of the industry alliances formed was among health workers. With frontline workers as members, hospital unions had their own share of workplace issues to resolve such as hazard pay, provision of PPE, and insurance coverage. For months, individual unions faced these challenges on their own but with the model of COTESCUP as a concrete example, Nagkaisa forged ahead in uniting the hospital unions within its different members. In the latter half of 2020, unions of the Alliance of Filipino Workers-SENTRO, United Filipino Service Workers, and the Federation of Free Workers (FFW) started organizing an industry alliance. A social media group chat facilitated the formation. A laundry list of common demands was formulated. One of the common actions taken was calling for a dialogue with DOLE to discuss the hospital workers' demands.

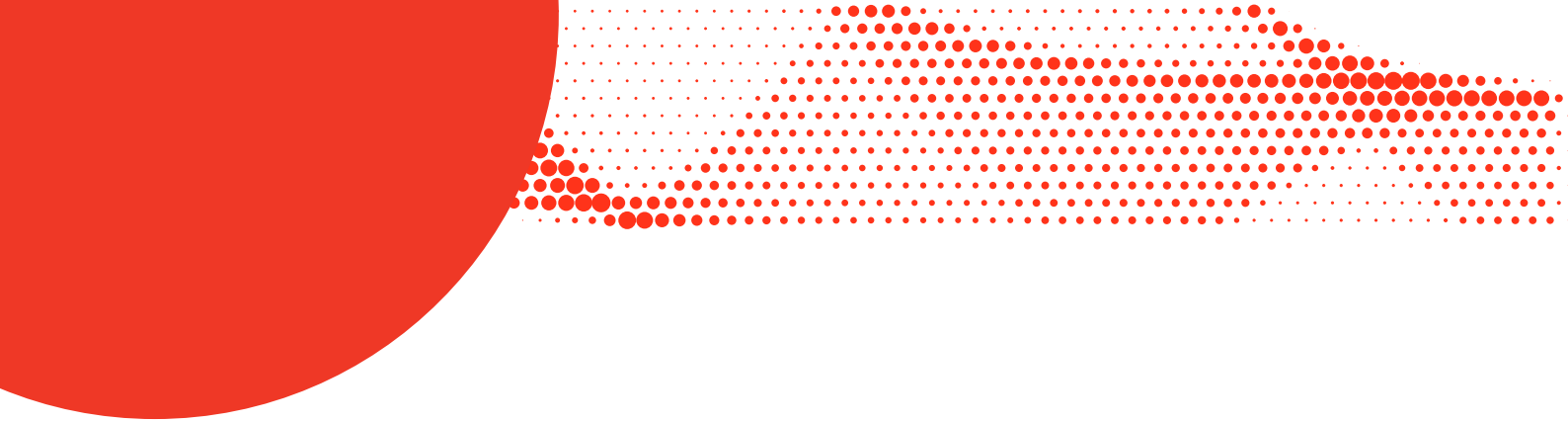
Another industry alliance formed by Nagkaisa was among pharmaceutical unions. As they were not frontline workers, medical representatives had to transition to a work-from-home setup during the pandemic. The shift created changes in their working conditions. Med reps complained of sales quotas that were difficult to achieve in the new landscape of online interaction with their doctor clients. The threat and reality of layoffs also caused stress to med reps.

The core group for the alliance came from local unions in the pharmaceutical industry which were already organized by PM and FFW. It expanded to other unions in the network of IndustriALL Philippines. Similar to COTESUP and the hospital union alliance, a group chat facilitated its formation and zoom meetings became normal means of interaction. A common set of COVID-19-related demands was drafted. After which, the pharmaceutical union alliance started lobbying for an audience with DOLE to negotiate its demands.

Even before the pandemic, Nagkaisa was actively advocating for freedom of association and decent work for workers in export processing zones. During the pandemic, workers in export processing zones suffered COVID-19-related discrimination and rights violations. In 2020 and 2021, union busting, mass layoffs, red-tagging, arrests, and dispersals hounded export processing zone workers. While Nagkaisa did not see the need to form an alliance

<sup>40</sup>R. O. Reyes, "Education frontliners call for timeout on layoffs, wage cuts", Sunstar, 14 August 2020, available at: <https://www.sunstar.com.ph/article/1867011/Tacloban/Local-News/Education-frontliners-call-for-timeout-on-layoffs-wage-cuts>.





among export processing zone workers, it sought DOLE's remediation of their complaints.

One of the pre-pandemic initiatives of Nagkaisa was a review of the guidelines for the conduct of security personnel during labor disputes. In 2019, a technical working group was supposed to discuss revisions proposed by Nagkaisa to strengthen these rules of conduct. The onset of the pandemic effectively put this on hold.

Another urgent demand of Nagkaisa was the ending of the Joint Industrial Peace Concerns Office (JIPCO). The not-so-secret agenda of JIPCO was the militarization of export processing zones and the criminalization of unionism. Police precincts were to be setup within export processing zones for the alleged purpose of industrial peace. JIPCO was the joint project of the police and the Philippine Economic Zone Authority (PEZA) and was launched in central Luzon a few weeks before the lockdown began.<sup>41</sup> Lobbying by Nagkaisa led to Labor Secretary Silvestre Bello III cautioning the police and PEZA on the dangers of JIPCO violating freedom of association. However, Bello's letter did not stop the police and PEZA from proceeding with JIPCO. Instead, the pandemic provided the perfect alibi for the police to militarize export processing zones. Police forces distributed aid to furloughed export processing zone workers during the pandemic while lecturing them on the alleged evils of unionism. In early 2021, JIPCO's rules and regulations of implementation were drafted.<sup>42</sup> Sometime later, PEZA renamed JIPCO, calling it the Alliance for Industrial Peace and Program Office, no doubt a maneuver to mitigate criticism by Nagkaisa and even DOLE.<sup>43</sup>

The threat of JIPCO, the red-tagging of unionists, and labor standards violations in the export processing zones animated Nagkaisa's campaign to protect export processing workers. DOLE has, however, been inconsistent in responding to Nagkaisa's demand for action on these issues.

### **Women and a Gender-based Perspective**

Cognizant of male dominance in existing union structures and the challenge to mainstream gender in the labor movement, Nagkaisa has an internal policy to ensure that women are both represented in its leadership bodies and are participating in its activities. Integral to this effort is the formation of the Nagkaisa Women's Committee. The committee has the power to plan and decide on actions relating to women's concerns and implement parallel campaigns and activities.

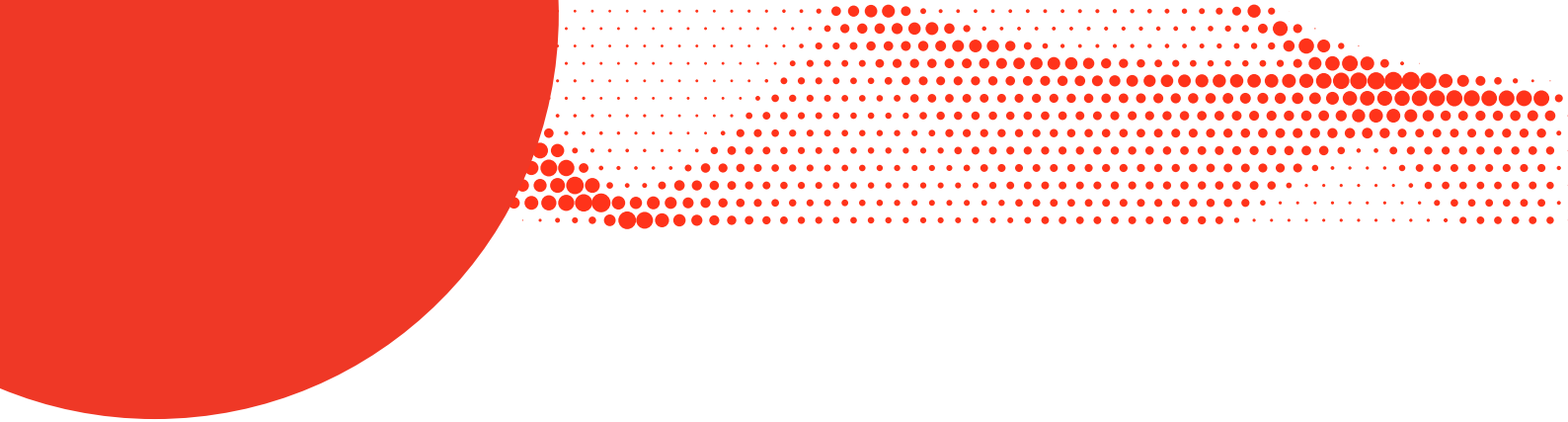
The convenors of Nagkaisa, which is its leading body, includes Annie Enriquez-Geron from the Public Services Labor Independent Confederation (PSLINK), Judy Miranda of PM, and Nice Coronacion of SENTRO who represents young women. Through their participation in the convenors group, women's concerns are integrated into Nagkaisa's plans and activities.

This same setup continued in the pandemic. Through the women convenors and the Nagkaisa Women's Committee, gender concerns were mainstreamed in the group's COVID-19 response. Women leaders from the national, regional, and local level participated in webinars, conferences, and workshops to develop the labor

<sup>41</sup>M. Balbin, "Police launches program to strengthen industrial peace in Bulacan", Philippine News Agency, 27 February 2020, available at: <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1095007>.

<sup>42</sup>Philippine Economic Zone Authority, "PEZA, PNP sign Implementing Rules and Regulations of Joint Industrial Peace and Concern Office (JIPCO) at Camp Crame for safe ecozones, industrial peace", 16 February 2021, available at: <http://www.peza.gov.ph/index.php/press-release/169-peza-pnp-sign-implementing-rules-and-regulations-of-joint-industrial-peace-and-concern-office-jipco-at-camp-crame-for-safe-ecozones-industrial-peace>.

<sup>43</sup>S. P. Medenilla, "DOLE keeping jurisdiction over ecozone labor disputes", Business Mirror, 20 September 2021, available at: <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2021/09/20/dole-keeping-jurisdiction-over-ecozone-labor-disputes/>.



sector's COVID-19 agenda. In the run up to International Women's Day 2021, the Nagkaisa Women's Committee led a delegation for a dialogue with DOLE on women workers demands for jobs, aid, and rights in the time of COVID-19.

The Women's Committee ensured that a gender-based approach was incorporated in the campaigns and advocacies that Nagkaisa launched during the pandemic. In articulating the demand for sufficient aid for all, the inclusion of working women, solo mothers, women with disabilities, and pregnant women was front and center. In the call for a safe return to work, non-discrimination with respect to gender was a priority. Thus, safeguarding working women without access to transportation and protection for pregnant women were complementary demands. In mobilizations that Nagkaisa led or participated in, women spokespersons highlighted the economic violence against women during the pandemic and the disproportionate burden placed on women.

The majority of healthcare workers are women. Thus, in the industry workers alliance built by Nagkaisa, gender issues were a particular focus. The long working hours of women health workers took a toll on their families as domestic care was also their main responsibility. Nagkaisa demanded special protection such as paid leave for pregnant workers, mothers with babies, or workers with conditions like gynecological diseases which compromised their immunity.

Nagkaisa vigorously campaigned for the ratification of Convention 190 (C190) which focusses on gender-based violence in the workplace. There was internal education for workers on the topic and dialogues with the government that, given that the pandemic escalated incidences of workplace and gender-based violence, asked for its immediate adoption. Nagkaisa created a core group that launched consultations and fora, drafted a unity paper, and lobbied government agencies. Once more Senator Hontiveros was an ally in the C190 campaign as she pledged to shepherd its adoption by the Senate. Nagkaisa also coordinated with global groups like the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC).

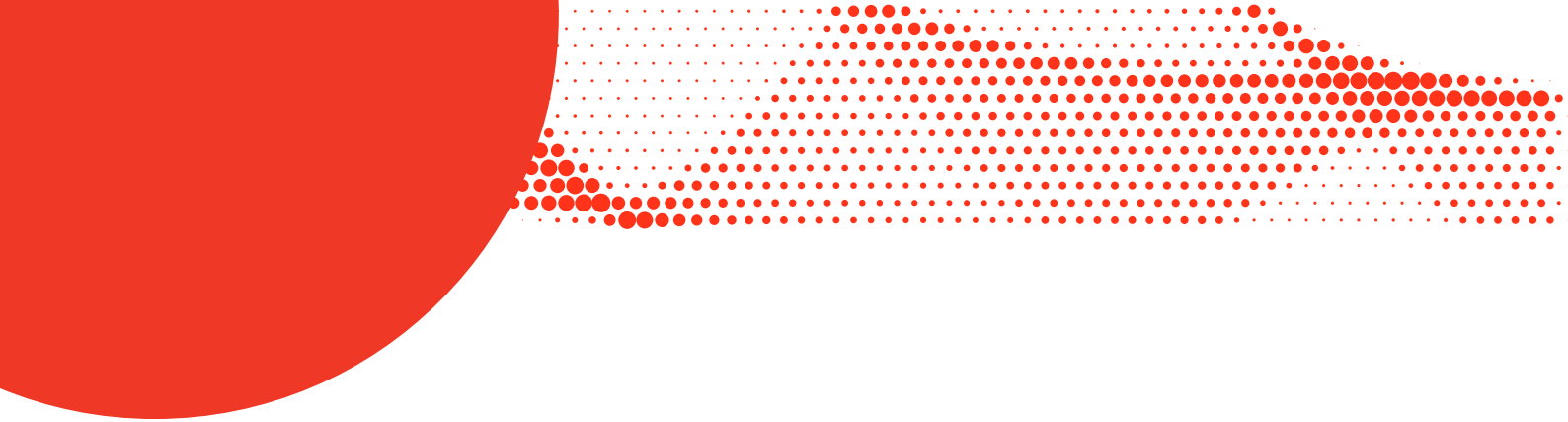
On 25 November 2020, Nagkaisa participated in the International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. There were protest dances, poetry readings, and rousing speeches on violence brought about by the economic crisis combined with the violence inflicted on communities by anti-worker policies and the government's militarized COVID-19 response.

## **Forging Alliances**

Nagkaisa entered into several alliances in pursuit of its aims and activities during the pandemic. These were alliances within and outside of the labor movement. Almost all of the alliances involved broadening the networks in defense of civic spaces and democratic rights.

Within the labor movement, Nagkaisa, Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU), and Pagkakaisa ng Uring Manggagawa formed the United Workers in time for a mobilization during the State of the Nation Address (SONA). The common demands of the United Workers for the demonstration included calls to scrap the DO 213, the LA 17, and the Anti-Terrorism Act.<sup>44</sup> The three groups had already joined together in 2019 but the pandemic revived the United Workers as a formation. United Workers also led a joint mobilization a month after the SONA. Rene Magtubo cited

<sup>44</sup>L. A. Aquino, "Labor groups to join SONAgkaisa protests", Manila Bulletin, 24 July 2020, available at: <https://mb.com.ph/2020/07/24/labor-groups-to-join-sonagkaisa-protests/>.



the revival of United Workers as among the key alliances entered into by Nagkaisa during the pandemic.

Meanwhile, Josua Mata mentioned the formation of the Council of Global Unions-Pilipinas (CGU-Pilipinas) as a major achievement of this period. CGU-Pilipinas united the four local affiliates of the ITUC—FFW, SENTRO, TUCP and KMU—in a campaign to defend civil liberties and labor rights in the country. FFW, SENTRO, and TUCP are all part of Nagkaisa. On an international level, CGU coordinates with the ITUC and different global union federations in the solidarity movement on behalf of the Philippine labor movement. The passage of the Anti-Terrorism Act and its threat to workers' rights motivated the action by the CGU and CGU-Pilipinas. Josua Mata stated that the strategic agenda of the CGU-Pilipinas would be an important pillar in extending the reach of Nagkaisa in the campaign against political repression.

Not only did Nagkaisa receive international support, it also showed solidarity with workers abroad. The labor coalition was the first group in the country to hold a solidarity action in support of the resistance of the people of Burma/Myanmar against the military coup. Ten days after the junta took control of Burma, Nagkaisa staged a noise barrage in Metro Manila in response to a call for international solidarity by trade unions. In a news report on the activity, Josua Mata was quoted as saying that "What happened in Myanmar can happen anywhere and we don't want that".<sup>46</sup> This expressed the key idea that the solidarity action was motivated by a common working-class struggle against rising authoritarianism that threatens labor rights everywhere.

The action spurred on the revival of a Philippine solidarity group for Burma and Nagkaisa's participation in a webinar in support of the resistance in Myanmar. While the protest for Myanmar was a coalition activity, Nagkaisa's member organizations also undertook separate international actions for various causes. For example, SENTRO was active in supporting the call to free a jailed Hong Kong labor leader and PM had its worker-members expressing solidarity with the unionization of Amazon warehouse workers in Bessemer, Alabama.

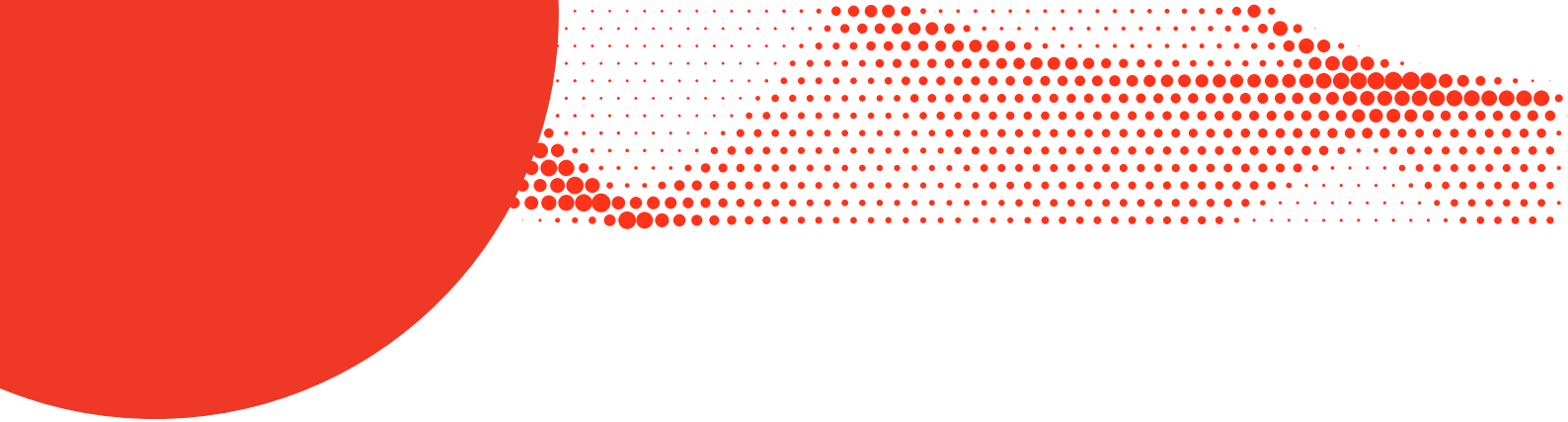
To advance the aim of defending democratic rights and opposing the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020, Nagkaisa led the establishment of the issue-based Movement Against the Terror Act (MATA). MATA united sectoral grassroots organizations of workers, farmers, women, and youth groups together with political and environmental groups in the call to scrap the new Anti-Terrorism Act. With MATA, Nagkaisa's advocacy against the law and political repression expanded beyond the labor movement. MATA joined Nagkaisa in common mass actions and online fora.

### **The Labor Sector's COVID-19 Agenda**

By the end of 2020, as the impact of the economic crisis and political repression worsened, Nagkaisa unveiled its policy recommendations for economic recovery. Termed State of Labor and its Agenda on Recovery or SOLAR, it consolidated the labor coalition's COVID-19 response in terms of concrete policy agenda. The drafting of SOLAR formalized programmatically the various advocacies and activities that Nagkaisa had conducted over the course of the pandemic. However, Judy Miranda averred that looking back, it would have been better if an all-women assembly was also held to affirm SOLAR.

<sup>45</sup>International Trade Union Confederation, "Council of Global Unions Statement on the Suppression of Democratic Rights in the Philippines", 21 July 2020, available at: <https://www.ituc-csi.org/council-of-global-unions-statement-philippines>.

<sup>46</sup>This quote references the 1 February 2021 coup in Myanmar/Burma. See: Aika Rey, "PH labor groups condemn Myanmar coup: 'The people will not accept military rule'", Rappler, 11 February 2021, available at: <https://www.rappler.com/nation/ph-labor-groups-condemn-myanmar-coup-february-2021>.



The main argument advanced in SOLAR is that an economic recovery necessitates protection for workers. In contrast to the denigration of labor rights as part of the government's COVID-19 response, Nagkaisa argued that labor rights must be respected. Likewise, an economic recovery cannot be predicated on just restoring the jobs lost during the pandemic but also on creating new green jobs. This demand links the call for advancing public health during the pandemic with protecting the environment for a sustainable future. Furthermore, recovery must be achieved through the advancement of human rights. Finally, SOLAR propounded that workers' interests must take precedence over business interests.

SOLAR proposed concrete policy measures in the areas of industrial policy, support for MSMEs, income and employment guarantees, a universal public health system, fair transition into a safe transport system, and the financing of economic recovery. Two particularly innovative policy recommendations in SOLAR are an Unemployment Support and Work Assistance Guarantee (USWAG) and a wealth tax on the richest Filipinos.

Under USWAG, Nagkaisa proposed that the government create jobs, including green jobs, ranging from 100 days to 9 months, and provide at least PHP 10,000 in monthly subsidies to the unemployed, including overseas Filipino workers. Nagkaisa submitted the proposal to DOLE in September 2020 as part of a serious effort to lobby and win. Later the group also had a dialogue with the Department of Finance to address concerns with financing the proposal. Nagkaisa also discussed their proposal with the DOLE Institute for Labor Studies which at that time was conducting its own study on income and job guarantees. Similar to the earlier demand for sufficient aid at the start of the lockdown, Nagkaisa sought allies who would integrate the USWAG into proposed new legislative approaches to the government's COVID-19 response.

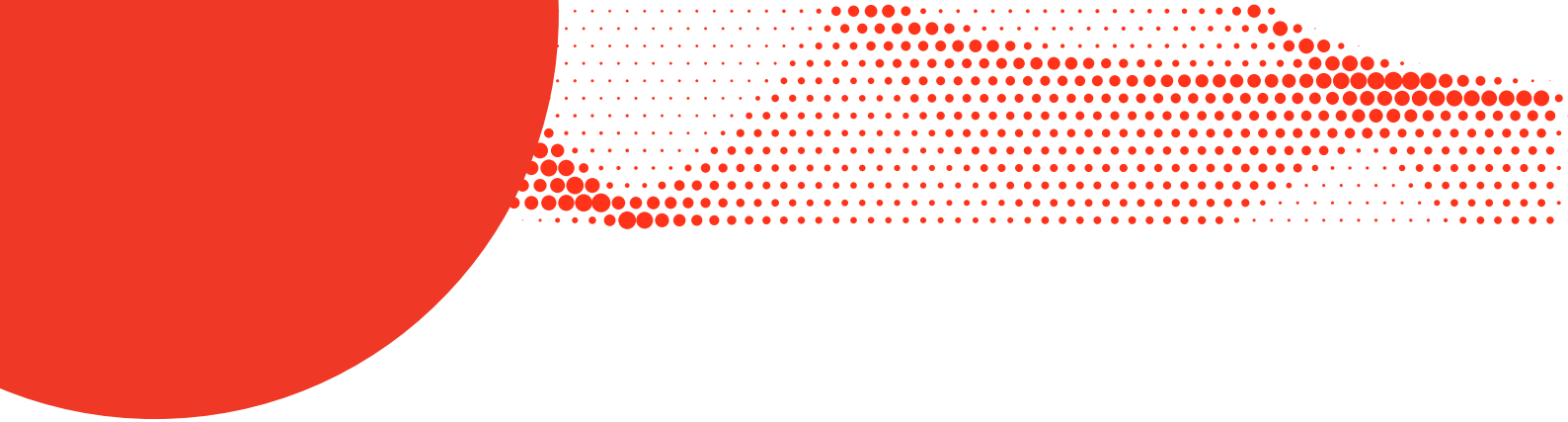
Nagkaisa's policy recommendations in SOLAR entail the mobilization of finances to subsidize income guarantees and support sectors like MSMEs. Admittedly, SOLAR is costly but it is necessary for a recovery that puts workers front and center. Therefore, Nagkaisa proposed the imposition of a wealth tax on the richest Filipinos to generate funds for economic recovery. Instead of incurring new loans that later have to be paid off by Filipino people, a tax on the obscene wealth of the richest Filipinos is a better option. According to Nagkaisa, a one percent wealth tax will yield some PHP 316 billion in funds for economic recovery. Moreover, Nagkaisa framed its proposed wealth tax as part of a real war on the oligarchy.

## **Conclusion**

The Duterte administration's authoritarian and militarized response to the pandemic led to an unprecedented economic crisis which has disproportionately affected the working class and women workers in particular. Business interests were prioritized by the government, as can be seen in both the anti-worker rules enacted by the IATF and DOLE and in the premature reopening of the economy. The pandemic was weaponized by the Duterte government against its political rivals and by the capitalist class against the working class.

In the face of these challenges, Nagkaisa pushed for a response that put workers' rights and welfare first. The earliest expression of this was the group's call for sufficient aid for all, a safe return to work, and a humane response to the crisis. Later, Nagkaisa's programmatic response took the form of its proposal for SOLAR and USWAG which were concrete policy recommendations for an economic recovery on the basis of the protection of labor rights.

Viewed from the lens of social movement unionism, Nagkaisa's response reveals elements of an expansive



union identity and purpose, as it advocated for interests of the whole working class, both formal and informally employed, and not just particular sections or even merely its organized section. Considerations of gender were integral to Nagkaisa's demands and activities. Key concepts pertaining to climate and sustainability were also incorporated in SOLAR through demands for a fair transition for transport workers. Informal workers' concerns were included in the early advocacy for sufficient aid and later in SOLAR.

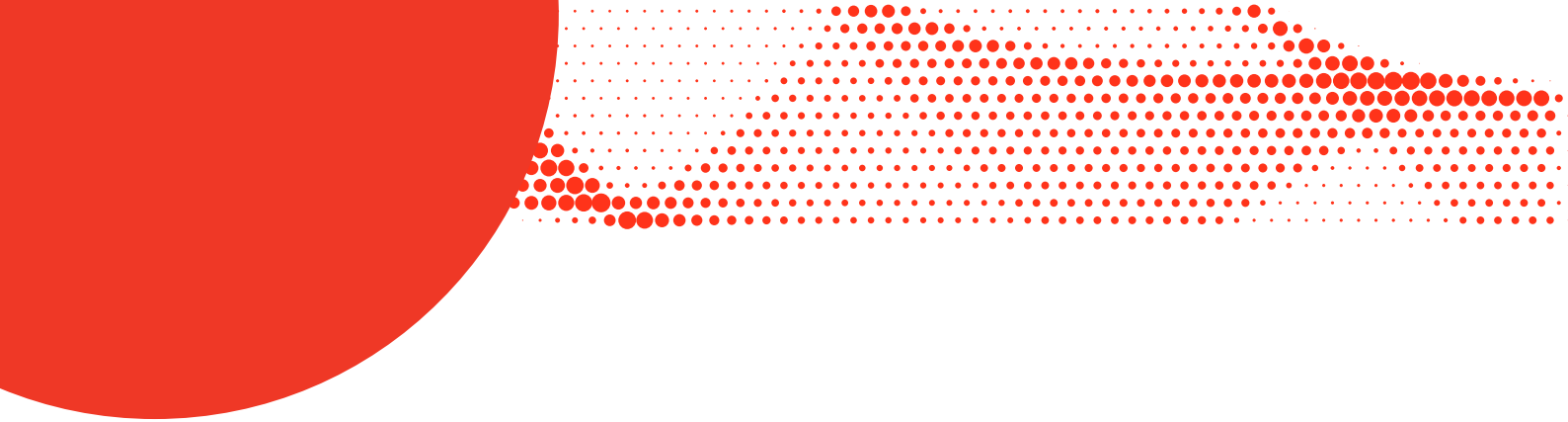
Nagkaisa faced difficulties in harnessing sources of workers' power in pursuit of its aims and advocacies during the pandemic. The union movement in the Philippines has been on a decline since the 1990's, leading to a great weakening of associational power in the labor sector. The ability to deploy structural power has been limited as workers' militancy receded and restrictive rules took effect. The terrain for utilizing structural and associational power became even further reduced in the context of the pandemic and the lockdown. Union members became dispersed as work-from-home orders became prevalent. Fear became normalized as infections raged and police impunity went unchecked. Thus, there were hardly any local struggles or mass actions in the early period of the lockdown. Nagkaisa's ability to mobilize was radically reduced. This accounts for the inability of Nagkaisa to make a forceful effort for its demands and for the state's increased indifference to the demands of the labor sector.

Even institutional sources of power proved difficult to access, as DOLE exercised social distancing with respect to the labor movement. The mechanisms for tripartism were side-lined as DOLE enacted rules without consultation. Tripartite meetings were not convened. All this was rationalized as a necessary consequence of the pandemic. Absent from the capacity to mobilize even token actions, DOLE was impermeable to pressure from Nagkaisa and other labor organizations.

Instead of physical actions, Nagkaisa's activities shifted to online interaction. Even then, labor organizers, activists, and leaders had to negotiate a steep learning curve because of new modes of communication, coordination, and advocacy. Still, Nagkaisa was able to transition from offline to online in the early part of the lockdown and then back to offline as the restrictions relaxed and outrage at the government's failed response to COVID-19 began to rise.

The more effective source of power that Nagkaisa was able to tap into was societal power in the context of the power resources approach. First, Nagkaisa forged crucial alliances within and outside of the labor movement, extending its reach for its advocacies and activities. Practically the whole labor movement was included in formations such as United Workers and CGU-Pilipinas. International labor solidarity in support of labor rights and against repression was fashioned through CGU and in the campaign against the Anti-Terrorism Act. The fight against the new terror law was facilitated by coalitions like the Nagkaisa-led MATA and by joint actions like the SONA protest. NCTU's demand for service contracting for informal jeepney workers was amplified through the support of the Move As One advocacy coalition. COTESCUP's call for a stop to layoffs in the education sector was partially achieved by inserting a provision in the Bayanihan 2 law on the strength of an alliance with Senator Hontiveros.

Second, Nagkaisa was able to utilize the mass media and social media to shape public opinion and, through this, compel government to heed its demands. It was basically the noisy appeals of the united labor movement and its echo in the popular consciousness of workers that finally led to the repeal of the DO 213 and the withdrawal of the proposal to defer the thirteenth month pay. It was these two issues that were the clear victories of Nagkaisa and the labor movement during the pandemic.



However, these are marginal victories given the scale of the economic crisis and the political repression affecting the working class. In this regard, the challenges facing Nagkaisa are enormous. Transforming the present conjuncture and the grave impact of the historic crisis into a surge in workers' militancy and a breakthrough in labor activism is not yet imaginable. Thus, Nagkaisa's consistency in advocating for a workers' first COVID-19 response must be matched by appropriate slogans and tactics to raise workers' consciousness.

Two key lessons can be understood from Nagkaisa's experience. First, the importance of forging working-class unity in the struggle for labor demands and against rising authoritarianism in the Philippines. Being a coalition project in itself, Nagkaisa was able to join hands with other labor organizations in overcoming historical fragmentation and building larger united fronts for a more coherent response to the economic crisis and authoritarian governance.

Second, the imperative for global solidarity in the fight against the worldwide turn to authoritarianism. Under the banner of a common struggle against military dictatorships and authoritarian populists, Nagkaisa was able to forge unity not just among local groups but also with international organizations. In this, the defense of civil liberties and democratic rights is bound up with the protection of labor rights and workers' interests. This adds another layer of meaning to Nagkaisa's 'workers first' demands.

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## FACING THE DOUBLE CRISIS: Omnibus Law, Covid-19, and Social Movements in Indonesia

By: Anwar "Sastro" Ma'ruf and Iqra Anugrah

In the age of political correctness and identity politics, the Indonesian experience displays that what connects the diverse experience of oppression and a wide variety of marginalized groups is their common fate of exploitation against capitalism. It is this class-based experience, rather than identity-based expression, that should become the basis in understanding the nature of capitalist exploitation and its remedies.



A representative from Inter-Factory Workers Federation (FBLP) received zakat (Islamic charity) from people to people solidarity initiatives for 400 women factory workers affected by the pandemic crisis. (Photo: Ari Widastari)

*In dealing with the coronavirus pandemic, the Duterte government's response was too late in stopping local transmission, too little in terms of preparation, and excessive in terms of lockdown enforcement. The Philippines has had the strictest and longest lockdown in Asia, yet the COVID-19 infections steadily increased from June 2020 until the surge on March 2021. This shows that lockdowns, without strong public health interventions, are ineffective to stop the contagion. Instead of swiftly addressing the loss of lives and livelihood, the government tightened its authoritarian grip on power. This paper examines the contradictions and contentions of Duterte's sustained populism in the context of strengthening authoritarian tendencies in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic response, utilizing the Gramscian perspective, critical theories on neoliberalism, populism and authoritarianism to analyze the increasing inequalities, neoliberal policies, and fascist tendencies in the current Philippine political economy.*





## Introduction

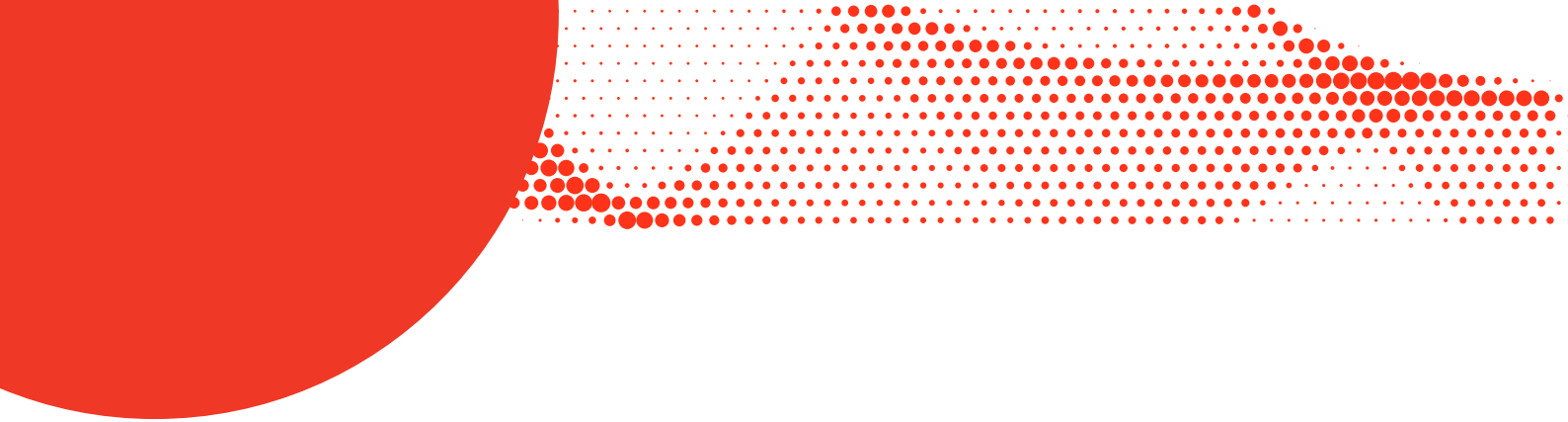
The world is facing another capitalist crisis. In recent years, profit-driven capitalist expansion has triggered the onslaught of people's livelihood and an explosion of populist backlashes across the globe (Hadiz and Chrissogelos 2017; Wolff 2016). The unanticipated entry of the Covid-19 pandemic, a result of profit-driven encroachment of nature, exacerbated the current crisis of capitalism (Foster and Suwandi 2020). Millions of working people have become victims of the pandemic – many have caught the virus, died because of it, and lost their jobs. Those who survived have to work longer hours under dire conditions. We are experiencing double crisis, where contradictions of capitalism intensify due to the unforeseen global health emergency.

Similar dynamics also take place in Indonesia. The government of Joko Widodo (Jokowi), who came to power under a reformist platform in 2014 and is now serving his second term, has become a willing accomplice of the neoliberal trend of business expansion (Wijaya 2020). So is the national parliament or the House of Representatives, an institution long dominated by supporters of established political and economic interests. Since 2019, the national legislature has been pushing for the enactment of the job creation Omnibus Bill, a streamlining of pro-investment laws designed to improve Indonesia's economic growth and competitiveness (Samboh 2020). Blessed by the government, the House recently agreed to pass the controversial bill (Mudassir and Anggraeni 2020). Under the guise of "job creation," it aims to facilitate a significant expansion of business investments – in other words, the interests of capital – at the expense of the working people and the environment. At the same time, the Jokowi administration's response to the Covid-19 wave in Indonesia has been disappointing. Initially, it downplayed the severity of the pandemic, and until now handles it with ad hoc and unsound policies (Mietzner 2020; Oley and Diningrat 2020). This haphazard approach has brought negative impacts on the most marginalized sectors – industrial laborers, rural peasants, contractual and freelance workers, working women, and the urban poor, among others.

Facing this double crisis, ordinary Indonesians are not standing still, as they continue struggling for their rights while navigating livelihood challenges during these trying times. This paper investigated the current and potential impacts of the Omnibus Bill politics and the Covid-19 pandemic on the working people in Indonesia. Here, we showed the limits and potentials of responses and strategies from Indonesian working people's organizations and social movements during this critical period.

## Political Economy of Indonesia's Double Crisis

Following the neoliberal trend in recent decades, Indonesia has moved towards a more market-oriented capitalist economy since the 1980s (Mallarangeng 2000). This includes various forms of liberalization in multiple economic spheres such as land resources, labor regulations, and foreign investments. Post-authoritarian politics has not reversed this trend, despite the initial excitement among civil society actors and movements with the emergence of various tendencies in the early years of democratization. To date, sustained civil society opposition and advocacy efforts have not been able to effectively tame this post-authoritarian capital expansion. Internationally, Indonesia remains tied to the global imperialist structure, where corporations in the Northern countries benefit from surplus value appropriation via the practice of labor arbitrage at Indonesian companies (Suwandi 2019). Domestically, the old oligarchic power structure crafted by capitalists and wealth-amassing political elites remains intact despite occasional shocks from lower-class mobilization in recent years (Hadiz and Robison 2013; Winters 2011). Political openness has indeed led to the adoption and provision of basic public service reforms in arenas



such as healthcare and education (Aspinall 2014; Rosser 2018). Nevertheless, this political democracy does not yet translate into major economic redistributionist policies that challenge existing class relations.

This is the context from which pro-capital legislations such as the Omnibus Bill emerged. Historically, the Indonesian state has been utilizing various regulations to legitimize capital expansion since the violent end of two decades of the post-independence populist experiment in 1965, especially during the authoritarian-developmental New Order period (1966-1998). Regulations concerning key areas such as land and natural resources, labor regulations, foreign investment, and the overall economic direction have been geared toward the deepening of business interests (Robison 1986; Winters 1996).

The job creation Omnibus Bill therefore should be seen as part of the larger historical trend in the Indonesian political economy. The Jokowi administration proposed the law to the House of Representatives to improve the ease of doing business and promote investment in Indonesia. This should come as no surprise: despite his initial reformist image and civil society support during his first election campaign in 2014, Jokowi soon capitulated to oligarchic interests (Anugrah 2020; Warburton 2016). When he ran for his second term in 2019, he was already held captive by his oligarchic backers and funders.

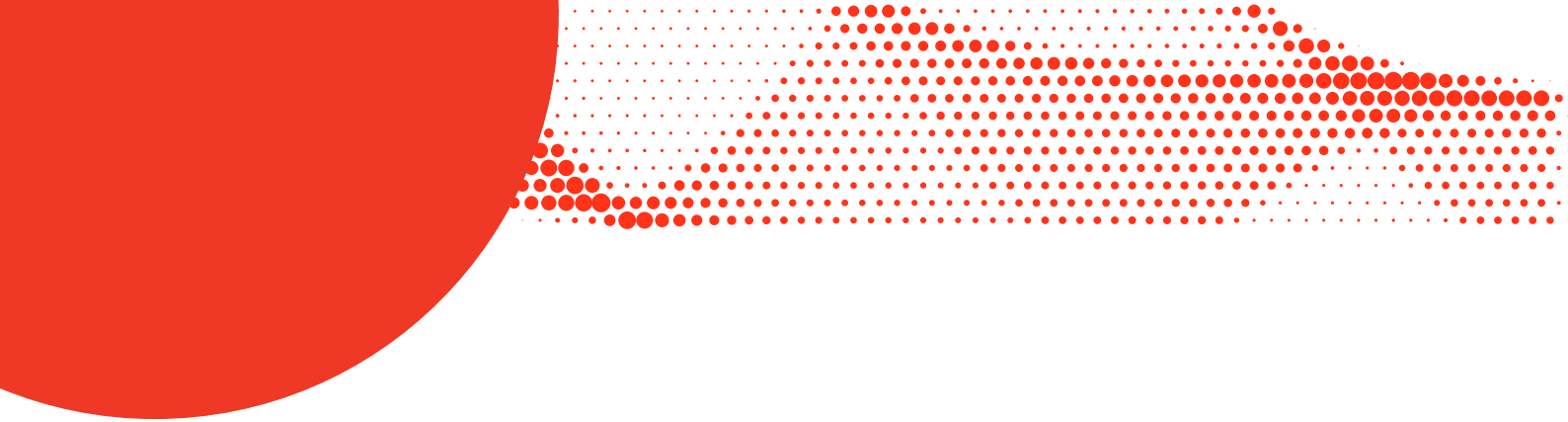
As public discussions and debates concerning Omnibus Law were underway, the Covid-19 pandemic hit Indonesia in early 2020. The government's initial denial and mishandling of the pandemic soon led to the rapid surge of Covid-19 cases across Indonesia, making it one of the worst public health crises that hit Indonesia in recent history. When we finished this paper, Indonesia ranked as the second-worst Covid-19 affected country in Southeast Asia just behind the Philippines, with more than 300,000 cases and 11,000 deaths by October 6, 2020 (Mainichi Japan 2020; The Jakarta Post 2020). By mid-2021, Indonesia has become one of the newest global epicenter of the pandemic, along with Brazil and the United Kingdom (Combs 2021). To date, the Indonesian government's response to this health crisis has been lackluster and disappointing, marked by the lack of three crucial policy components: 1) consistent implementation of social distancing measures, 2) appropriate policies to contain the pandemic, and 3) the provision of socio-economic cushioning for the public, especially the most marginalized.

After intense public pressure, the government eventually implemented large-scale social restriction measures (Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar, PSBB/LSSR) in April 2020 to prevent further transmission of Covid-19 (Suhartono and Sipahutar 2020). But the socio-economic costs of this half-hearted policy have been tremendous. Without any financial assistance, the vast majority of working people cannot afford the luxury of working from home and have to continue doing their jobs as usual. Some even ended up losing their jobs in the name of economic efficiency and stability. This in turn worsened the health crisis.

But in any moment of crisis, including this one, there are possibilities for social change and transformation too. The working people did not sit idly. Not long after the Covid-19 pandemic emerged, a wave of social movement mobilization and initiatives have arisen in response. Though far from being unified, these sporadic actions have helped to cushion the impacts of the crisis on the working people.

### **Job Creation Omnibus Bill: A Neoliberal Response to the Threat of Global Recession**

Booms and busts are an inherent part of the global capitalist economy. The main question is who will bear the cost when the bust happens when the bubble of growth bursts. Typically, it is the working people who bear the cost of declining growth and profit rate. Under this condition, as the general historical tendency of capitalism has shown,



capitalists and political elites will try to squeeze more profit for their benefit by exploiting the working people.

This is also true with the current phase of capitalism. Several Marxist analyses have shown how the global economic downturn and its looming recession in the aftermath of the post-2008 economic recovery have pushed the ruling elites globally to defend their class position and intensify the exploitation of the working people for profit (Bramble 2020; Svensson 2019).

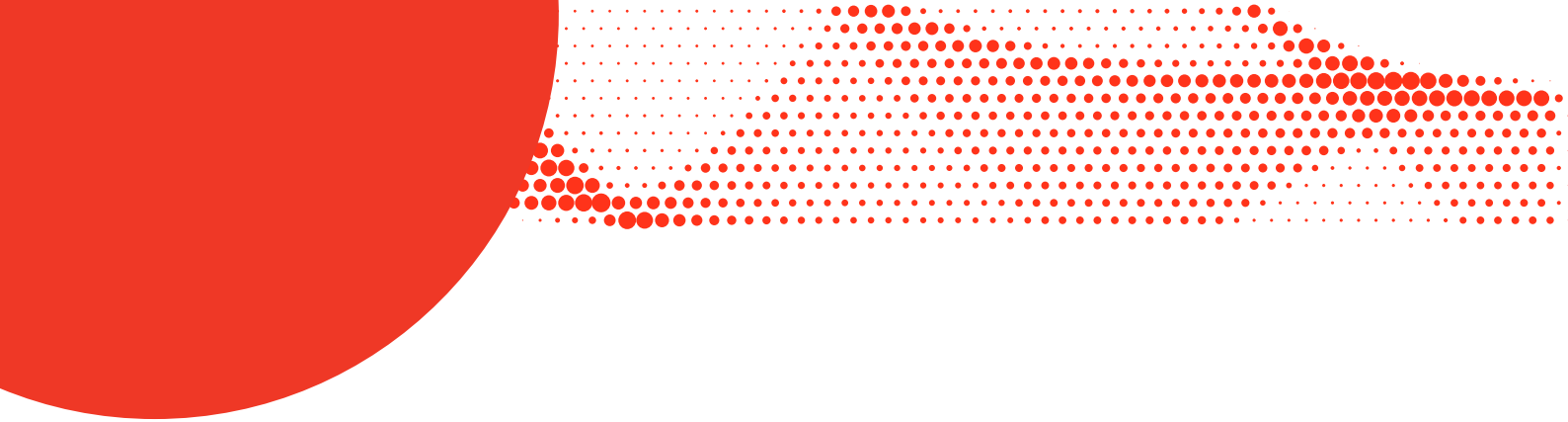
Indonesia is no exception to this global trend. In its attempt to maintain capitalist stability, post-authoritarian Indonesian governments have promoted business investments in natural resources, cheap labor, and service sectors for the benefit of the capitalist class and its political backers. The Jokowi administration simply followed this pattern. The cost of this policy orientation has been tremendous: deindustrialization, declining growth, and increasing socio-economic inequality (Gibson 2017; Muhamad, et al. 2020). Seen from this perspective, the job creation Omnibus Bill essentially is the latest attempt to push this political economy project, a project aimed at continuing surplus appropriation by disciplining working people and expanding market power.

This is also reflected in recent political dynamics in Indonesia. During the last presidential and general elections (September 2018–April 2019), key capitalist actors particularly resource-based oligarchs were influential in campaign financing and policy formulation of the two presidential candidates, Jokowi and Prabowo Subianto (Gokkon 2019). This oligarchic influence, combined with the promiscuous power-sharing tendency between government and opposition parties since 1998 (Slater and Simmons 2012), led to the absence of any viable opposition to balance major oligarch-backed parties. Even minor parties with no cabinet seats teamed up with the ruling coalition to accommodate controversial laws that could roll back progress on economic democracy, human rights, climate change, and deforestation (Anugrah 2020). This is evident in the composition of the political coalition dominating Jokowi's cabinet, with more than 40 percent of cabinet ministers coming from political parties in the ruling coalition representing 74 percent of seats in Parliament (DPR) with the remainder of cabinet posts filled by professionals with strong links to the oligarchy network (Lane 2019; Supriatma 2019).

In mid-September 2019, the World Bank Country Director for Indonesia, Rodrigo Chaves, visited President Jokowi and advised him to attract more foreign direct investments and further integrate Indonesia into the global value chain to mitigate the impacts of the looming global recession (Ekonid-AHK n.d.). A month after the said visit, Jokowi announced his second term's policy priority in his inauguration speech in October 2019, in which he reiterated his neo-developmental vision for Indonesia especially his plan to pass omnibus bills on job creation and small and medium enterprises (SMEs) (Idhom 2019). Other proposed omnibus bills on taxation and the pharmaceutical industry are also under discussion (Assegaf and Kadafi 2020).

Of these omnibus bills, it is the job creation bill that has attracted the most attention. This bill sought to amend and streamline existing laws seen to be barriers to foreign investment in Indonesia. Spurred by the ambition to create an unrestrained market for investment, capital accumulation, and oligarchic interests, the bill can be seen as a legal justification to curtail labor rights, socio-ecological sustainability, anti-corruption advocacy, and the broader democratic space, among other things (Partai Rakyat Pekerja 2020; Redaksi KSN 2020; Wardana 2020).

In other words, the bill aimed to strengthen the corporate-led flexible labor market regime and decrease hurdles for capital accumulation (L.M. and JN 2020). Specifically, it sought to significantly dismantle the hard-won labor rights and environmental protection guaranteed in the existing laws on labor (Law No. 13/2003) and environmental protection and management (Law No 32/2009). One concrete example of this is the bill's provisions on lessening public control of business activities and pollution. Furthermore, it protects entities engaged in forest burning –



including corporations and oligarchs – from legal responsibilities. The bill also greatly reduced workers' rights to a long vacation. Moreover, it also eased the complex regulations concerning the recruitment of foreign workers. Without proper regulations, foreign workers will now receive less protection compared to the local ones and social tensions between these two groups might intensify in the future. This was done by streamlining around 79 bills and 1,239 articles covering business permit, requirements for investment, workforce, small and medium enterprises (SMEs), ease of doing business, support for research and innovation, government administration, economic sanctions, land acquisition, government investment, and project, and economic zones into one bill which consisted of 15 chapters and 174 articles.

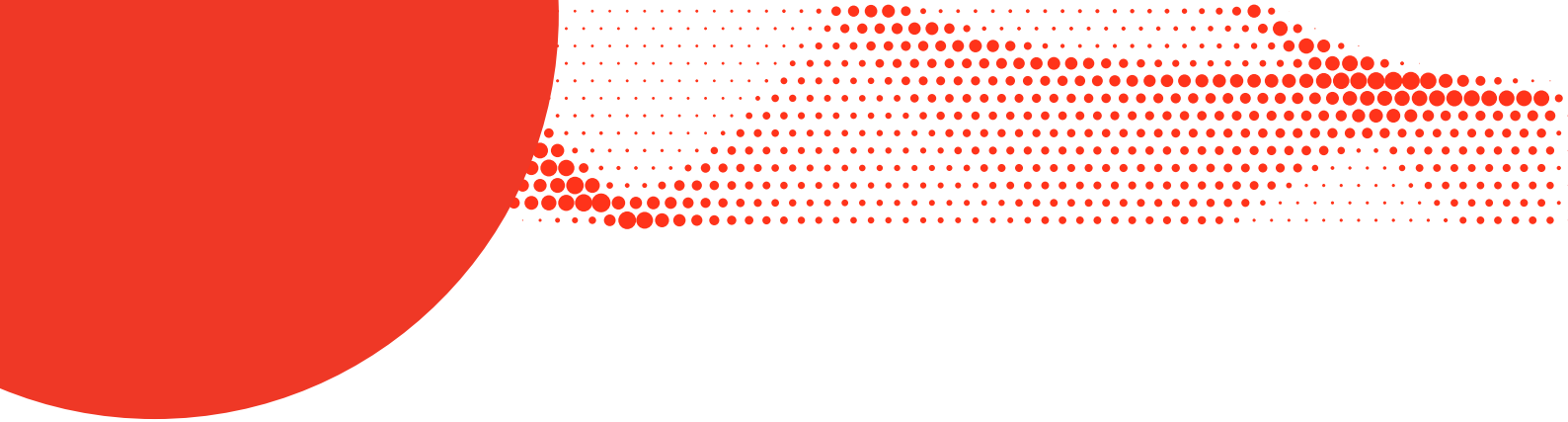
The eventual result of the bill implementation, we argue, is a new wave of a reserve army of labor. This new form of dispossession, profit extraction, and exploitation of the working people is legitimized under the veneer of “democratic” deliberation in the oligarchs-influenced government and House of Representatives and the promise of “job creation.”

### **Social Movement Responses to the Omnibus Bill and Covid-19 Pandemic**

As the tensions and controversies surrounding the job creation Omnibus Bill intensified, the Covid-19 pandemic suddenly hit and quickly swept Indonesia. Public confusion and policy disjuncts marked the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic response in Indonesia. Instead of implementing a full lockdown – technically labeled as regional quarantine according to Law No. 6/2018 on health quarantine – the government opted to implement LSSR or partial lockdown (Varagur 2020). These two policy measures are significantly different. Whereas a full lockdown mandates the government to provide basic life necessities such as medical support, food, clothing, and sanitary facilities during the designated quarantine period, LSSR has no such provision. Essentially, LSSR only regulated social distancing measures, such as restrictions on workplace and educational activities, mass worship, and events held in public spaces. Such a decision was proven to be controversial, for the scale of the pandemic quickly skyrocketed and thereby posed a significant public health threat. By implementing LSSR instead of a full lockdown, the government abandoned its responsibilities to the citizens.

This meant that citizens had to cover the unexpected living costs during LSSR by themselves. For the vast majority of working people, this is akin to slow suicide, especially for those working in informal sectors and contract-based jobs and gigs with little workplace benefits and facilities (Izzati 2020; Wilson 2020). Government subsidies for targeted poor households during the LSSR period also proved to be inadequate to cushion socio-economic costs of the most precarious households who lost their income during the pandemic. As predicted, the most affected sector of all are the informal workers, who depend on their daily incomes for their livelihood.

Our interviews with various organizers and members of social movements in Jakarta, arguably the worst-hit area, showed the daily struggles experienced by working people during the LSSR period. For instance, homeworkers in Muara Baru, North Jakarta affiliated with the Homeworkers Network of Indonesia (Jaringan Pekerja Rumahan Indonesia, JPRI) have lost their contract jobs due to the pandemic and LSSR. As a consequence, they were forced to rely on government subsidies and even private donations to make their ends meet. They had no choice but to rely on these relief efforts to cover their rent and living costs. Some homeworkers even had to stay in empty huts and spaces and struggled to get access to clean water and sanitary facilities, because they were forcefully evicted from their rented houses<sup>1</sup>.



Other wage laborers also faced similar challenges. Take the example of contract- and outsourcing-based workers in the industrial area of Tangerang. The precarious nature of their employment contract and their non-unionized status made it much harder for them to organize and fight for their rights. When companies in Tangerang implemented mass layoffs, they had no choice but to borrow financial resources from friends, neighbors, families, and even money lenders. Even unionized workers had to face the looming threat of sudden layoffs and salary cuts, though they are better equipped to defend their rights and employment status<sup>2</sup>. In the export processing zone of Cakung, North Jakarta, women workers, many of them serving as breadwinners for their families, had to face the double burden of keeping their jobs while taking care of their families during the pandemic (Affiat 2020).

Jakarta's urban poor also faced the challenge of maintaining their livelihood. We learned from a community organizer from the Indonesian People's Struggle Union (Serikat Perjuangan Rakyat Indonesia, SPRI) that many SPRI members across Jakarta – laundry workers, kiosk and shop staff, motorcycle taxi drivers, and small traders – lost about 80 percent of their income or even their jobs altogether due to the pandemic and the implementation of the LSSR. Moreover, fishers-cum-workers in the tourism industry in Harapan and Kelapa Islands in the Kepulauan Seribu Regency in Northern Jakarta were also negatively affected by this crisis. The prolonged closure of fish markets and tourist sites led to a massive loss of job opportunities for the islanders, forcing them to rely on government food subsidies and fish catchment for their everyday needs. Unfortunately, these food supplies were often inadequate, forcing them to share the supply packages with more families out of solidarity with each other<sup>3</sup>. Things were even tougher for fishers in Pari Island in the same regency, for they had to deal with the pandemic while fighting the threat of land-grabbing by urban developers. As they struggled for their residential rights, their income was speedily depleted due to the closure of fish markets and seaports<sup>4</sup>.

Rural areas were also affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. For example, peasant households in West Java struggled to sell their harvest. Meanwhile, farmgate prices of key food commodities such as vegetables, chilis, and tomatoes plummeted, costing the peasants a significant chunk of their income. At the same time, there was a scarcity of masks and hand sanitizers in rural areas, which increased the pandemic risk for these rural households<sup>5</sup>.

### **People's Initiatives against Covid-19**

These grassroots stories revealed that we cannot rely solely on the current government to guarantee social protection for all during the Covid-19 crisis. The government's incompetence in curbing the spike of Covid-19 cases and unwillingness to implement full lockdown with a comprehensive social protection package worsened the crisis.

Facing this ongoing pandemic, the working people did not sit idly. In response to the government's mishandling of the crisis, various social movements and people's organizations then launched the "People Help People" (PHP) campaign. This nationwide campaign, which grew out of the national anti-Omnibus Bill advocacy network, soon scaled up its activities. By coordinating local community donation efforts, this initiative aimed to address the scarcity of food supply and protective equipment such as masks, hand sanitizers, and disinfectants. It was a

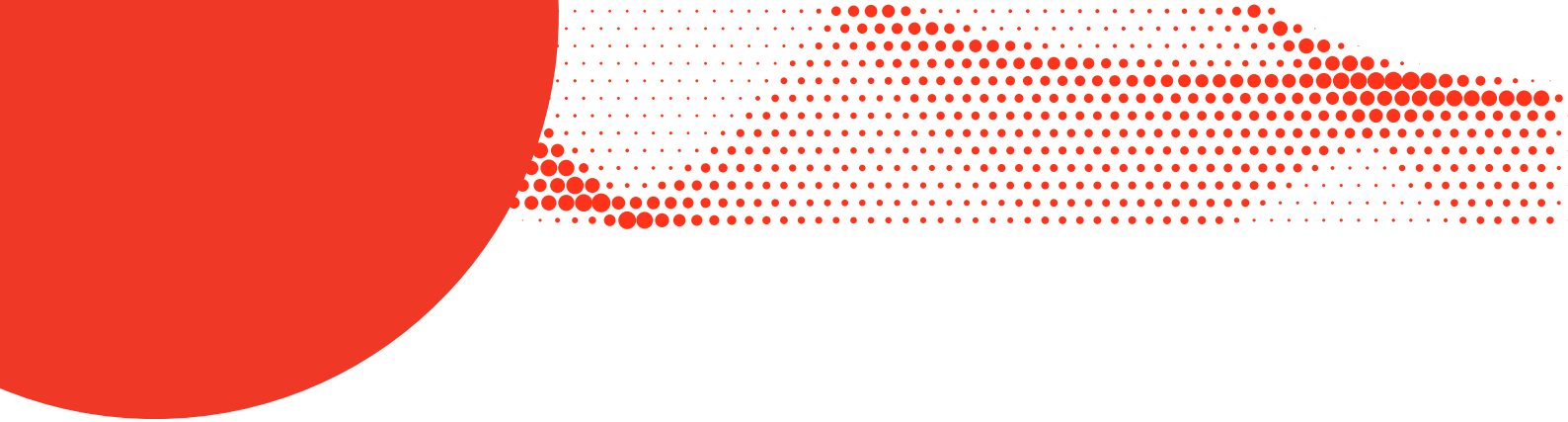
<sup>1</sup>Interviews with Wawan and Rina, community organizers from Trade Union Rights Centre, September 2020.

<sup>2</sup>Interviews with Nuzul and Anton, union leaders from the Karya Utama Labor Union Federation (Federasi Serikat Buruh Karya Utama, FSBKU) in Tangerang, September 2020.

<sup>3</sup>Interview with Dika Mohammad, General Secretary of SPRI, September 2020. SPRI represents around 3,000 poor households across Jakarta.

<sup>4</sup>Interview with Tubagus, activist from the Indonesian Forum for the Environment (WALHI), July 2020

<sup>5</sup>Interview with Erni, a community organizer from the Sundanese Peasant Union (Serikat Petani Pasundan, SPP), September 2020



welcome breakthrough in the middle of a price hike for the said basic necessities and inadequate policy measures.

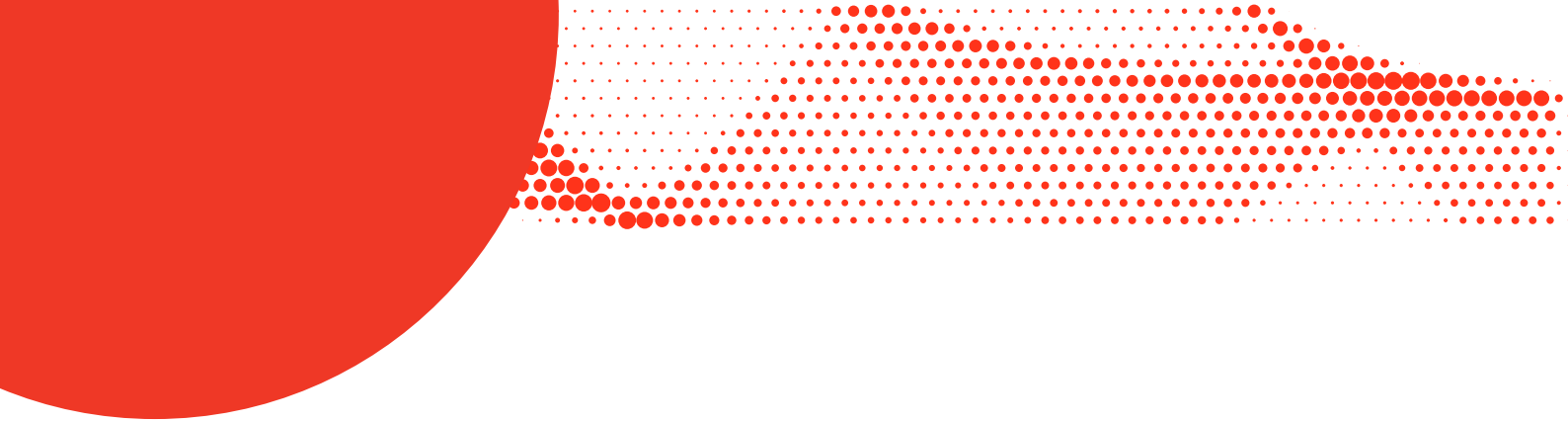
The campaign tackled two immediate problems. First, it promoted the production of self-made face masks and hand sanitizers by various communities, people's organizations, laid-off workers, and the urban poor. The campaign network then distributed these products to affiliated social movements, communities, and the public at large.

Secondly, it organized an alternative food supply network. Led by a number of social movements and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) such as the Confederation of Indonesian People's Movement (Konfederasi Pergerakan Rakyat Indonesia, KPRI), the Indonesian Forum for the Environment (Wahana Lingkungan Hidup Indonesia, WALHI), the Consortium for Agrarian Reform (Konsorsium Pembaruan Agraria, KPA), the Indigenous People's Alliance of the Archipelago (Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara, AMAN), and Trade Union Rights Centre (TURC), among others, the campaign organized 1) community kitchens, 2) food banks, 3) solidarity barns, and 4) community farming. These activities served several purposes. Community kitchens served as food donation centers and providers of fresh food for the needy. Food banks also served the same function and doubled as a collection and donation point for medical and protective gear supplies. Equally important was the creation of solidarity barns in rural areas. These barns bought agricultural and fishery products especially rice, vegetables, and fishes from direct producers (peasants, fishers, and rural cooperatives) and sold these to industrial workers and their unions. To support these efforts, the campaign also encouraged community farming movements in urban areas.

Various organizations took different roles in the PHP campaign. In Jakarta, KPRI and the street library community (Perpusja Jakarta) produced and distributed self-made hand sanitizers and disinfectants for the public, especially the poor. Other Jakarta-based organizations, TURC and the Action Unit of the Extended Family of the University of Indonesia (Kesatuan Aksi Keluarga Besar Universitas Indonesia, KA-KBUI) undertook another initiative by collecting data of Covid-19 patients, distributing donations, and establishing community kitchens in several communities. In Bandung, local activists and grassroots community leaders under Social Solidarity in Bandung (Solidaritas Sosial Bandung) built 11 community kitchens to serve marginalized groups such as victims of urban eviction, panhandlers, members of the LGBT community, people with HIV, and workers. Similarly, Food Solidarity (Solidaritas Pangan) and the United People Alliance (Aliansi Rakyat Bersatu, ARB) in Yogyakarta also launched a Covid-19 solidarity campaign by providing food supply for the needy (Ma'ruf and Estrada 2020).

A number of progressive religious organizations also took part in this campaign. In the Greater Jakarta Area, the Nahdliyin Front for the Sovereignty of Natural Resources (Front Nahdliyin untuk Kedaulatan Sumber Daya Alam, FNKSDA), the Progressive Islamic Forum (Forum Islam Progresif, FIP), and the Inter-Factory Workers Federation (Federasi Buruh Lintas Pabrik, FBLP) worked together to ensure the availability of food supplies and other household needs for workers during the fasting month of Ramadhan (Affiat 2020).

In rural areas, KPA worked in collaboration with peasant unions in Banten and West Java Provinces, namely the Bantenese Peasant Movement (Pergerakan Petani Banten, P2B), the Sundanese Peasant Union (Serikat Petani Pasundan, SPP), Karawang Peasant Union (Serikat Petani Karawang, SEPETAK), and Indramayu Peasant Union (Serikat Tani Indramayu, STI), to ensure the sale of rice harvested by these organizations to Greater Jakarta-based workers affiliated with labor unions such as the Indonesian Workers' United Confederation (Konfederasi Persatuan Buruh Indonesia, KPBI), the Confederation of Indonesian Union Alliance Congress (Konfederasi Kongres Aliansi



Serikat Buruh Indonesia, KASBI), and the National Union Confederation (Konfederasi Serikat Nasional, KSN). AMAN also coordinated food supply provision in rural areas by promoting the barter of fish and agricultural products between peasants and fishers. (Ma'ruf & Estrada 2020)

To connect these diverse urban and rural initiatives, KPRI, TURC, and JPRI promoted community farming in North Jakarta and Tangerang. Another organization, the Youth Movement Community (Komunitas Pemuda Pergerakan, KPP), also kickstarted community farming activities in urban slums in Petamburan and Tomang neighborhood in Jakarta, especially in the riverbanks of West Flood Canal.

Typically, these community farming projects started with participatory research activities to document daily household food consumption and cost. Findings from the research conducted by JPRI give us a sense of this consumption pattern. JPRI noted that its members, whose daily income ranges around IDR 20,000-50,000/day, spend around IDR 526,500,000/month or IDR 6,318,000,000 p.a. for their total consumption spending. Of these figures, approximately IDR 75,260,000/month or IDR 903,120,000 p.a. are allocated for vegetable consumption. Another data from KPRI and TURC suggested that by farming, selling, and buying their vegetables via producers' cooperatives, JPRI members can earn in total IDR 1,534,920,000 p.a. or close to IDR 500,000/month/ for each household. Albeit small, this strategy presented a possible alternative to the dominant capitalist model of food market and provision in Indonesia. It is hoped that this model can be expanded beyond local experimentations.

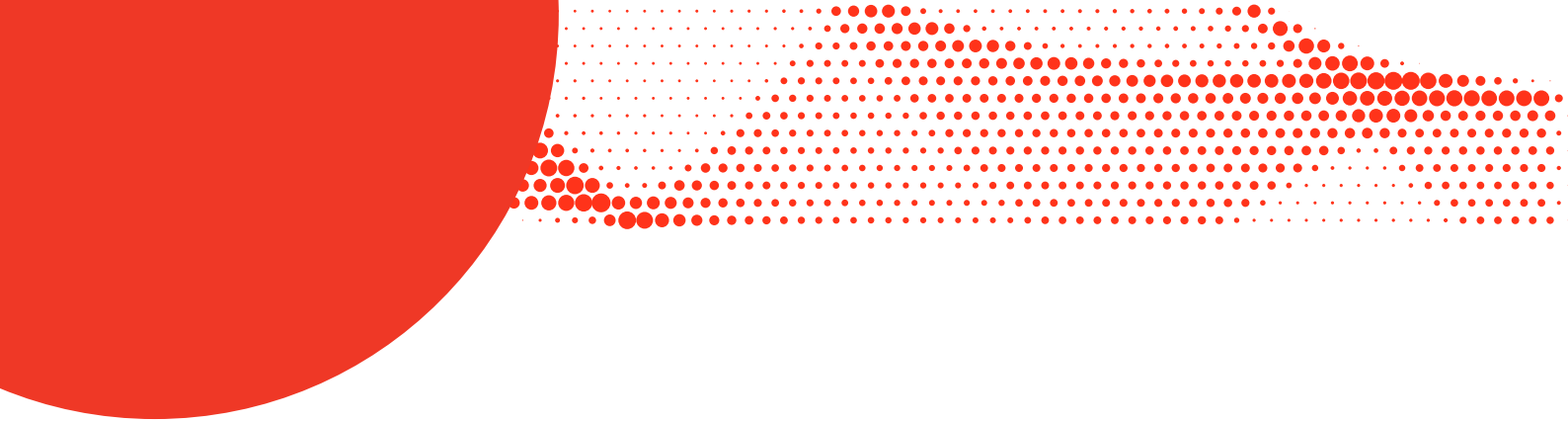
Indonesian social movements also intervened in the realm of social protection policies. For instance, SPRI and the Social Assistance Coalition (Koalisi Bantuan Sosial, Koalisi Bansos) launched a movement to access and control various social assistance and subsidy programs from the Indonesian government<sup>7</sup>. With the help of Koalisi Bansos, SPRI conducted a social audit analysis of its members and several urban poor hamlets in Jakarta. This small step allowed SPRI to get a better sense of its members' livelihood precariousness and push for government subsidy distribution. Out of the more than 2000 audited members, 930 household members who were eligible for the conditional cash transfer program, also known as the PKH (Program Keluarga Harapan) program, have not received their disbursement. The provincial social service agency then verified that 815 households were eligible to receive the national PKH program. In May 2020, SPRI then expanded its social auditing to cover roughly 4,000 urban poor households as a follow-up to the first survey. It found that around 2,000 households were qualified to receive the national PKH program and 3,400 households were eligible to receive Jakarta's PKH fund<sup>8</sup>.

Taking one step further, Koalisi Bansos also advocated for the Universal Basic Income (UBI) as a policy breakthrough for the Covid-19 crisis. Given the geographical swath of Indonesia, uneven distribution of social assistance, and government incompetency in handling the crisis, the coalition argued that UBI has the potential to address the sudden need for livelihood stability of the working people during the crisis. We support this assessment. Providing minimum living income for every adult Indonesian citizen will cushion socio-economic shocks on the working people and thereby guarantee general economic stability. To make it work even better, this scheme should ensure popular participation and democratic control from various people's organizations during implementation<sup>9</sup>.

These examples showed how the people's movement tackled the impact of the pandemic while battling against the implementation of the Omnibus Bill. The movement took up this two-pronged struggle at a time when capitalist development in Indonesia took a more authoritarian turn. Eviction and land-grabbing cases remained

<sup>6</sup>Interviews with Mikhael Adam, KPP Organizer, September 2020

<sup>7</sup>Koalisi Bansos is consisted of a number of NGOs and social movement organizations including KPRI and SPRI.



rampant during the pandemic. At the same time, state and corporate actors continued to push for the expansion of investment and infrastructural projects backed by security apparatuses. In North Sumatra, the Struggle Organization for the Guardians of the Land in Indonesia (Badan Persatuan Rakyat Penunggu Indonesia, BPRPI), an indigenous people's organization, fought against land grabbing committed by PTPN II, a state-owned company (Bangun 2020). Similarly, the Tebo Peasant Union (Serikat Petani Tebo, SPT) in Jambi struggled to win land rights stolen by PT WKS<sup>10</sup>. These are just a few instances of everyday disputes and oppression experienced by many elements of the working people.

Again, these initiatives showed that in every moment of capitalist crisis, there are opportunities for resistance. During this pandemic, efforts were done to connect disparate social movements and promote mutual learning continue, especially through online channels. While fighting various facets of capitalist oppression such as land grabbing, mass layoffs, and repression of anti-Omnibus Law protests, Indonesian social movements realized that there is a need to combine economic and political strategies and advocacies. This however can only be manifested under a more unified and class-conscious platform for the struggle that bridges fragmented organizations and puts collective participation of the working people as its main principle.

#### Concluding Remarks

The current trajectory of the Indonesian and global political economy however does not leave much room for hopeful predictions. Some analysts have argued that the Covid-19 crisis will present a heavy blow to capitalism or at the very least disrupt the oligarchic arrangement in Indonesia (Batubara 2020; Suryajaya 2020). Based on our detailed analysis, we can safely say that this assessment is premature. The Covid-19 pandemic has indeed been disruptive for the global capitalist structure as a whole. But to equate this sudden disruption and the inherent tendency for a crisis in capitalism as signs of its end is misleading.

Furthermore, a closer examination of the impacts of the coming economic crisis and the pandemic shows that while members of the ruling political and economic elites might suffer from this twin crisis, overall their class rule remains unchallenged. It is the majority of the working people who bear the brunt of the crisis.

This is what has been happening in Indonesia. As the state and the capitalist class are preparing to assert their dominance via the job creation Omnibus Bill, the pandemic temporarily disrupted this process of power consolidation. By and large, however, these political and economic elites can maintain their power vis-à-vis the working people. Worse, some of them are even able to benefit from this calamity. Several business sectors in Indonesia, such as textile, chemicals, pharmacy, medical equipment, food and beverage, logistics, and telecommunication have been able to gain some profit during this pandemic (Gusman 2020). The Indonesian Army and the State Intelligence Agency even tried to support Covid-19 vaccine development at Airlangga University (Bernie 2020). There is no sign that these elites will slow down in strengthening and consolidating their power base. As we are writing this paper, the Indonesian government and the House of Representatives decided to continue holding the regional head elections and pass the job creation Omnibus Law despite numerous criticisms and fear that these policies will exacerbate the Covid-19 crisis in Indonesia.

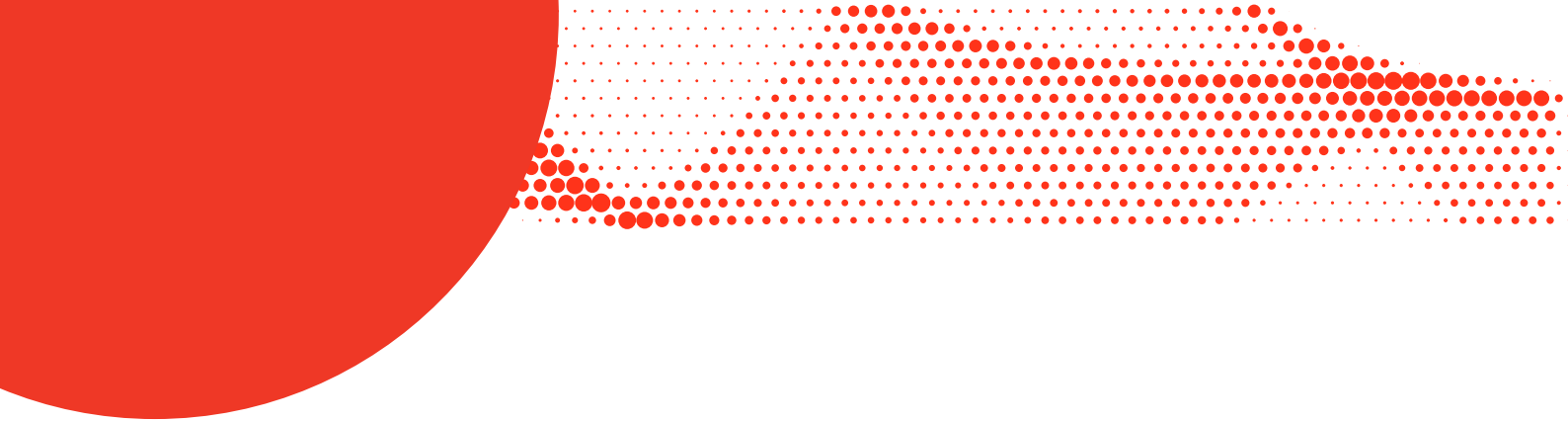
The global situation also looks rather bleak. As governments across the world struggle with effective policies to combat the pandemic, the market logic continues to dictate our economic, political, and social lives. Temporary

<sup>8</sup>Interviews with Dika Mohammad, SPRI General Secretary, September 2020

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Interview with Dodi SPT leader, September 2020





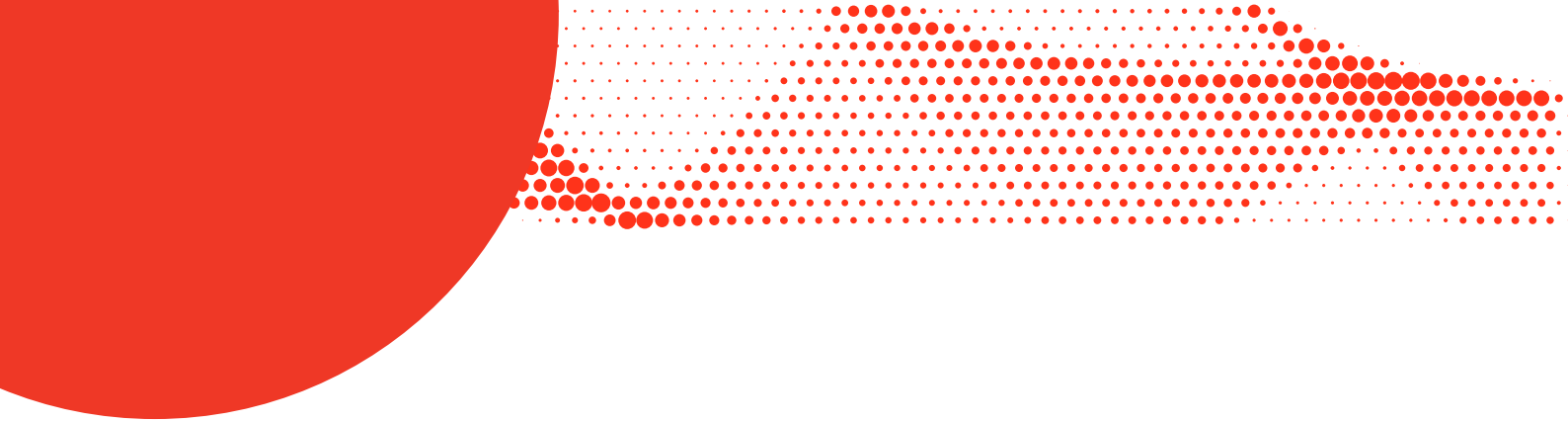
measures to cushion the unprecedented impacts of the pandemic are not only insufficient but are also unable to address the heart of the problem: severe inequality in healthcare services and facilities. This is reflected in the continuing dominance of big pharmaceutical companies in the production of Covid-19 vaccines and other healthcare services (Taibbi 2020). Despite efforts to promote closer global cooperation and cheaper vaccines, the big pharmaceutical industry is still emerging as the biggest profit-maker during this crisis. A more optimistic take on this issue is the possible resurgence of universal or near-universal healthcare policy ideas and proposals. But even this cautious optimism should be qualified, given the increasingly unpredictable and illiberal political climate throughout the course of the pandemic.

A more hopeful view, however, can be found in the practices and initiatives of various social movements in Indonesia and other parts of the world. For instance, Indonesian social movements sparked numerous people-led initiatives that aimed to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic while at the same time continuing advocacy work against the Omnibus Bill. This includes initiatives such as community donation efforts, food supply networks, online fundraising events, and community-led local lockdowns, to name a few. Additionally, these social movement actors and organizations also carry on their anti-Omnibus Bill campaign activities – from online campaigns to on-the-ground protests – while complying with social distancing and public health precautions.

This experience highlights important lessons for the global fight against capitalism and the construction of international solidarity among the working people. First, there is a pressing need to recenter class struggle in our fight to promote public health, expand democratic rights, and push socialist public policies. In the age of political correctness and identity politics, the Indonesian experience displays that what connects the diverse experience of oppression and a wide variety of marginalized groups is their common fate of exploitation against capitalism. It is this class-based experience, rather than identity-based expression, that should become the basis in understanding the nature of capitalist exploitation and its remedies. Secondly, the dual strategy of building alternative societal institutions and simultaneously challenging state power remains imperative to cushion the impacts of the capitalist crisis and, hopefully, fight back against the ruling class and secure gradual victories. Thirdly, there is a need to further promote bottom-up internationalism among working people's organizations across the world, especially those operating in the Global South.

This is something that is still lacking amid this pandemic. As participants in the Indonesian social movement scene, we admit that there is still a lack of communication and cooperation between movements in Indonesia and other parts of the world, including neighboring countries in Southeast Asia. This is rather unfortunate, considering that a closer connection between working people's organizations across borders and developing regions can strengthen the struggle against our common problems, whether it be austerity policies or the mishandling of the Covid-19 crisis. In Indonesia, organizations such as KPRI and the Working People's Party (Partai Rakyat Pekerja, PRP) have started this initiative by discussing the experience of the leftist government in Kerala in handling the Covid-19 pandemic with comrades from India and the Philippines<sup>11</sup>. We hope to see this type of initiative from other Indonesian social movement organizations in the future.

This brings us to the more important question: what are the alternative socialist policies in response to the twin crisis of capitalism and Covid-19? This is because ad-hoc, short-term measures are insufficient to address the long-term detrimental effects of the crisis. We, therefore propose two possible solutions: 1) scaling up ongoing campaign activities and solidarity economy initiatives and 2) promoting transformative and comprehensive



social protection policies. These proposals, we believe, will serve as a foundation for redistributionist and social protection agendas in the future.

The first proposal is straightforward. We argue that the sporadic advocacies and community initiatives executed by Indonesian social movements should be scaled up, moving beyond dispersed local activities. A more unified campaign against the Omnibus Bill should be sustained. The more challenging task is to broaden and connect diverse fundraising and food donation activities into an integrated, alternative food network. The purpose of this network is to connect rural direct producers of food – peasants and agricultural workers – with the working people as the most vulnerable urban consumers. By doing so, this network can effectively bypass profit-oriented big middlemen and distributors and thereby lessen the economic influence of market power especially in the food system.

The second proposal is much more ambitious. This is because pushing for redistributionist and social protection policies in Indonesia is a herculean task. As of now, several minimum social protection policies such as government-sponsored healthcare services and extensive educational subsidies for public schools are already in place. The next challenge is to push for further decommodification and democratic control across key public sectors – healthcare, education, public transportation, housing, decent jobs, and food supply, among others – and social classes – industrial and precarious workers, peasants, urban poor, working women, and the lower strata of salaried professionals, to name a few. Examples of these potential policies abound. For example, we propose the promotion of a democratic, planned food system where production, distribution, and consumption activities are organized by local communities and community-run producers' cooperatives. We also support several alternative policy schemes promoted by socialists in different parts of the world, such as UBI and the creation of new public sector jobs in renewable energy sectors through the Green New Deal. These policies have the potential to be implemented in the Indonesian context. To support these initiatives, working people and activists in Indonesia should also continue to formulate the most appropriate form of unified political leadership and carry on participatory research activities.

Of particular interest is the mainstreaming of UBI as an alternative social policy in the Indonesian context. A recent study on the feasibility of UBI in Indonesia, a joint project between KPRI and the social policy NGO Perkumpulan Prakarsa, revealed several illuminating findings (Maftuchan, et al. 2020; Ramdlaningrum 2020). First, there is widespread support for UBI and a more comprehensive social welfare scheme among government and civil society representatives – 68.68 percent of the respondents in an online survey conducted in September 2020 said that the state should promote the implementation of UBI<sup>12</sup>. Second, key civil society representatives in Indonesia see UBI not only as a form of cash transfer, but also as a mechanism of wealth redistribution especially for the most marginalized (e.g. informal workers, peasants, fishers, indigenous people, and working women), a social protection policy, an expansion of access to basic public services such as education, and a universal pension system – in short, a more progressive policy that goes beyond existing social welfare schemes<sup>13</sup>. Lastly and more importantly, the study's statistical simulation showed that UBI implementation can potentially reduce the wealth gap between poor and non-poor households by more than 40 percent, a significant number. These findings suggest the growing acceptance of UBI as an alternative to mainstream policies in Indonesia.

Echoing the Marxist sociologist Erik Olin Wright (2010), a democratic socialist solution to the double crisis will require revolutionary (rupture from existing state and social institutions), interstitial (consolidation of dual power

<sup>11</sup>This discussion was held in June 2020.

through the formation of alternative societal spaces and institutions), and symbiotic (deepening and expansion of existing reformist policies) strategies. This path, we argue, will open new possibilities to combat the impacts of the double crisis and advance the agenda of the working people in Indonesia and beyond.

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<sup>12</sup>This online survey was conducted in September 2020, targeting a variety of government, academic, and NGO representatives. Targeting 302 respondents, the completion rate of this survey was 50.99 percent (154/302).

<sup>13</sup> This is based on a focus group discussion with 26 representatives of local and national NGOs.

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# INDONESIA SOLIDARITY MOVEMENT DURING RESTRICTION: A Case Study of Solidaritas Pangan Jogja

By: Purnama Sari Pelupessy

The solidarity movement arose in response to among other things, massive layoffs, a lack of access to food, and a lack of access to health and education resources. Solidarity became the most visible phenomenon during the pandemic, presenting a turning point for global practices during this global crisis.

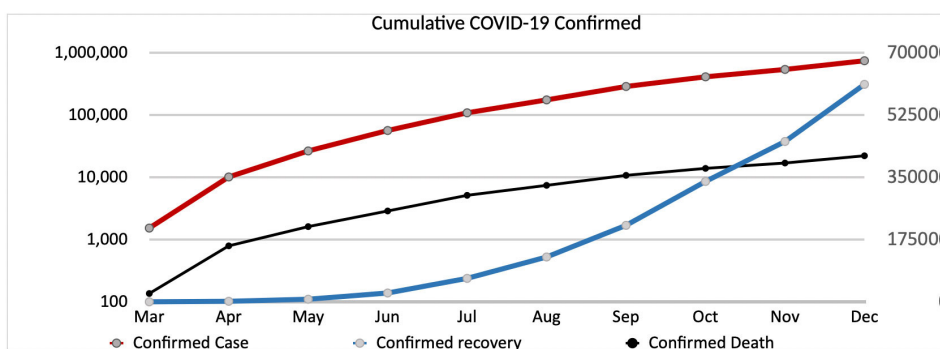


*The Indonesian government enacted a restriction policy in response to the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. The restrictions significantly impacted almost all sectors, particularly the food and logistics sectors, creating food insecurity and a chaotic situation at the grassroots level. On the other hand, community initiatives such as the food and logistic solidarity movement have emerged that attempt to overcome vulnerabilities at the grassroots level. This paper explores the Indonesian government's models and solutions for dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic and the people lead initiatives of the solidarity movement. This study uses qualitative methods to analyze power relations across different classes present during the pandemic, concluding that community efforts to build food solidarity and logistics can be a solution to crisis on a global scale.*

## Introduction

Since the discovery of COVID-19, up until it was declared a global pandemic, countries with increasing COVID-19 cases have sought to contain the virus by restricting human activities in public spaces.<sup>1</sup> Countries imposed regional quarantines, lockdowns, and regional restrictions on schools, offices, public facilities, workplaces, places of worship, markets, transportation, and travel bans.<sup>2</sup> Indonesia also implemented restrictions, with its policy of Large-Scale Social Restrictions (PSBB). The restrictions relate to prohibiting specific residents' activities in areas suspected to be infected with COVID-19, to prevent the further spread of the virus. The PSBB took effect on 31 March 2020, when the number of confirmed cases had reached 1,528, with the highest index of 80.09 on 24 April 2020.<sup>3</sup>[1]

**Figure 1.** The situation of COVID-19 Cases in Indonesia, 2020



Source: Ministry of Health, 2020<sup>4</sup>

A local government requesting to implement PSBB must report epidemiological curves, distribution maps, or local transmission data to the Ministry of Health. The local government must also give information about the fulfillment of people's basic needs, health facilities and infrastructure, budget and operationalization of social safety nets, and security. The Ministry of Health can decide whether to accept or reject the PSBB application based on the report.

Thousands of companies and SMEs had to reduce their workforce drastically, as many companies were affected by a decrease in revenue.<sup>5</sup> The closing or reduction of companies has impacted millions of workers who lost their jobs or experienced wage delays.<sup>6</sup> Informal workers and migrant workers, especially in urban areas, also

<sup>1</sup> World Health Organization, "Coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation Report No. 51", WHO, 11 March 2020, available at: [https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200311-sitrep-51-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=1ba62e57\\_10](https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200311-sitrep-51-covid-19.pdf?sfvrsn=1ba62e57_10)

<sup>2</sup> D. Dunford, B. Dale, N. Stylianou, E. Lowther, M. Ahmed, I. Arenas, "Asia, Australia and New Zealand in lockdown. Coronavirus: The world in lockdown in maps and charts.", BBC News, 7 April 2020, available at: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-52103747>

<sup>3</sup> M. Roser, H. Ritchie, E. Ortiz-Ospina, J. Hasell, D. Beltekian, E. Mathieu, B. Macdonald, & C. Giattino, "Policy responses to the coronavirus pandemic - statistics and research", Our World in Data, 2020 available at: <https://ourworldindata.org/policy-responses-covid?country=%7EIDN>.

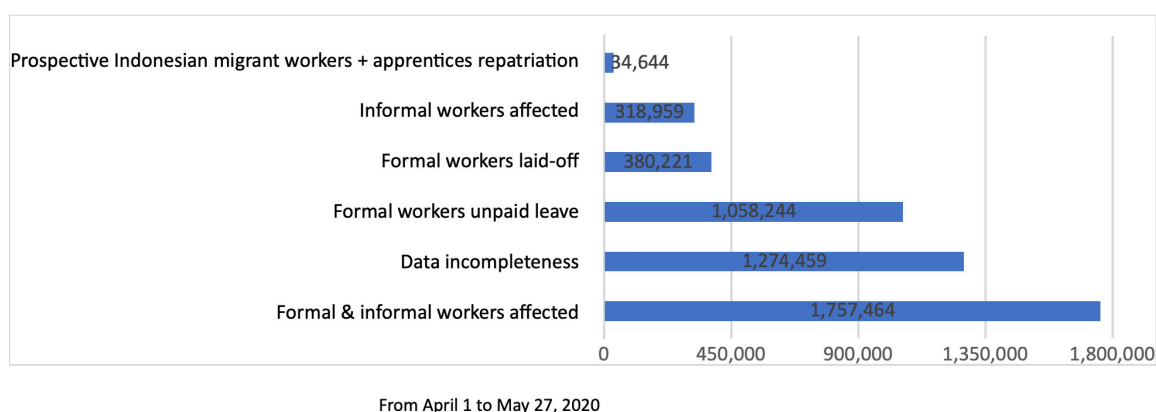
<sup>4</sup> Ministry of Health, "Indonesia COVID-19 Data Analysis, Update As of 27 December 2020", 2020,, available at <https://covid19.go.id/p/berita/analisis-data-covid-19-indonesia-update-27-desember-2020>.

<sup>5</sup> M.A. Rahman, A. Z. Kusuma, & H. Arfyanto, "Employment situations of economic sectors impacted by the COVID-19 Pandemic (No. 1)", SMERU Research Institute and Knowledge Sector Initiative, June 2020, available at: [http://smeru.or.id/sites/default/files/publication/ib01\\_naker\\_en.pdf](http://smeru.or.id/sites/default/files/publication/ib01_naker_en.pdf) and Y. Pusparisa & S. Fitra, "Pandemi timbukan sederet persoalan ketenagakerjaan", Databoks-Katadata, 9 July 2020, available at: <https://databoks.katadata.co.id/datapublish/2020/07/09/pandemi-timbukan-sederet-persoalan-ketenagakerjaan>

<sup>6</sup> Statistics Indonesia, "Hasil Survei Sosial Demografi Dampak Covid-19 2020", Badan Pusat Statistik, June 2020, available at: [www.bps.go.id/publication/2020/06/01/669cb2e8646787e52dd171c4/hasil-survei-sosial-demografi-dampak-covid-19-2020.html](http://www.bps.go.id/publication/2020/06/01/669cb2e8646787e52dd171c4/hasil-survei-sosial-demografi-dampak-covid-19-2020.html).

had difficulty earning an income. They faced multiple risks because most of them do not have social protection and security, so they were not included in any support beneficiaries list.<sup>7</sup> Restrictions have caused a significant reduction in economic activity and contributed to various pre-existing social inequalities based on gender, and class.<sup>8</sup>

**Figure 2.** The Number of Workers Affected by Restriction [2]



Source: Databox-Katadata (Pusparisa & Fitra, 2020)

Disruption to food supply chains from production to consumption arose after the government implemented the PSBB.<sup>9</sup> Food shortages mainly occurred in urban areas. In some areas, farmers continued to harvest crops but found it difficult to distribute their agricultural produce due to restrictions and decreased purchasing power. Layoffs and wage reduction contributed to this risk. People also had difficulty getting foodstuffs or primary necessity packages due to restrictions on markets and grocery stores.<sup>10</sup>

Farmers lost a significant portion of their income and had difficulties in their access to food sources. Fishermen continued to catch fish but the number of buyers was severely reduced.<sup>11</sup> Vegetables and fish piled up and rotted. The export of foodstuffs has been temporarily suspended due to restrictions between countries aimed at maintaining domestic food stability and security.<sup>12</sup> Additionally, the limited distribution of domestic food, including between food-producing rural areas and food-consuming urban areas, affected the income instability and household consumption of farming families. The Ministry of Transportation has issued transportation and travel

<sup>7</sup> Migrant Care, "Covid-19 and Indonesian Migrant Workers.", Migrant CARE, 12 June 2020, pp.12–5, available at: [migrantcare.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/20200612\\_Graphic-Slide-MC-COVID-19-english-minimum.pdf](http://migrantcare.net/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/20200612_Graphic-Slide-MC-COVID-19-english-minimum.pdf) and H. Retnaningsih, "Bantuan Sosial bagi Pekerja di Tengah Pandemi Covid-19: Sebuah Analisis terhadap Kebijakan Sosial Pemerintah", *Aspirasi*, 2020, pp. 215–27, December 2020, available at: <http://jurnal.dpr.go.id/index.php/aspirasi/article/view/1756>

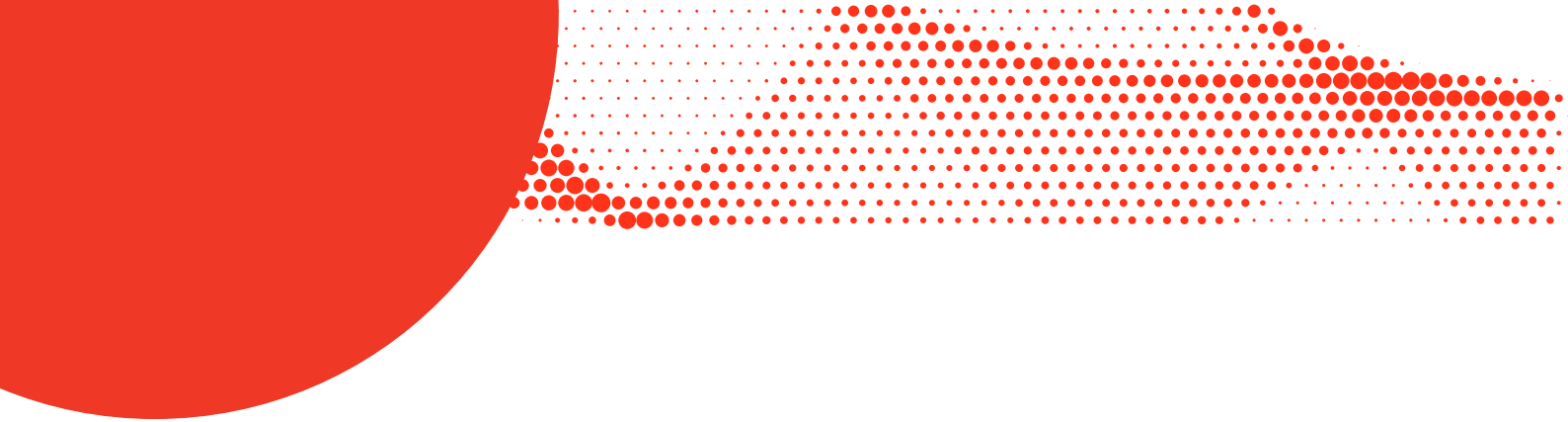
<sup>8</sup> National Commission on Violence against Women, "Siaran Pers Komnas Perempuan tentang Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan", Komnas Perempuan, 6 May 2020, available at <https://komnasperempuan.go.id/siaran-pers-detail/siaran-pers-komnas-perempuan-tentang-kekerasan-terhadap-transpuan-jakarta-6-mei-2020> and D.M. Purnamasari, "Banyak Masyarakat Terancam Diusir Dari Hunian Karena Tak Mampu Bayar Sewa", *KOMPAS*, 6 May 2020, available at <https://nasional.kompas.com/read/2020/05/06/15352821/banyak-masyarakat-terancam-diusir-dari-hunian-karena-tak-mampu-bayar-sewa>

<sup>9</sup> B. Dekker, "The impact of COVID-19 measures on Indonesian value chains", Clingendael Institute, June 2020, available at: [https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Policy\\_Brief\\_COVID-19\\_Impact\\_on\\_the\\_Value\\_Chain\\_Asia\\_June\\_2020.pdf](https://www.clingendael.org/sites/default/files/2020-06/Policy_Brief_COVID-19_Impact_on_the_Value_Chain_Asia_June_2020.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Gugus Tugas Covid-19, "Pedoman umum menghadapi pandemi Covid-19 bagi pemerintah daerah", Covid19.go.id, March 2020, pp. 78 and 138-43, available at <https://covid19.go.id/p/panduan/kemendagri-pedoman-umum-menghadapi-pandemi-covid-19-bagi-pemerintah-daerah>

<sup>11</sup> F. Mubarak & M. Ambari, "Sinking feeling for Indonesian fishers as Covid-19 hits seafood sales", *Mongabay*, 7 April 2020, April, available at: <https://news.mongabay.com/2020/04/sinking-feeling-for-indonesian-fishers-as-covid-19-hits-seafood-sales/>

<sup>12</sup> A. Patunru, G. Oktania, & P. Audrine, "Mitigating food supply chain disruption amid Covid-19 (Policy Brief No. 3)", Jakarta:



activity restrictions.<sup>13</sup> However, most people still chose to return to their hometowns because of the uncertainty of food supply in the cities where they worked.<sup>14</sup>

How can people meet their food needs and survive during restrictions when they have no income? This situation has motivated some people to form solidarity movements. Individuals began to join or form groups in various areas to address food insecurity at the grassroots level. There are various solidarity activities such as planting and harvesting, setting up public kitchens and cheap markets, distribution of foodstuffs, distribution of primary necessities packages, and distribution of masks and hand sanitizer.

Solidaritas Pangan Jogja (SPJ) is a solidarity movement formed at the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. SPJ emerged due to restrictions that caused increased poverty and hunger in Yogyakarta, becoming one of the pioneers of the widespread food solidarity movement which emerged in various regions.

This paper will answer two key questions: first, how did the restriction policy significantly contribute to food and logistics insecurity? And second, how did the SPJ overcome food and logistics insecurity at the grassroots level? This paper explores both the government's paradigm of 'solving' the pandemic by implementing a restriction policy that gave rise to food and logistics insecurity and the SPJ's paradigm and solution to the problem of food insecurity by implementing food solidarity practices during the restriction in Yogyakarta.

Firstly, this paper begins by discussing the restriction policy as a means of overcoming the pandemic and its impact on the food and logistics sector. The paper then describes and analyzes the background and characteristics of SPJ activities: how they formed the solidarity movement; the procedures for obtaining basic foodstuff; the means of processing and distributing food and foodstuffs or primary necessity packages to the community in a collective, organized, and coordinated manner; and challenges in carrying out solidarity activities including how to enable public participation, organize production flows and food distribution, and overcome shortages and deal with movement disturbances. Secondly, this paper describes the food and logistics solidarity movement as a political movement, and thirdly, the final portion of the paper discusses the idea of a solidarity movement as a global movement.

This study finds that the SPJ pattern of organizing allowed food and logistics solidarity to expand and escalate into a structured and systematic movement. This study also shows how a situation that arose during a crisis—the unprecedented event of the COVID-19 pandemic—became an opportunity to create global solidarity.

### **Food and Logistics Definition**

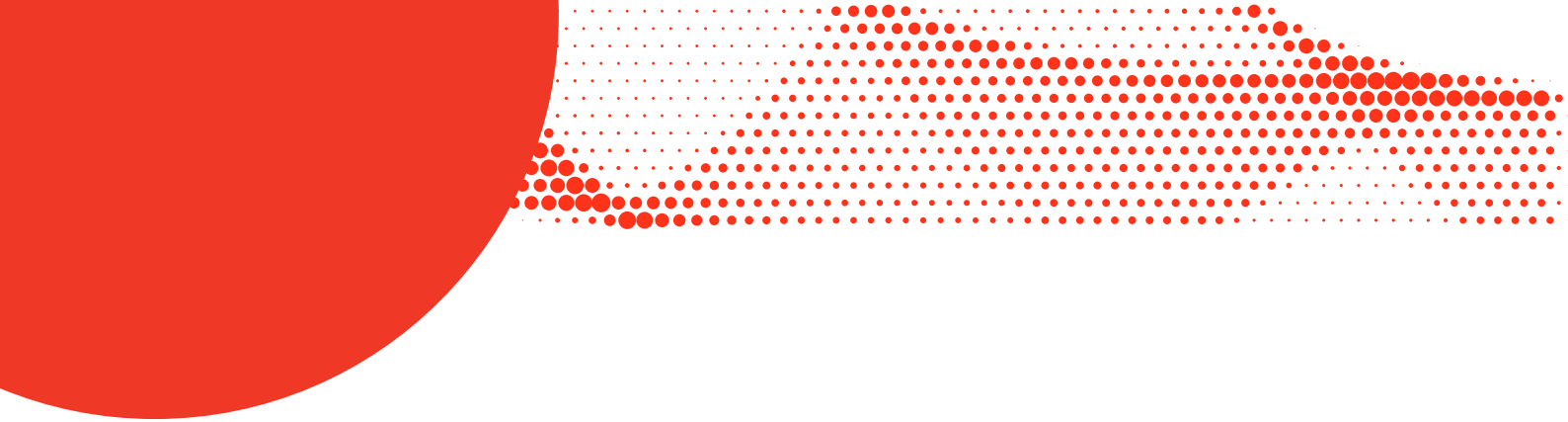
Under the Indonesian Law of Food, the definition of the term 'food' includes all the biological products of agriculture, plantation, forestry, fisheries, animal husbandry, and waters, which may be processed or unprocessed, which are designated for human consumption. This includes food additives, raw materials, and other materials used to prepare, process, and manufacture food or drinks.<sup>15</sup>

Center for Indonesian Policy Studies, May 2020, available at: [https://62db8dc7-7d03-4efc-98b1-70ff88ee4d70.usrfiles.com/ugd/62db8d\\_3e61e4478abf4417851f58fa1428a1b5.pdf](https://62db8dc7-7d03-4efc-98b1-70ff88ee4d70.usrfiles.com/ugd/62db8d_3e61e4478abf4417851f58fa1428a1b5.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> Gugus Tugas COVID-19, "Surat Edaran Nomor 4 Tahun 2020 Tentang Kriteria Pembatasan Perjalanan Orang Dalam Rangka Percepatan Penanganan Corona Virus Disease (COVID-19)" Covid19.go.id, 6 May 2020, available at <https://covid19.go.id/p/regulasi/surat-edaran-nomor-4-tahun-2020> and Ministry of Transportation, "Peraturan Menteri Perhubungan Republik Indonesia Nomor 18 Tahun 2020 Tentang Pengendalian Transportasi Dalam Rangka Pencegahan Penyebaran Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)", Ministry of Transportation, 9 April 2020, available at [https://jdih.dephub.go.id/assets/uudocs/permen/2020/PM\\_18\\_TAHUN\\_2020.pdf](https://jdih.dephub.go.id/assets/uudocs/permen/2020/PM_18_TAHUN_2020.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> <https://ejurnal.kependudukan.lipi.go.id/index.php/jki/article/download/584/pd>





Meanwhile, Trisilawaty et al. defined logistics in the context of food production and consumption as:

The management of production, supply, storage, and distribution of food between regions, including domestic rice grain procurement and RASKIN (Rice for Poor Households) distribution, price stabilization, and national rice stock fertilization.<sup>16</sup>

### **The Restriction**

The definition of restriction in this paper refers to the Large-Scale Social Restriction (PSBB) set out in the Indonesian Law of Health Quarantine, which limits people's activities in an area of concern to prevent the possibility of spreading COVID-19.<sup>17</sup> Unlike other quarantine types present in the Health Quarantine Act, the PSBB does not oblige the government to provide and distribute food to affected communities. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the government issued Government Regulation No. 21 in 2020, allowing the implementation of the PSBB under the Indonesian Health Quarantine Act.

### **Crisis: A Contextual Situation**

Crisis refers to something that disturbs the balance of capital movements, or the blockage of capital. Marx argued that "crises are never more than momentary, violent solutions for the existing contradictions, violent eruptions that re-establish the disturbed balance for the time being".<sup>18</sup> Michael Lebowitz added that the significance of the crisis is the manifestation of the examination of growth, where capital has faced obstacles that thwart its experiment and negate its essence.<sup>19</sup> Meaning that capitalism has played a role in creating a crisis and is at the same time trying to remedy it.

Emile Durkheim argued that social solidarity is characterized by cohesion between individuals in modern society that ensures social order and stability.<sup>20</sup> The interdependence in society that arises from work specialization is complementary, mutual, and connected, and not a result of some sense of innate togetherness or a moral bond. According to Durkheim, social solidarity in a time of crisis emphasizes the importance of collectivism and collective awareness based on social integration.

### **Solidarity: Theory and Practice**

Avery Kolers stated that the principles of solidarity theory are not for the oppressed people but the others who join when there is a call for solidarity because the action is needed and not because they agree on an objective.<sup>21</sup> Kolers emphasized the individuality and autonomy of agents who are in solidarity.

Conversely, James Petras situated solidarity as part of a movement that aims to raise awareness of a society's

<sup>15</sup> Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 18 of 2012 Regarding Food, November 2012, Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Republik Indonesia, available at: <https://www.dpr.go.id/dokjdih/document/uu/278.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> C. Trisilawaty, Marimin, & N.A. Achsani, "Analisis Optimasi Rantai pasok beras dan penggunaan gudang di perum BULOG divre DKI Jakarta", *Jurnal Pangan*, 2011, p. 182 <https://jurnalpangan.com/index.php/pangan/article/view/38/33>

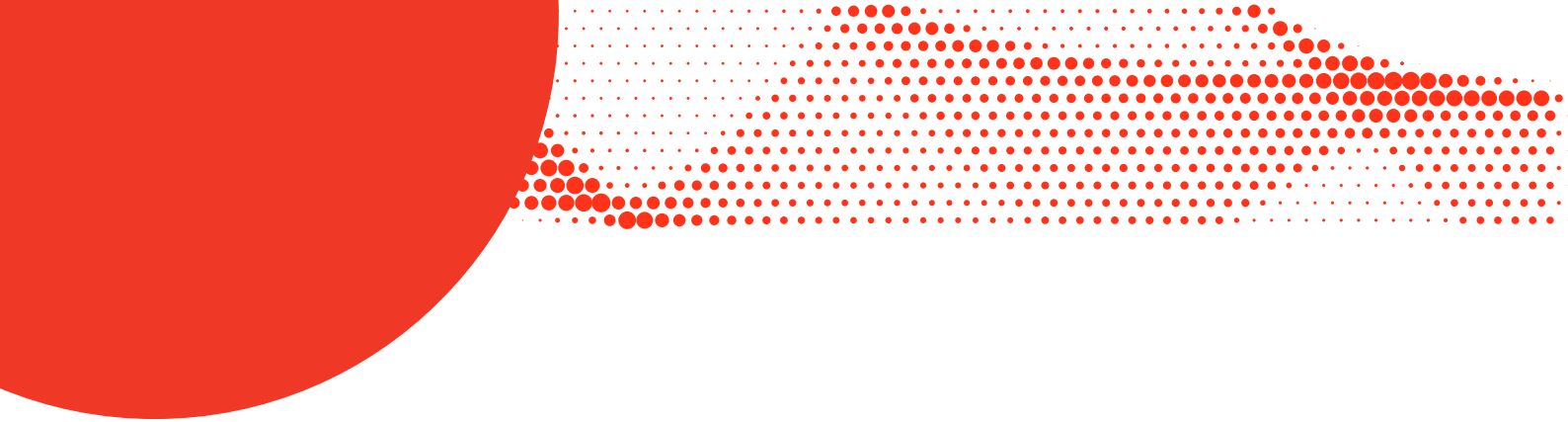
<sup>17</sup> Law of the Republic of Indonesia Number 6 of 2018 Regarding Health Quarantine, August 2018, Dewan Perwakilan Rakyat Republik Indonesia, available at <https://www.dpr.go.id/dokjdih/document/uu/1713.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> Marx, K., *Capital*, Penguin Books in association with New Left Review, 1978–81, p.5916

<sup>19</sup> M.A. Lebowitz, *Following Marx: Method, Critique and Crisis*, Haymarket Books, 1 September 2009, p.132

<sup>20</sup> E. Durkheim, *The Division of Labour in Society*, Macmillan, 1984

<sup>21</sup> A. Kolers, *A Moral Theory of Solidarity*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2016.



challenges and to building political power to change the general condition of the majority.<sup>22</sup> Solidarity in this sense refers to the solidarity of oppressed groups, which focuses on the collective action of members in the same class who share the same economic hardships, striving for collective improvement. Solidarity movements enable analysis and education in the context of the class struggle and take political risks through direct action. Sally Scholz even constructed a taxonomy of solidarity which consists of social solidarity, civil solidarity, and political solidarity.<sup>23</sup> Political solidarity, in this sense, requires a radical form of action and participation in the collective as a response to certain situations of injustice, oppression, social vulnerability, or tyranny.<sup>24</sup>

In a recent study on political solidarity, Simon Dougherty presented a spiral model prototype covering four aspects of multimodal solidarity, including: (1) best practices, (2) new theory, (3) adaptive organizational formation, and (4) networked political coalitions. Dougherty's spiral model can be used to build political relationships between different solidarity groups that develop simultaneously.<sup>25</sup>

Solidarity practices in times of crisis take various forms in different countries, involving individuals, organizations, and a combination of both. Jean Drèze and Amartya Sen describe how China, India, and Africa managed to overcome hunger through public involvement in various forms and actions.<sup>26</sup> Malnutrition and milk imports led to the creation of the Operation Flood (OF) movement in India, designed as a structural reorganization of the national milk market. The OF involved thousands of farmers who built cooperatives which made India an independent country with regard to both milk production and marketing.<sup>27</sup> During the COVID-19 pandemic, solidarity movements were started in various countries throughout the Greater Middle East, South and East Asia, Southern Africa, Europe, and South America.<sup>28</sup>

Haris Malamidis observed the development of social movement communities since the 2008 crisis through Solidarity 4 All (S4A), a platform which connects and supports solidarity organizations and initiatives in Greece.<sup>29</sup> Malamidis tabulated three broad categories of services in the food social movement: market organizations without intermediaries, collective and social kitchen organizations, food package collection and distribution involving the Social Movement Organization (SMO), and neighborhood assemblies.<sup>30</sup>

In a broader context, James Petras stated that solidarity involves sharing the risks of a movement, as both a process of political and educational struggle and to secure the social transformation agenda. Solidarity as a form of collective struggle contains the seeds of a future democratic collectivist society.<sup>31</sup> Petras's statement implies that solidarity can extend to the international level. Gleb J. Albert argued that internationalism should be seen as

<sup>22</sup> J. Petras, "NGOs: In the service of imperialism", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 14 May 2007, pp. 429–40, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472339980000221>

<sup>23</sup> S.J., Scholz, *Political Solidarity*, Pennsylvania State University Press, 2008.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 21–52

<sup>25</sup> S.A. Dougherty, "The art of political solidarity", Australian Catholic University Research Bank, 2017, pp. 21-52, available at: [https://acuresearchbank.acu.edu.au/download/09a82c6c29337531ad9609aee910aaa300e5ce975af6dd8e8ea11540764f46d6/1830246/Dougherty\\_2017\\_The\\_art\\_of\\_political\\_solidarity.pdf](https://acuresearchbank.acu.edu.au/download/09a82c6c29337531ad9609aee910aaa300e5ce975af6dd8e8ea11540764f46d6/1830246/Dougherty_2017_The_art_of_political_solidarity.pdf)

<sup>26</sup> J. Drèze & A. Sen, *Hunger and Public Action*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989, pp. 21-52

<sup>27</sup> B.A. Scholten, *India's White Revolution: Operation Flood, Food Aid and Development*, I.B. Tauris, Bloomsbury Publishing, 30 July 2010, pp. 2-4, 11, 18, 232

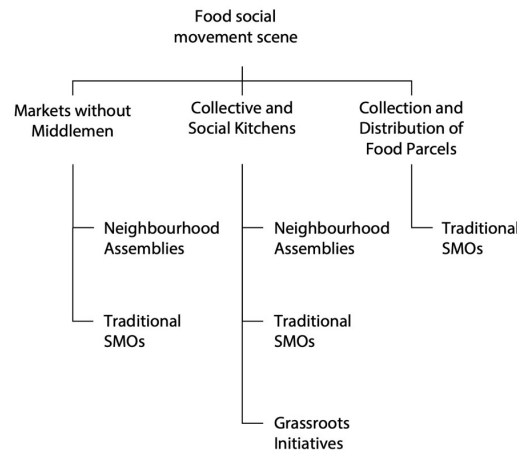
<sup>28</sup> M. Sitrin & Colectiva Sembrar, "Pandemic Solidarity: Mutual Aid During the Covid-19 Crisis", Pluto Press, available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv12sdx5v>

<sup>29</sup> H. Malamidis, "Social movements and solidarity structures in crisis-ridden Greece", Amsterdam University Press, 2021, available at: <https://library.oapen.org/bitstream/id/d995019b-b5e9-4632-8158-35938fdcf1fc/9789048551460.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 80–3

<sup>31</sup> J. Petras, "NGOs: In the service of imperialism", *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 14 May 2007, p. 438, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00472339980000221>

**Figure 3. Repertoires and actors in the social movement scene of Food<sup>32</sup>**



a revolutionary ideological and political concept.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, the class struggle must be international and thus, there is a need for international class solidarity. According to Albert, this is a vital principle of both the ideology of solidarity and within limits, the political practice. Petras and Albert, then, both suggest that the future of global solidarity is in internationalism.

### Field Research and Methodology

This study uses a qualitative descriptive method with a case study approach to analyze findings comprehensively. This research explores several key problems, dissecting power relations and the actions taken to create ideas for future global movements.

The data collection was done using both purposive sampling and snowball sampling. The primary data sources consisted of in-depth interviews with sources and a collection of internal documents from SPJ. Specific criteria were used to identify SPJ members who work in food solidarity, particularly in terms of pioneering the solidarity movement, organizational background, regional characteristics, and accessibility. This study also uses secondary data from official electronic data belonging to the government, national electronic media sources, social media, infographics, and brochures. The primary data was collected from September to December 2020 while the secondary data was obtained from January 2020 to February 2021.

Initial interviews were conducted with twelve sources from whom four key sources were re-selected. The interview guide contains open-ended and semi-structured questions that cover a variety of local contexts and disparities. Interviews were conducted directly by visiting sources in Yogyakarta. The interviews focused on the sources' profile, mode of work, challenges, and collective views on the solidarity movement. Interviews were terminated when there was repetition or when sources were unsuccessful at adding new relevant information to this study. Because this research took place during a pandemic, when most of Indonesia was under government imposed restrictions, this research is limited to those sources within reach.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid.

<sup>33</sup>G.J. Albert, "International Solidarity With(out) World Revolution: The Transformation of "Internationalism" in Early Soviet Society.", *Monde(s)*, 2016, p.38–50, available at: <https://www.cairn.info/revue-mondes-2016-2-page-33.htm>

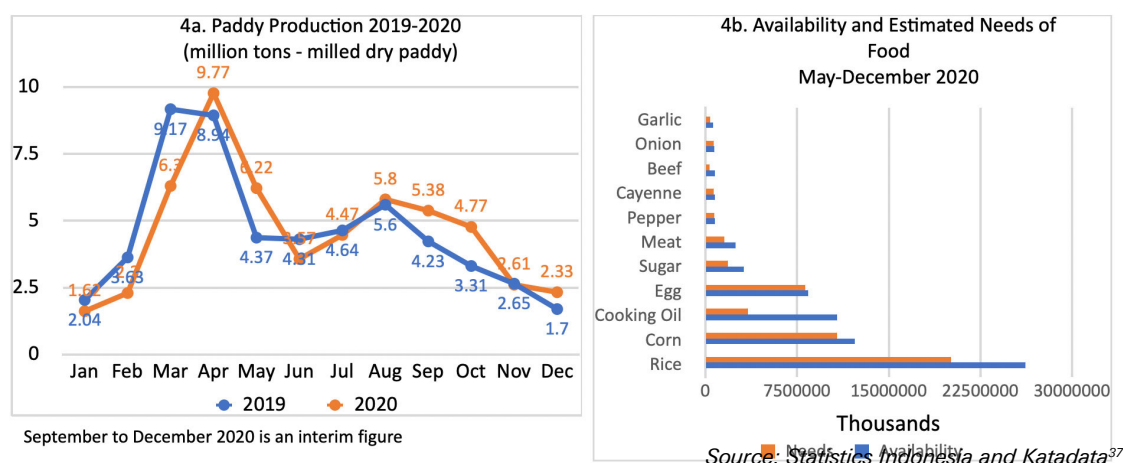
## Restriction in Indonesia

From the beginning, the Indonesian government did not take the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic seriously. Health Minister Terawan Agus Putranto said that the coronavirus is a mild virus but a heavy hoax.<sup>34</sup> Epidemiology and virus expert Syahrizal Syarif stated that coronavirus is contagious but it is just like a common cold or cough and does not cause death.<sup>35</sup>

Jokowi stated that the PSBB was not a lockdown nor quarantine but a limitation of community activities aimed at avoiding the pandemic's impact on small businesses, informal workers, and those who get a daily income.<sup>36</sup>

Food shortages occurred mainly in urban areas, even amidst the panen raya (big harvest)[3]. The highest rice production in 2020 occurred in April, amounting to 5.60 million tons (Figure 4a). However, rice availability from May until December 2020 met the needs of the populace. Interestingly, the disruption of production and distribution occurred regardless of the sufficient supply of warehouses and distribution centers. In contrast, staple goods such as chilies, eggs, and chicken meat had deficits due to a decline in agricultural production capacity.

**Figure 4.** The Situation of Food in Indonesia April-December 2020



Layoffs or wage reductions caused a drastic decrease in purchasing power making it difficult for farmers to distribute their agricultural products. This situation has an impact on lowering prices at the farming level. The Farmer Exchange Rate (NTP) decreased from 102.09 in March 2020 to 99.47 in May of the same year. Meanwhile, the Agricultural Business Exchange Rates (NTUP) also decreased from 102.90 to 100.16 between March and May.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Najwa Shihab, "Menangkal corona - Menkes terawan: Virus corona ringan, hoaksnya berat (part 4)", YouTube, 5 February 2020, available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=694TzfHzfc&ab\\_channel=NajwaShihab](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=694TzfHzfc&ab_channel=NajwaShihab).

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

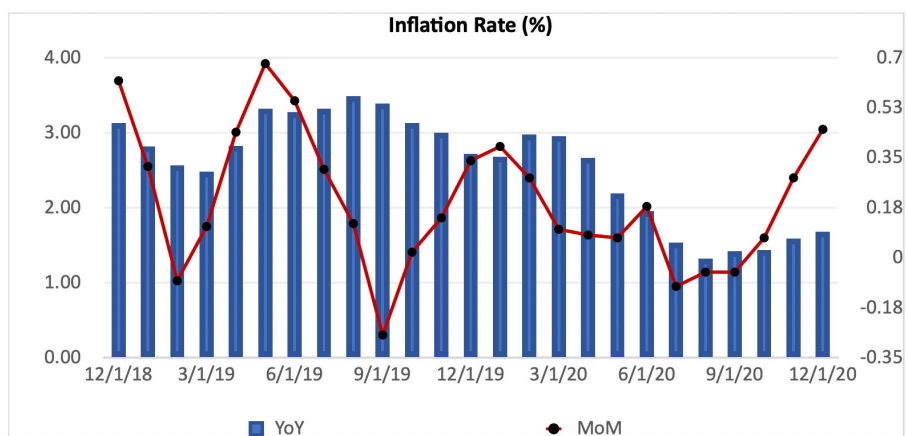
<sup>36</sup> Kompas TV, "Jokowi: Kita beruntung pilih PSBB bukan lockdown", Youtube, 7 May 2020, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGvbOQ6klmA&-feature=youtu.be>

<sup>37</sup> Statistics Indonesia, "Rice Harvest and Production Area in Indonesia 2020", Badan Pusat Statistik, 15 October 2020, available at: <https://www.bps.go.id/pressrelease/2020/10/15/1757/luas-panen-dan-produksi-padi-pada-tahun-2020-mengalami-kenaikan-dibandingkan-tahun-2019-masing-masing-sebesar-1-02-dan-1-02-persen-.html> and D.H. Jayani, "Perkiraan Kebutuhan dan Ketersediaan Pangan hingga Akhir 2020", Katadata, 22 June 2020, available at: <https://databoks.katadata.co.id/datapublish/2020/06/22/perkiraan-kebutuhan-dan-ketersediaan-pangan-hingga-akhir-2020>

<sup>38</sup> Statistics Indonesia, "Inflation, Farmer Exchange Rates, Producer Prices of Paddy and Rice, Wholesale Price Index, Tourism and Transportation", Badan Pusat Statistik, 1 September 2020, available at: [https://www.bps.go.id/website/materi\\_eng/](https://www.bps.go.id/website/materi_eng/)

The pandemic affected supply and demand, reflecting supply disruptions caused by restrictions. Inflation in 2020 increased by 1.68 percent, while the lowest monthly inflation was recorded in July at minus 0.1 percent.<sup>39</sup> In the last two years, the lowest inflation peak occurred during the pandemic with only a 1.32 percent rise in Q2 of 2020. In the second quarter of 2020, gross domestic product (GDP) fell to minus 5.32 percent. Community household consumption also fell drastically to minus 5.52 percent.<sup>40</sup>

**Figure 5. Inflation Rate in Indonesia**



Source Statistics Indonesia (2021a)

The primary sources of food and agricultural products are traditional markets or supermarkets, including online SMEs. In urban areas, the scarcity of foodstuff and primary necessity packages was very pronounced and stocks often ran out. Supermarkets limited the number of items that could be purchased, such as meat, sugar, flour, rice, and milk. Supermarkets also limited the maximum number of visitors at a time. The Ministry of Agriculture claimed that food logistics were secure. However, many people were constantly looking for food and forced to ignore the restrictions because they had to eat. Nevertheless, there was a shortage of access to these goods, not because of the reduced supply from farmers across the region but because the government decided not to secure the food supply chain for the population.

The Indonesian government issued policy strategies to deal with the impact of a pandemic. The main points of these strategies include accelerating economic recovery, providing health services, food security, and ensuring affected sectors receive compensation through an economic stimulus package. The government released economic stimulus packages in the form of fiscal and monetary stimuli to maintain people’s purchasing power and maintain economic and financial stability. Several forms of social assistance were distributed through the social safety net program, including assistance from the Family Hope Program (PKH), primary necessity packages, Pre-Employment Cards, and electricity rate discounts. The stimulus package also targeted individuals, SMEs, Large Businesses, and Industry.<sup>41</sup>

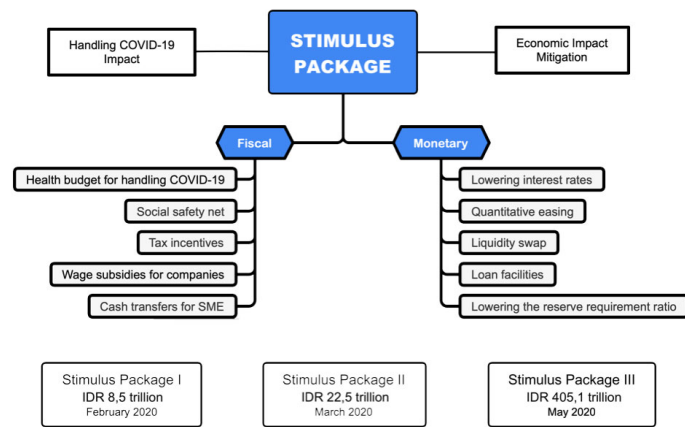
materiBrsEng-20200901113232.pdf.

<sup>39</sup> <https://www.bps.go.id/publication/2021/01/22/5e00fb7747dd5a7e0818fa40/laporan-bulanan-data-sosial-ekonomi-januari-2021.html>

<sup>40</sup> Statistics Indonesia, “Indonesian Economic Growth Quarter III-2020”, Badan Pusat Statistik, 5 November 2020, p.10, available at: <https://www.bps.go.id/pressrelease/2020/11/05/1738/ekonomi-indonesia-triwulan-iii-2020-tumbuh-5-05-persen--q-to-q.html>.

<sup>41</sup> Ministry of Finance, “Kerangka ekonomi makro dan pokok-pokok kebijakan fiskal tahun 2021: Percepatan pemulihan ekonomi dan penguatan reformasi”, available at: <https://fiskal.kemenkeu.go.id/informasi-publik/apbn?tahun=2021>

**Figure 6. Several Forms of Stimulus for Handling COVID-19 Impact**

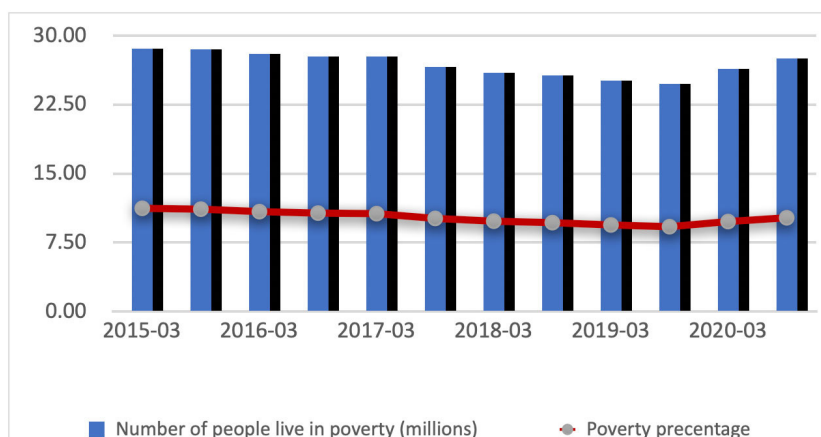


Source: Ministry of Finance (2021, p. 14)

Unfortunately, corruption is still a big problem in Indonesia’s bureaucracy. At the time of this research, the Minister of Social Affairs and member of the Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle (PDI-P), Juliari Peter Batubara, is being investigated for corruption in relation to the Ministry of Social Affairs’ COVID-19 social assistance funds project. The fund should be used to provide basic necessities worth IDR 300,000 per package, with a total value of around IDR 5.9 trillion. The total amount of corruption was around IDR 20.8 billion, wherein Batubara received IDR 17 billion from the project.<sup>42</sup>

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the poverty rate has also increased to 10.19 percent or 27.54 million people

**Figure 7. Number and %age of People Live in Poverty, 2015–September 2020**



Source: Statistics Indonesia<sup>44</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Kompas TV, Mensos Juliari Batubara Tersangka Korupsi, KPK Temukan 7 Koper Isi Uang, YouTube, 6 December 2020, available at: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqr1lcAJGtQ&ab\\_channel=KompascomReporteronLocation](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hqr1lcAJGtQ&ab_channel=KompascomReporteronLocation).

<sup>43</sup> V.F. Thomas, “Sri Mulyani Akui Bansos Pemerintah Tumpang Tindih Saat Corona”, *tirto.id*, 9 May 2020, available at: <https://tirto.id/sri-mulyani-akui-bansos-pemerintah-tumpang-tindih-saat-corona-foic>

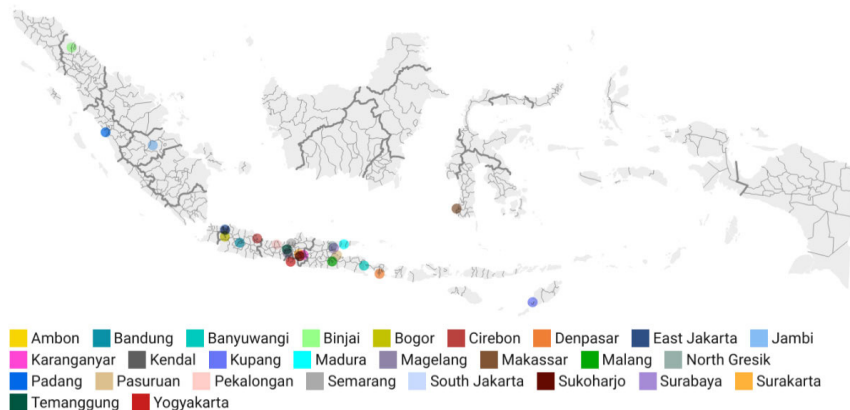
<sup>44</sup> Statistics Indonesia, “Profil kemiskinan di Indonesia”, Badan Pusat Statistik, September 2020, available at: <https://www.bps.go.id/pressrelease/2021/02/15/1851/persentase-penduduk-miskin-september-2020-naik-menjadi-10-19-persen.html>.

following a downward trend in previous years. The reason is that economic activity cannot continue as usual because income has decreased at almost all levels of society, and especially at the lower levels. The government emphasized that social assistance has been distributed and that people do not have to fear the threat of hunger. However, concerns arose over the economic stimulus package due to the inaccuracy of beneficiaries' data. The data used by the government for recipients of social assistance was largely unverified and not updated, for instance, there were still dead people included in the list. Moreover, the social assistance provided by the government was deemed insufficient to meet the needs of all the poor and those affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>43</sup> Apart from layoffs and chaos in the distribution of assistance, the poverty rate increase was due to handling the pandemic since the implementation of the restriction.

### The Emergence of the Solidarity Movement

It is essential to look at the emergence of the food solidarity movement and logistics as a whole, which appeared as small supply chains and extended to various regions in Indonesia [Appendix 1]. The solidarity movement initiators in both civil solidarity and social solidarity are diverse including activists, progressive organizations, communities, and NGOs. The SPJ is one of the organically developed solidarity movements that has become a political solidarity movement.

**Figure 8. Mapping Indonesian Solidarity Movements**



Visual <https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/BPyUX/3/>

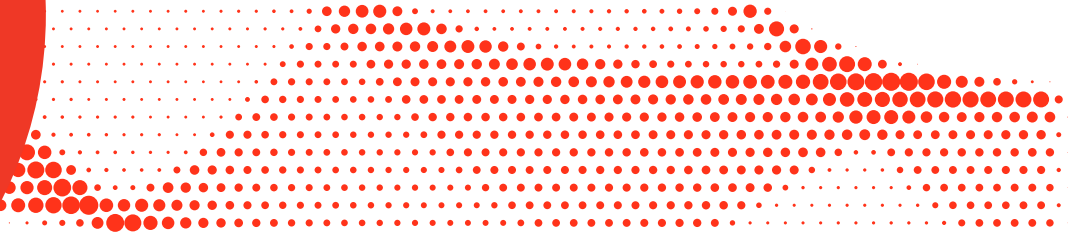
The Special Region of Yogyakarta (DI Yogyakarta) is a province that relies on Original Local Government Revenue from the tourism sector. Yogyakarta has produced the highest Regency Minimum Wage (UMK), while the Provincial Minimum Wage (UMP) in 2020 amounted to IDR 1,704,000, an increase of 1.085 percent from 2019.<sup>45</sup> In 2020, the UMP of DI Yogyakarta was the lowest UMP when compared with other provinces.<sup>46</sup>

Instead of PSBB, the DI Yogyakarta government determined the emergency response status in regard to the

<sup>45</sup> Statistics Indonesia - Yogyakarta, "Upah minimum Kabupaten/ Upah minimum provinsi di DI yogyakarta (rupiah)", Badan Pusat Statistik, 2020-22, available at <https://yogyakarta.bps.go.id/indikator/6/272/1/upah-minimum-kabupaten-upah-minimum-provinsi-di-di-yogyakarta.html>

<sup>46</sup> Statistics Indonesia, "Upah Minimum Regional/Propinsi (Rupiah)", Badan Pusat Statistik, 2018-20, available at <https://www.bps.go.id/indikator/19/220/1/upah-minimum-regional-propinsi.html>

<sup>47</sup> Governor of Special Region of Yogyakarta, "Keputusan gubernur DIY No. 65-KEP-2020 tentang penetapan status tanggap darurat bencana COVID-19 di DIY", 20 March 2020, available at: <https://corona.jogjaprov.go.id/files/33/Covid19/8/KepGub-DIY-No-65-KEP-2020-ttg-Penetapan-Status-Tanggap-Darurat-Bencana-COVID-19-di-DIY.pdf>



COVID-19 disaster.<sup>47</sup> Since March 2020, there has been a decline in tourism. Tourism activities were mainly closed during the pandemic. Provisions for food, drink, and accommodation, which is one of the indicators of achievement in the tourism sector, decreased by 1.12 percent in the first quarter of 2020, 39.21 percent in the second quarter, and 18.82 percent in the third quarter. The highest contraction occurred in the accommodation, food and drink, transportation, and construction sectors. Dozens of hotels were closed, and some were even sold because of low occupancy rates. WFH and travel bans had slowed down the transportation and accommodation sector. The number of tourists visiting DI Yogyakarta also decreased.<sup>48</sup>

The determination of the disaster emergency response status also had an impact on unemployment rate in Yogyakarta. Unemployment has increased by 32.37 thousand people (31.78 percent) from February to August 2020, bringing the total number of unemployed people to 101.85 thousand. Meanwhile, a total of 448.35 thousand people of working age experienced a reduction of working hours in August 2020.<sup>49</sup>

### **Solidaritas Pangan Jogja (SPJ)**

SPJ is a food solidarity movement based in Yogyakarta, Indonesia. SPJ was established through a joint initiative involving various individuals and community groups after managing its first four kitchens on 24 March 2020. SPJ emerged to combat the dire situation in Yogyakarta, where informal workers and other vulnerable economic groups faced a decrease in income due to restrictions on public space activities in response to COVID-19. SPJ inspired some people to distribute ready-to-eat food to informal workers. Some individuals were also willing to raise donations and distribute aid money.

The individuals who joined the SPJ early were not strangers to one another. They had already met in movements such as the Kulon Progo peasants' solidarity action, the Mobile People's Alliance (ARB), discussion forums, and other activities, both on a local and national scale. SPJ is not only a meeting place for people with a desire for solidarity and who are committed to managing donations for a kitchen network. It also organizes volunteers to cook, wrap, and distribute food, and provide reports to the public to ensure transparency and accountability.

### **The Founding of SPJ**

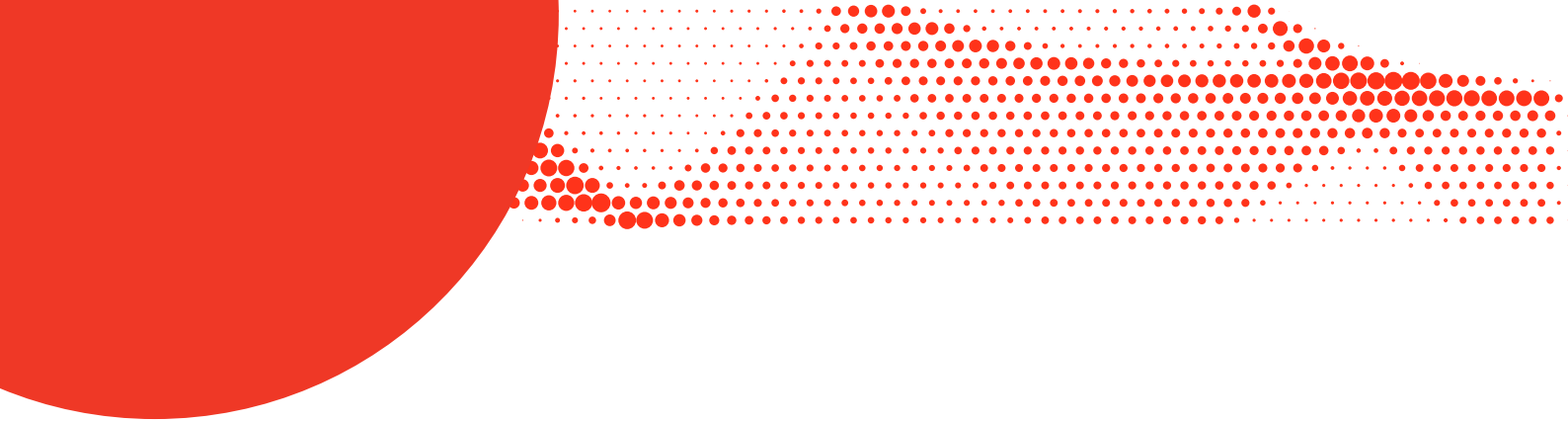
The restrictions have made it difficult for most people to access food. This inspired grassroots level organizing, as the group most affected by the pandemic sought to find a way out of the crisis by forming a social movement through bonds of solidarity. When the restrictions came into effect, followed by the establishment of a disaster response protocol, economic activity in Yogyakarta declined drastically, as it did other cities.

Syafiatudina, Dina for short, is an activist, writer, curator, and member of the Kunci Study Forum and Collective who lives in Yogyakarta. Dina observed that informal workers—including daily laborers, such as pedicab drivers or market porters—were experiencing a drastic decline in income. When Dina saw a neighbor facing an order cancellation from catering customers after the ingredients had been purchased and prepared for cooking, causing both capital and foodstuff to be wasted, the idea to create a soup kitchen emerged. Dina and her mother Ita then contacted their respective colleagues to raise donations so they could open a community kitchen.

<sup>48</sup> Regional Tourism Office of DI Yogyakarta, "Laporan kinerja instansi pemerintah (LKJIP) dinas pariwisata DIY tahun 2020", February 2021, pp. 31-33, available at: <https://visitingjogja.jogjaprov.go.id/webdinas/en/download/laporan-kinerja-instansi-pemerintah-lkjjip-dinas-pariwisata-diy-tahun-2020/>

<sup>49</sup> Statistics Indonesia - Yogyakarta, (2020b, November 5). Keadaan Ketenagakerjaan D.I. Yogyakarta Agustus 2020, 5 November 2020, available at: <https://yogyakarta.bps.go.id/pressrelease/2020/11/05/1068/keadaan-ketenagakerjaan-d-i--yogyakarta-agustus-2020.html>





Dina started to organize the villagers to establish a community kitchen. During the first three days of raising funds, Dina collected donations of around IDR 4 million. Several activists heard about Dina's activities. They then joined to help distribute packed rice to informal workers along at the roadside. After meeting and discussing the situation of food and logistics insecurity, they agreed to build a kitchen network which was later called SPJ.<sup>50</sup> Dina said:

I discussed with activists who also wanted to build the kitchen network. From the coordination through WhatsApp, I suggested that we manage this donation together. We also agreed to build a public kitchen network. Finally, SPJ stood up. The SPJ collective entrusted me to be the cross-kitchen coordinator and financial administrator. If I am not mistaken, on 22 March 2020, the collected donations were around IDR 7 million (Dina, personal communication, 25 September 2020).

Yatno, an independent activist and SPJ volunteer who lives in Yogyakarta, also produced masks and hand sanitizers at the beginning of the pandemic, two of the public's primary needs during this pandemic. Yatno said:

In Jogja, in the early days of the pandemic, we took the initiative to produce masks and hand sanitizer, then distributed them to the public. We get cloth donations and those who sew masks are also our friends (Yatno, personal communication, 3 December 2020).

Feri T.R., or Feri for short, is an SPJ volunteer who lives in Yogyakarta. He is also an activist and member of ARB research team Yogyakarta. Feri sees contradictions occurring in the grassroots community. Informal workers were severely affected but the local government has not taken any action. Feri said:

At the beginning of the PSBB, the local government focused on the arrival flow of travelers and health infrastructure. Although the government provided social assistance, many informal workers did not receive the assistance because the recipient list was based on existing government data and many informal workers were not registered in the assistance scheme.

Generally, informal workers are migrants from nearby areas in Yogyakarta. There are pedicab drivers, cart drivers, laborers carrying market goods, or scavengers looking for income. Meanwhile, other vulnerable groups include households on the poverty line, scavengers, and transgender groups (Feri, personal communication, 24 September 2020).

Another activist and SPJ volunteer from Kebunku Collective Gardening, Dodok Putra Bangsa or Dodok, described the situation in this manner:

At the beginning of the pandemic, the public themselves started the initiative. People started cooking and hanging food on the fence so hungry people could take the food, and it happened every day. However, it was not organized because it took the form of initiative. The most noticeable thing is that purchasing power has fallen. The situation is a crisis, America collapses, the European Union too. There is an SPJ kitchen nearby and I ended up there many times (Dodok, personal communication, 26 September 2020).

<sup>50</sup> Solidaritas Pangan Jogja, [@solidaritas.yogyakarta], Profile, 26 March 2020, Instagram, available at: <https://www.instagram.com/solidaritas.yogyakarta/>



## Structure and Workflow of SPJ

The donations coming in to SPJ were not only cash transfers but also a supply of foodstuff such as rice, tofu, tempeh, fruit, and vegetables. Most of the vegetables came from the Kulon Progo Coast Farmers Land Association (PPLP-KP).<sup>51</sup> The vegetable donations also came from Kebunku Collective Gardening.<sup>52</sup> There were also donation from residents outside Yogyakarta, such as Suko hamlet in Sewukan village, Magelang district.<sup>53</sup> According to Yatno:

The supply of vegetables mostly came from Kulon Progo farmers, whom we have advocated for together before because of the case of eviction for the construction of NYIA, the New Yogyakarta International Airport. We collected vegetables every Thursday. There were sixteen times we collected vegetables and each collection was a full pick-up truck. The trucks were from our network and had cheap rental prices, a discount as a form of solidarity. Before we collected the vegetables, the farmer groups had already prepared their crops and then we came and transported the vegetables. Sometimes we discussed with the farmers there before we returned to Yogyakarta (Yatno, personal communication, 3 December 2020).

Problems arise when there are restrictions in the supply and distribution of food. Dodok said:

Currently, what is needed is not money but food. Moreover, this problem can be solved by planting, I also started planting using empty land. When harvest came, we donated the vegetables to SPJ. It is a part of my activities in SPJ (Dodok, personal communication, 26 September 2020).

SPJ established a structure to manage donations and coordination between kitchens. The structure consists of a cross-kitchen coordinator, a financial administrator, and a person in charge of independently managing each kitchen. After several weeks of running the kitchens, the ARB decided to support SPJ by conducting open recruitment of volunteers and then directing the volunteers to the nearest kitchen in their locale. Each kitchen has between 10–15 volunteers. SPJ manages two types of kitchens, namely public kitchens and community kitchens. Dina said:

Public kitchens are kitchens that produce and distribute packaged rice or primary necessity packages to informal workers on the streets and in other public spaces. Community kitchens are kitchens managed by residents to meet the needs of residents with vulnerable economic conditions in their area. The kitchens at SPJ also collaborate with several other kitchen initiatives in Jogja (Dina, personal communication, 25 September 2020).

There are eleven kitchens in the SPJ network, which consist of five public kitchens and six community kitchens. The kitchens at SPJ are handled by a person in charge (PIC) of the kitchen. Each PIC coordinates a work team

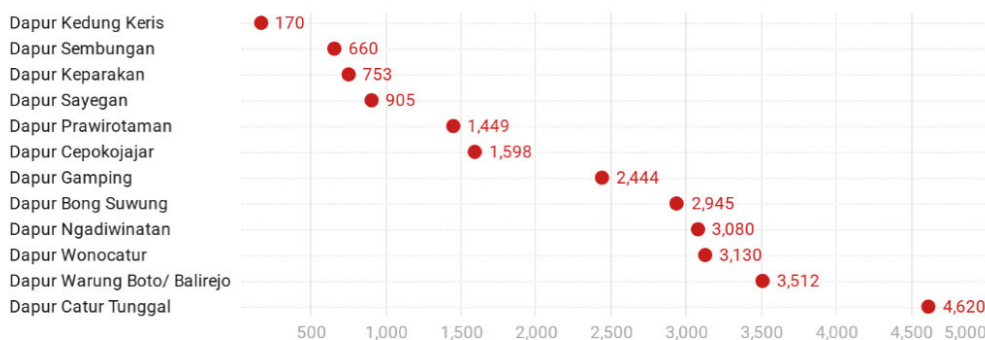
<sup>51</sup> Solidaritas Pangan Jogja [@solidaritas.yogyakarta], "Fresh vegetables from PPLP- KP" [Post], Instagram, available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/CANzabqg5DD/?igshid=1w82gzbiogtkp>

<sup>52</sup> Kebunku collective gardening Jogja [@kebunku\_jogja], "Panen di Kebunku #5" [post], 4 July 2020, available at <https://www.instagram.com/p/CCNGkawl5Bz/>

<sup>53</sup> Solidaritas Pangan Jogja [@solidaritas.yogyakarta], "Donasi dari warga Dusun Suko Desa Sewukan, Magelang" [post], 1 May 2020, available at [https://www.instagram.com/p/B\\_pDKhaD2t-](https://www.instagram.com/p/B_pDKhaD2t-)

in the kitchen that consists of at least a cooking team and a distribution team. The cooking team is in charge of processing food. The distribution team distributes the food to residents in the community or to informal workers on the streets. The food package distribution is based on the regional context and the decisions of each kitchen. Kitchens also subsidize each other's logistics. As of 28 April 2020, SPJ has distributed 25,266 packets of food.

**Figure 9. The Kitchen Food Packaged Distribution**



From March 26, to April 28, 2020

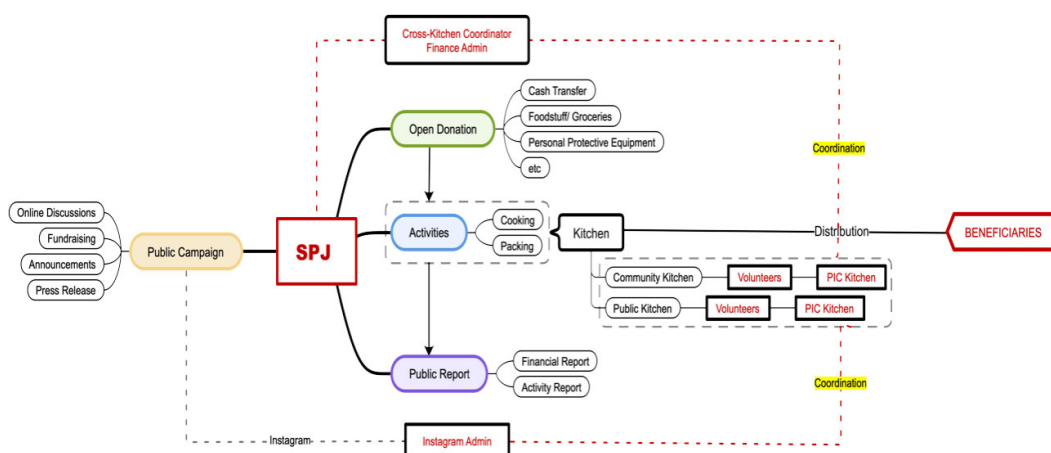
Chart: Pelupessy, PS - Source: SPJ Internal Database - Created with Datawrapper

Source: SPJ Internal Document [4]

The PIC reports on the use of the funds and the logistics of food distribution in coordination groups so each kitchen knows their condition and forwards this report to the team's volunteers. The cross-kitchen coordinator manages donation and logistics distribution. The social media admin reports the activities on production and distribution through social media. Yatno said:

Kitchens get funding from the donations. We converted to IDR 7,500 per pack to distribute the fund according to the kitchen report of how many packs will distribute. For example, a kitchen wants to distribute 100 packs, and then the kitchen will get IDR 750,000. These kitchens also subsidize each other's logistics. For example, if one kitchen does not have rice but there is a rice donation in the other kitchen, the kitchen with rice stock gives it to the kitchen that is short of rice (Yatno, personal communication, 3 December 2020)

**Figure 10. SPJ System and Workflow**

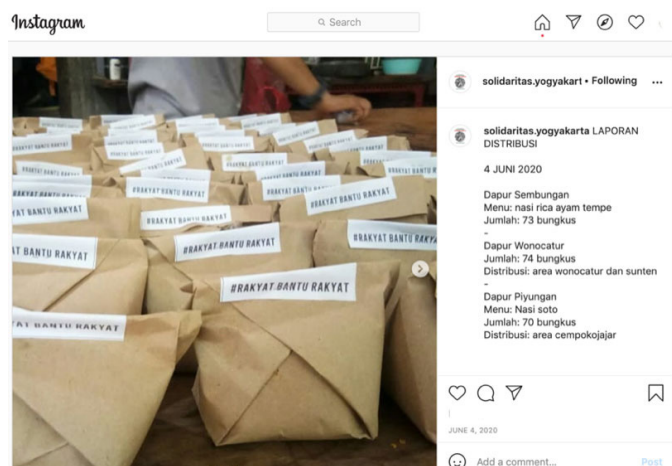


Because the SPJ depends on the trust of the public to manage incoming donations, it reports its activities and finances through the SPJ Instagram account. This report is a form of accountability for the work of SPJ to donors and the public. Moreover, SPJ uses Instagram for public activity such as online discussions and fundraising. As Dodok said:

I help to collect funds through Instagram Live. Sometimes we invite public figures to join fundraising efforts. They present music, perform, host discussions, anything. They were sympathetic and they want to help (Dodok, personal communication, 26 September 2020).

Several kitchens distributed packaged rice and inserting campaign messages in each package. One such message was “Rakyat Bantu Rakyat” meaning “people help people”, used as a solidarity tagline. Since SPJ kitchens had become autonomous cells, each kitchen could decide on their own campaign activities as long as these did not oppose the principles of solidarity. It was a form of political education aimed at informing the public about the strength of solidarity among people during the pandemic.

**Figure 11. SPJ Distribution Report**



Source: SPJ Instagram Post June 4, 2020<sup>54</sup>

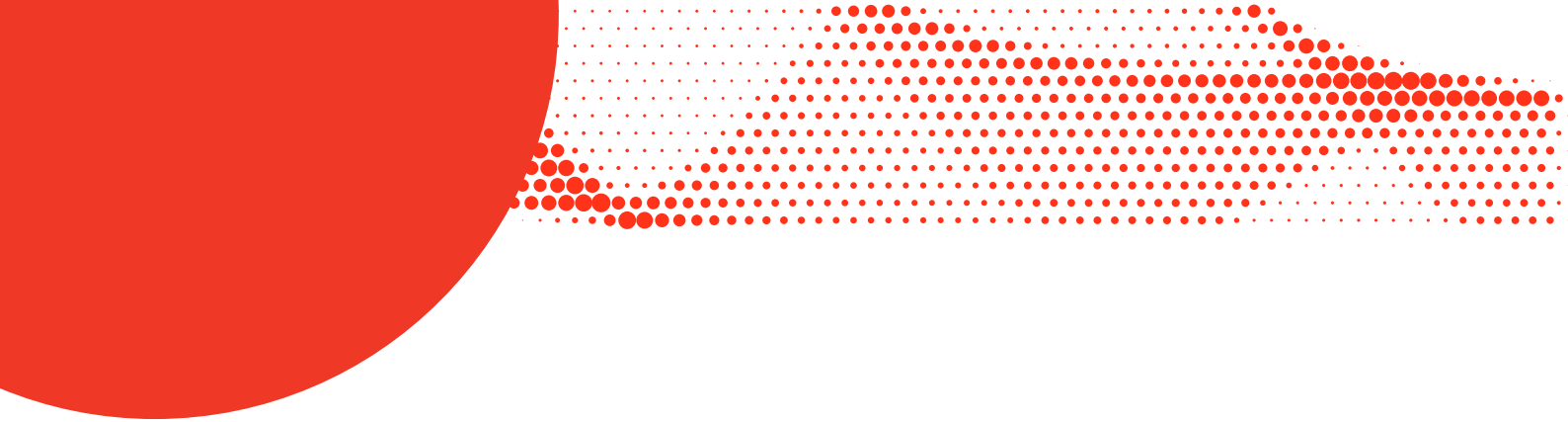
## Challenges

To extend the collective’s work, SPJ created security guidelines to prevent or overcome the threat of violence, to be carried out by all volunteers. The SPJ security guidelines were a collective act of mutual protection and mutual trust. SPJ realized that the possibility of threats from inside or outside the SPJ may occur at any time. The guidelines also serve to build a political attitude that is fair and equal for anyone, including the beneficiaries.

Police officers visited the SPJ kitchens and recorded the volunteers to observe the situation. Feri said:

During the pandemic, the ban on gathering was the reason authorities stopped kitchen activities. We are aware of the situation, so we follow health protocols, keep our distance, wash our hands,

<sup>54</sup> Solidaritas Pangan Jogja, [@solidaritas.yogyakarta], “Distribution report” [Post], Instagram, 4 June 2020, available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBBPJtCh0CH/?igshid=1kjibihz8xyu0>



use masks. Kitchen volunteers also have rotating assignments according to their agreements and ability. However, the authorities came to interfere with our activities several times because of the prohibition of gathering. We were asked about the donors. We told police officers to open SPJ's social media account because the donor's information was there. Even though in the kitchen, not all volunteers 'get together' because they have their duties (Feri, personal communication, 1 December 2020).

On 18 April, SPJ held an evaluation meeting at the Wahana Lingkungan Hidup (WALHI) Yogyakarta office.<sup>55</sup> At that time, nine participants were present. During the meeting, the head of the local neighborhood and several villagers came to the WALHI office and insisted on ending the meeting. After negotiating, the participants continued the meeting. Soon, dozens of people came to the WALHI office, intimidating and provoking the people there. The participants decided to leave the WALHI office to prevent violence. [5] Feri stated:

The local head, some villagers, and army came and asked to stop the meeting. However, they [continued] after the participants negotiat[ed]. Soon, dozens of people came. We coordinated about what step we [could] take. The participants [were] outnumbered, [so they] decided to leave the WALHI office. (personal communication, 3 December 2020)

When the disaster response situation in Yogyakarta began to ease, economic activities restarted. The community returned to their activities even though the situation was still limited. Though the pandemic was ongoing, several activities such as markets and public transportation resumed operations. SPJ decided to stop kitchen activities after experiencing a decrease in donations and volunteers. Whether networked directly with SPJ or not, several other food solidarity movements are still running in other parts of Yogyakarta. As Dina explained:

We temporarily stopped kitchen activities because we saw that economic activity had started to improve. We also think about the condition of the donors, which will be even more complicated. The impact of the prolonged pandemic also has an impact on donors. Every day the donations are decreasing, so it is difficult for us to manage the kitchen (Dina, personal communication, 23 September 2020).

The decision to stop SPJ activities is also based on community considerations as they are already starting to recover from the trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic. Feri said:

Community activities have started to run even though they are still limited, and indeed everyone has not yet found a job. Nevertheless, like it or not, they have to leave because they have to find food because they are workers. We read this phenomenon as a form of decreasing public trauma to the pandemic. Apart from that, some volunteers have also started to wrestle with their respective activities so that resources are decreasing (Feri, personal communication, 3 December 2020).

As of 20 July 2020, SPJ officially closed all kitchens except for the Sembungan kitchen which is still running today. SPJ continues its activities, starting to design a sustainable economic model, especially for each kitchen.

<sup>55</sup> Walhi Yogyakarta Profile - Updated, 15 October 2021, available at [walhi-jogja.or.id/index.php/2021/10/15/profil-walhi-yogyakarta](http://walhi-jogja.or.id/index.php/2021/10/15/profil-walhi-yogyakarta).

<sup>56</sup> Putra, A. P., "Kementerian PANRB Umumkan Top 21 Inovasi Pelayanan Publik Penanganan COVID-19", Ministry of Administrative and



## Official Stance

On 26 August 2020, through its official website, the Ministry of Administrative and Bureaucratic Reform (PANRB) announced the top 21 public service innovations for covid-19 handling. The announcement included SPJ's name as an award recipient for the category of civil society.<sup>56</sup> On 3 December, SPJ received an invitation from the Regional Secretary of the Yogyakarta City Government to attend the work visit of the Ministry of PANRB, related to the awarding.

On 4 December 2020, SPJ held a press conference titled: "Appreciation from the People, for the People". There, SPJ expressed its statement to refuse to attend the working visit of the PANRB Ministry and refuse the proposed awards.<sup>57</sup>

In the statement, SPJ argued that their network was not a public service but a people's movement that arose because the government could not provide guarantees in any form during a pandemic. SPJ gave out its own awards to all SPJ kitchens, various local groups involved in the SPJ, and solidarity movements in various regions. SPJ demanded that the state ensure a quick and fair allocation of funds for handling COVID-19, so that aid reaches the people who need it most.

## How the Indonesian Government Deals with the Impact of COVID-19

In low and middle-income countries like Indonesia, income tends to influence patterns of food consumption. When restrictions occur, income decreased or was lost, and the ability to obtain and consume food also decreased. People find it challenging to provide food for themselves and their families because they have lost jobs and income sources. Big cities are the nodes of the spread of COVID-19. The restriction is a subjective decision because it does not consider the primary needs of the affected community.

The pandemic already halted the movement of capital. Countries under capitalist control will always be motivated to protect the interests of their capitalist class, especially in times of crisis. The state will take whatever steps possible to protect those interests. A powerful way to detect the state's partisanship during the COVID-19 pandemic is through the regulations it issues [Appendix 2].

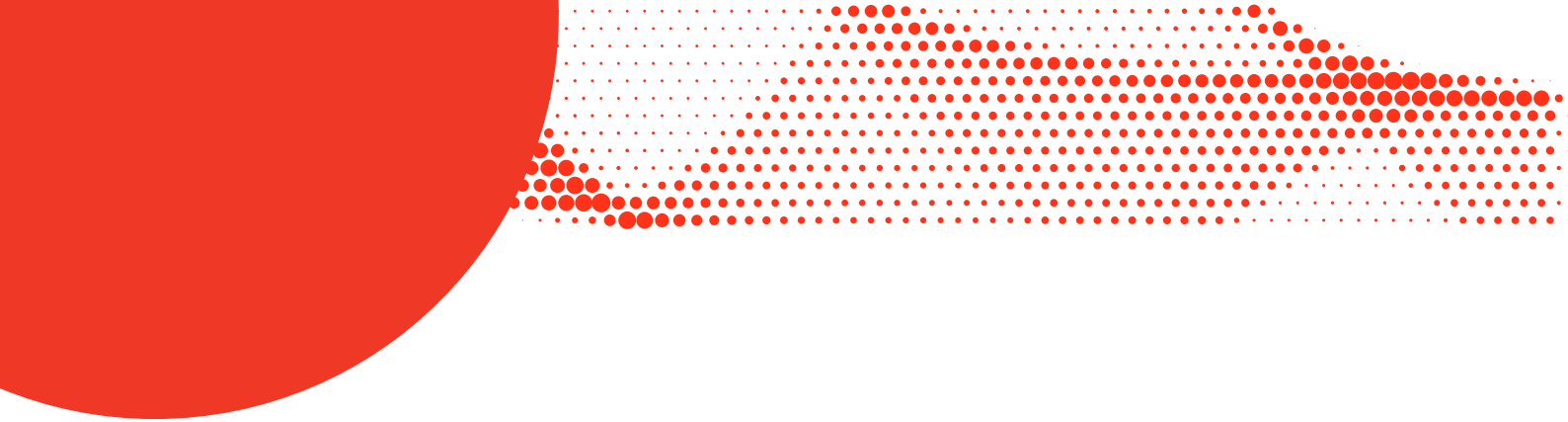
When restrictions occur, food needs increase as people become increasingly dependent on dwindling food supplies caused by logistical problems. Restrictions to contain the spread of the virus simultaneously cause food shortages among the people. Social assistance is only a temporary relief and is not a solution to a pandemic. The government already guaranteed food sufficiency. However, owners of capital did not want to reduce prices or distribute food free of charge. They would not spend significant capital without making big profits. It meant that food shortages were not due to deficiency or empty food stocks. Then, where was the food?

Many farmers ended up throwing away their crops because the price of produce was meager due to lack of distribution. The people who live in poverty and register as social assistance recipients struggled to eat because

Bureaucratic Reform, 26 August 2020, available at: <https://menpan.go.id/site/berita-terkini/kementerian-panrb-umumkan-top-21-inovasi-pelayanan-publik-penanganan-covid-19>

<sup>57</sup> Solidaritas Pangan Jogja [@solidaritas.yogyakarta], "Pernyataan Sikap SPJ: Kita Semua Berhak untuk Hidup dengan Layak dan Bermartabat!" [Post], Instagram, 4 December 2020, available at: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CIXYNLUgdjH/?igshid=19wpsqqwslkg4>

<sup>58</sup> Coordinating Ministry of Economic Affairs, "Infographics - Job Creation Bill Infografis - RUU Cipta Kerja", 7 May 2020, available at: <https://ekon.go.id/info-sektoral/15/7/infografis-seputar-ruu-cipta-kerja>



they received limited temporary social assistance. Amid the people's difficulties, the government issued a campaign to eat nutritious food to increase immunity from virus attacks. But who could enjoy nutritious food amid a pandemic? Nutritious food has become a luxury for people who live in poverty and vulnerability.

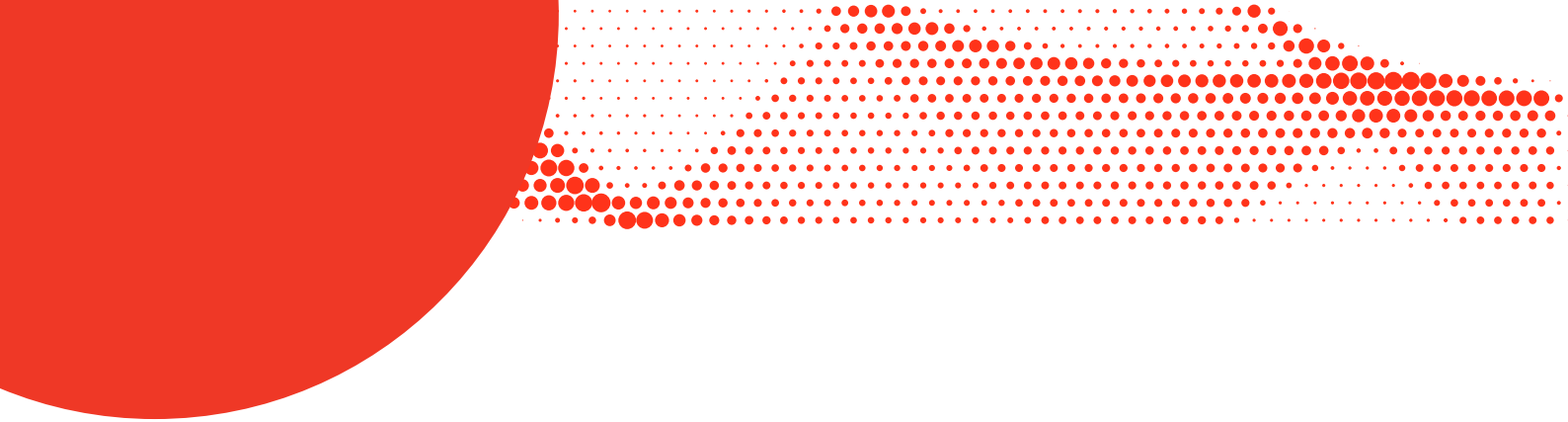
There should have been no food supply crisis amid sufficient food availability. However, what happened during the pandemic was a centralization of food, causing the stagnation of the food supply. Big food companies focused on profit-dominated sectors such as the nursery industry, fertilizer industry, plantation industry, food processing, and large food outlets. They tried to hold back their production capital so as not to acquire losses and at the same time, withhold food production from being distributed free of charge. As a result, foodstuff and primary necessities in markets and grocery stores were very limited or even scarce.

Meanwhile, there were many restrictions implemented during the pandemic, including functional reduction of food and logistics transportation, travel bans, or business closures. These disrupted supply chains and hindered capital movement further. However, disruption due to restrictions will not lead to layoffs, poverty, and hunger in the long term.

The government presented a way to control the situation via the provision of assistance programs. However, the program was just a short-term way to overcome indicators of poverty and hunger. The government sought to keep the economy running but in the process, put at risk the health and safety of individuals who stood a greater chance of contracting COVID-19. In an Indonesian context, restrictions were a way to contain the spread of COVID-19. However, restrictions have forced many people to choose to leave their homes to find work or food. The government and the financial institutions encourage investment in agriculture, food production, and trade in food commodities. To increase food production, the government issued soft loans to farmers and fishermen. The government also provided capital assistance to the SME sector to revive its business. However, the loan and capital assistance is a form of financial centralization from the state or private financial institution under the guise of assistance from the state. On the contrary, the government has increasingly opened up investment sources through the Omnibus Law on Job Creation<sup>58</sup> and the Food Estate<sup>59</sup> project on the pretext of strengthening food security.

The government continues to convince people that they are in a position to serve their interests. Indeed, the President's statement regarding the advantages to civil society of choosing PSBB rather than quarantine or lockdown has been criticized as mere lip service intended to reduce the political turmoil created by protests. The claims made by the President were merely intended to create an illusion that would help maintain the stability of the country. However, restrictions without guaranteeing sufficient food provision is an objective condition that triggers a public response against the Indonesian government, regardless of any whitewashing or denial by government officials. Since the state clearly failed to carry out its mandate of fulfilling food needs despite the restrictions they imposed during the pandemic, the public provided solutions and people organized themselves into a solidarity movement.

<sup>59</sup> Sutrisno, E., "Food estate project: A solution for food security and connectivity", Indonesia.Go.Id, 16 June 2020, available at: <https://indonesia.go.id/narasi/indonesia-dalam-angka/ekonomi/food-estate-untuk-hasil-pertanian-melimpah-dan-konektivitas>



## Solidarity as a Pathway to a Political Movement

In times of restriction, people live amid turmoil and uncertainty. During the pandemic, people relied on the government to provide food and other supplies from logistics warehouses. However, there was no follow-up other than relying on temporary social assistance. Thus, the solidarity movement cannot be separated from state ineptitude amid the pandemic restrictions. The solidarity movement is a public response to the government's inadequate response to COVID-19, aimed at alleviating the impact of the pandemic on the community. In this case, the solidarity movement arose in response to among other things, massive layoffs, lack of access to food, and lack of access to health and education resources. Solidarity became the most visible phenomenon during the pandemic. Solidarity has presented a turning point for global practices during this global crisis.

SPJ ensured that marginalized and vulnerable groups were the beneficiaries of efforts to meet food and logistical needs during the pandemic restrictions. People made donations to SPJ as a humanitarian act and SPJ passed on these resources to those who needed them most. SPJ also strengthened networks among workers. For example, the PPLP-KP farmer network donated their harvest to SPJ kitchens. In this way, SPJ succeeded in strengthening solidarity among workers through supply chains and distribution networks.

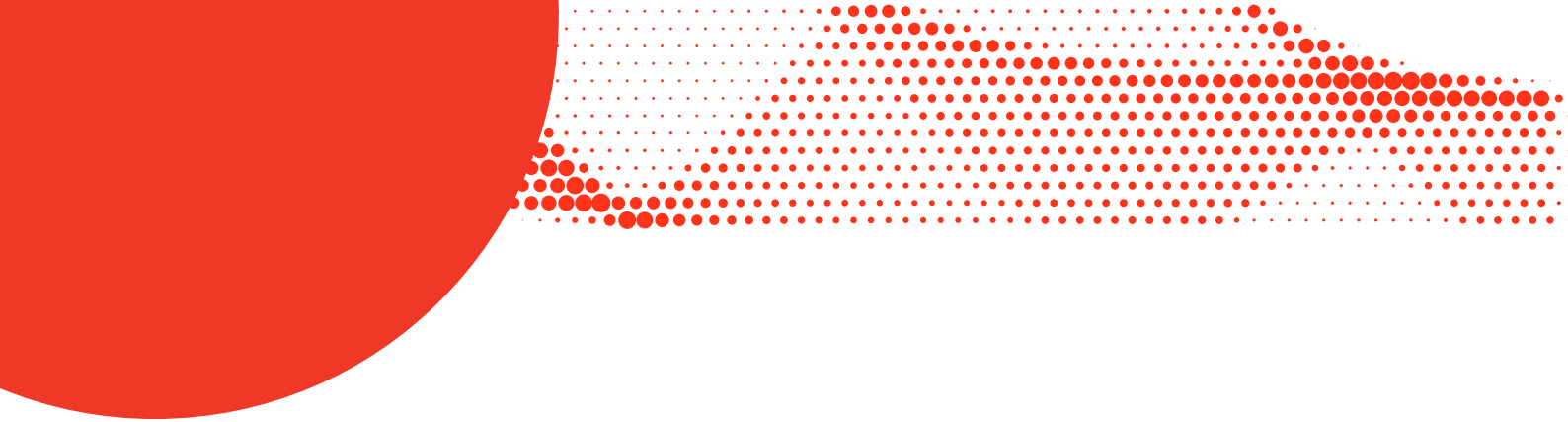
SPJ also became a political literacy space that continues to maintain the principles of equality and humanity. These principles are also a form of political education to create a just and equal society, with an emphasis on gender relations and the prevention of sexual violence. For SPJ, caring for the welfare and safety of everyone involved in the network is absolutely essential. As a collective, SPJ strives to build healthy and equal relationships within and outside the network by compiling security guidelines and collectively preventing violence.

The government's failure to handle the pandemic ultimately led to the formation of grassroots solidarity movements. When solidarity appeared to the public as a practice during food shortages, the government sought to get involved but made things worse. Officials issued sympathetic statements and even tried to reward the solidarity movement for services that have helped the country maintain stability amid the political and economic turmoil caused by the pandemic. However, SPJ firmly rejected this award and the empty platitudes of the government. SPJ does not have solidarity with the state. Instead, it stands in solidarity with the people, who survived the crisis not because of state intervention but despite the failures of the state. The attitude taken by the SPJ in this regard is a political statement that also serves as political education for the people.

SPJ has provided evidence that the solidarity movement remains a robust short-term solution in times of crisis. The experience of the SPJ shows that local actions can echo those of broader solidarity movements. In the Indonesian context, SPJ inspired other cities to build local networks with other solidarity movements despite the limitations imposed during this period. SPJ, through collective action, forged strong connections with other groups, which is a factor that allows those in the solidarity movement to organize and act together.

The solidarity movement has also brought the context of social collectivism to a broader stage by showing the contradiction in the relationship between the state and the people. In this relationship, the state controls the livelihoods of citizens, even deciding whether to provide protection or engage in repression. The intimidation experienced by SPJ shows that the government is coping with the impact of a pandemic with repressive methods, which is in opposition to how civil society actors handled the pandemic through humanist methods. These divergent ways of coping show the accommodation of both parties to their own class interests.





The SPJ and the presence of other solidarity movements is not intended to fill in the gaps left by the government's inadequate pandemic response but instead, to help the public realize that the current system is outdated and must be replaced. The solidarity movement exists to strengthen the sustainable work of grassroots networks and movements that experience commodification, injustice, and poverty at the national, regional, and global levels. SPJ's efforts to distribute food could lead to meaningful changes both locally and nationally.

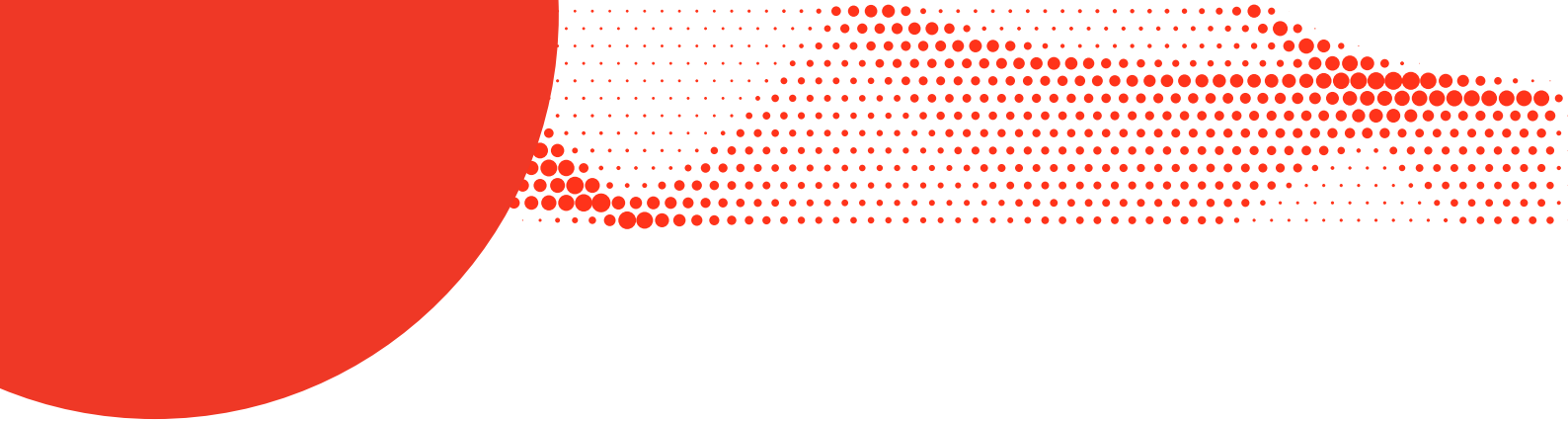
The crisis continues to this day. The COVID-19 pandemic shows that the world needs to undergo massive transformation. For this reason, the solidarity movement also needs to be transformed, not only as a social movement but as a class solidarity movement that simultaneously collides with capitalism.

In the SPJ, there is awareness about changing the structure of a sustainable economic system. It is crucial to think about sustainable economic development in the long run and be in line with building a sustainable food system because food is a basic human need. The sustainable food system can occur by changing the market structure through shortening of the supply chain. Renewal of the market structure must begin by building collective strength to control local food chains, switching them from upstream to downstream, such as buying directly from farmers at a reasonable price. There must be a change in the function of infrastructure such as markets, transforming them into social-ecological infrastructure that provides healthy food. Thus, a truly sustainable food system will aim to build universal and viable food ecosystems, from producers to consumers.

The transition to a universal sustainable food ecosystem requires changing people's consumption behavior and building a collective institution to renew the supply chain from production to distribution. The collective institution must have a decentralized and democratic food supply chain system, which strengthens social movements simultaneously. Communities—collectively, actively, and equally as providers and custodians of the supply chain, together with collective institutions—must break the industrial-model food supply chain. Turning local food systems into a universal food ecosystem that is radically and holistically sustainable is a significant challenge for the global movement. Therefore, it is time to encourage the social solidarity movement to build itself into a broader systemic movement. This means that social solidarity must transform into class solidarity and the local network must become connected to various global networks.

Class solidarity can be a driving force behind the creation of a universal sustainable food ecosystem as a step towards systemic and structural transformation. First, it is necessary to continue to increase solidarity by building genuine relationships with the public based on collective work and struggle. Working together in the broadest movement to build communities is the best way to ensure the education and build the political awareness of the people. The political lessons of the solidarity movement highlight the importance of raising awareness, especially with regard to how the state neglected its mandate to serve the people. Solidarity also proves that unity—as always—has the power to break down barriers and fears. Second, it is necessary to see the pandemic in a global context and likewise to see solidarity in a global context. It is time to breach the country's territorial borders and join international movements while simultaneously preparing food defense mechanisms for crises.

Third, while a deepening crisis will continue to generate social movements, they will become stale and repetitive if the movements do not unite to increase class solidarity and translate into an international political movement. As can be seen in the solidarity movements in many countries such as Italy, Poland, India, and Indonesia, these movements stand side by side with oppressed people. The solidarity movement also delegitimizes government policies that neglect the rights of citizens. The movements in various countries prove that the state can no longer



hide behind flawed and failed policies.

What if the solidarity movement breaks national boundaries and unites into an international movement that is politically opposed to a common enemy: capitalism as a system of oppression? The class solidarity will weaken capitalism and the international political movement will break the global capitalist system's chains.

Solidarity has occupied a position in the global political movement. It is necessary to continue pushing this solidarity in a revolutionary manner in preparation for structural and systemic transformations. It begins, as seen in the case of Indonesia, by creating and organizing as many community groups as possible at the grassroots level, through the formation of new communities or the utilization of the existing communities such as neighborhood associations, R.T., R.W. or youth groups, family welfare empowerment groups, and PKK. Communities can be directly involved in collective food fulfillment, i.e., in building collective agriculture, building processing industries, and creating an inter-regional supply chain system. Political movements in this regard can be two things, the building of an international political block and the raising of the political consciousness of the masses to urge the state to end the outdated system.

Food and logistics can become available through the supply and distribution chain, moving from raw materials, treatment, processing, and distribution, until reaching consumers. The involvement of farmers, transport workers, market traders, chefs, food traders, packers, delivery couriers, and domestic workers must also be taken into consideration. These groups also need to be realized and brought together so that the class solidarity movement can reach more people in future. In the end, structural and systemic transformation rests on the development of a viable alternative to capitalism. This new system must be equal and enlightened, free from capital's centralization and the toxic relationship between state and society. As the pandemic has demonstrated, people need a new system where food production and distribution are not based on the whims of capitalists. In many countries, the food and logistics solidarity movement aimed at breaking dependence on the state is radical. It proves that there is a global movement founded on people's sovereignty and class solidarity, ready to materialize.

## **Acknowledgments**

This research was supported by the Rosa-Luxemburg-Stiftung Southeast Asia, Manila. We thank our colleagues from Solidaritas Pangan Jogja (SPJ) and Kebunku Collective Gardening, especially Dina, Dodok, Feri, Yatno. They provided insight and expertise, although they may not agree with all of the interpretations/conclusions of this paper. We pay tribute to Novri Auliansyah. Rest in power, comrade.

## **Endnotes**

1. The raw dataset is downloaded from [https://raw.githubusercontent.com/OxCGRT/covid-policy-tracker/master/data/OxCGRT\\_latest.csv](https://raw.githubusercontent.com/OxCGRT/covid-policy-tracker/master/data/OxCGRT_latest.csv), which is available in Microsoft Excel format in Our World in Data under CC-BY license (as cited). The data also links to The Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker (OxCGRT) Hale, T; Webster, S; Petherick, A; Phillips, T; & Kira, B (2020); Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker, Blavatnik School of Government. <https://www.bsg.ox.ac.uk/research/research-projects/covid-19-government-response-tracker> See the codebook data here <https://github.com/OxCGRT/covid-policy-tracker/blob/master/documentation/codebook.md>
2. Data incompleteness means the workers still have uniformity or duplication of their Population Identification

Numbers.

3. Panen Raya is a term used for harvesting done on a large scale and is usually used in reference to rice harvesting. Farmers get rice yields many times higher than usual.
4. Dapur Warung Boto is a kitchen network of Dapur Wonocatur coordinated by SPJ. The fund submitted to the Dapur Wonocatur PIC and the PIC distributed some of the funds they have received to Dapur Warung Boto. SPJ also reported Dapur Warung Boto's activities even though SPJ did not directly coordinate Dapur Warung Boto. Visual <https://datawrapper.dwcdn.net/qTs42/2/>
5. At the same time, the authors attended an online consolidation meeting with ARB. The meeting was suspended temporarily due to information about the dismissal of the SPJ evaluation meeting at the Walhi office

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## List of Abbreviation

BULOG	Logistics Agency	Badan urusan Logistik
DI	Special Region	Daerah Istimewa
GDP	Gross Domestic Product	Produk Domestik Bruto
Komnas Perempuan	National Commission on Violence Against Women	Komisi Nasional Anti Kekerasan terhadap Perempuan
NYIA	New Yogyakarta International Airport	Bandara Internasional Yogyakarta Baru
NGO	Non-Government Organization	Lembaga Swadaya Masyarakat
PDI-P	Indonesian Democratic Party of Struggle	Partai Demokrasi Indonesia - Perjuangan
PIC	Person in Charge	Penanggung jawab
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment	Alat Pelindung Diri
PPLP – KP	Coastal Land Farmers Association - Kulon Progo	Paguyuban Petani Lahan pantai – Kulon Progo
PSBB	Large Scale Social Restriction	Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar
SME	Small and Medium-sized Enterprises	Usaha Menengah-Kecil dan Mikro (UMKM)
SPJ	Jogja Food Solidarity	Solidaritas Pangan Jogja
WALHI		Wahana Lingkungan Hidup
WFH	Work From Home	Bekerja Dari Rumah
WHO	World Health Organization	
Pasuruan	Solidaritas Pangan Pasuruan	Food cooking and distribution; Foodstuff or primary necessities packages distribution
Pekalongan	Solidaritas Pangan Pekalongan	Food cooking and distribution; Foodstuff or primary necessities packages distribution; Charity/Cheap Market; Mask and hand sanitizer production and distribution
Semarang	Dapur Umum Semarang Peduli	Food cooking and distribution
	Koalisi Rakyat Bantu Rakyat (KOBAR)	Crop/roots or vegetable Gardening
South Jakarta	Gerakan Solidaritas Lumbung Agraria (GeSLA)	Foodstuff or primary necessities packages distribution; Food barn

## Appendices

### Appendix 1. Food and Logistics Solidarity Movement in Indonesia March-November 2020

City/ District	Name	Activity	Source
Ambon	Mari Bakabong	Crop/roots or vegetable Gardening	<a href="https://bit.ly/solidaritas1">bit/ly/solidaritas1</a>
Bandung	Solidaritas Sosial Bandung	Food cooking and distribution; Foodstuff or primary necessities packages distribution; Crop/roots or vegetable Gardening; Catfish farming	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/solidaritassosialbandung/">https://www.instagram.com/solidaritassosialbandung/</a>
Banyuwangi	Solidaritas Pangan Banyuwangi	Food cooking and distribution; Foodstuff or primary necessities packages distribution.	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/solidaritaspangan_bwj/">https://www.instagram.com/solidaritaspangan_bwj/</a>
Binjai	Pasar Gratis Binjai	Charity/Cheap Market	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/pasargratis.binjai/">https://www.instagram.com/pasargratis.binjai/</a>
Bogor	Solidaritas Pangan Bogor	Food cooking and distribution	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/solider.bogor/">https://www.instagram.com/solider.bogor/</a>
Cirebon	Solidaritas Pangan Cirebon	Foodstuff or primary necessities packages distribution.	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/bebrayanpangan/">https://www.instagram.com/bebrayanpangan/</a>
Denpasar	Solidaritas Pangan Bali	Food cooking and distribution; Foodstuff or primary necessities packages distribution; Seed distribution	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/solidaritaspangan_bali/">https://www.instagram.com/solidaritaspangan_bali/</a>
East Jakarta	Rumah Solidaritas Kemanusiaan Warga Jakarta (RSKWJ)	Food cooking and distribution; Food Banking	<a href="https://jaring.id/yang-bersemi-kala-pandemi/">https://jaring.id/yang-bersemi-kala-pandemi/</a>
North Gresik	Solidaritas Pangan Gresik Utara	Food cooking and distribution; Foodstuff or primary necessities packages distribution; Mask and hand sanitizer production and distribution	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/solidarita.id/">https://www.instagram.com/solidarita.id/</a>

City/ District	Name	Activity	Source
Jambi	Perpus Rakyat	Foodstuff or primary necessities packages distribution	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/perpusrakyat/">https://www.instagram.com/perpusrakyat/</a>
Karanganyar	Solidaritas Pangan Karanganyar	Food cooking and distribution; Foodstuff or primary necessities packages distribution	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/solidaritaspangankaranganyar/">https://www.instagram.com/solidaritaspangankaranganyar/</a>
Kendal	Solidaritas Pangan Kendal	Food cooking and distribution; Foodstuff or primary necessities packages distribution	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/solidaritaspangan.kendal/">https://www.instagram.com/solidaritaspangan.kendal/</a>
Kupang	Posko Berbagi Masker	Mask and hand sanitizer production and distribution	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/bit/ly/solidaritas1">bit/ly/solidaritas1</a>
Madura	Solidaritas Pangan Rakyat	Food cooking and distribution; Foodstuff or primary necessities packages distribution; Mask and hand sanitizer production and distribution	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/solidaritaspanganmadura/">https://www.instagram.com/solidaritaspanganmadura/</a>
Magelang	Solidaritas Pangan Magelang	Food cooking and distribution; Foodstuff or primary necessities packages distribution; Mask and hand sanitizer production and distribution	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/solidaritas.pangan.magelang/">https://www.instagram.com/solidaritas.pangan.magelang/</a>
Makassar	Solidaritas Pangan Makassar	Food cooking and distribution; n; Mask and hand sanitizer production and distribution	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/panganmakassar/">https://www.instagram.com/panganmakassar/</a>
Malang	Solidaritas Pangan Malang	Crop/roots or vegetable Gardening	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/tanganmalang/">https://www.instagram.com/tanganmalang/</a>
Padang	Koperasi Mandiri dan Merdeka	Charity/Cheap Market	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/bit/ly/solidaritas1">bit/ly/solidaritas1</a>
Pasuruan	Solidaritas Pangan Pasuruan	Food cooking and distribution; Foodstuff or primary necessities packages distribution	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/solidaritaspangan_pasuruan/">https://www.instagram.com/solidaritaspangan_pasuruan/</a>
Pekalongan	Solidaritas Pangan Pekalongan	Food cooking and distribution; Foodstuff or primary necessities packages distribution; Charity/Cheap Market; Mask and hand sanitizer production and distribution	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/solidaritas.pangan.pekalongan/">https://www.instagram.com/solidaritas.pangan.pekalongan/</a>
Semarang	Dapur Umum Semarang Peduli	Food cooking and distribution	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/dapurumumsemarangpeduli/">https://www.instagram.com/dapurumumsemarangpeduli/</a>
	Koalisi Rakyat Bantu Rakyat (KOBAR)	Crop/roots or vegetable Gardening	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/bit/ly/solidaritas1">bit/ly/solidaritas1</a>
South Jakarta	Gerakan Solidaritas Lumbung Agraria (GeSLa)	Foodstuff or primary necessities packages distribution; Food barn	<a href="http://kpa.or.id/media/baca/liputan%20khusus/524/GeSLA_Atasi_Covid-">http://kpa.or.id/media/baca/liputan%20khusus/524/GeSLA_Atasi_Covid-</a>
Yogyakarta	Solidaritas Pangan Jogja (SPJ)	Food cooking and distribution; Foodstuff or primary necessities packages distribution; Mask and hand sanitizer production and distribution	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/solidaritas.yogyakarta/">https://www.instagram.com/solidaritas.yogyakarta/</a>
	Kebunku collective farming	Foodstuff or primary necessities packages distribution; Crop/roots or vegetable Gardening	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/kebunku_jogja/">https://www.instagram.com/kebunku_jogja/</a>
	Komunitas Majelis Mau Jahit (Mamajahit)	PPE distribution	<a href="https://mamajahit.id/">https://mamajahit.id/</a>
Sukoharjo	Solidaritas Pangan Sukoharjo	Food cooking and distribution; Foodstuff or primary necessities packages distribution; Mask and hand sanitizer production and distribution	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/sedoyodhahar_/">https://www.instagram.com/sedoyodhahar_/</a>
Surabaya	Solidaritas Pangan Surabaya	Food cooking and distribution	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/pawone_arek2/">https://www.instagram.com/pawone_arek2/</a>
	Solidaritas Pangan Rakyat	Food cooking and distribution; Foodstuff or primary necessities packages distribution; Mask and hand sanitizer production and distribution	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/spc_crew19/">https://www.instagram.com/spc_crew19/</a>
Surakarta	Lumbung Solidaritas Rumah Banjarsari	Mask and hand sanitizer production and distribution; Food barn	<a href="https://www.kompas.com/tren/read/2020/04/13/160300565/wabah-virus-corona-cerita-lumbung-solidaritas-dari-banjarsari-?page=all">https://www.kompas.com/tren/read/2020/04/13/160300565/wabah-virus-corona-cerita-lumbung-solidaritas-dari-banjarsari-?page=all</a>
Temanggung	Solidaritas Pangan Temanggung	Foodstuff or primary necessities packages distribution; Mask and hand sanitizer production and distribution	<a href="https://www.instagram.com/tmg.solidaritas/">https://www.instagram.com/tmg.solidaritas/</a>

**Appendix 2.** List of Regulation Released by the President of Indonesia in the Context of Handling the Pandemic

No	Regulation	Date	Title	Documentation Number
1	Presidential Regulation No. 108	November 10, 2020	Amendments of Presidential Regulation Number 82 of 2020 on Committee for handling the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) and National Economic Recovery	LN.2020/NO.256: 11 HLM.
2	Presidential Regulation No. 99	October 5, 2020	Vaccines Procurement and the Implementation of Vaccinations in handling the Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic	LN.2020/No.227: 13 HLM.
3	Presidential Decree No. 18	September 3, 2020	National Team for the Acceleration of Vaccine Development for Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)	SK NO.044314 A: 10 HLM.
4	Presidential Instruction No. 6	August 4, 2020	Discipline Enhancement and Law Enforcement of Health Protocols in the Prevention and Control of Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)	
5	Presidential Regulation No. 76	July 7, 2020	Amendments to Presidential Regulation Number 36 of 2020 concerning Work Competency Development through the Pre-Employment Card Program	LN.2020/NO.170: 12 HLM.
6	Government Regulation No. 29	June 1,0 2020	Income Tax Facilities for Handling the Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)	LN.2020/NO.148, TLN NO.6526: 18 HLM.
7	Government Regulation No. 23	May 9, 2020	Implementation of the National Economic Recovery Program to Support the State Financial Policy for Handling the Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic or Facing Threats that Endanger the National Economy or Financial System Stability and for the National Economy Rescue	LN.2020/NO.131, TLN NO.6514: 17 HLM.
8	Presidential Decree No. 12	April 13, 2020	Determination of the Non-Natural Disaster for the spread of the Corona Virus 2019 (COVID -19) as a National Disaster	SK NO. 01A740 A: 3 HLM.
9	Presidential Regulation No. 54	April 3, 2020	Posture Changes And Details Of State Revenue And Expenditure Budget Year For 2020	LN.2020/NO.94: 11 HLM.
10	Government Regulation No.21	March 31, 2020	Large Scale Social Restriction for Accelerating Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Eradication	LN.2020/NO.91, TLN NO.6487: 5 HLM.
11	Presidential Regulation No. 52	March 31, 2020	Construction of Observation and Shelter Facilities for Corona Virus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) or Emerging Infectious Diseases on Galang Island, Batam City, Riau Islands Province	LN.2020/NO.92: 7 HLM
12	Government Regulation in place of Act No. 1	March 31, 2020	State Budgeting Policy and the Stability of Budgeting System for Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Pandemic Disaster or Managing Threats for National Economy and Stability Budgeting System	TURNED INTO ACT NO.2 OF 2020
13	Presidential Decree No. 11	March 31, 2020	Declaration of Public Health Emergency Situation for Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)	LN.2020/NO.134, TLN NO.6516: 53 HLM.
14	Presidential Instruction No. 4	March 2,0 2020	The Refocussing on activities, fiscal allocation, and procurement of goods and services to accelerate Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) response.	SK NO.031003 A: 2 HLM.
15	Presidential Decree No. 9	March20 2020	Revision of President Decree 7/2020 on Task Force for Rapid Response to Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)	SK No 022698 A: 4 HLM.

Source: *Legal Documentation and Information Network - The State Secretariat of the Republic of Indonesia* <https://jdih.setneg.go.id/Produk>

# The Disparities of Education Access in Indonesia During the COVID-19 Pandemic

By: Nunu Pradya Lestari

Although the world has become deeply connected and internet penetration is increasing every year, a large proportion of the population in Southeast Asia, as in many other developing countries, does not have access to the internet and electronic devices. Problem after problem arose. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only given birth to a health and economic crisis, but also an education crisis.



An Indonesian student learning remotely with a gadget during the pandemic. (Photo: Ronaldy Irfak/Shutterstock.com)

The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the model of education in Indonesia. The Indonesian government issued a distance learning policy on March 17, 2020, requiring all learning activities to be carried out at home using an online learning model. Over several months, the implementation of this policy has revealed significant disparities in the country's education system. Although several other policies are being pursued to support equal access to online learning, in practice there are still many students who are experiencing difficulty in adapting to distance learning. The purpose of this study is to uncover the gap in access to education during the implementation of distance learning policies and to describe the practice of capitalizing education that has resulted in inequality over the years. The reality of the disparity in education that occurs globally is an important issue that needs to be pushed into the global solidarity agenda.





## Introduction

As the threat of COVID-19 spread to countries around the world, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global pandemic on March 12, 2020. Since then, all human activities have been restricted, including learning activities. Remote learning has been implemented in all educational institutions, from elementary schools to universities, in order to prevent the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

On March 17, 2020, the Indonesian government issued a distance learning policy regarding learning and working from home through a circular from the Minister of Education and Culture, No. 36962/MPK.A/HK/2020. The circular contains the following provisions:

- (1) Apply the learning online from home for students;
- (2) Employees, teachers and lecturers who work, teach or give lectures from home (Working from Home) through the conferencing video, digital documents and other learning tools. (Deborah, 2020)

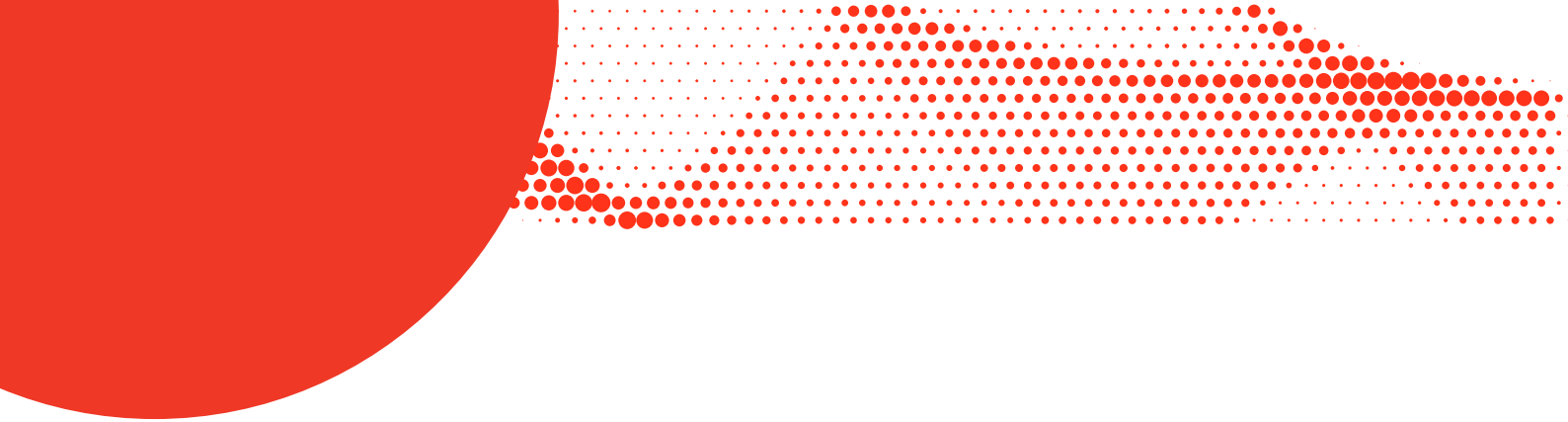
The COVID-19 outbreak added to the problems of the education system in Indonesia. A chronic problem in the implementation of the education system in the country is quality distribution. The vast and separated territory of Indonesia, which spans several islands, creates disparities in the quality of education delivery in urban and rural areas. This quality gap is measured using the eight national education standards set in Indonesia under Government Regulation no. 19 of 2005 (concerning the Standardization of National Education, which was later revised through PP 32 of 2013). Based on these eight standards, there are significant disparities in the delivery of education between urban and rural areas. In urban areas, the fulfillment of the quality and quantity of the eight standards is relatively high, while in rural areas the fulfillment of these standards is done halfheartedly and does not even meet the lowest level of the specified standards.

The gap in the implementation of education was exacerbated by the COVID-19 outbreak. In the phase of digital technology development carried out with the development of the Revolution 4.0, the implementation of education did not have a significant effect. But in reality, distance learning activities through online processes are considered to be a new challenge in the era of the Industrial Revolution 4.0. This was especially highlighted in the midst of social distancing during the pandemic, which forced massive changes to the digital-based learning model (Digital Education) throughout Indonesia.

Indonesia is a nation with over 15,000 islands and a population of some 268 million, scattered across 34 provinces (Dukcapil, 2020). With such a large population and a challenging geographical situation, integrating quality and access to higher education for all citizens is not easy.

Regardless of the situation, the digital education model has not been fully developed in Indonesia. The ministry of education began a project for a digital education system in 1955, with a corresponding diploma for secondary and high-level teachers. However, it was not until 1981 that the digital education system began to be more widely used. It was characterized by the establishment of Universitas Terbuka Indonesia (online-based university) in 1984 (Belawati et al., 2005).

The aim of the Indonesian government in launching Digital Education and Universitas Terbuka was to increase the equity and accessibility of quality higher education programs, amid the limitations of university development



in Indonesia (Belawati et al., 2005). However, this model has not yet fully reached the lower social strata of society. This was because Digital Education also has requirements that must be met—namely, access to digital information. Under this criterion, not all students have equal access, mainly due to the uneven availability of digital infrastructure. Until now, Indonesia has not provided adequate cyber-based digital technology infrastructure as the main prerequisite for distance learning. In addition, socio-economic status also affects the ability and skills to access digital information. The close relationship between social inequality, availability of access, and digital skills affects the quality of Distance Learning and creates a digital divide.

The term “digital divide” refers to the gap in access to digital technology such as smartphone devices and gadgets. But as cyber technology develops rapidly and massively in society, the terminology shifts to include the gap in access to cyber-based digital technology (Van Deursen & Van Dijk, 2010).

It is the reality of this digital gap that has exposed the country’s poor education management, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite efforts by the government to extend leniency to students during the COVID-19 pandemic, its implementation still has little government supervision. Such was seen in the policy of giving credit to students, in accordance with the Minister of Finance Decree No. 394/KMK.02/2020 (Ramli, 2020), and in the policy of reducing educational fees which refers to the regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture No. 25 in 2020 (Kasih, 2020). These policies did not solve the root problem of unequal access to the resources necessary for education. Apart from their financial situation, the students also face other serious obstacles during the distance learning process.

Digital inequality during the COVID-19 pandemic can’t be separated from the direction of the Indonesian education system, which adheres to neoliberalism. The tertiary level is one of the most affected levels of the multidimensional crisis in the application of the neoliberal model of education. The Higher Education Law, Article 64 paragraph (2) and (3), explains that higher education has its autonomy in both academic and non-academic. Non-academic autonomy includes the establishment of operational norms and policies including organization, finance, student affairs, workforce, and infrastructure (Subkhan, 2017).

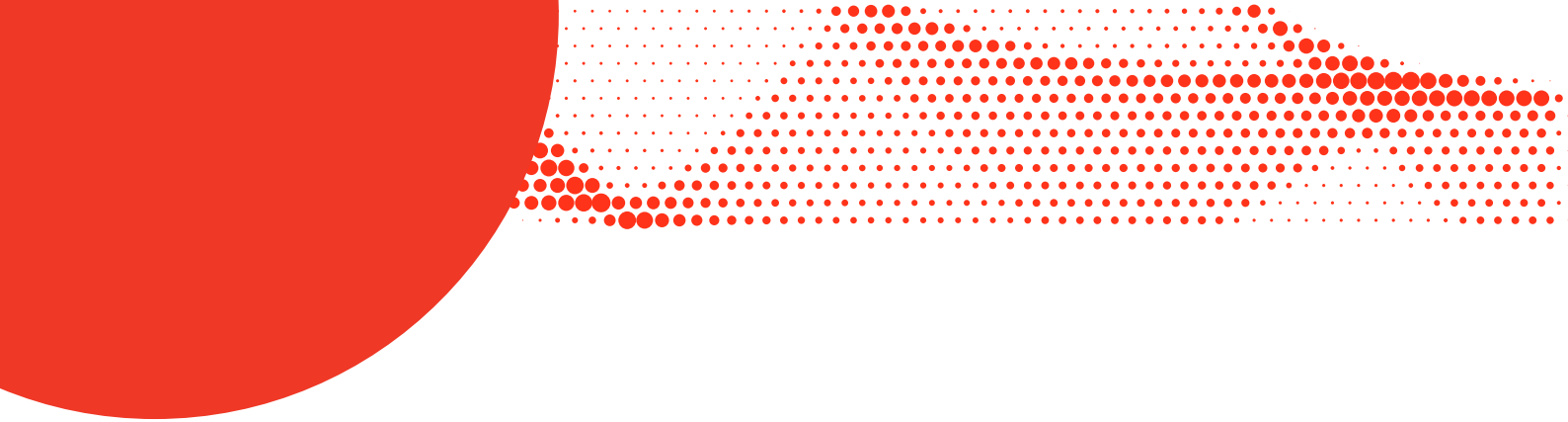
With autonomy, educational institutions have their own internal policies in managing or failing to ask government support regarding students during the pandemic. In terms of warnings about a reduced pulse rate and a reduction in education costs during the COVID-19 pandemic, not all educational institutions have complied.

From this point of view, the COVID-19 pandemic inevitably creates disparities in access to education, especially in higher education. Therefore, the problem of this research is the disparity in access to education in Indonesia during pandemic, and its purpose is to give insight into that issue and propose possible ways forward.

### **Virtual Learning (E-learning)**

Many higher educational institutions around the world use the internet and digital technology to develop teaching and learning activities (Harsasi, 2015). To describe these various learning systems, several terms are used such as computer-mediated learning, web-based training and most often e-learning (Ifijeh et. al, 2015).

“E-learning” stands for electronic learning, where the teaching and learning process uses electronic media, specifically the internet as a learning system (Komendangi, 2016). The term also refers to a technology-based



learning model which includes various concepts and technologies related to learning, such as distance, digital, electronic, online, web-based, and mobile learning.

Another important term is “e-learning infrastructure.” To support e-learning, the following are needed: (a) renewable energy use, such as power generators; (b) a strong internet bandwidth; (c) Intranet; and (d) the creation of a regional center, increasing access to education (Dalton, 2015).

“E-learning utilization” is a concept that must also be taken into consideration. E-learning systems can be implemented via synchronous or asynchronous modes, or a combination of the two formats. For example, e-learning in the form of asynchronous models is already abundant on through the e-learning portal. In the case of e-learning in its synchronous form, students and teachers should be at the computer simultaneously. The learning process with its synchronous form is carried out live, either through audio or video conference. In relation to this, another important term is “blended learning,” which combines conventional learning forms or face-to-face discourse with online learning methods. To improve traditional forms of teaching and administration, e-learning has been used most effectively in teaching at the university (Harsasi, 2015). The LMS (Learning Management System) is software for creating online college materials (web-based) that in today’s era is implemented using an LMS moodle. The activities which can be supported by the LMS includes tracking/tracking & monitoring, collaboration, administration, pecking materials for learning, assessment (duty, quiz), and interactions or communications. Asynchronous learning methods also include the use of LMS, emails, blogs, board discussions, and surveys (Gibbons - Kunka, 2017).

Finally, there are also “e-learning standards” by which the benefits of increasing standardization are identified (Varlamis, 2006; Marshall, 2011): ease of movement between learning applications because of the standard interface; common content formats; reduced development costs for tool vendors; and component integration and reuse by application and platform designers.

### **The Distance Learning Policy during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

Educational institutions often have agencies responsible for furniture, educational equipment, educational media, books and other learning resources, and other materials equipment needed to support a steady and ongoing learning process. These are an important component in meeting the national standard of education in Indonesia.

The national standard of education is the minimum criteria for the education system in the United Republic of Indonesia. The national standard scope of education includes content standards, process standards, competence standards, educators and education standards, tools and infrastructure standards, management standards, financing standards and educational assessment standards (PP No. 15/2005 on the National Standard of Education, 2005).

According to the formulation of the Education Media Standardization Guidelines Preparation Team for the Ministry of Education and Culture quoted by Suharsimi, “Educational Facilities are all the facilities needed in the teaching and learning process both mobile and immobile so that the achievement of educational goals can operate smoothly, regularly, effectively and efficiently” (Arikunto and Yuliana, 2008).

Meanwhile, educational infrastructure includes “All basic utilities that indirectly promote the implementation of

educational processes in universities, such as courtyards, gardens and parks” (Bafadal, 2003).

The etymology of “tools” and “infrastructure” are different, but the two are often mentioned together. The 2003 Chapter No. 20 of the national education system in section 45 (1) states that “each formal and nonformal education unit provides the tools and infrastructure that meet educational requirements consistent with the growth and development of physical potential, intellectual, social, emotional and psychological capacities of students” (Darmono, 2007).

In 2020, to reduce the spread of COVID-19, the Indonesian government adapted face-to-face learning methods for remote learning. The learning pattern was changed from an aspect of the learning tools and infrastructure to an aspect of public attention. (See the timeline of the implementation of Distance Learning in Table 1.)

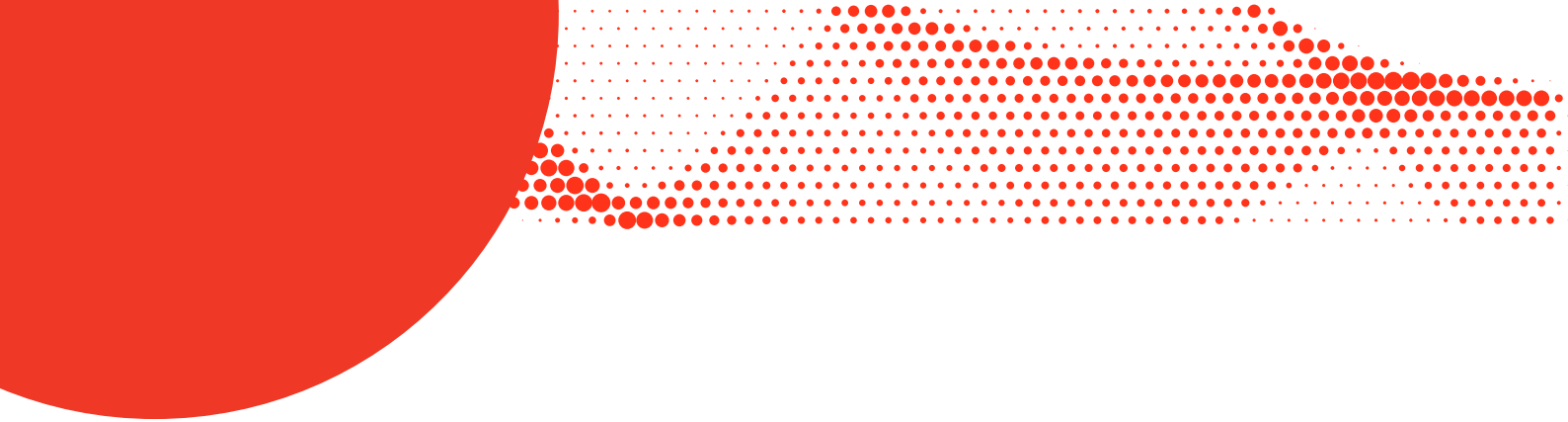
**Table 1.** Ministry of Education and Culture Policies During the Distance Learning.

Date	Policy
March 9, 2020	A circular letter from the Ministry of Education and Culture concerning an appeal to work from home, study from home, and worship from home
March 17, 2020	Directorate General of Higher Education negotiates the cheap quotas with the internet providers and Ministry of Communication and Informatics
March 23, 2020	A circular letter from Directorate General of Higher Education, Learning during the pandemic and Freedom of Learning
March 31, 2020	A circular letter from Directorate General of Higher Education, Relaxation of academic schedules, extension of Drop Out deadline, help students in need through efficiency
April 22, 2020	The Council of Chancellors of State University agreed to four mitigation mechanisms for reducing the Single Tuition Fee (UKT): pending, gradually, lowered, and remittances, according to the economic conditions of the parents

Distance learning is a teaching and learning process carried out at a distance through the utilization of various communication media (The Ministry of Education and Culture Policy No. 109/2013). It is defined as a learning process that does not occur in the form of face-to-face contact between the teacher and the student. Communication takes place in two ways which are bridged by media such as computer, television, radio, telephone, internet, video and so on (Munir, 2009).

Distance education is based on open education, thus providing learning flexibility for students across time and space (Pannen, etc, 2011). The Education Distance Learning Model Development Team from the Ministry of National Education listed several characteristics of Distance Learning, including:

- a. The geographical separation between the teachers and the students;
- b. The diversity of communication lines and syncretic and simultaneous interactions among students, the student and the teacher, or both students and teachers with other learning resources;
- c. The use of various learning media to convey learning;

- 
- d. The availability of various learning assistance services for students; and
  - e. The organization the educational process in one institution.

For the quality of education to be evenly distributed and improved, it is better if the distance learning uses information and communication technology, especially computer technology with the internet. It is necessary to have adequate infrastructure in distance learning. Distance learning infrastructure includes, among others, the presence of the following (Munir, 2009):

- a. An internet network which includes School Information Networking (JIS), City with Wide Area Networks (WAN), Information and Communication Technology (ICT) Center, and Intranet/Internet Network.
- b. An Educational TV Development Program which includes 1) TVE Receiver: receiving live broadcasts, 2) TVE Receiver and Relay: receiving TVE broadcasts, 3) TVE Receiver, Relay and Mini Studio: receiving TVE broadcasts, broadcasting TVE broadcasts, local transmission of independent TV broadcasts.
- c. Integration of Educational TV and Information and Communication Technology Center (ICT).

### **Disparity in Access to Technology**

Many definitions of digital disparity were put forward by experts and institutions in the *Pekommas Journal*, Vol. 17 No. 2, August 2014 pages 81-90, and 83. Some of them are mentioned below. According to OEDC (2001), the definition of digital disparity is:

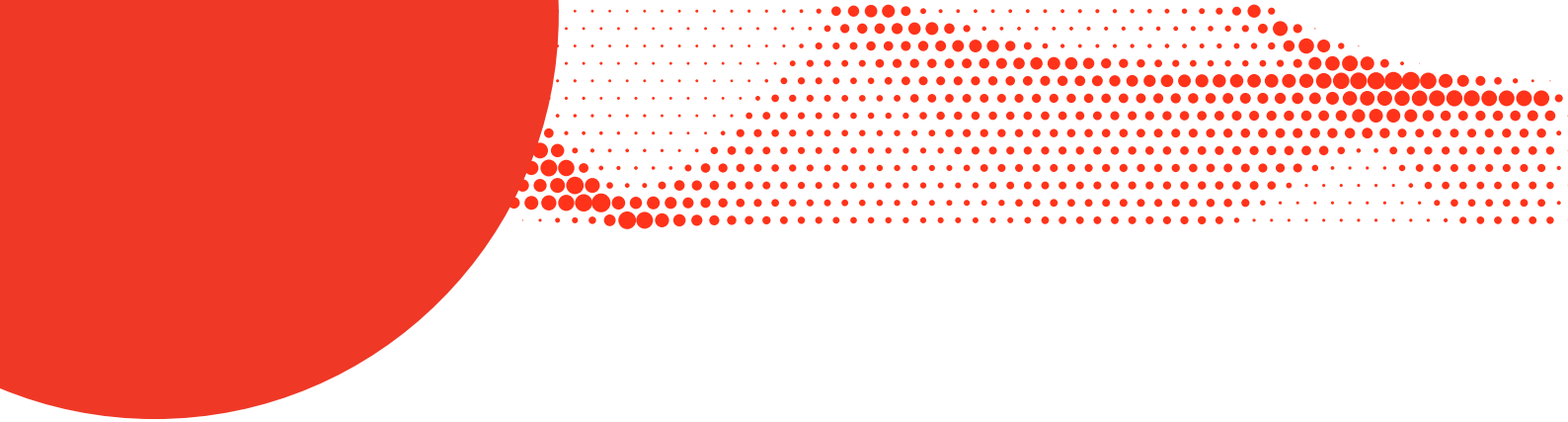
“the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socioeconomic levels with regard both to their opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICTs) and to their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities. The digital divide reflects various differences among and within countries.”

The digital disparity is also defined as the ability of individuals or groups to have a gap about how to access and use it economically for the user (Baase, 2012).

The negative effects of digital disparity are related to information technology strengths and differences in information obtained by individuals. Individuals who suffer digital disparity will certainly not be able to use information technology to the fullest. The results, when it comes to information, also differ. In addition, other impacts that can occur are lack of access to information, inequality of information, poverty of information, and disparity of information or information gaps (Zulham, 2014).

Meanwhile, the Independent Oxfam Indonesia Institute and the International Non-Governmental Organization Forum on Indonesia Development (INFID) in 2017 noted the factors that led to high inequality in Indonesia, namely:

- a. Market fundamentalism that propels rich people to take the greatest advantage of the economic growth;
- b. Increased Political Capture, where the rich are able to take advantage of the influence of changing rules that can benefit them;
- c. Gender inequality;
- d. Low wages that make the lower class people unable to escape from poverty conditions; and
- e. Inequality of access between the rural and the urban infrastructure.



Inequality or disparity between regions is common in a region's economic activity. This is due to differences in the natural resource content and demography of individual areas. These differences also make the ability of an area encourage development as well. Thus, in each area, there is a common term for both advanced and backward (Sjafrizal, 2012).

## **Research Question and Methodology**

This study seeks to describe and explain the issues surrounding the disparities in access to education in Indonesia during the COVID-19 Pandemic. The researcher specifically looked into: (1) the difficulties faced by students; (2) access to financial and facilities support provided by the government; and (3) the response of student movements to the government's distance learning policy.

The researcher used the case study approach with qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative methodology aims to understand the phenomenon that occurs on the disparity in access to education in Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, quantitative data aims to provide basic data on the situation of Indonesian students participating in distance learning programs.

Meredith, et al (2003, p. 436) explained that a case study research is a study of phenomena on a natural context in the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon. The case study used in this research aims to solicit responses from participants (informants) about the phenomena that occur in disparities in access to education in Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Interview methods**

This study used the interview technique for data collection, utilizing two interview methods in particular. The first is the structured interview. Data collection using this interview technique is carried out using a Google Form which contains questions related to educational disparities in Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic. The use of this interview technique was carried out because of limitations in making contact (social distancing) with informants. The second method is the unstructured interview, wherein data collection using interview techniques was carried out by telephone or video call interviews, by selecting 20 informants randomly.

Interviews were also done with informants from the student sector; namely, students who are directly affected by distance learning policies. The researcher also conducted interviews with the Chairman of the Indonesian Student Union, Ade Irwan. The purpose of the interview was to gather information about the map of political consolidation and the education advocacy movement in Indonesia during the pandemic.

The technique of selecting respondents in this study was purposive sampling. The purposive method was done by selecting persons who met specific criteria as subjects. The respondents of this study are students with active status who have been studying under the Distance Learning Policy during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study involved 500 respondents as participants, spread across 10 provinces throughout Indonesia. The distribution of respondents who were the focus of this research from the 10 provinces is presented in the table below.

Challenges during the data gathering period included time constraints and limitations on the part of the respondents in terms of their willingness to participate in the study and availability of tools to fill out the Google Forms used for this research. The survey was carried out from May to August 2020.

Meanwhile, in the unstructured interview method, the researcher randomly took 2 informants from each

**Table 2.** The Province is the Focus of Research and the Dispersion of Informants.

No.	Province	The Number of Respondents
1.	DKI Jakarta	52
2.	West Java	20
3.	Central Java	72
4.	East Java	116
5.	Lampung	51
6.	North Maluku	27
7.	Yogyakarta	83
8.	West Nusa Tenggara	40
9.	South Sulawesi	29
10.	North Sumatera	10
<b>Total Respondents</b>		500

of the 10 provinces which were the focus of the study. The total number of informants was 20 people. Data collection was conducted through a combination of telephone interviews and video calls which were carried out from August to September 2020. On the other hand, focus interviews with informants from student movement figures were conducted in September 2020.

### Respondent Profile

For this study, 500 survey questionnaires were distributed, and the response rate was 100%. The characteristics of the respondents in this study were divided into several categories, namely: age, gender, year of study, university status, categories of scholarship recipients and non-scholarship recipients, and tuition fees per semester.

### Results and Discussion

**Table 3.** Profile of Respondents Based on Personal Background.

		Frequency	Percentage
Age	17 – 19 years old	194	38,8%
	20 – 22 years old	218	43,6%
	≥ 23 years old	88	17,6%
Gender	Male	287	57,4%
	Female	213	42,6%

		Frequency	Percentage
Year of Study	2015	20	4,0%
	2016	43	8,6%
	2017	118	23,6%
	2018	152	30,4%
	2019	167	33,4%
University Status	State University	202	40,4%
	Private University	298	59,6%
Scholarship Recipients	Scholarship Recipients	91	18,2%
	Non-Scholarship Recipients	409	81,8%
Tuition Fees Each Semester (in Rupiah)	< 1.500.000	106	21,2%
	1.500.000 – 3.000.000	177	35,4%
	3.000.001 – 4.500.000	117	23,4%
	4.500.001 – 6.000.000	54	10,8%
	6.000.001 – 7.500.000	18	3,6%
	7.500.001 – 9.000.000	9	1,8%
	9.000.001 - 10.500.000	5	1,0%
	> 10.500.000	14	2,8%

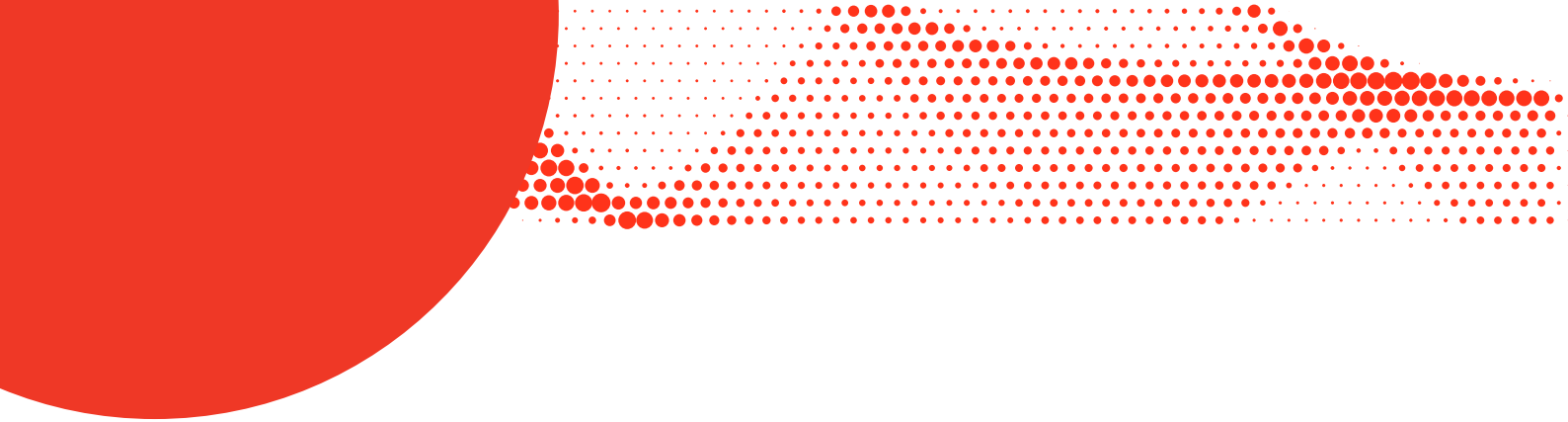
The results of this study were analyzed by the researcher using data analysis techniques developed by Creswell John (2015, pp. 517-518) using 7 technical stages of data analysis: (1) preparing and organizing data for analysis; (2) exploring and coding data; (3) coding to build descriptions and themes; (4) representing and reporting research findings, (5) interpreting the findings; (6) validating the accuracy of findings; and (7) drawing research conclusions.

The table below summarizes the findings from the survey collected from 500 respondents:

**Table 4.** Summary of Research Results Through Questionnaire Distribution.

		Frequency	Percentage
The Informants' Situation on the Distance Learning.	1. Not having difficulty during the distance learning.	63	12,6%
	2. Experiencing difficulties during the distance learning.	437	87,5%
	3. Signal Provider supports the distance learning.	223	44,6%
	4. Signal Provider doesn't support the distance learning.	277	55,4%
	5. There are facilities for distance learning.	155	31,0%
	6. There are no facilities for distance learning.	345	69,0%
	7. The Informants know the tuition subsidy policy during the pandemic.	302	60,4%
	8. The Informants don't know the tuition subsidy policy during the pandemic.	198	39,6%





		Frequency	Percentage
	9. The informants know that the Ministry of Education issued a directive to subsidize quota for distance learning.	283	56,6%
	10. The informants don't know that the Ministry of Education issued a directive to subsidize quota for distance learning.	217	43,4%
Support for Tuition Fees from Universities / Governments During the Pandemic	1. Providing quota fees for some students.	29	5,8%
	2. Giving quota fees for all students.	129	25,8%
	3. Reduction in tuition fees.	73	14,6%
	4. No support at all.	269	53,8%
The Cost Which Issued for Distance Learning (the Internet Credit in Rupiah)	1. < 10.000	12	2,4%
	2. 10.000 – 50.000	78	15,6%
	3. 50.000 – 100.000	200	40,0%
	4. > 100.000	210	42,0%
Support Facilities when Distance Learning at Home (WiFi, Laptop, Electricity, Signal Provider)	1. Highly Supportive	15	3,0%
	2. Supportive	122	24,4%
	3. Not Supportive	263	52,6%
	4. Highly Unsupportive	100	20,0%

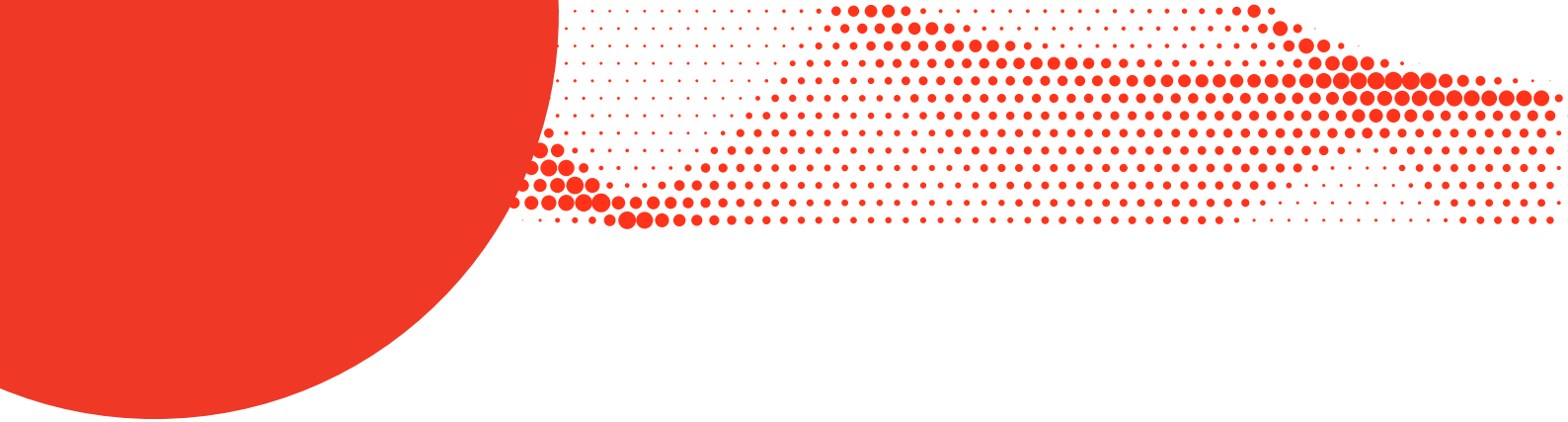
During the COVID-19 pandemic, teaching and learning activities in Indonesia were shifted to Distance Education. The quantitative data obtained by the researcher (Table 4) describes the situation of informants during the implementation of the Distance Learning policy.

Based on this data, 87.5% of informants experienced difficulty with the distance learning process. Not all of them have adequate equipment, be it a computer or a smartphone, internet quota, or even electricity. In addition, Distance Learning activities that require internet media also present considerable obstacles for some students, particularly with regard to network connections and technical errors such as server downs and errors that hinder the learning process.

One of the informants, a resident of North Maluku Province, said, “The main obstacle for me is the less supportive network in my village. In addition, there are problems with quotas, as well as insufficient laptops.”

Students also reported an increase in the cost of purchasing internet quota packages. From the findings obtained by the researcher (Table 4), the majority of informants (42%) spent more than Rp. 100,000 per month, and about 40% of informants spent internet quota fees starting from Rp. 50,000 to Rp. 100,000 per month. This fee is allocated specifically to support distance learning regardless of the cost of the internet quota package they spend in normal situations.

In the case study of distance learning that was attended by informants from both public and private universities, a majority of informants provided independent learning facilities and independent internet quota which are adjusted to the economic capacity of their families. However, the informants admitted that when interviewed, they hoped



that there would be subsidies for internet quota pulses or convenience in learning.

One of the informants said, “Unfortunately, there is no free quota. Students sometimes have to ride a vehicle to a neighbor’s house with a good signal.”

This is not in accordance with the mandate of the Directorate General of Higher Education, Ministry of Education and Culture through Circular Number 302/E.E2/KR/2020 concerning providing easy learning during the COVID-19 emergency. 60.4% of informants also claimed to know the policy of helping students during the Distance Learning process.

But unfortunately, in its implementation, the circular is only an appeal that the university (with its autonomy) can provide flexibility in implementing distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. University leaders, both public and private, are given the authority to take steps that are tailored to the conditions of their respective regions and universities (Press Release of The Ministry of Education, 2020).

One form of autonomy is the sharing of subsidized internet quota costs to students. The provision of free internet quota is based on a circular letter from the Ministry of Education and Culture (Kemendikbud) with letter number 8202/C/PD/2020, allocated from the government budget and then distributed through universities. This type of subsidy is different from scholarships where assistance for students is only valid temporarily as long as the Indonesian government still establishes a COVID-19 emergency status.

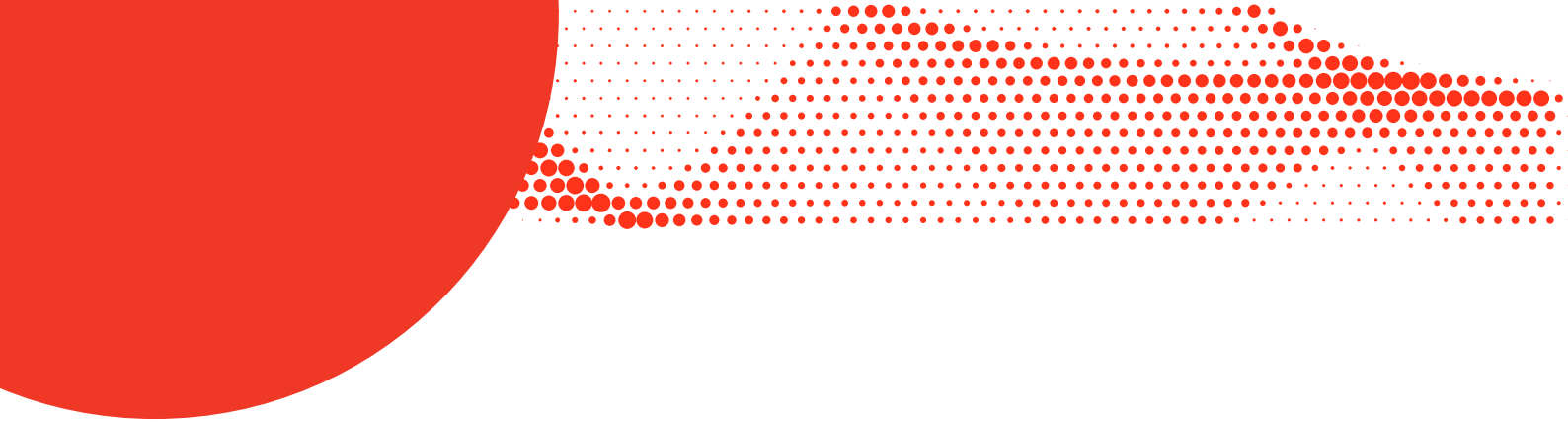
In its implementation, referring to Table 4, 53.8% of informants did not receive subsidized internet quota assistance. One informant from a private university described the process of the bureaucracy for disbursing assistance as “complicated.” Their university, which received autonomy from the government, set requirements such as the submission of a poverty certificate as a condition for getting an internet quota subsidy.

The complexity of the problem of access to education when implementing distance learning policies is influenced by the availability of supporting elements of distance learning such as internet-based learning tools, internet quotas, electricity and internet networks.

Based on data collected from informants spread across 10 provinces, it is evident that there are disparities in access to support for the distance learning process. This is reinforced by the findings of the researcher (Table 4) related to support for distance learning facilities which shows that as many as 20% of the informants stated that access and learning facilities were less supportive, 52.6% of the informants stated that they were not supportive, 24.4% said they were supportive, and only 3.0% of informants stated that access and facilities were very supportive of distance learning.

### **Education Disparities in Indonesia during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and caused a wide disparity among socioeconomic classes in terms of access to education. Munir (2009) explains that to improve the quality and accessibility of education, “it is better if distance learning uses information and communication technology, especially computer technology with the Internet.”



Distance learning policies with online learning methods that do not provide adequate infrastructure, apart from showing disparities in access to learning facilities, are also related to disparities in information accessibility. This means that the distance learning process without an adequate internet network infrastructure will not guarantee the quality of online learning during a pandemic. In rural areas where there are very minimal and are even in dire need of support for educational facilities such as customer access to cellular service providers, access to digital devices, electricity, and access to internet quotas, education disparities will inevitably occur.

Furthermore, the high cost of distribution of learning technology for students will be difficult to overcome if it is not balanced with the growth of adequate family income sources. This fact widens the disparity in access to information technology, which will have broader repercussions, namely in relation to disparities in information and education. Zulham (2014) explains:

The negative impact of digital disparities is related to the power of information technology and differences in information obtained by individuals. Individuals who experience digital disparity, of course, will not be able to use information technology to its full potential. The result, when it comes to information, there are also differences. In addition, other impacts that can occur are lack of access to information, inequality of information, poverty of information, and disparity of information or information gaps.

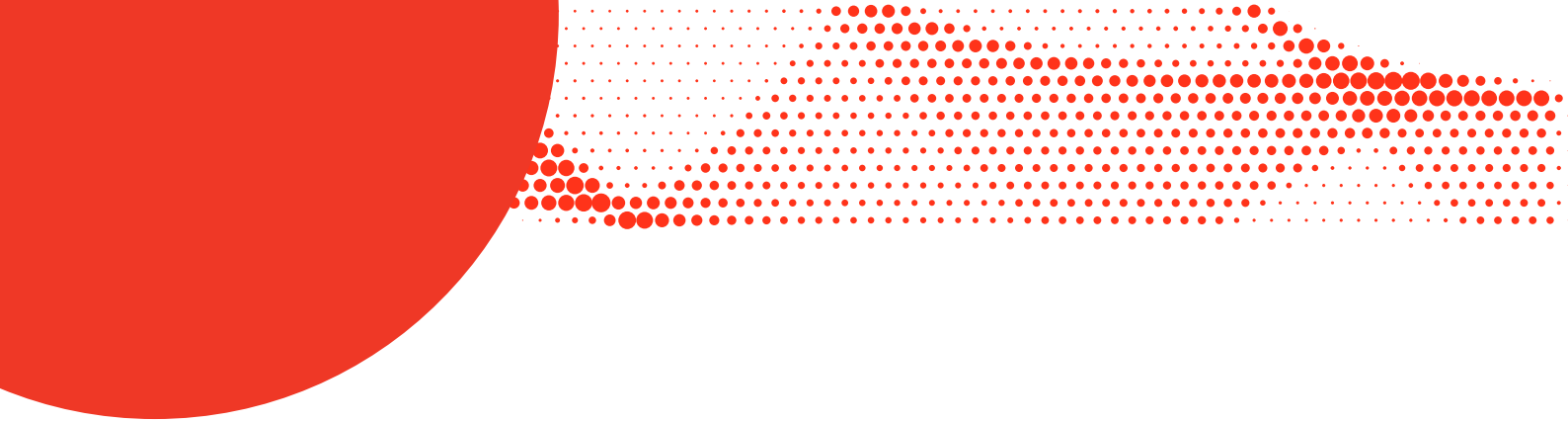
Apart from the problems of accessibility and costs, the lack of government support through regulations, education subsidies and priorities for equal distribution of education, infrastructure, will make alleviating disparities in access to education difficult to answer. For the case studies of education in Indonesia, educational disparities during the COVID-19 pandemic will inevitably occur. The lack of access to technology that occurs among students in Indonesia will be a major problem in the provision of distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Indicators of disparity in access to technology will inevitably lead to disparities in education, because the distance education that was implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic relies heavily on access to internet technology. Based on the explanation of OEDC: 2001 (Pekommas, Vol. 17 No. 2, August 2014, pp. 81-90; p. 83) digital disparities refer to:

...the gap between individuals, households, businesses and geographic areas at different socioeconomic levels with regard both to their opportunities to access information and communication technologies (ICTs) and to their use of the Internet for a wide variety of activities. The digital divide reflects various differences among and within countries.

Despite the urgent problems faced by students, the situation could still take years to resolve. The solution to education costs and credit subsidies, which only apply during the COVID-19 pandemic, will not solve the fundamental problem of disparities in access to education in Indonesia. Therefore, realizing an education system based on the principle of social justice requires the cooperation of all stakeholders, including social movements.

### **Criticism of Education Policy During the Pandemic**

Through a Circular from the Minister of Education and Culture, No. 36962 MPK.A/HK/2020, the Indonesian government enforces a policy of studying and working at home for teachers and students. The concept of Long-Distance Education (Pembelajaran Jarak Jauh) as of March 17, 2020 is applied to all learning activities from basic



education to higher education in Indonesia.

A number of social movements, some of them spearheaded by the student movement, criticized the policy. One element of the movement that responded to this policy was the Educational Revolution Committee, an alliance forum consisting of a network of organizations at the university level, university external organizations and student organizations. The committee, which was formed in 2018, carries one of the demands particularly the demand for realizing a free, scientific, democratic and social vision education.

The chairperson of the Indonesian Student Union, Ade Irwan, said that the demands of their movement are a direct response to the government's indecisiveness regarding the education policy during the pandemic. According to him, the Circular from the Minister of Education regarding the obligations of Distance Learning only touches the technical realm of implementation that prioritizes online learning. However, this policy does not include a more fundamental aspect as it does not guarantee the availability of infrastructure that can be accessed by all students. This includes providing internet quota, provider signal capabilities, and technology equipment.

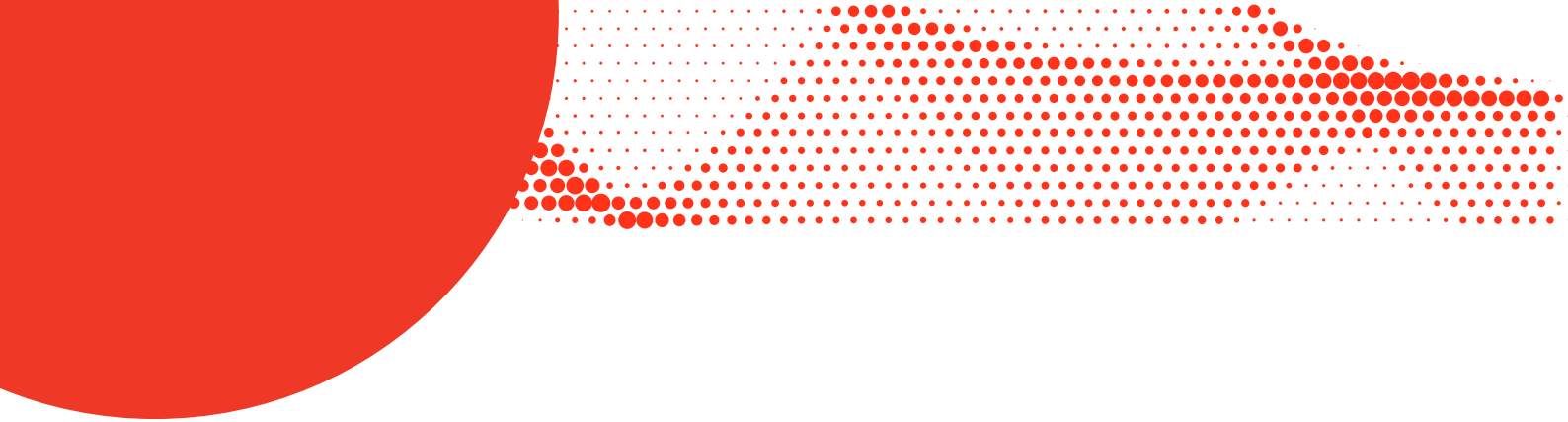
The reality is that the government has given autonomy to both public and private universities regarding the implementation of distance learning policies during the pandemic. In fact, in June 2020, the Minister of Education Regulation (Permendikbud) No. 25 of 2020 was passed. It served as a guideline for universities in providing tuition fee relief (UKT) to students whose economies are affected by COVID-19.

Unfortunately, the Permendikbud does not regulate the maximum percentage limit of tuition fees that universities can collect from self-selected new students. So, the facts in the field show that a majority of universities do not reduce tuition fees even though lectures are conducted using the online method.

The government policy that has received criticism from a number of social movements is the policy of providing credit subsidies to students. This has been regulated in the Minister of Finance Decree (KMK) 394/KMK.02/2020 which was effective from 31 August 2020 to 31 December 2020. Data and communication package fees were given selectively. This means not all students got allowances. There are several conditions that must be fulfilled by students, including the obligation to attach a Surat Keterangan Miskin (Poor Certificate), and their claim must be approved by the university.

This bureaucratic policy is considered by the student movement as an ineffective response to the problem of disparity in access to education. Apart from the very limited quota for subsidy recipients, several informants in this study admitted that they were not aware of this policy. So the question arises: is it appropriate for an education policy during the pandemic to be returned according to the rules and autonomy of each university? Meanwhile, the situation of students who experience psychological burdens due to difficult-to-access learning methods also adds to the economic burden.

Several student and youth movement networks have also taken steps to criticize the government's unequal policies. Among their actions are protests against the university management and the filing a lawsuit against the Supreme Court. The wave of movement at the university level began to be massive from April to August 2020. After that, student organizations also campaigned on various issues, such as the ratification of the Omnibus Law and a number of other democratic issues.



According to Irwan, currently the student movement is not ready for broader consolidation, for various reasons. Among the factors contributing to this situation are: the increasing oppressiveness of university actions, the limitations of initiating meetings between networks especially during the pandemic, and the lack of pioneering social movements to maintain the spirit of struggle. However, the form of protests they launch on social media are still quite massive today. Ade added that in the future, efforts to improve consolidation among student movement networks and social movements will continue to be carried out, particularly in the context of the fight against the state as the party responsible for overcoming disparity in access to education in Indonesia.

### **Educational Resolution for Global Solidarity**

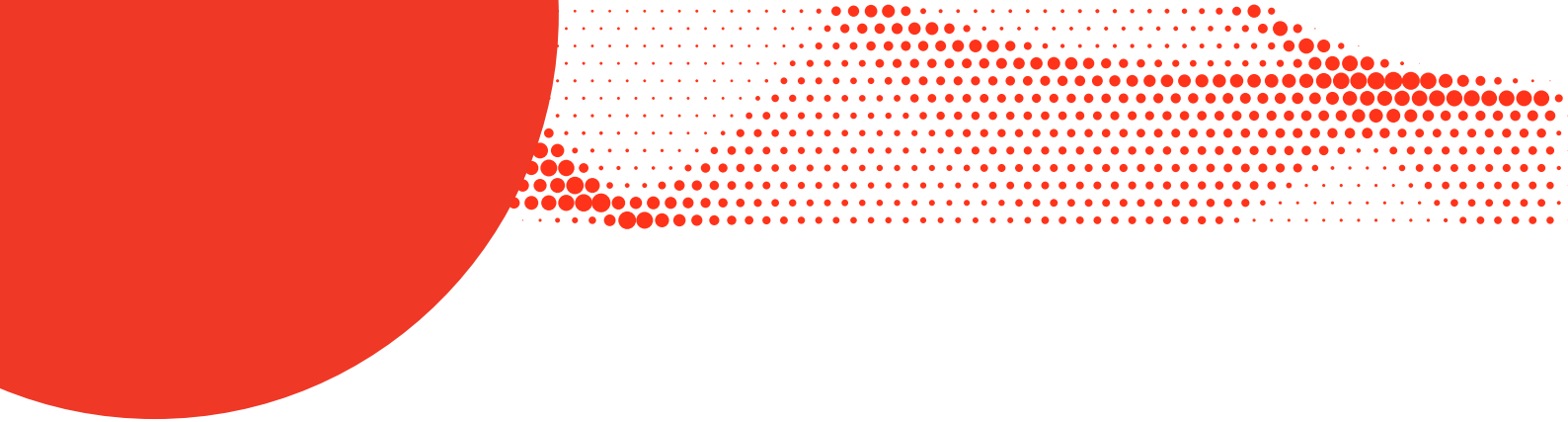
Most schools and universities have closed during the COVID-19 pandemic, not only in Indonesia, but throughout Southeast Asia. Many countries shifted from face-to-face classes to online learning in an attempt to limit further transmission of the disease. This sudden change certainly caused anxiety for all parties, including the students and teachers.

Although the world has become deeply connected and internet penetration is increasing every year, a large proportion of the population in Southeast Asia, as in many other developing countries, does not have access to the internet and electronic devices. Problem after problem arose. The COVID-19 pandemic has not only given birth to a health and economic crisis, but also an education crisis. The education crisis has been amplified by the existing “digital divide,” or the gap in accessing or using internet devices. If we look at the internet penetration in Southeast Asia, only three countries have internet penetration of more than 80%: Singapore, Brunei Darussalam, and Malaysia. Indonesia, as the most populous country in the region, only has 56% penetration, meaning only 150 million of its 268 million people have access to the internet. Meanwhile, Thailand has 57% internet penetration, followed by Myanmar 39%, and Vietnam 38% (Yasmin, 2020). We can see this gap by looking at the differences in internet speeds in different regions. People in city centers often enjoy much faster internet compared to those living in less developed areas.

Most universities in Indonesia have implemented online teaching following the enactment of the Minister of Education Circular in March 2020. Although universities can conduct online learning, most students do not have the resources and infrastructure to adapt to this learning model.

When we talk about online teaching systems, unequal access to the internet will certainly affect students’ opportunities for education. This has exacerbated disparities in access to education, which previously existed. As a result, millions of students are left behind in education when they have to undertake Distance Learning. Schools and universities in other countries in Southeast Asia may face similar challenges, or perhaps worse because they suffer from a more significant digital divide.

Governments in Southeast Asia need to address several issues—including ensuring the reliability and stability of internet connections, as well as student access to necessary technological devices—when designing online education policies, in case another pandemic occurs in the future. Students must be given an adequate learning environment given the distractions caused by staying home and coping with the pandemic. The provision of sufficient assistance to students is a crucial factor in the quality of education received by students during a time of crisis.



Regarding international solidarity, social movements in Indonesia are not yet connected to one another, especially those that talk more specifically about the issue of educational disparity. So, to bring up the idea of an educational revolution or an alternative education with a new internationalist vision has not yet been connected.

Irwan, spokesman for the Education Revolutionary Committee, said that although communication with several networks at the international level has been established, there has been no initiation to bring about consolidation. The same applies to communication with student and youth movement networks in Southeast Asia, such as Thailand and the Philippines. In the future, the student and student movement in Indonesia will seek to build relationships both at the ASEAN level and on an international scale. This agenda is in order to develop solutions to realize social justice in education, especially during the pandemic.

## **Conclusion**

In order to prevent the spread of COVID-19, the Indonesian government enacted a distance learning policy. Although this was not the first time such a model had been implemented in the country, the pandemic situation has forced large-scale and drastic changes to the entire learning process in Indonesia, as schools transitioned from face-to-face learning to online learning models. Unfortunately, this change has not been matched with efforts to ensure equal access to education in all provinces in Indonesia. As a result, there is a serious disparity problem that affects underprivileged students in particular.

Based on the research results, it can be concluded that the disparity in access to education in Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic was caused by a lack of support for learning facilities to students. Barriers that arise include support for signal provider access, access to digital-based devices, electricity, and access to internet quota. This imbalance is triggered by the uneven development of infrastructure that supports the e-learning process throughout Indonesia. Inequality in access to learning facilities also causes disparities in access to information. This means that the distance learning process does not guarantee that students get fair education rights during the pandemic, especially in rural areas with very limited digital infrastructure.

The solution to providing internet quota subsidies, which only applies during the COVID-19 pandemic, will not solve the fundamental problem related to the problem of inequality in access to education in Indonesia. As a resolution, in implementing education during a pandemic, the Indonesian government must still adhere to applicable national education standards, including Content Standards, Process Standards, Educational Assessment Standards, and Graduate Competency Standards. This is important so that the issue of disparity in education becomes an urgent problem that must be resolved immediately so that the implementation of a just education system can be realized.

In addition, the reality of disparities in education, especially during a pandemic, does not only occur in Indonesia but also globally. So it is important for activists and social actors to unite their vision and promote the issue of disparity in the education sector on a global solidarity agenda. This is so that in the future, the government, society, students and social movements can participate in realizing a free, scientific, democratic and socially-minded education.

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## FRICIONS OF THE 'NEW NORMAL': Figures of Covid-19 Solidarities in Indonesia

By: KUNCI Study Forum & Collective (Ferdiansyah Thajib, Nuraini Juliastuti, Gatari Surya Kusuma, Fiky Daulay)

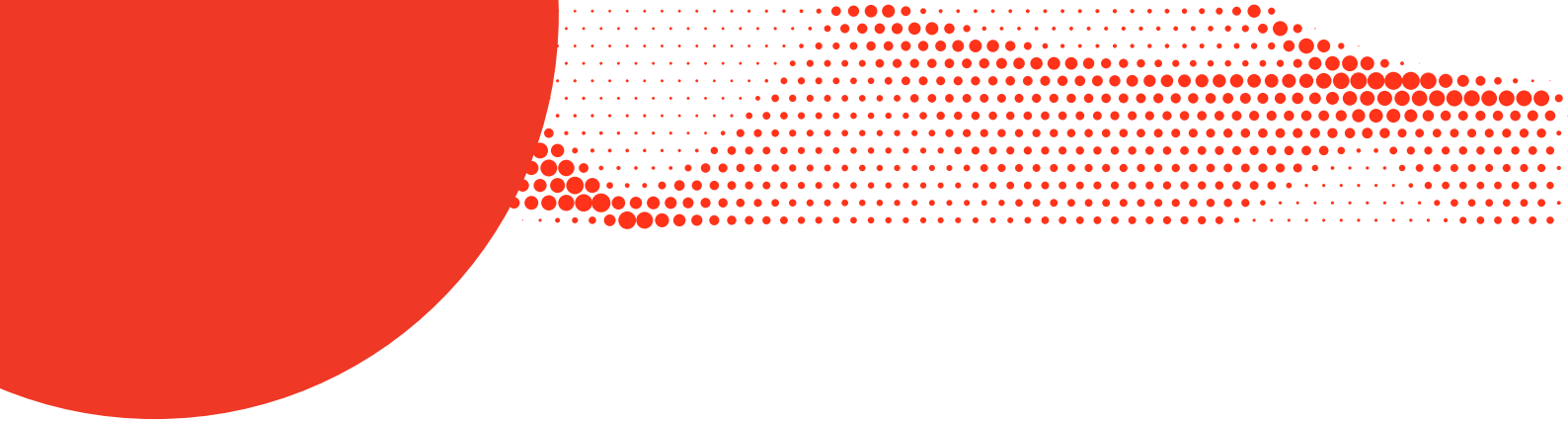
Similar to the Indonesian case, solidarity practices in the region do not only emerge as political contestations or acts of protest but also take place through the ethical doing of mutual care and interdependence. The pandemic crisis has provided us with glimpses of how actors with heterogeneous priorities of struggles and from very different social locations share common aspirations and actions towards a world beyond Covid-19



Distribution of relief goods coordinated by trans artist, Tamarra, through the Donasi Teman Waria (Support our Waria Friends) initiative. Waria is a local term for transgender woman. (Photo: Tamarra)

The official rhetoric regarding the 'New Normal' in Indonesia has become infused with the discourse on the imagination and aspiration of life beyond COVID-19. In this essay, we investigate how the idea of the New Normal is being complicated, negotiated, and contested by different grassroots solidarity practices in Indonesia. Embedded in specific local contexts and struggles, members of Indonesian civil society have been actively constructing and strengthening platforms of solidarity since the pandemic began. They comprise individual and collective initiatives that embody local, national, and trans-local aspirations of new ways of living amidst the widening gaps of inequality caused by the current pandemic. Their solidarity practices reveal how narratives of the New Normal are not the mere nostalgic longing for what has been normalized but have become ethical tools for rearranging the world, beginning anew.





Written in October 2020, this article chronicles the situation in Indonesia during the first wave of COVID-19, when one question of when life would return to normal began to haunt many people's lives. The government, under President Joko Widodo (Jokowi), has been trying to respond to this question with a wide range of measures that include the adoption of jurisdictional semi-lockdowns, called PSBB (Pembatasan Sosial Berskala Besar or Large Scale Social Restriction) and the distribution of stimulus and relief packages to alleviate the effect of COVID-19 on the nation's economy. Similar to what is happening across the globe, the current pandemic has made obvious the deep and pervasive structural inequalities in Indonesian society. However, instead of addressing these deeper issues, the government response so far tends to ignore and thus potentially exacerbate these problems. One example of these shortcomings is Jokowi's launch of the New Normal campaign, which utilizes an oft-cited phrase to introduce a series of policies that allow social and economic activities to resume amidst the pandemic while maintaining strict health and hygiene protocols. As stated by Jokowi's televised speech introducing the "New Normal" policy in mid-May:

Co-existing is not giving up. It's adapting. We fight Covid-19 by prioritizing strict health protocols that we all must follow. The government will ensure that our lives can gradually return to normal while at the same time observe and consider the facts that are happening on the ground. I stress that the safety of our citizens remains our priority. This is not a question of one or the other. This isn't a dilemma. Our lives will definitely change due to this pandemic. That is a certainty. That is what we call the New Normal. But this different condition will not be filled with pessimism or fear, we will regain our productivity with optimism since all will be done with precautions.<sup>1</sup>

Officially, the actualization of the New Normal policy involves the issuance of guidelines by various ministries stipulating the adoption of behavioral changes intended to curb the spread of COVID-19 in offices, factories, and public areas such as shopping centers and houses of worship. These policies are interchangeably accompanied by the use of acronyms<sup>2</sup> that generally echo public health messages produced by the World Health Organization, such as the AKB, Adaptasi Kebiasaan Baru or Adopting New Behaviors, and the 3M campaign, Menggunakan Masker, Mencuci Tangan, Menjaga Jarak or wear a mask, wash your hands, and maintain social distancing.

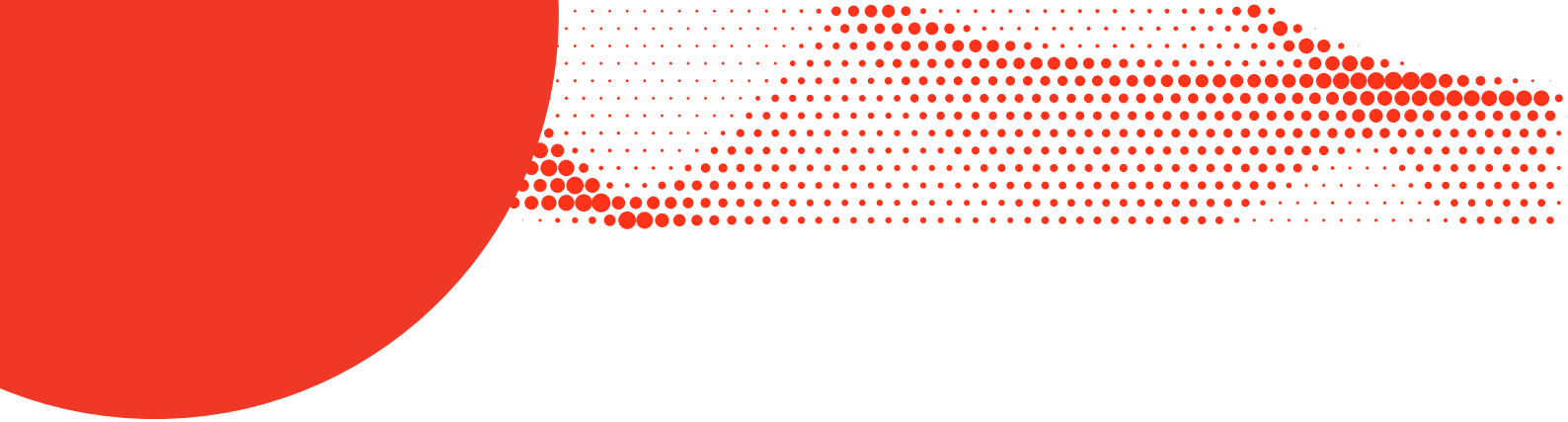
Globally speaking, New Normal is not a unique term. Even before it was adopted by many international institutions, including WHO, and used to mitigate the long-term effects of COVID-19, this term had circulated widely following the global financial crisis of 2007–08 and the aftermath of the crisis, a recession which lasted until 2012. The phrase was also used in the wake of China's economic downturn in 2012. The Indonesian government joined in with the discourse of the New Normal which was circulating globally by adopting it as a strategy for coping with the uncertainties brought about by the pandemic. However, this iteration has been met with increasingly incongruous speculations in the public sphere.

Many critics argue that Jokowi's New Normal policy is more likely to create a greater risk of the general public being misled into believing that some stability can be regained in the immediate future. As Indonesian social psychologists Dicky Pelupessy, Jony Eko Yulianto, and Monica E. Madyaningrum observed, many of Jokowi's

<sup>1</sup>Indonesian State Secretary, Presiden Jokowi: Pemerintah Ingin Masyarakat Produktif dan Aman dari Covid-19, YouTube, 15 May 2020, available at: <https://youtu.be/gLh1sED9k78>.

<sup>2</sup>According to Nuraini Juliastuti (2006), the pervasiveness of acronyms and abbreviations in Indonesian political languages represent a play and practice of language that is paradoxically aimed at both extracting the meaning of a certain object or social phenomenon into one particular mechanical understanding and at the same time detaching it from a more grounded understanding of a social reality.

<sup>3</sup>D. Pelupessy, J.E. Yulianto & M.E. Madyaningrum, "Bias kelas dalam diskursus pemerintah soal COVID-19", *The Conversation*, 21 September 2020, available at: <https://theconversation.com/bias-kelas-dalam-diskursus-pemerintah-soal-Covid-19-146022>



COVID-19 policy directives are marked by class bias, in which the poor are treated as a difficult group in need of intervention, and existing measures tend to prioritize enable the middle class to safely reactivate the economic cycle. As we will elaborate on in this paper, public health emergency responses in Indonesia are used to justify the politics of securitization, for example, the justification of the state to expand its biopower<sup>4</sup> to discipline individual bodies and control populations through the police, military, preman (local thugs), and informal security groups.<sup>5</sup>

Shortly after it was made public, rhetoric around the New Normal policy has become infused with a discourse of the imagination of and aspirations for of a life beyond COVID-19. New Normal as a social construct seeped through various media channels by way of constant politicizing and permeated into daily expressions of hope and expectations, as well as fear and disappointment. The levels of public frustration and mistrust towards the government response were also epitomized by the trending of the hashtag #IndonesiaTerserah, in English #IndonesiaWhatever, on Instagram and Twitter.<sup>6</sup> All the while, the number of daily infections and fatalities across the archipelago showed no signs of declining. The capital city of Jakarta, for example, was one of the first to reimpose lockdown measures as the city governor Anies Baswedan learned that the virus had not been contained by the initial PSBB. Despite these grim disruptions, speculations of what normality would look like after the health crisis passed continued to develop as a key space of interface and awkward engagement between discrete political actors. Anthropologist Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing dubs these awkward, unstable, and transient interactions as “frictions” —these are zones “where words mean something different across a divide even as people agree to speak”.<sup>7</sup>

Diverging slightly from Tsing’s original conceptualization of the productive friction of global connections, in this essay we consider questions intended to construct lines of connection between civil society members in Indonesia as they cope with the global crisis caused by COVID-19: What solidarity work is made possible by the interactions between these inconsonant experiences? How does knowledge travel between them? What are the stakes, and what kind of power relations are being reproduced and re-organized along these trajectories?

### Working With Patches and Figures

To trace this complex confluence, we brought together singular patches of observation. They are composed of data gathered from seemingly unrelated resources, collected among others from various online resources and media representations, ethnographic presence in social media, and engaging in conversations with variously located protagonists. Occasioned by online face to face meetings, we collaboratively wrote this article remotely from our respective, self-imposed confinement in our ‘homes’ that are also separated by long-haul flights—as two out of four of us live in Yogyakarta, one is currently based in Berlin, and the other in Melbourne.

Our positioning as authors also configures a patchwork. By this, we are referring to how we traverse notions of ‘home’ and ‘field’, as well as the boundaries between the ‘personal’ and ‘professional’ in ethnographic knowledge production.<sup>8</sup> In KUNCI, the collective to which we all belong, we have been practicing study as a form of slow and nomadic inquiry. This habit has been influenced by challenges in navigating time differences, long-distance col-

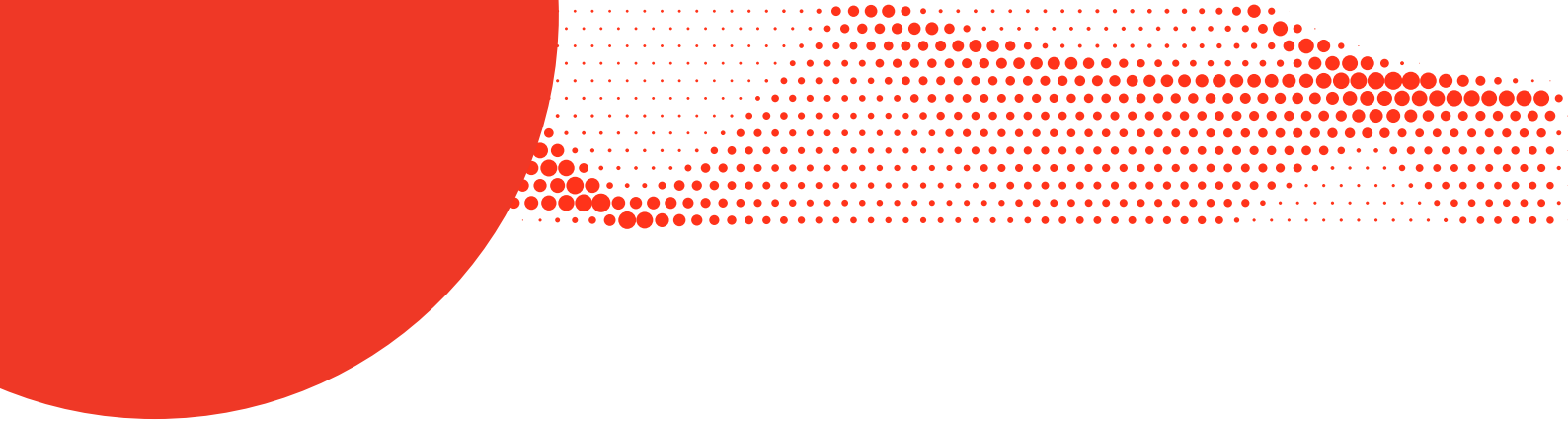
<sup>4</sup>Foucault, M. (1990). *The history of sexuality* (1st ed., Vol. 1), Vintage Books.

<sup>5</sup>For further reading, see Natasa, A. (2020, June 3). *New Normal Initiation Is Still Centralized*. University of Gadjah Mada News Report. <https://www.ugm.ac.id/en/news/19504-new-normal-initiation-is-still-centralized>

<sup>6</sup>For further reading, Costa, A. B. D., & Widiyanto, S. (2020, May 18). *#IndonesiaWhatever: Indonesians vent online over virus response*. Reuters. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-coronavirus-indonesia/indonesiawhatever-indonesians-vent-online-over-virus-response-idUSKBN22U194>

<sup>7</sup>Tsing, A. L., *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection*, Princeton University Press, 28 November 2004.

<sup>8</sup>G. Günel, S. Varma, & C. Watanabe, “A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography, Member Voices”, *Fieldsights*, 9 June 2020, available at: <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/a-manifesto-for-patchwork-ethnography>.



laborations, and contentious local contexts. We would like to extend this positioning to this essay. Hence, rather than posturing that we can capture all aspects and represent all perspectives, assuming an elevated position from which to look at the world, our knowledge is intimately situated within the incommensurable differences that constitute the material and affective conditions of the subjectivities represented in this essay.<sup>9</sup>

In this essay, we investigate the frictions arising out of encounters and interactions across difference, by tapping into the ways less-confident translations of the New Normal reverberate among what we call “figures of COVID-19 solidarity in Indonesia”. This designation is inspired by the approach developed by Joshua Barker, Erik Harms, and Johan Lindquist, who used the term figures of Southeast Asian modernity to describe “subject positions that manifest and comment upon a particular historical moment in the complex articulation of large-scale processes that are shaping the countries of the region”.<sup>10</sup> These figures are also real people who embody what Raymond Williams called structures of feelings, an emergent connectivity tied to a social experience that is still in process.<sup>11</sup>

The figures of solidarity in the COVID-19 era are diverse, including social justice activists, initiators of the food sovereignty movement, people with non-heteronormative gender expressions, and community filmmakers. Embedded in specific local contexts and struggles, these members of Indonesian civil society have been actively developing platforms of solidarity since the pandemic began. They consist of individual and collective initiatives that embody local, national, and trans-local aspirations about new ways to live, shaped by the long-term vulnerability and widening gap of inequality caused by the current pandemic. Many of their struggles are also shadowed by tensions with the dominant discourse of well-being that is overdetermined by neoliberal interests. This tendency is encapsulated by Jokowi’s government’s orientation towards infrastructure and economic development, which is reminiscent of a New Order developmentalist approach.<sup>12</sup>

In the following four sections we will detail how, for the distinct figure, self-preservation in the wake of the multidimensional crisis could not be done by focusing on individual survival only. But instead, that surviving “well” necessitates reclaiming meaningful connections with others and broader living environments.<sup>13</sup> In the last section of this paper, we weave together some of the themes discussed in prior sections to better understand how among solidarity creators in Indonesia, narratives of the New Normal are not a mere nostalgic longing for what has been normalized but are ethical tools for rearranging the world anew.

## Hijacking the Pandemic

This section discusses the discourse and vision of the New Normal from the perspective of social justice activist circles. For this case study, we worked with the Yogyakarta-based activists’ network Aliansi Rakyat Bergerak (Alliance of the People Movement or from here on, Alliance). The Alliance holds the view that the COVID-19 pandemic provides a greater opportunity for state oppression. We contextualized the emergence of the Alliance in relation to emergencies as both an important moment and condition of the timeline of the organization.

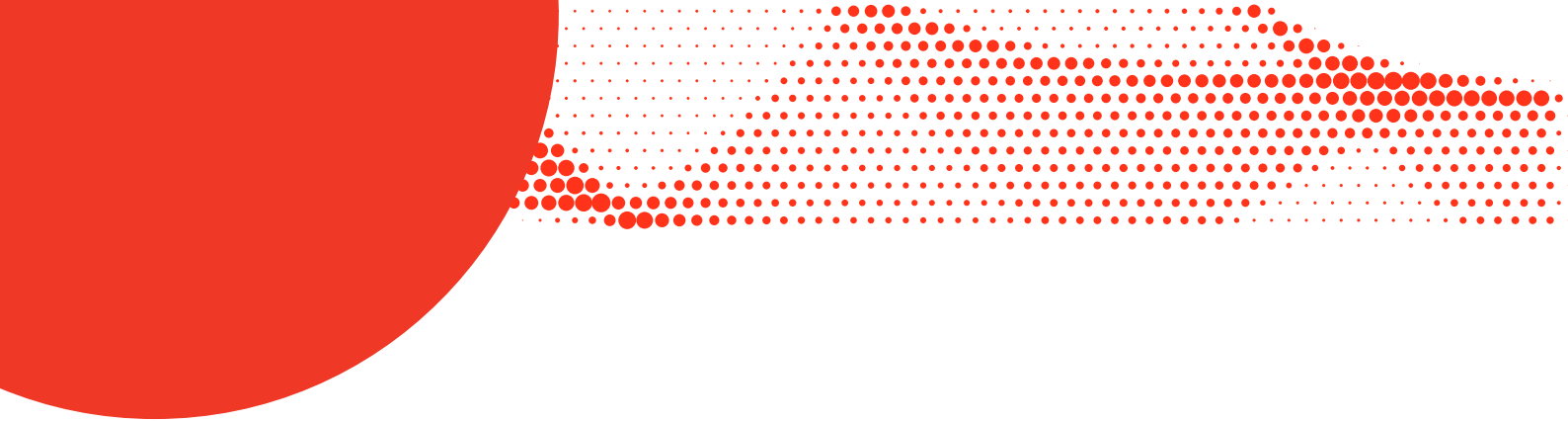
<sup>9</sup>D. Haraway, “Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective”, *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3, 1988, pp. 575–99, available at: <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>.

<sup>10</sup>J. Barker, E. Harms, & J. Lindquist, “Figures of Southeast Asian Modernity”, University of Hawai’i Press, 2014, available at: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt6wqdn3>, p.2.

<sup>11</sup>Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977.

<sup>12</sup>E. Warburton, “Jokowi and the New Developmentalism”, *Bulletin of Indonesian Economic Studies*, 15 February 2017, pp. 297-320, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00074918.2016.1249262>.

<sup>13</sup>J.K. Gibson-Graham, J. Cameron, & S. Healy, *Take Back the Economy: An Ethical Guide for Transforming Our Communities*, University of Minnesota Press, 9 May 2013.



Melani Budiarta describes the political climate in post-Reformasi Indonesia as a climate of emergency in which activists redirected their activism, filling various roles that responded to community needs.<sup>14</sup> We extend Budiarta's proposition to articulate emergencies as specific conditions that engender new political configurations which lead various activists to determine new directions. Doreen Lee's research on Generasi 98 (Generation 98) and archival activists interpret the big gap between generations from 1978–98 as the result of the success of the depoliticization of campuses during the New Order era. It also can be seen as an 'undocumented time' because the documentation of many episodes of political violence that happen between 1970–80 is scarce.<sup>15</sup> Drawing on Benedict Anderson's concept of logic of seriality, Lee asserts that the naming of the activist generations in Indonesia—Generasi 1908, 1928, 1945, and 1966—represents "a specific and unique generational contribution to the evolution of pemuda (youth) nationalism".<sup>16</sup> Lee foregrounds the period to investigate how the memories and productivity of the previous youth movement shaped the next generation's narratives and to make sense of how it transformed into the student movement of 1998.

We use Lee's undocumented time to make an observation of the social and political archiving conditions between 1998 and 2020. Many activists of the Alliance are part of post-Generasi 98. When Reformasi took place, they were still in primary or high school. Reformasi 1998 is an event they learned and relearned through documentation by mass media and other available archives. However, the fall of Suharto also brought a period of openness to knowledge and information. Lee observed how during the 2014 presidential election in Indonesia, both experienced and new activists "lived in a post-Suharto world without mystery".<sup>18</sup> The existence of knowledge products about the systemic abuse and the repressive history of the state, equipped Alliance activists with the intellectual tools needed to articulate unresolved issues and formulate necessary actions.

The activists grew up witnessing the polarization of diverging political views, religious radicalization, gender and sexuality-based oppression, and the irregular censorship of the media. The Alliance first rose to prominence during the organization of the Gejayan Memanggil (Gejayan Calling) protest at the end of September 2019 in Yogyakarta. Nonetheless, the movement tackled diverse and nuanced issues by demanding the cancellation or review of aspects of the criminal code bill that affected citizen's private lives, from abortion to supernatural knowledge. The movement also demanded a revision of the Komisi Pemberantasan Korupsi (Corruption Eradication Commission) bill, prosecution of governmental elites who are responsible for environmental destruction, the refusal of problematic bills on agrarian and labor affairs, urgency in passing bills on sexualized violence, and prosecution for human rights violations. The media often portrayed the movement as 'millennial'. It is also said to be one of the largest student movements since 1998. The Gejayan Calling protest drew wide public support from various segments of the population, including high school students, women activists, artists, and public intellectuals. It seems apt to define the current generation as the 'broken promises generation' as their activism is dedicated not to navigating post-crisis conditions but instead, to making sense of life in perpetual crisis.

Alliance uses social media as an important medium to convey messages to its followers. As of February 2022 the network's Instagram account @gejayanmemanggil has some 94,300 followers. This large number of followers

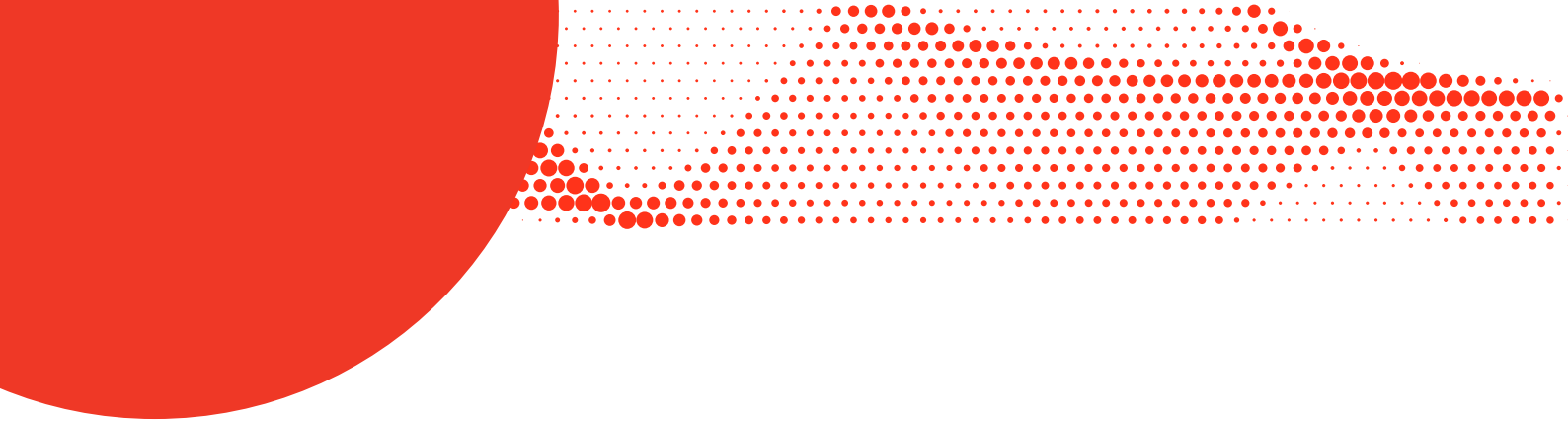
<sup>14</sup>M. Budiarta, "The Blessed Tragedy: The Making of Women's Activism During the Reformasi Years", *Challenging Authoritarianism in Southeast Asia: Comparing Indonesia and Malaysia*, A. Heryanto & S. K. Mandal (Eds.), Routledge-Curzon, 2003, pp. 145–78.

<sup>15</sup>D. Lee, *Activist Archives: Youth Culture and the Political Past in Indonesia*, Duke University Press, May 2016, p.7-8.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid, p.11.

<sup>17</sup>Ibid p.213.

<sup>18</sup>KUNCI Study Forum & Collective, *The Classroom is Burning: Let's Dream About a School of Improper Education*, Ugly Duckling Presse, 15 December 2020, pp.34-5.



indicates the popularity of Alliance among young people and active Instagram users. This popularity partly results from Alliance's capacity to couch social and political discourse in popular terms.

Jokowi was late to acknowledge the arrival of COVID-19 to Indonesia. Instead of preparing for the worst, Jokowi's government were still paying social media influencers and political pundits to promote the government's economic approach to dealing with the pandemic. The Alliance, on the other hand, uses Instagram to disseminate information which may not be directly related to COVID-19 but can be used as a departure point for examining the government's absence in many moments of crisis.

The Alliance does not solely rely on social media as a strategy. It uses a combination of actions, maximizing the effectiveness of online platforms whilst publishing critical analysis papers and organizing rallies. The Alliance's latest activities include the organization of the Pasar Gratis, a market to provide free goods, and the Rapat Visual gathering. Rapat Visual serves as a public invitation to create visual responses that express frustrations over the injustice of state policies and their impact on the public. While expressing its concerns about certain social and political issues, the Alliance also dedicates its posting to creating awareness of other pressing concerns and sources of anxieties as stated by various activist groups in different areas of Indonesia. Alliance functions in support of a network of Indonesian activists and as a community for those who are concerned with what is happening in their social environment.

The Alliance has insisted on holding its meetings following standard health protocols. The pandemic brings forward a fear of something invisible that is looming in the background of everyday life. Within the context of the worrying state of life during the pandemic in Indonesia, organizing collective gatherings to protest and think collectively about what essential steps need to be taken sounds risky. To inhabit the fragile ecosystem of social security means having no other option but to keep on moving and doing something. The practices of Alliance affirm the idea that the existence of safety nets for the public is rarely dependent on formal institutions.

The Alliance has regularly stated that the pandemic should not lead to neglecting human rights and social justice issues. For example, Alliance provides background narratives about the danger of the Omnibus Jobs Creation Bill, on work creation implementation, and the detrimental effect of delaying passing the Elimination of Sexual Violence Bill.<sup>19</sup> Alliance relays information from various indigenous groups about the continuing custom-derived confiscation of land. They provide the constant nudging that everyone needs to educate themselves about Indonesia's colonial power, Papua, the politics of natural resources and mining industries, and human rights violations. The recent appointment Prabowo Subianto, a former member of the Tim Mawar (Rose Team), as Defense Minister proved that the Widodo presidency is lacking the commitment to resolve human rights violations. The Rose Team was part of the Kopassus, the Army's Special Forces, which was responsible for the kidnapping and killing of political activists during the final period of the New Order regime between 1997–98. While appearing broad and fragmentary, Alliance's multi-directional critiques remind us of Fernando Tormos's definition of intersectional solidarity: "a recognition of oppression as constituted by multiple and interacting social structures".<sup>20</sup> A strategy which "requires recognizing and representing intersectionally marginalized social groups formed by

<sup>19</sup>The controversial bill bases its regulation on the relaxation of environmental standards, revocation of building permits, central position of the state on issuing all business licenses, and relaxation of investment regulations, while substantially reducing or scrapping various aspects of and labor safety net mechanisms. See: Samboh, E., "Guide to omnibus bill on job creation: 1,028 pages in 10 minutes", The Jakarta Post, 24 February 2020, available at: <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/02/21/guide-to-omnibus-bill-on-job-creation-1028-pages-in-8-minutes.html>. Last accessed on 10 February 2022.

<sup>20</sup>Tormos, F., "Intersectional solidarity", Politics, Groups, and Identities, 2016, p. 712 available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/21565503.2017.1385494>.

multiple interactions and linkages between different social structures and lived experiences”.<sup>21</sup>

Alliance created the hashtag #pandemidibajak, which translates to #thepandemichasbeenhijacked, to accompany their posting. They also used another hashtag #pandemidibajakoligarki or #thepandemichasbeenhijackedbytheoligarchy. Such hashtags read as a summary of all the opinions presented through their platform. It demonstrates a perspective that the pandemic provides a means of introducing various policies and bills that are only in favor of powerful elites. In dealing with the pandemic, the government lacks national strategies and emergency consolidation.



*A Poster campaign on the streets of Yogyakarta. The poster reads Pandemi dibajak oligarki: Awas rezim rakus. Gagalkan Omnibus Law or in English, ‘the pandemic is hijacked by the oligarch: Beware of the greedy regime. Break down the Omnibus Law’. Image courtesy of Fiky Daulay.*

Despite ongoing public protests, the People’s Representative Council passed the Omnibus Jobs Creation bill on 6 October. Alliance assisted in the organization of a rally in Yogyakarta on 8 October to protest the bill’s implementation. The organization of the rally does not only reflect the urgency of protesting the bill but also, provides insight into the values of organizing and participating in rallies during the pandemic. Alliance demonstrates that the fight against COVID-19 also involves standing up against systemic abuse and state neglect.

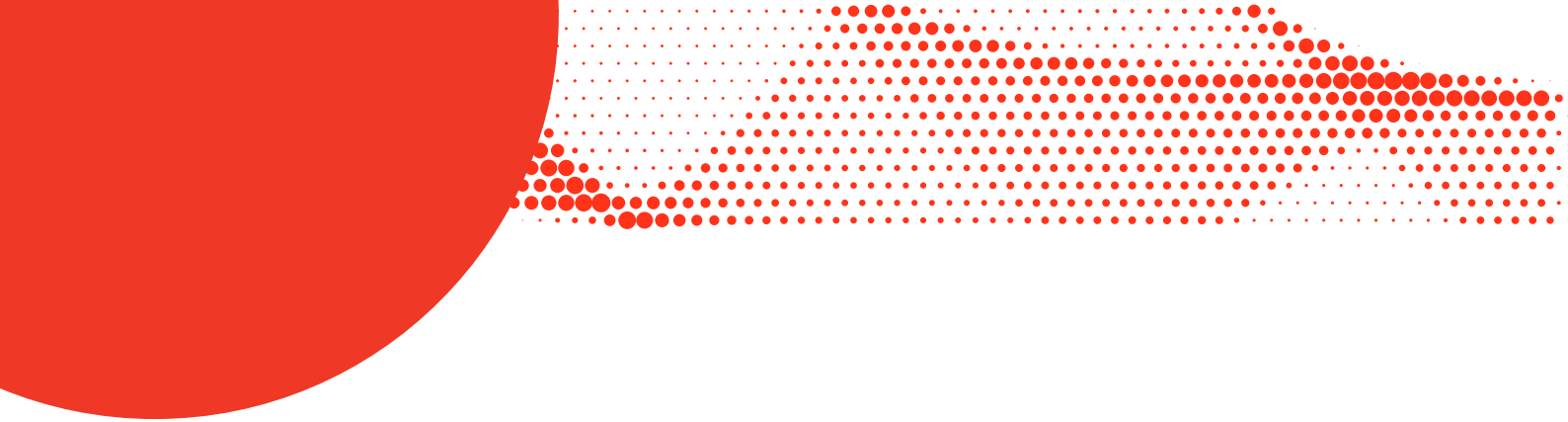
Alliance’s latest paper, published in 2020, discusses various policy sectors emphasizing the fact that the crafting of state policies does not take into account the health and economic crises of the people. The ‘New Normal’ is based more on economic consideration and less on the well-being of the people. Alliance refers to the state’s New Normal policy as a ‘fatal mistake’ because it lacks a sense of crisis. Instead of allocating the state budget to increase the rate of testing and improve health facilities, the budget is spent on providing stimulus packages for large companies. Various large infrastructure projects are still taking place. The pandemic has intensified the long-standing crises of education, sexualized violence, and the environment. The decision to justify the New Normal phase is based on economic importance, coupled with the lack of integrity of the Ministry of Health and minimum health infrastructure that existed, leads to conditions where the wider community will succumb to further fatalities. As Alliance wrote, we are left to our own devices: “In the long run, we are dead!”<sup>22</sup>

## Solidarity Through Food

As the nation remains alert to the continuing upsurge of COVID-19 cases, deaths, hospitalizations, and economic

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>(Aliansi Rakyat Bergerak, 2020, Pandemi Dibajak Oligarki section, para. 5)



downturns, people became aware that there was a serious food shortage. Indonesia is heavily dependent on the import of numerous food staples. Travel restrictions during the pandemic caused major delays to the food supply chain. Food stocks need to be preserved in order to ensure that staples are available for all communities and to avoid the rise in food prices and inflation.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, the sense of there being a food crisis is hardly new. This problem already occurred in the 1950s, during Sukarno's presidency. The government argued that the main factor that caused this food crisis was the speed of population growth when compounded with the minimal utilization of diverse food resources. Though they resorted to food imports as a short-term strategy, the Sukarno government envisaged a more innovative approach to deal with the problem of supply chain shortages. To develop public consciousness to food sustainability, they created a major program that portrayed the richness of local food resources which culminated in the publication of *Mustikarasa: Buku Masakan Indonesia*, the *Mustikarasa: Indonesian Cookbook*, in 1967. The publication of the book was intended to diversify the consumption of staples such as rice to other seasonal produce. The wider aim was to develop a more positive relationship between food consumption and local food knowledge. *Komunitas Bambu*, a Jakarta-based publisher, republished the book in 2016. In his introductory text, historian JJ Rizal perceives the program and the book as results of Sukarno's politics of self-reliance.

The politics of self-reliance or *berdikari* is an abbreviation of *berdiri di atas kaki sendiri*, which means to stand on one's feet. Amiruddin Al Rahab examined the inclusion of *berdikari* in Sukarno's economic policy during the Guided Democracy period in 1959.<sup>24</sup> The application of *berdikari*, Al Rahab asserts, was part of the nation's attempt to create the foundations of a strong national economy during the early period of Indonesia's independence. The strength of the foundation lies not only in the potential of Indonesian natural resources but also in the government's willingness to focus on the social welfare of the people, and is not to be dictated by foreign economic powers. In popular discourse, *berdikari* became a common expression for gaining autonomy in a broader sense. Along with the tumultuous political whirlwind that followed the country's anti-communist purge of 1965-66, Sukarno's politics of self-reliance and his ambitions to achieve food security were swept away.

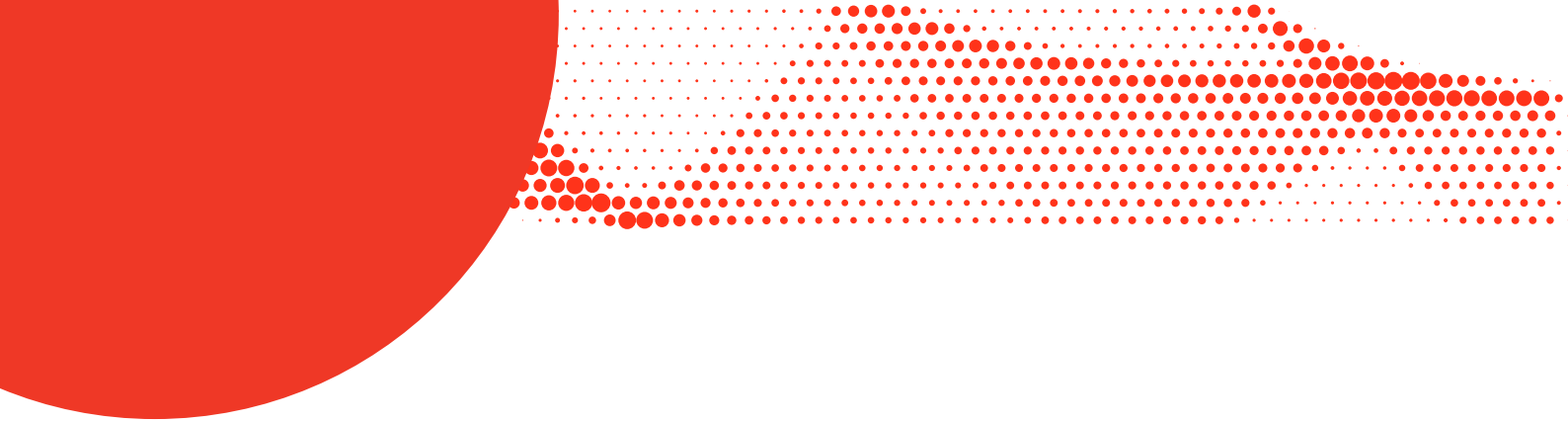
Currently, as an anticipatory measure against the global crisis predicted by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Jokowi's government has responded with the Food Estate program. 770,000 hectares of land in Central Kalimantan and North Sumatra are in the process of being converted into rice paddies and areas that will yield non-irrigated crops, such as maize and cassava. In its later stages, the mega project will also be expanded to other regions such as South Sumatra, West Papua, and East Nusa Tenggara. Designed to attract global investments, the realization of this scheme is overseen by the military, with the Defense minister Prabowo Subianto acting as the leader.

Since it was announced, the Food Estate project has garnered controversy and is not well received by various local environmental and indigenous activists as it inherits the ambitions of Suharto's Mega Rice Project (MRC) of the 1990s.<sup>25</sup> The MRC ended in monumental failure in 1999 because peat lands were not suitable for rice farming. The online network monitoring the recovery of Kalimantan peatlands, *Pantau Gambut*, notes the inconsistencies

<sup>23</sup>See Rahman, D. F. (2020, April 21). Staple food imports arriving in May to safeguard stocks, prices: Airlangga, The Jakarta Post. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/04/21/staple-food-imports-arriving-in-may-to-safeguard-stocks-prices-airlangga.html>.

<sup>24</sup>A.A. Rahab, *Ekonomi berdikari Sukarno*, Komunitas Bambu, 2014.

<sup>25</sup>R.J. Miranda & A. Adventa "Food Estate Project: New Ecological Disaster Brewing in Kalimantan", *Jakarta Globe*, 29 June 2020, available at: <https://jakartaglobe.id/opinion/food-estate-project-new-ecological-disaster-brewing-in-kalimantan>



between the Food Estate project and the government's environmental protection policies.<sup>26</sup> This is reflected in the Food Estate's plan to use some former MRP locations as new production sites. In the broader context, this policy potentially exacerbates the gaping disparities in land ownership, further exposing smallholder farmers to the risk of agrarian conflicts. It also provides more leeway for large scale industries to tighten their grip, monopolizing food distribution nationwide. However, at this stage, it seems too early to predict the future of Jokowi's Food Estate program.

Anxieties about pandemic induced food scarcity are also running high within our close surroundings in Yogyakarta. Hence, many independent collective kitchens are being organized. A case in point is the Solidaritas Pangan Jogja (SPJ) which has been focusing on providing meals for those who work in the informal sector, including rickshaw drivers, women porters working in traditional markets, scavengers, and others who lost their source of income during the PSBB. SPJ was officially founded on 26 March 2020. It started as one kitchen and later developed into a network of 11 kitchens in Yogyakarta city. SPJ's operation has been backed by public donations since the beginning of the pandemic, however, as the pandemic lasts longer than anticipated, the revenue generated from donations is decreasing. Since May 2020, most members of the network have ceased kitchen activities, leaving only Dapur Sembungan kitchen collective as the only active group.

Concurrently, the public landscape in Yogyakarta has been witnessing a surge in gardening and farming initiatives, such as Kebunku (My Garden), Kebun Sama (Collective Garden), and Sekti Muda. While Kebunku and Kebun Sama have only emerged during the pandemic, Sekti Muda was founded much earlier in 2014. We present all three of them here as groups that attempt to create sustainable models for dealing with the food crisis. The pandemic creates a situation where they are more effectively networked.

Kebunku's initial operation was driven by Dapur Sembungan's need for a sustainable supply of produce. This urban farming project is situated within the Gusdurian Foundation building in Yogyakarta. Gusdurian is a popular term referring to the adherents of the late Abdurrahman Wahid. Wahid, also known as Gus Dur, was a Muslim leader, prominent politician, and thinker, and served as the fourth president of Indonesia. The Gusdurian Foundation now functions as a space to exchange ideas on the arts, culture, and religious tolerance.

Kebun Sama is an initiative that optimizes the front and back areas of the KUNCI Study Forum & Collective's workspace by developing a community garden. The gardeners of Kebun Sama are a combination of KUNCI members and other groups or organizations that regularly use our base as a place for working or hanging out. Through gardening, we are learning to grow our own food. The urge to subsist on our own production should not be perceived as mere nostalgia or a return to simplicity but as something that emerged as the result of post-crisis reckoning. It serves as the implementation of a 'subsistence perspective' which is not only opposed to commodity-based production but also points to the possibility of attaining a good standard of living at the margins of society.<sup>27</sup> The gardening initiative demonstrates how surviving the pandemic is initially about fulfilling our own individual needs which emanate out to those closest to us. The subsistence path leads to the creation of shared resources for others.

<sup>26</sup>Pantau Gambut, "Ruwetnya Lokasi Cetak Sawah Baru (The Confusing Location on New Rice Paddies Field)", Pantau Gambut, 18 May 2020, available at: <https://pantaugambut.id/publikasi/ruwetnya-lokasi-cetak-sawah-baru>

<sup>27</sup>M Mies & V. Bennholdt-Thomsen, *The Subsistence Perspective: Beyond the Globalised Economy*, Zed Books:London, 2000, p.5



The third initiative, Sekti Muda is an abbreviation of Sekolah Tani Muda or Young Farmers School, was started by Dimas Dwi Laksana, Wardha Andriyuni, and Fuad Langgara. Through organizing gardening classes and visits to farmers-practitioners, Sekti Muda educates young farmers “to spread their newly acquired knowledge and foster a new generation of independent and environmentally aware farmers”.<sup>28</sup> Sekti Muda’s agenda is prefigured by the climate crisis. This initiative has been actively promoting natural farming which rules out the use of manufactured agricultural enhancers like chemical fertilizers and pesticides, and is modeled on Masanobu Fukuoka’s ecological farming principles. These practices hark back to traditional local farming practices that were made scarce following Suharto’s Green Revolution in the 1970s.<sup>29</sup> Sekti Muda also adopts an agroecology approach which is aimed at providing “economic, social and environmental benefits that are rooted in farming traditions”.<sup>30</sup>



*A member of Solidaritas Pangan Jogja (SPJ) tending the crops at Kebunku, Yogyakarta. Image courtesy of Benny Widyo.*

By juxtaposing the practices of food sovereignty activists with the state’s policies on food supply, we can discern diverging points in the ascription to the historical model of berdikari. The government’s approach to the food crisis is oriented towards a logic of mass-production farming which in the long run has devastating effects on both the environment and small-scale farmers. Their understanding of berdikari ignores Soekarno’s suggestion that one needs to acknowledge the potentials, and we add, limitations of local resources. Alternatively, community initiatives such as Kebunku, Kebun Sama, and Sekti Muda develop berdikari as means for a self-subsistence that is ingrained in the interconnected tissues we share with others and our ecologies. Such solidarities are fueled by and are contributing to trans-local engagement with the existential threat posed by the climate crisis.

### **Dignified Refusal**

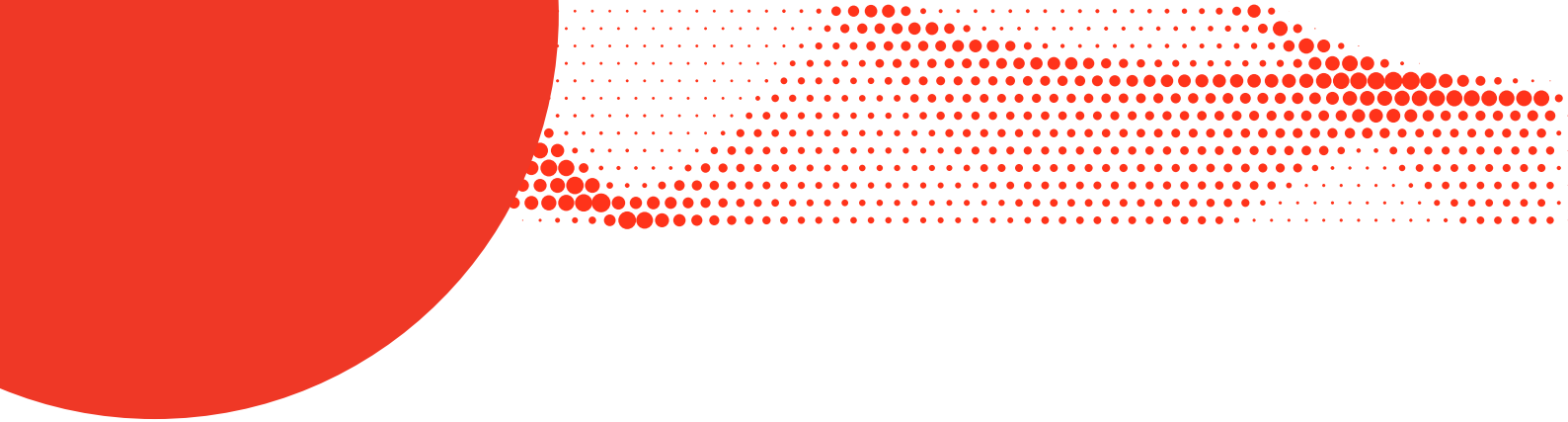
COVID-19 has amplified structural inequalities faced by people with diverse sexual orientations, gender expressions, and identities in Indonesia. For these subjectivities, the crisis caused by the pandemic follows an arduous five years of dealing with a growing tide of persecutions.<sup>31</sup> In this sense, their struggles with everyday violence have been somewhat ‘normalized’.

28 D.D. Laksana, W. Andriyuni, & F. Langgara, “Natural Farming in Yogyakarta”, Inside Indonesia, 19 February, 2020, available at: <https://www.insideindonesia.org/natural-farming-in-yogyakarta>

29 M. T. Wicaksono, et.al., “Farmers’ worst enemy”, Inside Indonesia, <https://www.insideindonesia.org/farmers-worst-enemy-2>

30 D.D. Laksana, W. Andriyuni, & F. Langgara, “Natural Farming in Yogyakarta”, Inside Indonesia, 19 February, 2020, available at: <https://www.insideindonesia.org/natural-farming-in-yogyakarta>

31 N. Kantjasungkana & S.E. Wieringa, “Creeping Criminalisation: Mapping of Indonesia’s National Law and Regional Regulations that Violate Human Rights of Women and LGBTIQ People”, OutRight Action International, New York, 2016, available at: <https://outrightinternational.org/sites/default/files/CreepingCriminalisation-eng.pdf>.



Some state actors have not only been complicit in but are also responsible for perpetuating public violence against sexual and gender minorities. As we focus on what has happened since the beginning of 2020, we acknowledge that the list of incidents is long. Many sexual and gender minorities have been experiencing loss of employment, forced exorcisms, and have been targeted by sporadic raids launched by both the government apparatus and local vigilante groups.<sup>32</sup> During the PSBB, transgender women have been disproportionately targeted by transphobic attacks in public spaces. Mira, a trans woman in Jakarta, was burned to death by a mob. In Aceh, a trans woman hairdresser named Alin was stabbed by her client at her workplace. In Bandung, West Java, two trans women were victimized by a cruel prank perpetrated by a YouTuber who gave them ‘COVID-19 care packages’ that were filled with bricks and garbage. The perpetrator had seemingly exploited the particularly vulnerable situation of trans women during COVID-19 to gain more viewers and followers. These incidents have compounded the dramatically deteriorating economic conditions of trans women during the pandemic.

Government measures to contain COVID-19 have further laid bare the adverse impacts of employment discrimination against people of non-heteronormative genders. Before the pandemic, trans women, especially those coming from poor backgrounds, often found themselves restricted to working in precarious, low-income jobs within informal sectors such as sex work, busking, and working in hair salons. The stay-at-home order has resulted in limited access to the already very few income sources and means of livelihood available to trans people.

A long exposure to structural inequalities has created an awareness among many trans individuals of the failings of the Indonesian government, that tends to ignore them under normal circumstances and is likely to do so during the pandemic. As morbid as this realization might sound, it has galvanized the trans community, who have developed the skills to come together and organize mutual aid and care. Since the pandemic began, those who have ostensibly been left behind by the government’s relief efforts took a stand, setting up solidarity networks that centered on the needs of their communities.

For example, the transwomen theater groups Sanggar Seroja and Queer Language Club have been organizing food distribution from before social distancing measures were imposed in Jakarta. Other LGBTIQ organizations in Jakarta, like Sanggar Swara, Arus Pelangi, and GWL-INA, in conjunction with the Legal Aid Institute and UN-AIDS, formed the Crisis Responses Mechanism Coalition, raising donations for hundreds of trans women living in greater Jakarta and beyond. Similar actions have also been organized in other regions such as Aceh and Medan in North Sumatra, Bandung, Bali, and Maumere in East Nusa Tenggara.<sup>33</sup>

In Yogyakarta, trans artist Tamarra initiated the initiative Donasi Teman Waria calling on people to ‘Support Our Waria Friends’, waria is a local term for transgender woman.<sup>34</sup> The idea came about when Tamarra returned home

<sup>32</sup>K. Newell, “LGBTQ+ community leaders in Indonesia: overcoming pandemic hardship”, New Mandala, 23 July 2020, available at: <https://www.newmandala.org/lgbtq-community-leaders-in-indonesia-overcoming-pandemic-hardship/>.

<sup>33</sup>J. Winterflood, “Please, don’t underestimate us’: Community-led initiatives are helping Indonesian transwomen survive Covid-19”, Coconuts Jakarta, 5 May 2020, available at: <https://coconuts.co/jakarta/features/please-dont-underestimate-us-community-led-initiatives-are-helping-indonesian-transwomen-survive-covid-19/>

<sup>34</sup>Tamarra prefers the third person pronoun Tamarra over ‘he’, ‘she’ or ‘they’.

<sup>35</sup>The Indonesian Ministry of Health classifies suspected cases of COVID-19 into two levels. The first, Orang Dalam Pemantauan (ODP) or Person Under Monitoring, is a person who has a fever or a history of fever and/or coughing or flu, and has traveled from other high-risk countries or regions in Indonesia or has been in contact with persons who are COVID-19 positive. An ODP may be allowed quarantine at home or in a government-appointed facility for fourteen days. The second level, Pasien Dalam Pengawasan (PDP) or Patient Under Supervision, is a PUM showing symptoms of pneumonia or who receives a positive test result. These patients may be treated at a hospital.

after being quarantined in hospital in March 2020 after showing symptoms of COVID-19.<sup>35</sup> Tamarra initiated the Donation, with the assistance of two trans women activist friends, Rully Malay and Ayu, whose tasks were to collect information about who, within their close surroundings, was in a dire situation and what kind of support was needed. In the initial round, Tamarra tapped into Tamarra's own social media network, primarily on Facebook and Instagram, to circulate the call for donations. In this first trial, Tamarra managed to collect enough donations, in the form of grocery staples, personal protective equipment, and subsidies for rent, to be distributed among 16 trans women.

Around six months after the donation was requested, we spoke with Tamarra via WhatsApp who stated that the "amount of people rallying behind the donation really surprises me, especially considering all the rejections that waria have been dealing with these days". Indeed, the outpouring of support for trans women in different regions demonstrates that patterns of exclusion towards trans people are being disrupted during the pandemic, especially considering public tolerance towards people of non-heteronormative sexualities and genders is still very low in Indonesia.<sup>36</sup> Tamarra continued, suggesting that it was also interesting that "actually, since COVID-19 and the lockdown took place did you notice how many people now use it as an opportunity to reclaim their 'spaces'? Just look at all the webinars that are happening these days, freely discussing about LGBT-related issues."

A reliance on digital technologies for organizing gatherings during COVID-19 has enabled sexual and gender minorities from across Indonesia to connect in faster and much cheaper ways.<sup>37</sup> Moreover, technology enables those involved in these gatherings to evade surveillance and avoid the raids that have become almost routine when gatherings were held for and by people with alternative sexualities and genders in physical spaces. Yet Tamarra's remarks left us with another important question: to what extent does the practices of reclaiming safer online spaces create change for future offline organizing?

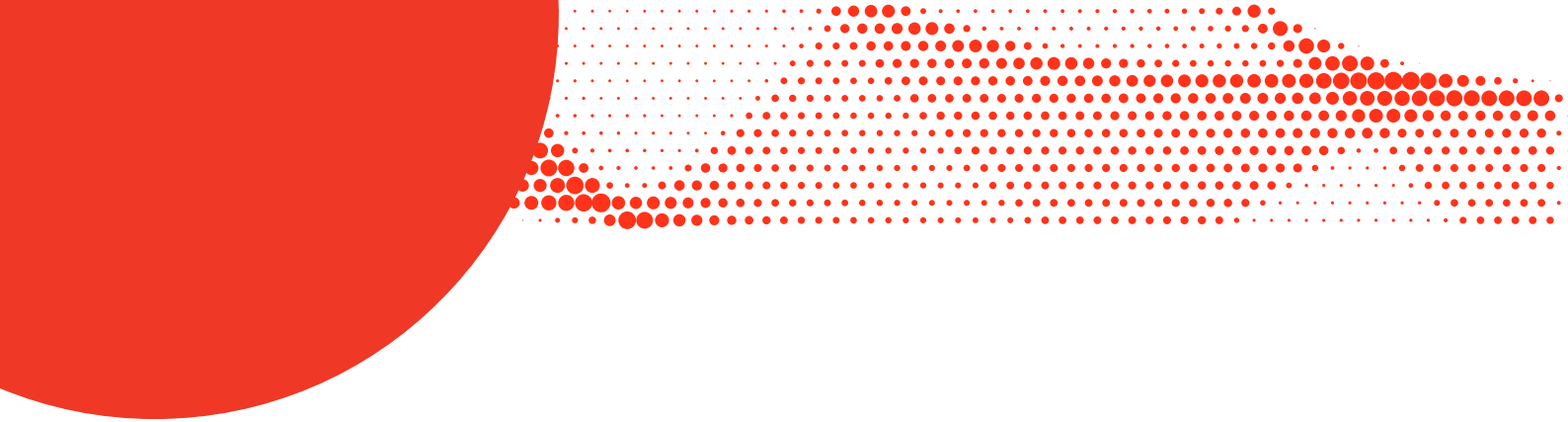


*Distribution of support coordinated by Donasi Teman Waria. Image courtesy of Tamarra.*

With regards to the current status of the donation, Tamarra told us that it is still ongoing and the number of recipients has increased to 150 people. For Tamarra, this is the maximum amount that can be handled. While according to Tamarra, the amount of incoming donations each month has become relatively stable, the decision to limit the

<sup>36</sup>P. Apriza, "More Indonesians tolerant of homosexuality, though vast majority still say no: Pew survey", The Jakarta Post, 26 June 2020, available at: <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/06/26/more-indonesians-tolerant-of-homosexuality-though-vast-majority-still-say-no-pew-survey.html>

<sup>37</sup>Rodriguez, D. G., & Suvianita, K., "How Indonesia's LGBT community is making a difference amid COVID-19", The Conversation, 26 June 2020, available at: <https://theconversation.com/how-indonesias-lgbt-community-is-making-a-difference-amid-Covid-19-140063>.



number of recipients is also to avoid redundancy. Currently, more community-based organizations run for and by trans women in the city, such as Kebaya Foundation and Al Fatah Waria Islamic Boarding School, organize relief efforts and form their own networks of recipients. As previously mentioned, apart from the assistance of two friends, Tamarra works on an individual basis and is not part of any of the trans women organizations in Yogyakarta. Tamarra had been using a pre-existing personal bank account to manage donations. To ensure accountability, Tamarra has been posting a list every month on social media that details the name of donors, the amount of money received, and the amount spent.

Accompanying the online update of the donation report that preceded our phone conversation, Tamarra asked playfully what we would do “to ensure the creativity of waria friends in Jogja so that they could generate stable income”. When we asked whether anyone responded to this question, Tamarra said no one did but continued stating: “What I would like to do is to buy a piece of land and then invite my waria friends to do something there. We can use this land for farming, or making a bed and breakfast, or opening up a restaurant. Basically, anything that can provide us with a steady income.” Issues of spatial appropriation once again popped up in Tamarra’s concerns about the temporality of Donasi Teman Waria. Tamarra suggested this time that land acquisition would be the next plausible step towards escaping everyday violence in public spaces, economic difficulties, and unstable work patterns.

Aspirations for the a New Normal held by trans solidarity workers constitute a way of living that is radically different from the ones intimated by official discourse. Tamarra and other platforms of COVID-19 solidarity led by and for trans women demonstrate acts of the refusal to engage with support provided by a government that has willfully neglected their right to exist. Through practices of mutual care, members of gender minorities denounce the idea of going back to normality which signifies the perpetuation of structural inequalities, while offering new possibilities of sustaining solidarity through difference. Difficult as it has been, life during COVID-19 has inadvertently enabled transgender people to reclaim some spaces for living life in dignity and solidarity. These are the spaces of the future that should be fomented further throughout and beyond the pandemic.

### **Visualizing the Virus**

For two years, one of us, Fiky Daulay, has been an active member of the Belangtelon Initiative, an independent film distribution platform based in Surabaya and Yogyakarta. The platform was initiated as a network for artist-filmmakers to distribute films that promote exploratory cinematic experiments through a series of screenings, workshops, and especially film festival submissions. Unlike commercially established film distribution agencies, Belangtelon has maintained an open, offers low to no-budget participation, is based on friendship, and mainly driven by its members’ interest in supporting film distribution of film to distant locations.

Apart from occasional exchange visits, the interaction between the group members is also sustained by WhatsApp group messaging. The group chat is used to regularly exchange news, ideas, or updates related to their efforts to distribute the films that they produced including through film festivals and other possible platforms. WhatsApp also becomes a channel for routinely exchanging detailed information about the personal lives of the members. Stories about daily accomplishments, hardships, banter and jokes are shared there.

In one evening at the end of July, Daulay saw an image posted on the WhatsApp group of Belangtelon. This image depicted one of his friends, Zainal, wearing a face shield with a mobile phone attached to his head, the phone

screen was facing outward displaying the scene in front of them. At first, Daulay thought his friends were simply making a joke.



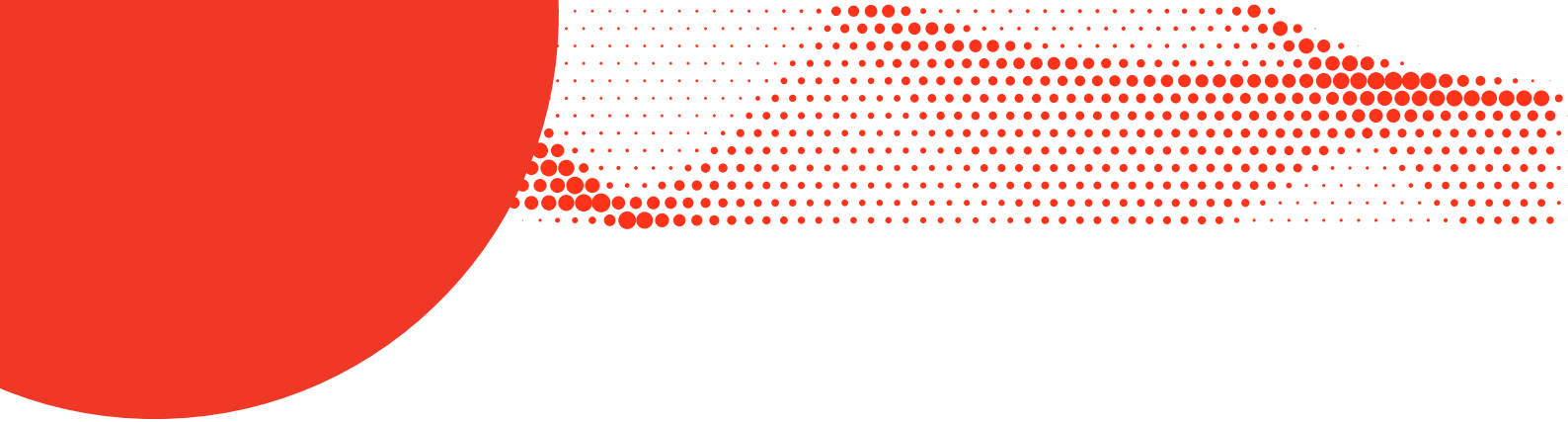
*The filmmakers' preparation before their quest to find the coronavirus. Image courtesy of Belangtelon Initiative.*

About a week later, a second image popped up on the group message feed. Once again in this image, Zainal was wearing the same camera contraption on his forehead. This time he was wearing a pink-colored T-shirt and a black mask. Both articles of clothing have "Corona nangdi Rek?" or "where is corona, folks?"<sup>38</sup> written on them in capital letters. He is holding something off-camera which looks like a fishing net. Standing opposite Zainal, looking at the camera, are Iyung, and Dwi who is seemingly looking at his watch. All three of them appeared to be standing in the middle of an empty road, next to the lane divider. No passersby were in sight. It seems like they are getting ready to go somewhere. However, Daulay realized that these images were not mere jokes. This was later confirmed when another friend in Surabaya, Yoyo, wrote a message in the group chat saying that Zainal, Dwi, Iyung, and himself were making a film about COVID-19. The two images were posted to inform the group chat members about how the process evolved.

All of this happened in a month when COVID-19 infections were very high in Surabaya. At that time, various local media outlets were filled with news depicting Surabaya as the second most infected city in Indonesia. Apart from bombarding the public with dramatic claims regarding the pandemic's status in Surabaya, the media had also actively become the mouthpiece for the rhetoric established by the central government concerning the New Normal policy, especially after this policy was first officially implemented in Surabaya, in mid-July. We could sense, however, amidst what appears to be a common journalism practice of balancing a need to provide accurate information to the public with the need to get it to them quickly, that many media practitioners themselves are struggling to construct an unbiased view of the New Normal policy.

Similar to what is happening globally, press coverage in Surabaya tended to obsessively focus on number driven daily updates on the progress of the pandemic, outbreaks, cases of infections, regional, national, and sometimes global fatalities, and momentous government policies. These reports mainly featured information provided by official National Task Force against COVID-19 press releases. This task force, together with the National Economic

<sup>38</sup> Rek is a shortened form of Arek. Arek is commonly used to define friends, companions or even people in a more abstract sense. Arek or arek-arek in plural form often suggests a sense of belonging or companionship or even a wider camaraderie among people of Surabaya. Rek is commonly addressed to friends, acquaintances, or a person that is not recognized personally. This pronoun is also used in other cities in East Java.



Recovery Task Force, is a subordinate part of the Committee of COVID-19 Response and National Economic Recovery, which was installed by the government's Regulation 28 on 20 July 2020. The committee was formed after another task force initiated by Jokowi in March 2020, the COVID-19 Response Acceleration Task Force, which is mainly comprised of public health officials, was dismissed.

This abrupt shift in the command line of pandemic response is only the tip of the iceberg of much larger bureaucratic inconsistencies, compounded by tensions between national and regional governments that have been thoroughly discussed elsewhere.<sup>39</sup> But here we focus on how the mainstream media's over-reliance on quantifications and uncritical reporting of often haphazard and ambiguous government policies has presented us with a dilemma. This practice has been widely adopted by the global mainstream media to emphasize the risk of infection and the severity of the pandemic outbreak, aiming at generating greater public compliance to preventative health measures.<sup>40</sup> This practice's impact on effective public prevention and recovery, however, are not so clear.

In her article assessing the predominant use of numbers in evaluative processes, scholar in education and social justice, Eve Tuck, takes inspiration from Patricia Carini who wrote:

when the immeasurable isn't recognized or valued, it tends to slip from view. Out of sight, it ceases to claim our minds and attention... [T]hese kinds of experiences tend to become not talkable. The language left for saying them, for exploring their meanings, grows rusty, archaic, clumsy on our tongues, and sometimes, embarrassing or forbidden."<sup>41</sup>

At stake in using pure quantification to legitimize the factualness of COVID-19 is the lack of articulation of what these numbers mean for understanding reality. Through blind faith in the objective quantification of human behavior and sociality, we lose the ability to perceive immeasurable relationships and processes.

While assuming neutrality, the representation of figures and numbers of infections and fatalities has been instrumentalized to consolidate the privileged and subject those who are the most vulnerable to violent disciplinary measures. The reproduction of inequalities is shown by the implementation of the New Normal policy in Surabaya, marked by the revised Mayor Regulation no. 33/2020 imposing a 10.00 p.m. curfew on the city.<sup>42</sup> The penalties of violating this regulation –which disproportionately affect workers in informal sectors, the poor, and homeless people–include military-led punishments, including doing degrading actions in public such as push-ups and dancing. Instead of addressing the regulation's discriminatory and dehumanizing effects, the local media is more interested in becoming an echo chamber for state biopower.<sup>43</sup>

The most recent production of the Belangtelon Initiative is a critical commentary on the dehumanizing representation of the New Normal in mainstream media. While the cinematic aim is to speculate on the visual dimensions

<sup>39</sup> H. Noer, "What has hampered Indonesia's Covid-19 response?", Policy Forum, 2 September 2020, available at: <https://www.policyforum.net/what-has-hampered-indonesias-Covid-19-response/>.

<sup>40</sup> A.A. Olagoke, O.O. Olagoke, & A.M. Hughes, "Exposure to coronavirus news on mainstream media: The role of risk perceptions and depression", *British Journal of Health Psychology*, 16 May 2020, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/bjhp.12427>.

<sup>41</sup> E. Tuck, "Breaking up with Deleuze: desire and valuing the irreconcilable", *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 6 October 2010, pp. 635–50, available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2010.500633>.

<sup>42</sup> See article 25A in the Mayor Regulation no.33/2020: <https://covid19.hukumonline.com/2020/07/13/peraturan-wali-kota-surabaya-nomor-33-tahun-2020/>

<sup>43</sup> Suarasurabaya.net reported the sanction for the violation of the Mayor's New Normal regulation. See Z Abidin, "Pelanggar Perwali New Normal Disanksi Push Up Hingga Joget", *Suara Surabaya*, 22 June 2020, available at: <https://www.suarasurabaya.net/kelanakota/2020/pelanggar-perwali-new-normal-disanksi-push-up-hingga-joget/>.

of the virus, the film is also intended as a social experiment that provides space for ordinary people to make sense out of their everyday life under the pandemic. The performative aspect of the film entitled *Corona Nangdi Rek?* took inspiration from a common scene found in the urban landscape of Surabaya, and Indonesia in general, where small groups of people collect donations on the street for mosque renovations. In this informal fundraising situation, the collectors of the donations usually positioned themselves in the middle of busy traffic, slowing down the cars that are passing by while extending a fishing net as a tool to collect the donations.

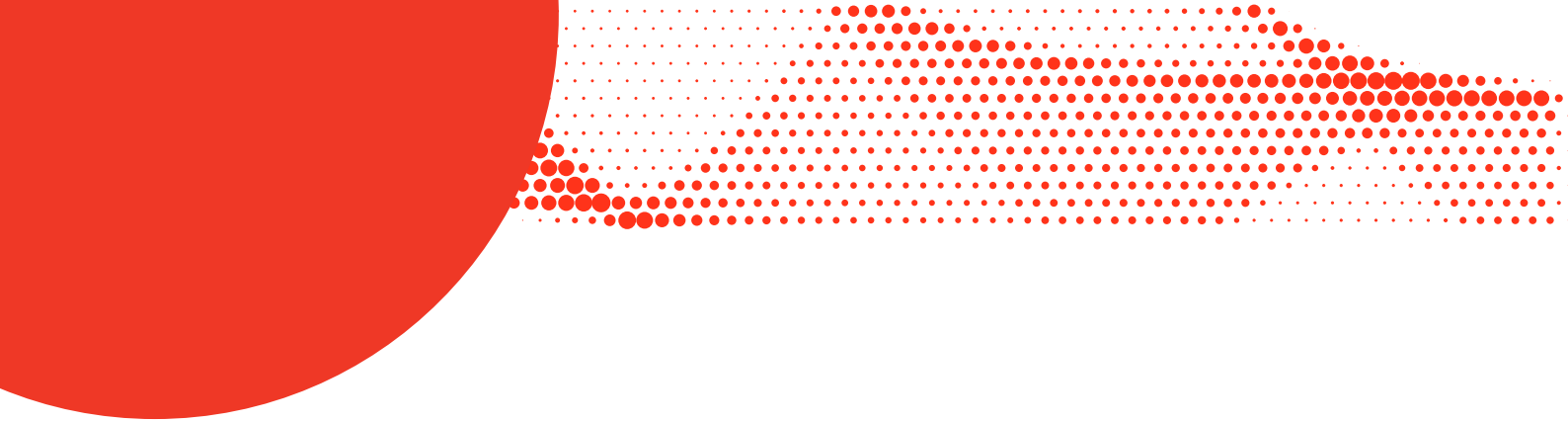
Consisting of filmmakers, urban farmers, and unemployed youth, the production team frequented different public spaces in Surabaya, including risk areas such as night markets in Wonokromo, Joyoboyo bus station, and the city zoo, and used them as shooting locations. At these spots, they simulated fundraising activities by brandishing a fishing net into the air to attract the attention of local pedestrians. Once connections with the unwitting bystanders are built, the filmmakers ask where they could find COVID-19. The portable camera strapped onto the filmmaker's forehead was constantly capturing these interactions in a more natural way. The questions raised by the filmmakers involved open speculations on the existence of COVID-19, teasing out commentaries from rickshaw drivers, riverbank dwellers, street vendors, and other people on the streets.

The film's staging exemplifies what Erika Balsom calls "reality-based community", i.e., an observational documentary which aims to create "for the viewer a time and space of attunement in which a durational encounter with alterity and contingency can occur, with no secure meaning assured".<sup>44</sup> The use of a strapped-on portable camera implies a social mirroring process through which the filmmakers are engaging with two layers of interrogative encounters. The first layer provides an opportunity for marking shared subjectivities. Through the appearance of the viewer's reflection on the mobile phone screen, one is being interpellated into a subject, which in this case marks the local social category of *arek* which represents working-class identity. As we spoke to Yoyo via a Zoom conference, he explained that taking selfies with a mobile phone camera has been a part of popular practice, so there is nothing new about it. However, during the film shooting, they wanted to use it as means for reducing their authorial positions as the camera holder while making sure that the subjects are fully aware that they are being recorded. This technique is ultimately about bringing together the point of view of the filmmaker and the recorded subjects, to create a reciprocal social affinity.



*A snapshot from Corona Nangdi Rek? The subtitle reads 'yang bicara corona itu kan manusia?' In English, 'aren't we humans the ones who speak of Corona?'* Image courtesy of Belangtelon Initiative.

<sup>44</sup> E. Balsom, "The Reality-Based Community", e-flux Journal, June 2017, available at: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/83/142332/the-reality-based-community/>.



The mirroring technique allowed arek to express what they think and feel about the filmmaker's attempts to visualize the coronavirus. Without the help of a microscope, they would never capture the physicality of the virus. At the crux of these recorded interactions in the spontaneous dialogue on COVID-19, is an understanding that it is deeply tied to its invisibility. In one sequence of the film, detailed in the image above, someone commented from off-camera saying: 'Here we are anti-virus, anti-corona'. To this remark, the main subject, a street shoe vendor responded while sitting nonchalantly on the edge of the sidewalk that it is "not a problem for rich people only. Five years lockdown will not be a problem for them. While for us? We will be gone." He continued: "Aren't we humans the ones who speak of Corona?"

In this particular scene, the street vendor proposes a critique of power: who has the power to claim the 'reality' of COVID-19? He refracts the imagination of the New Normal by addressing the perennial issue of class division. While it is clear for him that both sides of this class divide are equally threatened by the current pandemic, in the long run only those with adequate resources can continue living while those without will perish. Rather than echoing the trope of victimhood, the candid remarks of the street vendor can be interpreted more as a reminder of how pandemic realities are also socially constructed. In doing so, they draw attention to the political dimension of the pandemic response which determines which articulations are being made visible or invisible and whose voices are being heard or silenced. Concurrently, this notion subsumes an ethical demand that challenges our social responsibility to actively reimagine what post-pandemic futures would look like.

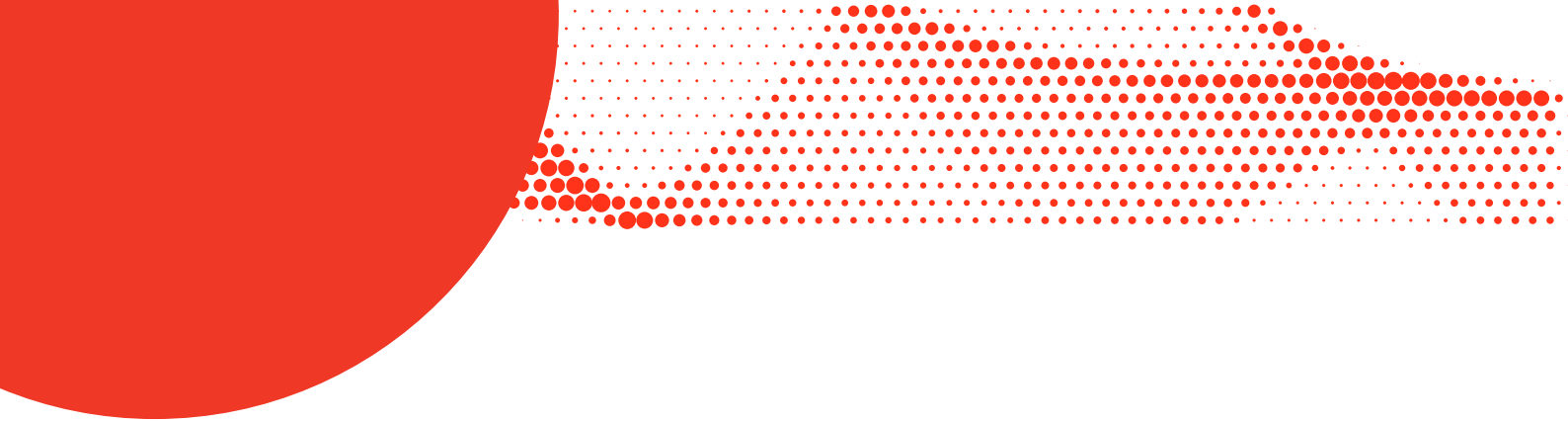
'Corona Nangdi Rek?' signifies the collaborative potentials between filmmakers and ordinary people to engage with the multilayered realities of the New Normal. This creative and contingent process generates a richer and more nuanced representation of social realities than the ones reproduced by mainstream media's ambiguous preoccupation with quantified 'facts'. Through their convivial aesthetics, the community filmmakers in Surabaya set up an intersubjective space where working-class subjectivities can carve out a sense of belonging with, and commitment to, the visions of post-pandemic futures.

### **Diffractioning Life After COVID-19**

At the beginning of this essay, we opened with a question that signaled our deep concerns about how the temporal horizon in which a definite end for the current global pandemic is being tenaciously obscured. The discussion that we have developed in the text, however, actually follows another path of inquiry. This is because even in the most optimistic scenario which is promulgated by state rhetoric of the New Normal, the only conceivable way forward, for now, is to coexistence with the virus and keep people alive, healthy, and economically productive, despite ongoing infections and fatalities.

In parallel to the official discourse of the New Normal, emerged people whom we describe as figures of solidarities, imaginaries, and aspirations, with a level of acuteness and liveliness that goes beyond public health and economic considerations. These are figures who inhabit a wide array of areas of life, anchored to different social, political, and economic positions, and engaging with various communication and media practices. Our approach has been shedding light on how frictions with the regime of the New Normal emerge through local particularities. While appearing idiosyncratic and fragmentary, there are some important trajectories shared by the different figures. Most of them are occupying the space left by Indonesian government systems that neglect environmental degradation, ignore human rights abuse, and perpetuate structural inequality. The various figures are all also compelled to undertake solidarity actions during COVID-19, not only to cope with gaps in the government response





but also to generate space in which to survive well together.

As a closing statement, we string together the distinct parts of narratives, practices, and imaginations of these figures of solidarity generated by dealing with the prolonged crisis created by the pandemic. Within this complex landscape, all seem to agree that COVID-19 has overturned the once familiar world we lived in and had got used to in so many ways. Concurrently, no one seems to be convinced that a definitive break can exist between life before, during, and after COVID-19 if entrenched structural inequalities remain unaddressed.

Within these frictions, the multiple practices of solidarity that each figure respectively articulated fight against, repair, defy, and negotiate the current situation. These disparate modes can be thought of together as ethical actions for surviving well together. Ethics is a process that involves a creative remaking of a disrupted world.<sup>45</sup> The values and habits that are being remade in the different solidarity engagements include decentering power, restitution of relationships between human and non-human nature, mutual care, and collaborative productions of knowledge, understanding that ethical action is “a practice of adopting new habits”.<sup>46</sup> Frictions with the New Normal have compelled the different figures to work towards surviving well together. In dealing with the accumulative effects of the pandemic on health vulnerability, economic inequality, and ecological sustainability, mutual responsibility is further solidified.

What is happening in Indonesia shares some resonances with what is occurring within the region, as well as across the Global South.<sup>47</sup> For example, frustrated by the inadequate response of Duterte’s government in handling the pandemic, various civil society actors in the Philippines have organized the emergency distribution of food, personal protection equipment, and cash.<sup>48</sup> Malaysian fishing communities have set up alternative distribution lines to support their local communities’ food security.<sup>49</sup> While taken at face value, these initiatives appear to be quite fragmented and geographically separated, however, we see them as mirroring each other.

Facing the inadequate COVID-19 responses of the varying regional governments, local stakeholders share a common strategy, taking direct action for and within their closest communities. Many strategies follow informal routes to bypass bureaucratic structures, including utilizing social networking services to support each other. These cases further reveal moments when the normalization of pandemic induced crisis has become a process of redefining relationships between the state and social actors. Similar to Indonesia, solidarity practices in the region do not only emerge as political contestations or acts of protest but also take place through the ethical performing of acts of mutual care and interdependence. The pandemic crisis has provided us with glimpses of how actors with heterogeneous priorities in struggles and from very different social locations can share common aspirations and actions towards a world beyond COVID-19.

<sup>45</sup> Jarrett Zigon, “Moral breakdown and the ethical demand: A theoretical framework for an anthropology of moralities”, *Anthropological Theory*, 1 June 2017, pp. 131-50.

<sup>46</sup> J.K. Gibson-Graham, J. Cameron, & S. Healy, *Take Back the Economy: An Ethical Guide for Transforming Our Communities*, University of Minnesota Press, 9 May 2013, p. xviii

<sup>47</sup> G. Bhan et al., “The Pandemic, Southern Urbanisms and Collective Life”, *Space + Society*, 3 August 2020, available at: <https://www.societyandspace.org/articles/the-pandemic-southern-urbanisms-and-collective-life>

<sup>48</sup> F. Gutierrez, *Solidarity and sharing in an unequal society: Covid-19 in the Philippines*”, *Open Democracy*, 2 May 2020, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/democraciaabierta/solidarity-and-sharing-unequal-society-Covid-19-philippines/>.

<sup>49</sup> E Harvey, “Malaysia: Fisher-folk switch to direct distribution #covidsolidarity”, *Friends of The Earth Asia Pacific*, 27 June 2020, available at: <https://foeasiapacific.org/2020/07/08/stories-of-solidarity-under-coronavirus-from-the-asia-pacific/><sup>38</sup>Rek is a shortened form of Arek. Arek is commonly used to define friends, companions or even people in a more abstract sense. Arek or arek-arek in plural form often suggests a sense of belonging or companionship or even a wider camaraderie among people of Surabaya. Rek is commonly addressed to friends, acquaintances, or a person that is not recognized personally. This pronoun is also used in other cities in East Java.

## Coda: The New Normal is Here

Many things have changed since the completion of this article at the end of 2020. In January 2021, the government renamed the PSBB through the decree on Pemberlakuan Pembatasan Kegiatan Masyarakat, or PPKM (Community Activities Restrictions Enforcement) to decentralize the decision-making process, allowing regional leaders to slow down the infection rate. However, following the outbreak of the Delta variant in Asia, in mid-May 2021, the dream of the New Normal has turned into a nightmare. Indonesia has since then become the new epicenter of COVID-19 and the numbers of infections and deaths soared, bringing the health care system to the brink of collapse.

Amid this devastating turn of events, people-to-people solidarity efforts in Indonesia have been diversifying their activities and broadening their scale and scope. Added to the already existing initiatives in food solidarity, cash donations, and medical equipment provision, many rallied together to help, bringing oxygen tanks to patients in a critical condition, building coffins, and providing funeral assistance for the dead. The sheer breadth of responses mobilized during the second wave of the pandemic further demonstrates how solidarity work is epitomized by communities coming together and that in times of crisis this is no longer an exception but rather what the New Normal is and should be about.

*KUNCI Study Forum & Collective experiments with methods of producing and sharing knowledge through the act of studying together at the intersections between affective, manual, and intellectual labor. Since its founding in 1999 in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, KUNCI has been continuously transforming its structure, processes, and methods of working. Initially formed as a cultural studies study group, KUNCI's present practices emphasize collectivizing study by way of space-making, discussion, research, publishing, and school organizing. KUNCI traverses and connects institutional, disciplinary, and geographical boundaries. KUNCI's membership is informal and based on friendship, as well as principles of self-organization and collaboration.*

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## DIASPORIC SOLIDARITY: Filipino Migrants' Covid-19 Initiatives Between the Philippines and Europe

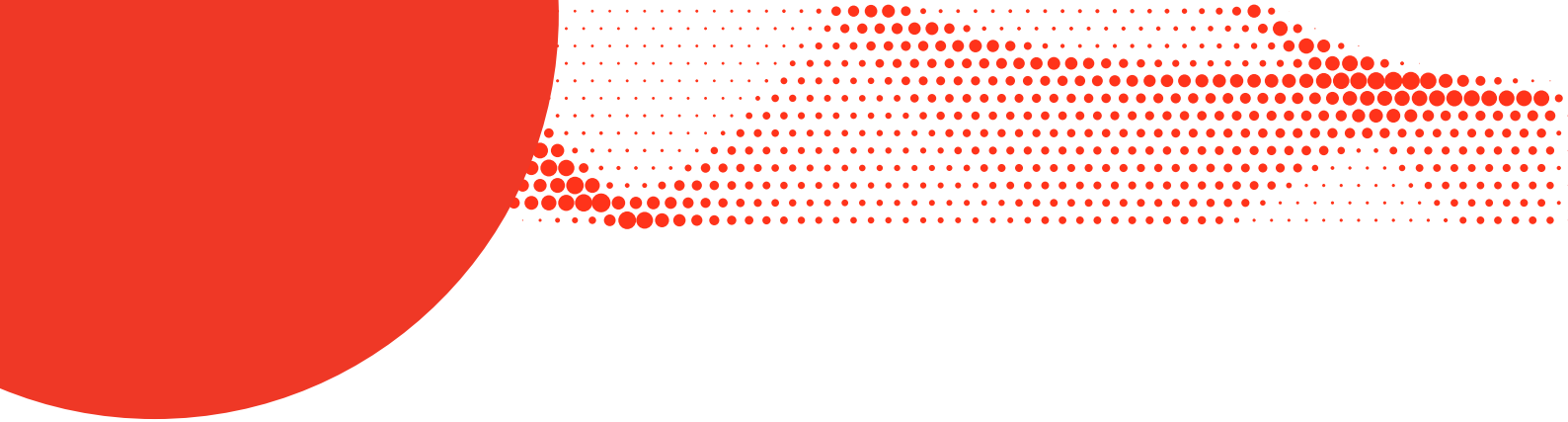
By: Rosa Cordillera A. Castillo, Rachele Bascara, Jasmine Grace Wenzel, Kate Lim, and Analie Neiteler

This is a solidarity that those interviewed for this paper indicate is based on a sense of collective responsibility, interconnectedness, recognition of the plight of others, shared interest, and emotions such as empathy, love, and care that are actualized in active involvement and participation. Furthermore, solidarity was seen as a bonding process that gives people a sense of belonging, particularly in the diaspora.



Filipinos in UK, Kanlungan members and volunteers launched the #FilipinoFoodForNHS to provide warm meals for NHS staff – Filipinos and non-Filipinos. (Photo: Kanlungan Filipino Consortium)

*Migrant Filipinos' positionality between the homeland and their place of migration shapes the transnational character of their civic and political engagements as these relate simultaneously to both the Philippines and the diasporic contexts. In this paper, we analyze how the initiatives of Kanlungan Filipino Consortium in the United Kingdom and Ayuda: Hope Through Action in Germany built and enacted solidarity within the diaspora and between the diaspora and the Philippines through their responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, we consider how these Covid-19 initiatives and solidarity work relate to charity and existing inequalities as well as to global solidarity.*



*“Solidarity’s role during the pandemic is extremely important, particularly since this is a moment of dire economic, social, political, and cultural crisis. What would address this crisis is solidarity among global citizens through various forms of unity, cooperation, help, and empathy.” - Kakay Tolentino, indigenous woman leader, KATRIBU*

## **Introduction**

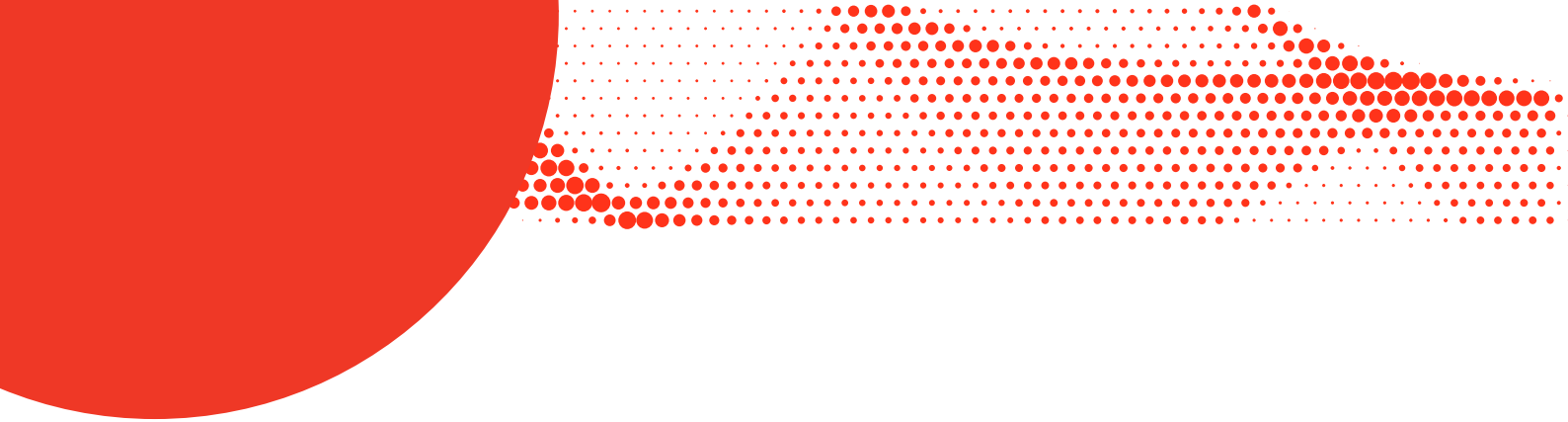
The Covid-19 pandemic exposed structural inequalities and inadequate healthcare systems in various parts of the world. At the same time, the pandemic’s impact on global health and the resulting economic downturn led to a heightened discourse on solidarity centered on the narrative that we are all in this together. That is, each one must do their part so that the virus will not spread for the sake of the collective. At the minimum, this includes mask-wearing, social distancing, and proper hygiene. At its extreme, this means being on strict lockdown, without prolonged contact with people beyond one’s household.

The pandemic and lockdowns resulted in far-reaching consequences on people’s quality of life and mental and emotional well-being, particularly among vulnerable populations (Graham-Harrison et. al. 2020; Kokou-Kpolou et. al. 2020; Sumner et. al. 2020). Racism also intensified as people sought to pin the blame for the virus on certain sectors of the population, such as those racialized as “Chinese.” Furthermore, the pandemic exposed structural racism evident, for instance, in the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on People of Colour in the US and Europe (Hu 2020).

In the United Kingdom, the Filipino community was hit badly by the pandemic. One reason for this is that many Filipinos work for the NHS. Filipinos account for 25% of the total Covid-19-related deaths among NHS staff and 30% among the nurses, even though Filipinos comprise only 1.4% of the NHS workforce (Susan Cueva, interview, 2020). Moreover, the undocumented status of some Filipinos and the predominant nature of Filipinos’ livelihood in the UK: informal, low-paid, and precarious, made them acutely vulnerable to the intersecting health and economic impacts of the pandemic. As lockdown restrictions were introduced, Filipinos working as nannies, caregivers, domestic workers, and hospitality industry workers lost their jobs, a stark situation for undocumented Filipinos. Galam (2020) notes that the latter is among the hardest hit by the pandemic not only because could they not find work, but also because they could not isolate themselves properly due to their cramped living conditions. Even more tragically, fear of accessing NHS services due to their undocumented status discouraged some Filipinos from seeking medical help when they contracted Covid-19. There have thus been cases of undocumented Filipinos who died at home due to Covid-19 (Galam 2020).

The dire confluence of the effects of the pandemic, migration, racism, living space, and livelihood can also be observed in Germany where infection surged in places where migrants labor under exploitative and unsafe conditions (Soric 2020). Infections were likewise high in some refugee shelters where refugees and asylum seekers live in cramped conditions (Müller 2020). Filipinos have also been affected in Germany, particularly those in the seafaring industry who were not allowed into Germany despite their ships being docked there (Keller 2020). Stranded in Germany, many Filipino seafarers could not return to the Philippines because there were no adequate facilities to quarantine them (Keller 2020).

The situation in the Philippines is no less grim. The militaristic approach of Rodrigo Duterte’s government to the



pandemic where suspected violators of the lockdown have been imprisoned and even killed has been heavily criticized for not addressing the pandemic as a public health issue (Maru 2020; Yusingco and Pizarro 2020). Consequently, the Philippines remains in the top 30 countries with a high number of active cases (Johns Hopkins University's Coronavirus Resource Center 2020) despite having the "world's longest and strictest lockdown" (Olan-day 2020) that started in mid-March 2020 and persists in one form or another as of the time of writing this paper (CNN 2020). Allegations of government corruption that weakened the healthcare system for years, the delayed implementation of lockdown measures, deficient contact tracing and testing system, and the lack of economic support resulted in immense pressure on the healthcare system and economic hardship for many Filipinos (Maru 2020; Vallejo and Ong 2020; Ravelo 2020).

### *Research objectives and methods*

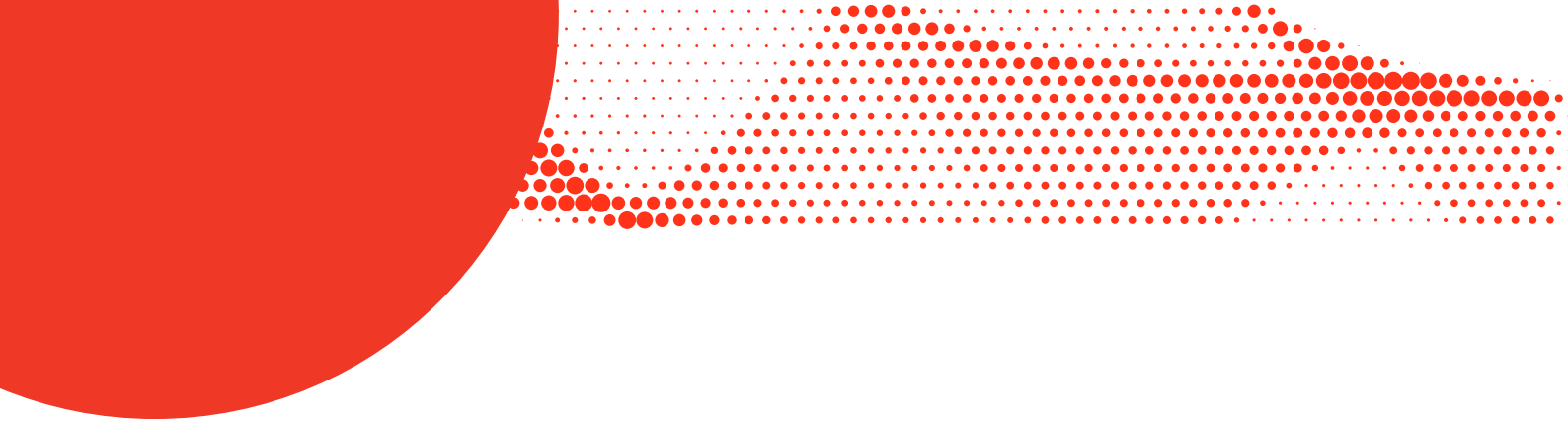
These conditions faced by Filipinos in the homeland and abroad prompted various solidarity initiatives, big and small, such as community pantries, mutual aid, charity, and barter systems, among others (Fernandez 2020). Migrant Filipinos have been at the forefront of mounting initiatives to address the impacts of Covid-19 and the resulting lockdown on Filipinos in the diaspora and the Philippines. In this paper, we focus on two such initiatives in Europe: [Kanlungan Filipino Consortium](#) in the UK and [Ayuda: Hope Through Action](#) in Germany. We inquired into how Filipino organizations and initiatives in Europe built and enacted solidarity within the diaspora and between the diaspora and the Philippines through their responses to the Covid-19 pandemic. Kanlungan's initiatives supported frontliners and helped poor and undocumented Filipinos in the UK, while Ayuda's initiative, a collaboration between Filipino and German organizations, raised funds for some of the most vulnerable communities in the Philippines. We looked at the factors that enabled these initiatives to build solidarity as well as the challenges that they encountered in realizing their goals. Furthermore, we considered how these Covid-19 initiatives and solidarity work relate to charity and existing inequalities as well as to global solidarity.

To answer these questions, we drew from our personal experiences working with Kanlungan and Ayuda and analyzed social media posts connected to these initiatives. Additionally, we conducted qualitative interviews with four officers and three beneficiaries of Kanlungan in the UK. Meanwhile, we interviewed seven organizers of Ayuda, two beneficiaries, five artist-donors, and three donors who are in Germany, other parts of Europe, and the Philippines.

We directed our attention to Filipinos in the diaspora because we are located in the diaspora and were personally involved in these initiatives. By diasporic Filipinos, we mean people with roots in the Philippines, including "first generation" migrants and their descendants who have dual or non-Filipino citizenship as well as overseas Filipinos who settled abroad either permanently or temporarily. With over ten million Filipinos living abroad, the diaspora is a social, economic, and political force abroad and in the Philippines. They prop up the country's economy through their remittances as well as shape the Philippines' social relations and politics (Almendral 2018). A manifestation of the latter can be seen for instance in the overwhelming support of Filipino migrants for President Rodrigo Duterte. At the same time, Filipinos have created thriving communities and forms of solidarity in their new homes abroad.

### *The concept of solidarity*

There is an extensive conceptual discussion on solidarity. For this paper, we use the notion of solidarity as



“the feeling of reciprocal sympathy and responsibility among members of a group which promotes mutual support” (Wilde 2007: 171). Solidarity can be distinguished according to types: moral, political, and social (Laitinen 2014: 131). Moral solidarity concerns “the whole moral community of all moral agents, whether or not members of the same society.” This is the idea that we owe some form of moral solidarity to all human beings simply by virtue of each individual’s intrinsic moral worth or that recognition of one’s humanity requires some form of moral solidarity. This is why Singer (2010) argues that there is a duty to aid those in need even if they are in far-off places or to alleviate the suffering of those we can, even if said suffering was not caused by us. In this sense, moral solidarity is relevant to the notion of solidarity that goes beyond one’s nationality, ethnicity, and other aspects of identity and can be construed as global in scope. The second type of solidarity is political solidarity, which is more focused than moral solidarity. Political solidarity is what gets activated when a citizenry or an identifiable group is engaged in a project of social change or is advancing a political agenda (Laitinen 2014: 131). In between these two types of solidarity is social solidarity. Laitinen (2014: 131) describes social solidarity as covering the “aspects of social integration, bonding, and social ties characterized by feelings of belonging, readiness to support, normative commitments and identifications, rather than brute force or economic imperatives.”

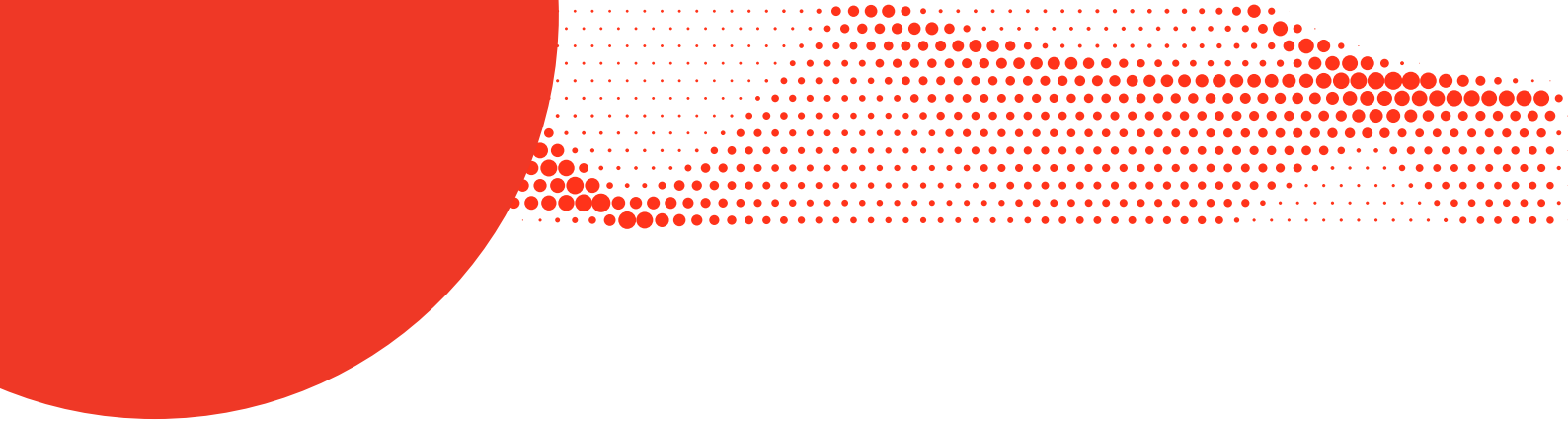
We suggest that the initiatives of Kanlungan and Ayuda are animated by and are enactments of social and moral solidarity. Moral because those involved in it expressed an overarching moral desire to help humanity grounded on notions of common humanness and interconnectedness with other human beings. Social because forms of help were shaped as well by feelings of belonging and identification with the diaspora and the Philippines and because the initiatives primarily targeted Filipinos (although not exclusively as in the case of Kanlungan). The initiatives were not directly political in that they had no obvious or identifiable political project that can bring about social change, even if the initiatives helped highlight structural inequalities in the UK and the Philippines. Instead, the initiatives were created to address urgent needs.

We further contend that diasporic solidarity is a form of solidarity that is shaped by migrant Filipinos’ positionality between the homeland and their place of migration, their experiences abroad, and their understanding of the situation in the Philippines. It is shaped by their feelings about this situation and towards fellow Filipinos and their homeland. Concerning their Covid-19 initiatives, diasporic solidarity was animated by emotions such as empathy, love, care, courage, anxiety, frustration, and anger, and was built through the effective use of social media, communication strategies, and tapping into and building on pre-existing networks and trust among actors in the diaspora and between them and partners in the Philippines (as in the case of Ayuda), and of personal ties to the Philippines. These mould the transnational character of their solidarity work as these relate simultaneously to both the Philippines and the diasporic contexts.

We turn at this juncture to the work of Ayuda.

## **Ayuda**

In March, as Germany went into lockdown, alongside the Philippine government’s reported problematic response to the pandemic, members of the [Philippine Studies Series Berlin](#) and [Tipon](#) began discussing how to extend help to some of the most affected communities in the Philippines. Formed in 2014, the Series, as the Philippine Studies Series Berlin is known, is a platform for lectures, discussions, art, and film events on the Philippines and the diaspora that also organizes events protesting human rights violations in the Philippines as well as donation drives. Meanwhile, Tipon, which is a Filipino word for ‘gathering,’ is a community of migrants helping each other



to harness the power of storytelling to care for themselves and their fellow migrants, and to give back to their larger communities. Formed in 2019, some of its core members are also part of the Series. Informed by family, friends, and acquaintances in the homeland as well as through mass media and social media of the dire situation of fear, hunger, and violent state response and state neglect in the country, Series and Tipon members responded by mounting a donation drive to help some of the most vulnerable in the Philippines. This core group of four women named the initiative Ayuda: Hope Through Action. Ayuda is a Filipino term for acts of aid to alleviate another's suffering.

The group collaborated with three other Philippine-related Germany-based organizations: [PhilNetz e.V.](#), [Philippinisches Diaspora Netzwerk](#), [Babaylan Germany e.V.](#), and [Philippinenbüro e.V.](#) These organizations work, in one way or another, on issues faced by the Filipino/a/x diaspora. They engage with and confront societal and political issues in the Philippines through the various activities and advocacies that they have organized through the years. Additionally, these organizations have an active social media presence that links Germany and the Philippines.

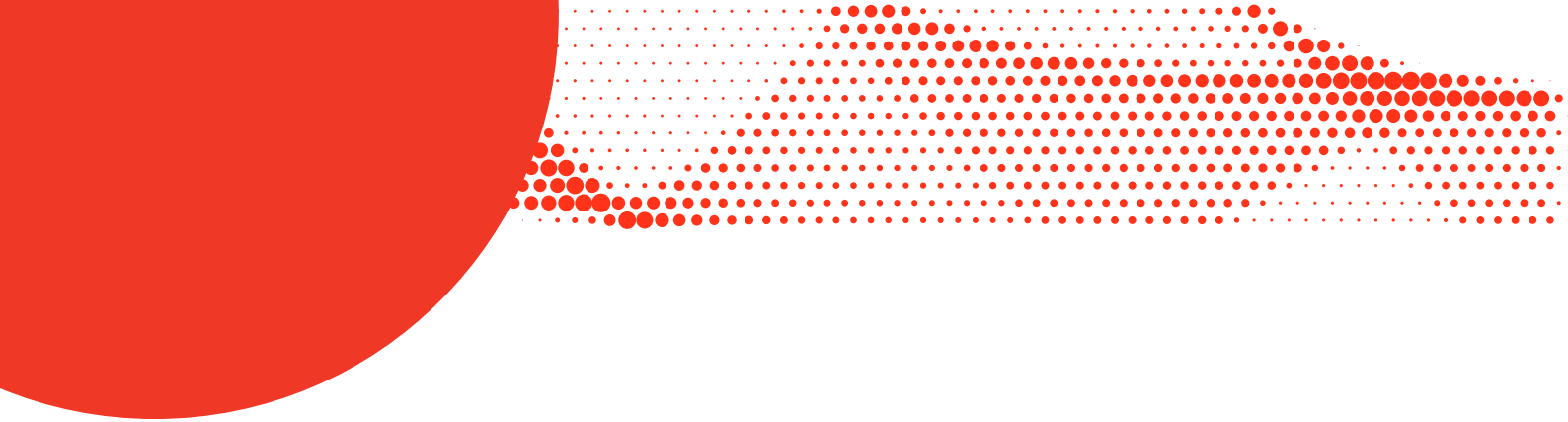
To drive traction for the call for donations, the group organized *Ayuda Na!*, a series of performances and online art exhibits by Filipino artists and musicians around the world that ran from April 13 to 20, 2020. Thirty artists, musicians, and bands coming from the Philippines, Europe, and as far as Australia and Argentina lent their time and talent to Ayuda during this period. Many of them are friends, friends of friends, or acquaintances of organizers of Ayuda and were thus approached through these connections. Remarkably, some of them voluntarily approached Ayuda organizers to offer their art or music.

Crucial to the decision-making of Ayuda organizers was a consideration of the following: (1) the pitfalls of charity work in obscuring structural issues that lead to suffering and inequalities; (2) choosing beneficiaries who are faced with intersecting issues of poverty, discrimination, and violence; (3) consulting beneficiaries on how Ayuda can best help them rather than by dictating how the donation will be used; and (4) having a multiplier effect by choosing recipient organizations in the Philippines who not only provide relief to the most vulnerable and underserved communities but who also source the relief food from farmers struggling during the severe lockdown.

To address the concern about obscuring structural issues of inequalities and violence, Ayuda included information about the plight of its beneficiaries in its campaign and the work of organizations that are helping them to raise awareness about structural issues of inequalities and violence faced by these communities, even if the goal of the drive was not to directly address these. While this was not free from the tension between the need to raise money across a broad swathe of the public, on the one hand, and critiquing structures and policies of inequalities and injustices, on the other hand, a matter we will return to below, this did not prevent Ayuda from communicating to the public some of the issues that its beneficiaries face. To illustrate, the caption of the thank you [video](#) by one of the recipient organizations, the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women-Asia Pacific (CATW-AP), that was posted on Ayuda's Facebook Event page, explained their organization's work on ending violence against women. Meanwhile, Kakay Tolentino, Dumagat leader and spokesperson of Kalipunan ng mga Katutubong Pilipino (KATRIBU), another recipient, gave a thank you [message](#) that highlighted the plight of indigenous peoples and the work of their organizations in helping indigenous communities.

Likewise, raising awareness ran through some of the artworks and music posted on the event page. Among these, the caption on Joseph Chio's photographic project of Filipino healthcare workers in Germany emphasized the "positive, substantial contribution of immigrants to German society." Meanwhile, Krisanta Caguioa-Mön-





nich's paintings of women victims of domestic violence and trafficking were a reminder of how the pandemic specifically impacts women.

Directing attention to these multiple yet intersecting issues and the differential impact of the pandemic on vulnerable populations while at the same time highlighting interconnectedness, the need for action, particularly from those who can help, and redirecting potentially crippling emotions such as despair towards emotions that can engender action such as hope, is evident in Ayuda's call for donations:

The pandemic's repercussions will be felt differently across the globe, with some populations likely to suffer more than others. Particularly vulnerable are places like the Philippines where there are relatively frail health systems and where large segments of the population have precarious livelihoods. This may seem distant from us here in Germany, yet as this virus has shown us, we live in a global village – what happens in one part of the world sends out ripples that reach the farthest corners.

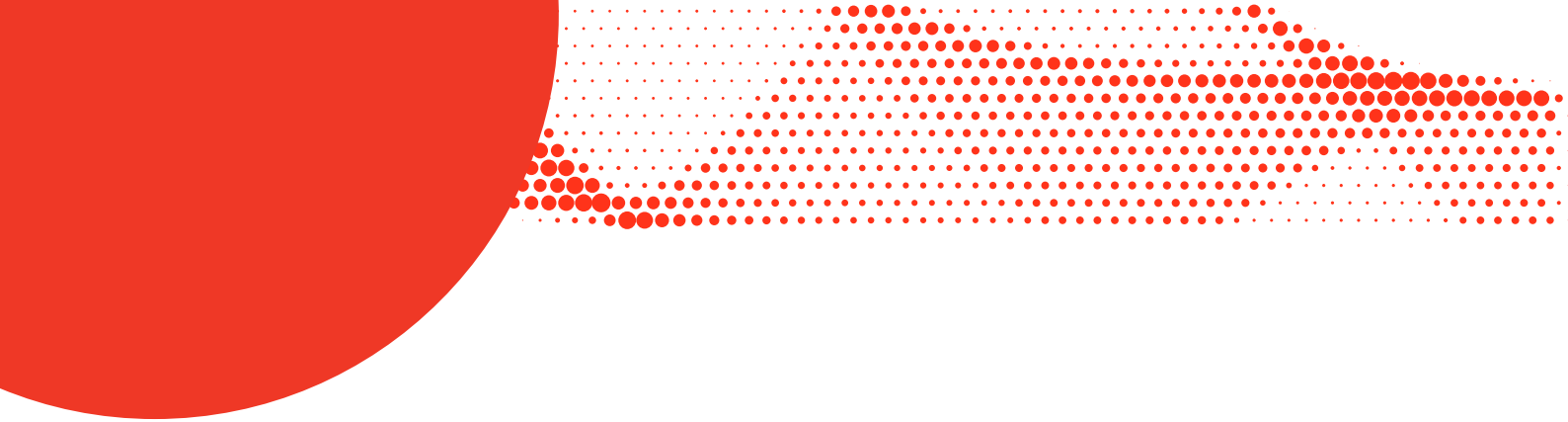
This need not lead us to despair, but to hope, as it means that we are also capable of solidarity based on our interconnection [...] Yet hope and imagination are not enough. We need hope that gives birth to action, and action that unites people in hope.

Guided by this vision, the group studied available data from organizations in the Philippines on which parts of the country are most at risk of Covid-19 but are underserved in terms of government support and hospital facilities, while at the same time consulting with local organizations to inquire into their needs. Based on these considerations, Ayuda decided on helping the following recipients:

- 1) [The Amai Pakpak Medical Center in Marawi City](#): APMC is the main hospital in Marawi City, Lanao del Sur, a city torn apart by the 2017 war that displaced 98 percent of its population. Many of the displaced continue to languish in crowded evacuation camps and are thus at high risk of coronavirus infection. The hospital appealed for help especially in the provision of personal protective equipment.
- 2) [CATW-AP](#) has been delivering relief goods, including basic food procured from their partner farmers and hygiene supplies to women victims of sex trafficking and extra-judicial killings wrought by Duterte's "drug war," and their families in impoverished communities.
- 3) [KATRIBU](#), [Bai Indigenous Women's Network](#), and [Sandugo Movement of Moro and Indigenous Peoples for Self-Determination](#) delivered urgent food relief, sourced from their partner communities, and hygiene packs to indigenous communities. These are communities rarely reached by government support and often subjected to discrimination and militarization.

To provide a concrete amount to potential donors, Ayuda indicated in its donation drive that €30 will feed a family of six members for two weeks and provide them with hygiene kits. The same amount also covers the purchase of a set of personal protective equipment (mask, gown, and shoe cover) for a frontliner.

The initial Facebook post about Ayuda on the Facebook pages of its organizers reached 13,500 people, while emails were sent to over a hundred recipients. The online concerts, artworks, and messages of gratitude



from beneficiaries were viewed thousands of times. In two weeks, Ayuda was able to raise €5,356.27, exceeding its initial goal of €4,000. As with the artists and musicians from various parts of the world, people who donated money were also located globally: Europe, the United States, Singapore, Australia, and the Philippines. More than eighty people donated, both Filipinos and non-Filipinos, some of whom pooled donations from family members and friends before sending the money to Ayuda.

This amount provided food and hygiene packages to 145 families in urban poor communities in Metro Manila and nearby provinces through CATW-AP. KATRIBU and their partners pooled Ayuda's donation together with other donations in their *Lingkod Katribu* relief effort to deliver food packs to 300 Dumagat families in the Sierra Madre, 400 Aeta families in Pampanga, and 100 Lumad students who have sought refuge in the University of the Philippines Diliman due to the militarization of their ancestral lands in Mindanao. Meanwhile, Ayuda's local partner Balay Mindanaw delivered 100 Hazmat suits, 100 disposable cover-all PPEs, 190 pieces KN95 masks, and 600 pieces surgical masks to APMC. Photos and information on the outcome of the donation drive were sent to donors and were also posted on Facebook.

### *Solidarity defined*

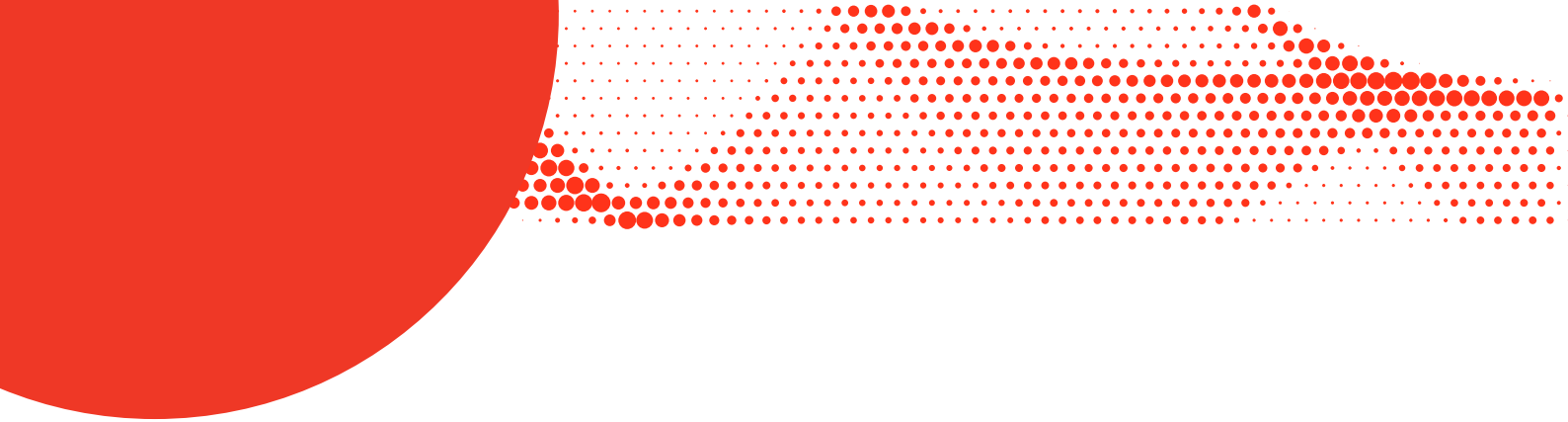
Through these actions, Ayuda enacted and built solidarity between those who organized the initiative, and between organizers, recipients, donors, and artists. This is a solidarity that those interviewed for this paper indicate is based on a sense of collective responsibility, interconnectedness, recognition of the plight of others, shared interest, and emotions such as empathy, love, and care that are actualized in active involvement and participation. Furthermore, solidarity was seen as a bonding process that gives people a sense of belonging, particularly in the diaspora.

The importance of action was stressed by several interview respondents. As an Ayuda organizer said, solidarity should go beyond "lip service" and must "be backed up by meaningful action." Another interlocutor asserted that solidarity is putting empathy into action. Action is based on what one can give. That is, if one cannot give money, then helping publicize the call for donations is in itself considered as a form of involvement.

We see here that notions of helping are central to solidarity. Some interlocutors likened the concept of solidarity to the Tagalog concept of *bayanihan* understood as a morally imbued "communal effort" (Borja, et. al. 2020) where, as one respondent said, "people help for the common good without putting first their self-interest." Relatedly, solidarity is construed as "the opposite of indifference." It is furthermore built on a sense of interconnectedness on a global, political, and bodily scale: "Each of us is interconnected. What happens to one country, affects us also. It is like a human body. If your finger hurts, or your head aches, it affects the rest of your body," asserted one respondent.

Despite the precondition of shared interests, responsibility, and willingness to act that underlie solidarity, some interlocutors also recognized that the intensity of solidarity varies depending on one's role and depth of involvement in the initiative. For instance, a more intense and prolonged feeling of solidarity flowed through those involved in the nitty-gritty task of setting up Ayuda because it necessitated constant communication and strategizing among and between Ayuda organizers and recipients. As one Ayuda organizer remarked:

Solidarity was strongly felt among organizers and beneficiaries who went out of their way to im-



plement the donation. They [recipient organizations] had to do the difficult work of distributing the donation. This is the deeper level of solidarity. The next tier is the artists. Then the next tier is those who donated.

At the same time, as much as it showed who got involved, Ayuda also “revealed those who chose not to be involved, those who chose not to stand in solidarity,” noted another organizer.

### *Ayuda’s success*

The success of Ayuda in garnering support for its donation drive from various parts of the world and exceeding its target was attributed by organizers, donors who include artists, and recipients we interviewed to the following:

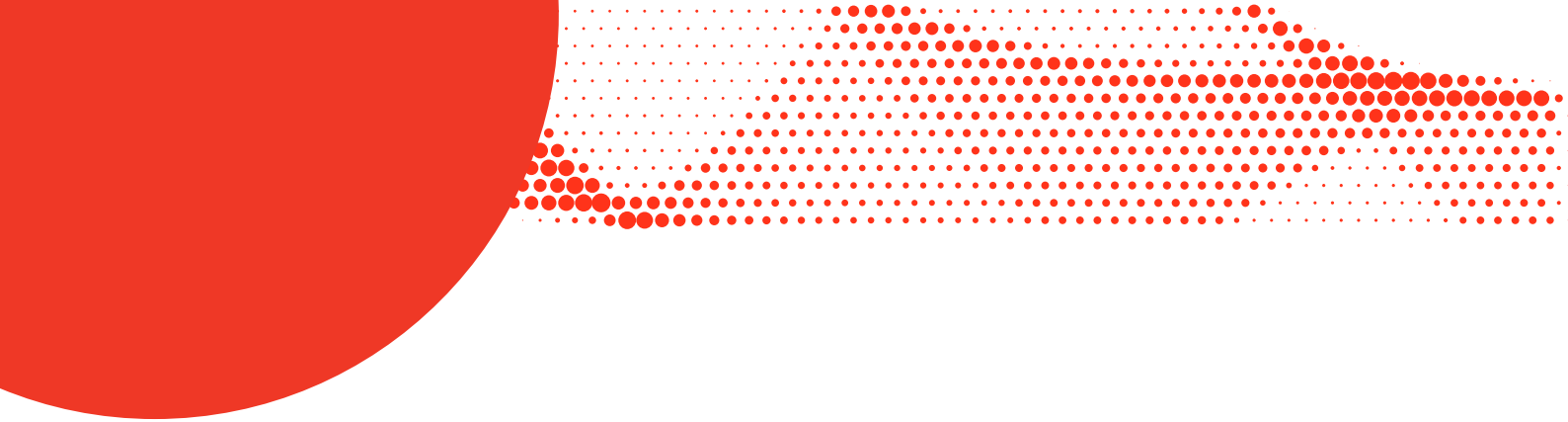
1. The use of social media: Despite reservations about using Facebook due to security concerns and its polarizing effect on Philippine politics (more on this below), several Ayuda organizers recognized that it was crucial in the success of the donation drive because it enabled the initiative to have a Philippine and international reach. One of them said,

I don’t think we would have been able to successfully run the campaign without this platform. The people we wanted to target a lot of them are in the Philippines, all over the world. And a lot of them are using FB actively.

Social media also linked the initiative to other conversations, insights, and information on the pandemic to the pages of its partner organizations and recipient organizations thereby multiplying the publicity and helping raise awareness about the work of these organizations. Another advantage of social media is its multi-sensorial content, which elicited more emotional and quicker responses than emails. Moreover, through social media, Ayuda was able to give people who were stuck in their houses a platform to transform their anxieties about the situation in the Philippines into concrete action.

2. Clear information and transparency: Several donors appreciated the clarity and transparency of information on where the donations will go, who will be helped, and how the donations will be used. Indicating how much a certain amount of money will procure in terms of PPEs or how many families it will feed and for how long provided donors a concrete idea of the impact of their donation. Aside from this, Ayuda used language that strived to appeal to people regardless of their political leanings, a matter we will return to below. One organizer said, “A lot of people could see beyond politics and see that we were doing this for concrete reasons. We had pictures and data to show them and that would have affected them in one way or another.”

3. The use of art and music: Tapping into Filipinos’ love for the arts and music, the online art and music event that featured several famous musicians helped to publicize the donation drive not only in Germany but also in other parts of Europe, the Philippines, Singapore, the United States, and Australia. Equally significant, it touched people and brought them together. As an Ayuda organizer noted, “there’s nothing like music and art to touch a different part of a person, to help them become aware of something.” Two musicians who performed for Ayuda added, “Music brings people together” and “gives comfort to a lot of people.” That art and music not only provides information and a source of connection but is also emotional and relevant to solidarity-building were articulated by Noel Cabangon, a well-known Filipino singer-songwriter who opened Ayuda’s online event:



A lot of my audience say that music keeps their sanity, that it makes them feel really good...People gravitate to music. That's why music plays a crucial role in forging solidarity amongst people.

The efficacy of using art and music was echoed by one of the recipients who thought that the online concert served as a new form of campaigning that was able to engage people and build solidarity despite the limitations to physical gathering.

4. Timing and speed: Ayuda was conceived at the beginning of April, half a month after Duterte declared a militarized lockdown in the Philippines. Mounting the drive immediately at this point before donation fatigue set in and when people were looking for ways to help was seen by some of our interlocutors as key to the success of the donation drive.

5. Networks and trust: Ayuda was quickly set up because of pre-existing networks of its organizers, as individuals and as groups, which included not only the partners in Germany but also artists, musicians, and donors in various parts of the world. The readiness of the main organizers to work with each other was founded on trust built on several years of personal ties and familiarity with each other's work, political stances, and collaborations. These established and expanded the chain of solidarity. Trust on members of the Ayuda team and personally knowing the initiators were also cited as a reason by several donors and artists for supporting the initiative.

6. Ties to the Philippines: Ties to the Philippines were deemed important in the success of the donation drive as these motivated people to help. It also shaped their feelings of responsibility for the country and its people. These ties can range from deep and enduring relations due to kin, friendships, or professional work and to more fleeting connections, such as travel to the Philippines.

7. Affect and emotions: Many of the respondents expressed affective and emotional reasons for their involvement with Ayuda and in enacting solidarity. These include empathy, feelings of collectivity, connectivity, belonging, hope, urgency, and attachment to the homeland, as well as anxiety, anger, and frustration at the Duterte administration's response to the pandemic. Aside from getting involved with Ayuda, such emotions have led members of the Filipino diaspora in Europe to closely follow the events in the homeland. For instance, to initiate more meaningful and effective forms of help, one Ayuda organizer tried to "empathize with the groups in the Philippines" by asking: "What would be my needs when I am a very small organization or a small hospital in a very isolated place?" This form of empathy was directed towards seeking a concrete point for potential action.

Furthermore, the feeling of being together with others through Ayuda was strongly felt by some organizers and donors. One of them said that "Ayuda allowed others to come together in this initiative, to be touched together with what's happening in the Philippines." Another donor based in Europe said, "It felt good to be able to contribute to an initiative by fellow Filipino migrants in Europe. I felt that I was somehow part of the community as well." Meanwhile, the emotional stress of the pandemic was channeled towards productive ends by some of the respondents, one of whom said, "What enabled me to push ahead regardless was the adrenaline rush of experiencing an emergency as well as the sheer desire to do something to help back home." The affective and emotional dimension of solidarity thus also entailed the active rechanneling of potentially crippling emotions towards emotions that can lead to action. One Ayuda interlocutor explained this accordingly: "Solidarity involves encouragement, it is a kind of support. It discourages fearfulness and greediness. People become greedy when they are in fear."



## *Challenges*

1. Social media know-how: Using Facebook necessitated quickly learning how to maximize the platform for a two-week online art and music event to reach a broader audience and garner as much attention as possible.

2. Social media limitations: Despite the advantages of using social media, the digital divide, “filter bubbles,” “echo chambers,” and algorithms have been cited by some respondents as limiting who can be reached by the initiative. As one organizer points out, “To the extent that social media algorithms that promote filter bubbles determine who can see the posts we share, it’s also possible and likely that Ayuda didn’t garner enough visibility in certain quarters.” Meanwhile, others feared being trolled for their support for the initiative, especially since social media trolling has become a prevalent issue among social media users both in the Philippines and in other countries.

3. Personal circumstances: One’s ability to help and the form that solidarity takes are shaped by one’s circumstances. The precarity of migrants’ situation and the tremendous need for their families back home have been cited as reasons that shape one’s engagement with initiatives such as Ayuda. As one donor said, she contributed music because she could not donate financially due to her precarious situation in Europe and the financial help that she had already extended to family and friends back home. Conversely, “privilege blind-spots” was cited by a donor as potentially hindering solidarity building.

4. Calibrating language used: In choosing as recipients some organizations who are critical of Duterte’s policies, Ayuda organizers were cognizant of the risks of unwanted Philippine government attention such as harassment of organizers, beneficiaries, and artists and of discouraging those who support the President to donate. Calibrating the language used in the campaign to balance the call for donation and support from the broadest public possible with the desire to highlight problematic policies back home was therefore challenging. One organizer expressed this tension, “Many times, I also try to figure out what is the right thing to do. Solicit more support and keep quiet, not become so vocal about our critique.” Meanwhile, another interlocutor said, “As long as it’s something that helps to contribute to the solution. Maybe not a solution but an elevation of the suffering. I did not consider any political side.”

5. Polarization: The tension of calibrating language used is also linked to the political polarization among Filipinos. Several interlocutors wondered if people’s involvement in Ayuda was impacted by the “DDS (Diehard Duterte Supporter) / anti-DDS rift” in the diaspora, as one interlocutor put it. Several organizers lamented the lack of participation of some people they know of, even if not personally, who are based in Germany. One of them said, “Of course, I wish there were other, more donors among our kababayan. We were faced with the challenge that there is some kind of division among us.” Even though Ayuda’s “communication tactics” strived to speak across political divides, one interlocutor nevertheless noted that political leanings “played an important role in terms of pulling resources and funds if most of the donors are basically against the ill practices of this government.”

6. Perception about organizers: Connected to polarization, some organizers thus wondered whether their openly critical stance on the Duterte regime put off potential donors who support the President.

7. Risks to recipients: Ayuda’s recipient organizations were the ones who did the bulk of the heavy and risky work:

procuring the relief goods and PPEs and delivering the donation in a context of strict lockdown where government permits are needed to move around. They were thus exposed to risks not only of catching the virus but also of being harassed by government forces, as what happened to Lingkod Katribu whose relief work was temporarily halted by soldiers in Rizal. Furthermore, there was the challenge of coordinating with local government officials to deliver the relief goods, which Lingkod Katribu was able to overcome after a series of negotiations.

patients under critical condition to building coffins and provide funeral assistance for the dead. The sheer breadth of responses mobilized during the second wave of the pandemic in Indonesia further demonstrates how solidarity works epitomized in communities coming together in times of crisis are no longer a state of exception but rather what the New Normal itself is and should be about.

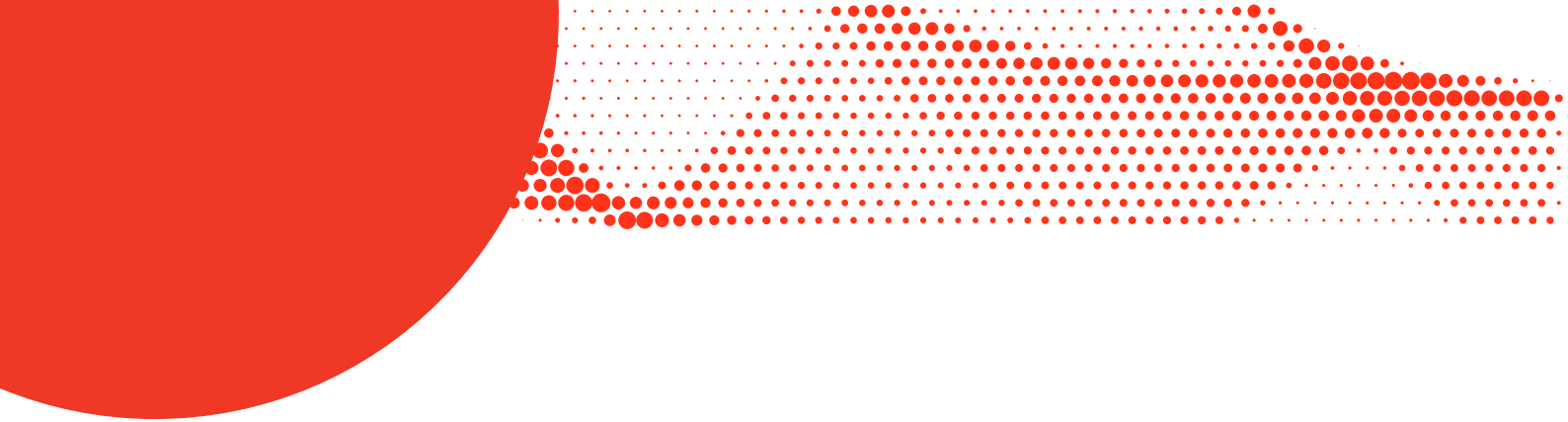
### Kanlungan

A London-based charity, Kanlungan Filipino Consortium was founded 26 years ago and is composed of several grassroots organizations that aim to promote and advance the interests of Filipino migrants in the UK. During the height of the first lockdown in the UK, the grassroots organizations that constitute the Kanlungan alliance came together to form a Covid-19 response team for the Filipino community in the UK. They launched initiatives to address four main concerns: the welfare of Filipinos working in the informal sector who lost their jobs; Filipinos who needed to self-isolate (those infected with Covid-19 and those who have underlying health conditions); undocumented Filipinos; and Filipino NHS workers.



Germany-based organizers of Ayuda: Hope Through Action, thank all contributors after the online project raised more than €5,000 in cash donations to provide relief to selected communities in the Philippines.. (Photo: Tapon)

One of the initiatives was directed towards providing essential groceries to people who needed to self-isolate and for those who have lost their jobs with no recourse to public funds. Another initiative was the provision of gift certificates from major supermarkets so that those who were in a difficult financial predicament can shop for their essentials. There were at least two projects that involved NHS workers. Newly arrived Filipino nurses were given proper winter clothing and food. Also, in collaboration with volunteer Filipino chefs, #FilipinoFoodForNHS



became a successful and widely recognized initiative, garnering media coverage. At the same time, Kanlungan, together with other organizations, started [Status Now](#), an alliance of UK-based migrant organizations demanding that all undocumented migrants be granted legal status or leave to remain in the UK.

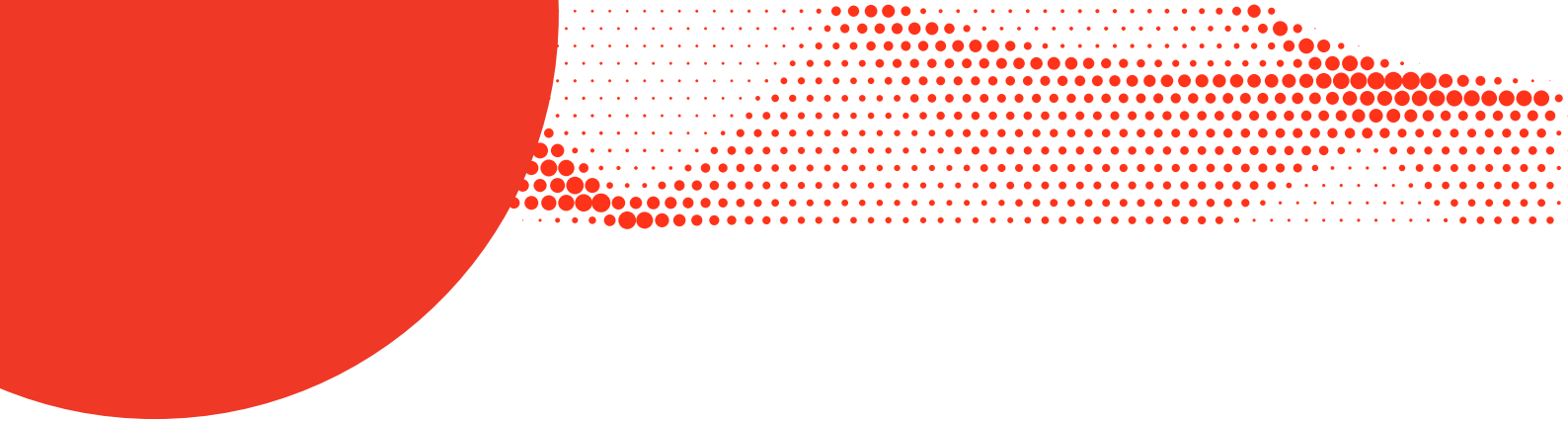
Initially, members of the organizations and their friends started asking for help from each other due to the need to self-isolate. A task force of volunteers was created on Facebook, and, through this, groceries were delivered to the homes of vulnerable and Covid-19 infected members of the Filipino community. As news of this initiative spread in the community, the number of people asking for help and the number of volunteers offering help increased. Suddenly, Filipinos outside of the family and friends of the members of the organizations involved started reaching out to Kanlungan to ask for help.

As a registered charity organization, Kanlungan was able to secure some funding. With the rise in the number of people asking for help, it became necessary to introduce a selection criterion on who to assist, as the demand far exceeded the financial and manpower resources of the charity. While initially, any Filipino that called the advertised helpline asking for grocery deliveries was helped, it was decided that only those with no recourse to government aid or any form of public funding should be prioritized in receiving financial aid – whether in the form of receiving free essential groceries or gift certificates from supermarkets. Self-isolating individuals who needed help in procuring groceries had groceries delivered to them, but they reimbursed the volunteers for the expense. Self-isolating individuals who lost their jobs and who were in a dire financial predicament were given essential groceries free of charge. In the end, there were as many as 79 volunteers who procured and delivered groceries to over 500 Filipinos who were self-isolating.

#FilipinoFoodForNHS started with a Filipina chef, Maria Garbutt-Lucero of Baboy Club, who got in touch with Kanlungan to say that she wanted to cook Filipino food for Filipino nurses in the NHS. Granted that Kanlungan was willing to arrange the logistics, she said she will volunteer her time and skills to cook the food. When Filipino NHS workers heard of the initiative through social media, there was a barrage of requests for Filipino food from different hospitals, and Maria could no longer cope with the demand. She then contacted other Filipino chefs and together they launched an online campaign on GoFundMe asking for donations to buy the ingredients to make Filipino food for NHS workers. They aimed to raise £300 for the ingredients but ended up receiving a whopping £4,790 in donations. This allowed the project to continue longer. For several weeks, Filipino chefs were cooking Filipino food, delivered to hospitals by Kanlungan volunteer drivers. The NHS staff – Filipinos and non-Filipinos – were very appreciative of the warm Filipino meals.

Kanlungan also received news about newly arrived Filipino nurses, who landed in the UK just as the government closed its borders. The newly arrived nurses were unprepared for the British climate, especially since, for many of them, it was their first time to live outside of the tropical Philippines. They did not have the appropriate type of clothing for the cold weather. The nurses arrived during the beginning of the lockdown when non-essential shops were closed, making it difficult for them to buy clothes that the UK weather required. Kanlungan volunteers made a call for donations for winter coats for Filipino nurses, which they collected from various donors' houses and delivered to the newly arrived Filipino nurses.

Finally, Kanlungan launched a campaign to regularize undocumented migrants. What started as a conversation between an undocumented friend of a Kanlungan volunteer evolved into a grassroots movement involving over 150 undocumented Filipinos in the UK. Through word of mouth, friends of friends of undocumented Filipinos in



the UK found out about how Kanlungan is distributing free essential groceries and gift certificates to Filipinos with no recourse to public funds. As the number of undocumented Filipinos reached out to Kanlungan swelled, it became evident that a serious campaign for legal status was necessary. Thus, Kanlungan reached out to other migrant organizations and became one of the founding members of Status Now.

### *Solidarity defined*

For Kanlungan volunteers and officers who were interviewed, solidarity was essential for the success of their initiatives. While they all professed to feel empathy and sympathy for destitute fellow Filipinos, they were all insistent that solidarity goes beyond mere thoughts and feelings. For them, solidarity must manifest itself in a person's behavior, and, more specifically, through a person's willingness to engage with others in collective action. As Susan Cueva, a Trustee of Kanlungan said, solidarity must be enacted through our "shared action to support each other."

### *Kanlungan's success*

1. The use of social media: Facebook became the primary platform for the promotion of Kanlungan's initiatives. One Kanlungan volunteer's video about the distribution of essential groceries to vulnerable individuals had over 10,000 views. The campaign to regularize undocumented migrants in the UK also started as a Facebook Messenger group chat between a Kanlungan volunteer, a Kanlungan Trustee, and an undocumented Filipino. The group chat has now reached over 150 members, most of whom are undocumented Filipinos in the UK. The promotion of #FilipinoFoodForNHS was also done on Facebook, with friends of Filipino nurses and other healthcare workers sharing information about the initiative, which generated more requests in various hospitals in and around London.

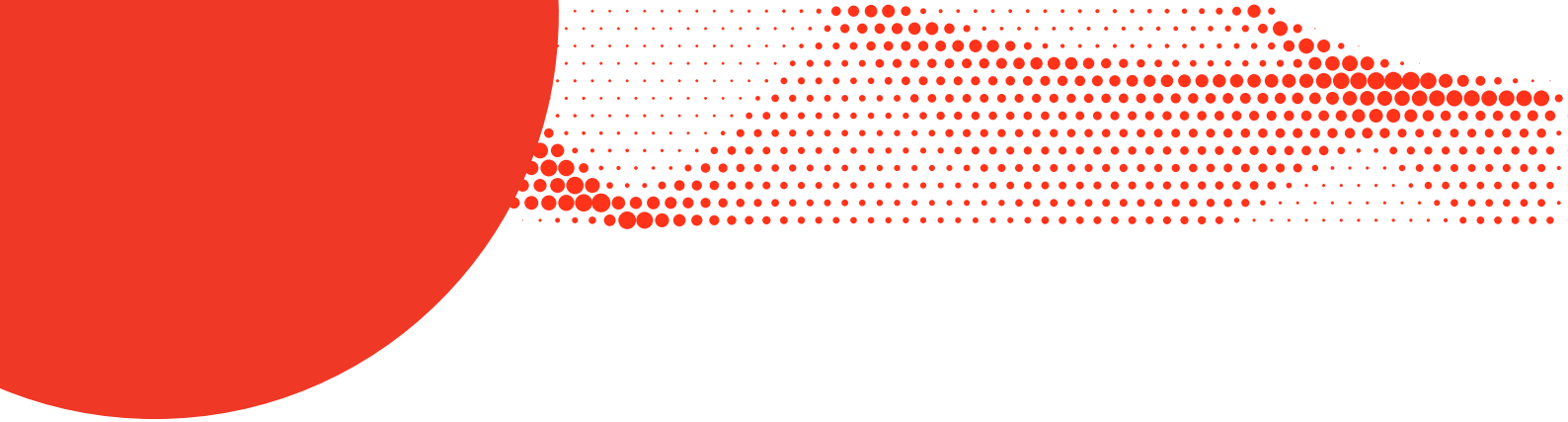
2. Desire to help: Kanlungan launched their Covid-19 initiatives because people were asking for help. Many Filipinos working in the informal sector have lost their jobs and were struggling to access financial assistance from institutions like those set up by the UK Government and the Philippine Embassy. This created an imperative within Kanlungan to launch initiatives aimed at helping destitute Filipinos in the UK. They were especially concerned about the predicament of undocumented Filipinos, whom they knew were afraid to ask for medical help from the NHS due to their immigration status.

3. The importance of bayanihan: Some of the interview respondents likened solidarity to the notion of bayanihan, which is similar to the view of some Ayuda interlocutors. Given that the initiatives were set up by Filipinos and primarily intended to help other Filipinos, it makes sense to invoke bayanihan. Like some people who helped Ayuda, bayanihan provided a socio-cultural framework for enacting solidarity for those who became involved with Kanlungan's Covid-19 initiative.

4. Shared predicament: A sense of shared predicament also motivated people to help Kanlungan. The threefold increase in racialized hate crimes committed against Asians strengthened bonds of solidarity among Filipinos, as they became acutely aware of their shared predicament of being targets of Covid-19-related racial abuse.

Relatedly, the recognition that a significant portion of Filipinos in the UK are employed in the informal sector was a primary motivator to set up the Covid-19 initiatives. The knowledge that many Filipinos are NHS workers, making





them especially at risk of contracting Covid-19, was also a motivator. An awareness that a non-negligible number of Filipinos in the UK are undocumented was another concern for the people involved in these initiatives.

Personal circumstances that link with others' situations could also be said to be a significant reason why people volunteered. Many of the Kanlungan volunteers come from the [Filipino Domestic Workers Association \(FDWA\)](#). The FDWA is among the seven Filipino organizations that constitute Kanlungan. As domestic workers themselves, they were very much aware that many domestic workers lost their jobs due to the pandemic and lockdown restrictions. As a self-help group, they are primarily concerned with other domestic workers. According to Phoebe Dimacali, the chairperson of FDWA, membership increased as more and more domestic workers lost their jobs and asked for support from the organization. Meanwhile, Kanlungan volunteer Garry Martinez shared that he has a soft spot for undocumented Filipinos in the UK due to his first-hand experience of being undocumented himself when he was in South Korea.

5. Personal ties: Kanlungan helped Filipinos and non-Filipinos, people they knew personally as well as strangers. Nonetheless, personal ties to Filipinos were another reason why people contributed their time and skills to Kanlungan's initiative. When friends and relatives infected with Covid-19 or who have underlying medical issues that make them particularly vulnerable to the virus were asking for help, Kanlungan organized a volunteer response team, delegated tasks, and created a procedure that would identify and prioritize who to help and what kind of aid to offer.

The relevance of personal ties in building solidarity went beyond Filipinos. One of the volunteers for grocery delivery was an Arab man who saw the initiatives advertised on social media. He said he was motivated to volunteer and help the Filipino community because he was raised by a Filipino nanny. He thus wanted to give back to the Filipino community.

6. Emotions: As with Ayuda, emotions that could be crippling were channeled towards emotions that could be productive. While the people in Kanlungan were fearful of contracting Covid-19 themselves and were worried about the safety and well-being of their families and friends, they saw it as an opportunity to show courage in the face of adversity. These respondents construed courage not as an absence of fear but as the overcoming of fear.

vAt the same time, volunteers were driven to help due to the empathy they felt for destitute Filipinos, on the one hand, and admiration for NHS workers, on the other hand. Seeing others' situations prompted them to go out of their way to help.

7. Non-partisanship in delivering aid: The Filipino community in the UK, like the Filipinos in the Philippines, are politically polarized between being pro or anti-Duterte. Kanlungan and its member organizations have, before the pandemic, organized activities critical of the current administration, which were picketed by pro-Duterte Filipinos. Interestingly, political polarization was somehow reduced during the pandemic and the delivery of Kanlungan's services. There was a heartening exchange between Susan Cueva and a locally prominent Duterte supporter. The latter, who was previously critical of Kanlungan's work, praised the initiatives for not discriminating recipients based on political lines and started referring destitute Filipinos to Kanlungan.



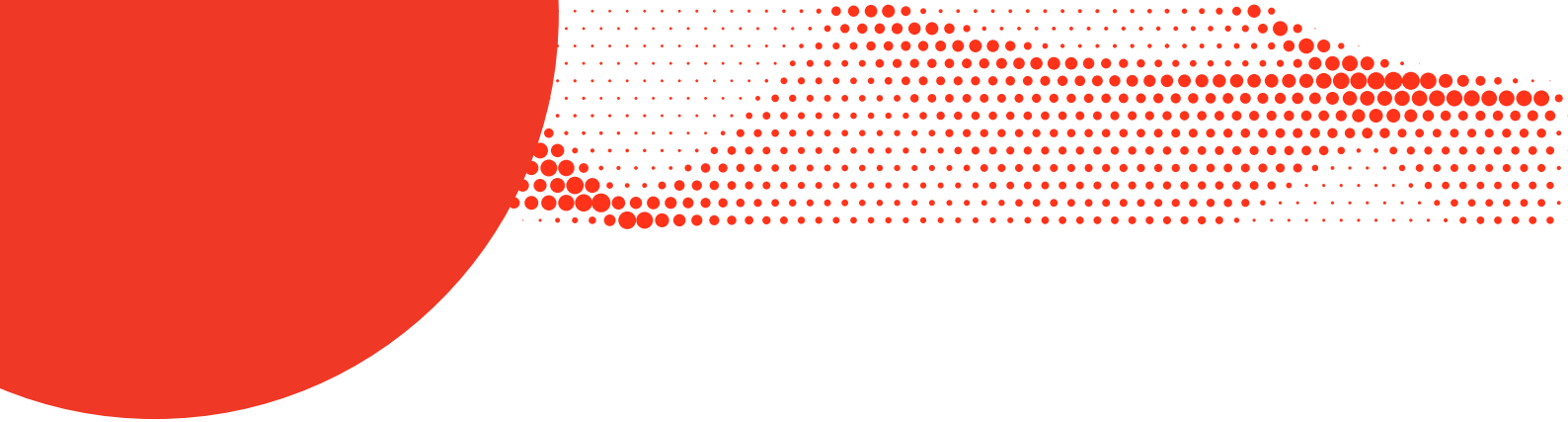
## Challenges

1. Financial resources: The main obstacle that Kanlungan encountered was a lack of financial resources and that almost everyone involved was a volunteer without any financial remuneration. This meant that the financial situation of the charity had to be closely monitored and that the initiatives relied on the goodwill of individuals who volunteered their time and skills for free.
2. Personal circumstances: Sometimes, people dropped out in the command chain of help due to their circumstances, such as their limited time. This and lack of financial resources were significant logistical hurdles that needed to be overcome.
3. Lack of organizational structure beyond the UK: According to Susan Cueva, Kanlungan and its member organizations lacked the organizational infrastructure to expand Kanlungan's services and enact a more global form of solidarity among Filipinos. She recounted an experience she had in Spain at the height of the pandemic, where she met Filipino domestic workers who lost their jobs. They told her that Spain-based Filipino informal workers have no organization to turn to because there is no organization there that is doing work like Kanlungan's.
4. Polarization: Even though a staunch Duterte supporter praised Kanlungan, the Covid-19 crisis did not completely dissolve the tension between pro and anti-Duterte camps in the UK. Some pro-Duterte individuals dismissed as fake news Kanlungan's publicity of their initiatives, which included news articles from reputable newspapers.

## Solidarity, charity, inequality

Giving financial donations is conceived by those who contributed to Kanlungan and Ayuda's initiatives as an enactment of solidarity. It is a voluntary form of action to help alleviate another's suffering, "mutual support" to go back to Wilde's (2007) definition, which goes beyond empathy or commiseration. Such voluntary help, particularly in the form of financial contribution, can be construed as a form of charity. The relationship and difference between solidarity and charity have been debated philosophically, touching in particular on how they address injustice and inequality (see Laitinen 2014). In practice, however, the concepts of solidarity and charity are overlapping and can, in many instances, be indistinguishable from each other, as seen in the experiences of those who contributed to Ayuda and Kanlungan. Some Ayuda respondents understood charity as an act of solidarity, with one saying that "charity is needed given the justified needs of the vulnerable and marginalized people compared to those people/groups in privileged positions." Charity was seen as the only recourse given the urgency of the needs, even if those interviewed recognized that it will not lead to long-term structural changes. As an Ayuda organizer who understood the pitfalls of stopgap measures such as charity work in addressing long-term structural issues on the one hand, and the urgent need for action, on the other hand, said, "What else can we do? For now, it felt urgent, and we need to send immediate help." While another respondent admitted, "Charity exposes obvious inequalities, it certainly does not dismantle them though." We see here that people's conceptualizations of these terms, and more generally the plurality of reasonable conceptions of what is good and moral, do not reflect the tension between these terms in philosophical discourse.

What can be highlighted, however, is the tension between solidarity and inequality. Ayuda and Kanlungan's Covid-19 initiatives were set up as an immediate response to the urgent needs of vulnerable communities due to inadequate government response in both the UK and the Philippines, structural racism in the UK, as well as the



poor state of the healthcare system and the violent tactics employed by the state in the Philippines. These initiatives' very existence and their communication strategies exposed these inequalities even if their goal was not to directly enact social and political change. At the same time, by working with organizations that have expressed criticisms of government policies, the initiatives were able to further highlight these issues. One can say that to address inequalities, these inequalities must first be made visible and understood by a broad public. In this sense then, the work of Ayuda and that of Kanlungan is a step towards addressing inequalities. This is all the more relevant given the track record of the organizations that mounted these initiatives in critiquing unjust policies in the diaspora and the Philippines. Kakay Tolentino of KATRIBU appreciated this, saying, "Ayuda was a way to amplify to people outside of the country the plight of indigenous peoples during the pandemic and lockdown, and to get to know the people who organized the fund drive for those in the Philippines." She furthermore emphasized the importance of recognition, in the form of aid, for those who have been oppressed. She shared that indigenous communities who received aid from Ayuda through Lingkod Katribu "knew that what Lingkod Katribu will bring is not just from Lingkod Katribu, but from other groups as well. That is why we explain to them that among the donation are those that came from Ayuda."

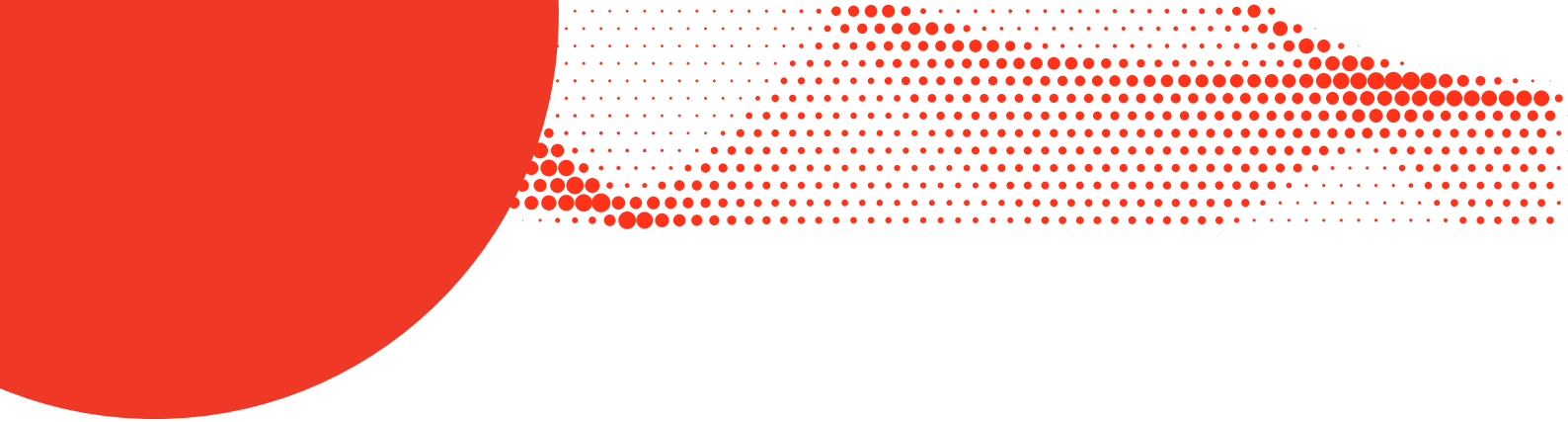
Meanwhile, in the UK, several axes of inequalities exist within the Filipino community. There is economic inequality where some Filipinos, especially the undocumented, are among the poorest in the UK, working low-paid jobs without any job security while sending most of their earnings to the Philippines, whereas there are also Filipino elites studying in UK universities. There is also status inequality in the sense that NHS workers, for example, are usually considered to be more valuable to society than cleaners or domestic workers. Finally, there is immigration status inequality. There are Filipinos who acquired British citizenship, making them entitled to the full range of rights and access to services that any British person has. Then there are Filipinos on citizenship-track resident visas, Filipinos on short-term student visas, Filipinos on spouse visas, and so on. And then there are Filipinos who have no legal status at all, who live in fear of deportation every day.

As with Ayuda, Kanlungan's initiatives were primarily designed to address the urgent and immediate needs of Filipinos who required and asked for help, instead of attempting to dismantle these inequalities. These initiatives could be described as *pantawid gutom* or to stave off hunger. The provision of essential groceries and supermarket gift certificates, the delivery of Filipino food to NHS workers, and the supply of winter clothes to newly-arrived nurses were not designed to tackle any of these structural inequalities in the Filipino community, but rather to provide immediate assistance.

These initiatives thus also highlighted inequalities within the diaspora and between the diaspora and the Philippines. In the UK, it became apparent that there are people who needed help and there are those who can help. As one Ayuda respondent said, comparing the plight of Filipinos in Germany and in the Philippines "brought home to me the extent of social inequality that pervades our world, where some populations are well cushioned by social welfare while others are left to fend for themselves." This critical reflexivity on difference, instead of similarity, is another avenue through which solidarity can be built (Hemmings 2012).

### **Insights from diasporic solidarity for global solidarity**

Several insights about building transnational and potentially global solidarity can be gleaned from the preceding discussion. First, feelings of belonging and connectivity to Filipinos and the Philippines are crucial in shaping sol-



idarity work in the diaspora. One can say that diasporic solidarity gets activated primarily through these ties, connections, and feelings. This shared sense of belonging and interconnectedness, notwithstanding the existence of polarization, is a potent avenue through which aid and support structures flowed, not only towards the Philippines as in the case of Ayuda but also within the different diasporic communities, as seen in Kanlungan's work.

Yet, diasporic solidarity is not just confined to those who have ties to Filipinos and the Philippines. Kanlungan's work with Status Now is a case in point. Inspired by the recent decision of the Portuguese Council of Ministers to grant migrants and asylum seekers already living in the country full citizenship rights as a response to the pandemic, Status Now is demanding that the British Government do the same. If this initiative succeeds, it has the potential to repair a significant form of inequality among Filipinos in the UK. This brings us to our second insight, namely that recognition of shared predicament beyond one's nationality and ethnicity is a vital point for unity among people in the diaspora and can thus build and enact diasporic solidarity. That is, the realization of shared struggles can enable people to help one another.

Third, solidarity that is global in scale suggests feelings and actions of connectedness and support grounded on a notion of commonality of humanity beyond one's kin, friends, countrymen/womxn, acquaintances, and colleagues. It is animated by a shared goal that transcends socially or geographically constructed borders and is thus founded on a sense of moral solidarity. An Ayuda organizer, for instance, described the initiative as global in scope because it involved people in various parts of the world and of different nationalities. This is important in elevating local issues to a global audience, as one artist explained:

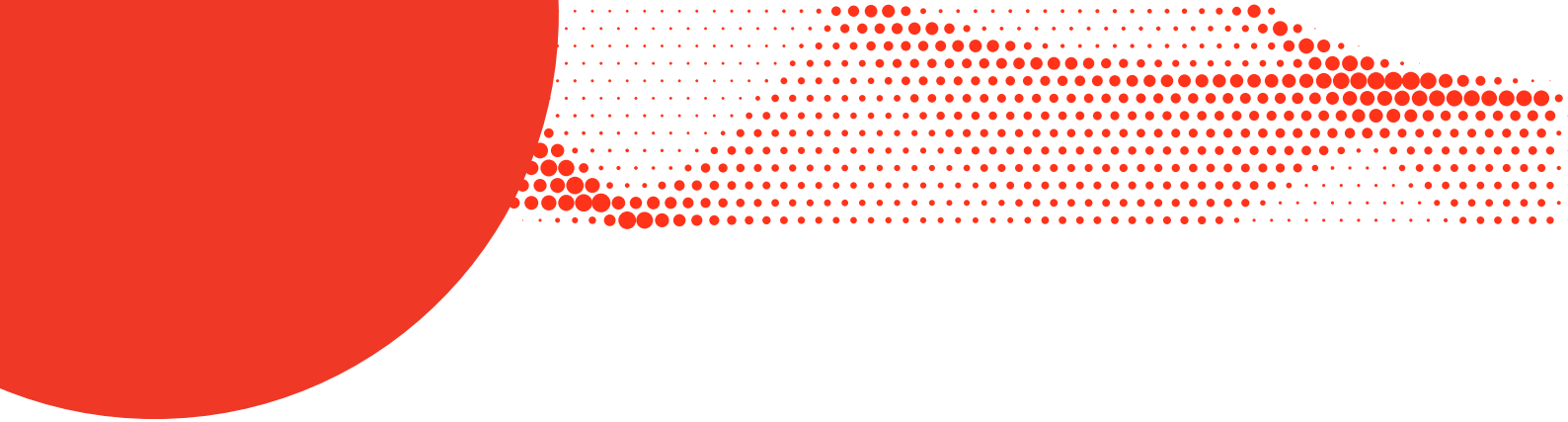
We need international support to be able to denounce human rights violations. We need international support to be able to feed those who are in need. We need global solidarity to be able to bring our dreams to fruition because it is a global community now. Therefore, there should be cooperation and solidarity now among organizations from different parts of the world.

Fourth, global solidarity can be manifested in the linking of local struggles with other struggles, such as with Kanlungan's Status Now campaign.

Fifth, despite the importance of shared predicament in building solidarity, caution must be observed on who might be excluded in calls for solidarity. One must ask: whose voices are heard and whose are silenced? Whose issues and plight are addressed, and whose are ignored? Building and enacting global solidarity must thus grapple with differences and inequalities across peoples (Roediger 2017), employ an intersectional lens, and consider as well how solidarity can antagonize those who do not have the same interests (Wilde 2007: 173). As Ahmed (2014: 189) asserts:

Solidarity does not assume that our struggles are the same struggles, or that our pain is the same pain, or that our hope is for the same future. Solidarity involves commitment, and work, as well as the recognition that even if we do not have the same feelings, or the same lives, or the same bodies, we do live on common ground.

Finally, diasporic solidarity is a pathway towards a particular form of global solidarity. It necessitates commitment, work, timely action, mobilizing emotions, maximizing social media, and tapping transnational networks, personal



ties, and trust relationships. It also involves effective communication strategies, such as the use of arts and music, and intercultural and transparent information, to engage as many people as possible in the delivery of aid and support. Crucial here is bridging political, geographic, national, and other differences without erasing the intersectionality of people's experiences, towards the recognition of interconnectedness and of, as Ahmed (2014) asserts, living on common ground. It further critically reflects on how the language of charity can sometimes conceal the obligations generated by injustices, and the potential of solidarity to antagonize and exclude. But it recognizes as well that perhaps during times of crises, what matters ultimately is that people mobilize to attend to each other's needs, and we must utilize whatever language or concept is most effective in ensuring that aid is speedily delivered to the needy, while at the same time raising awareness about inequalities. In a post-Covid-19 world, these strategies and critical reflections on our work will remain relevant as we address the long-term impacts of the pandemic on vulnerable populations and these impacts' attendant structural roots.

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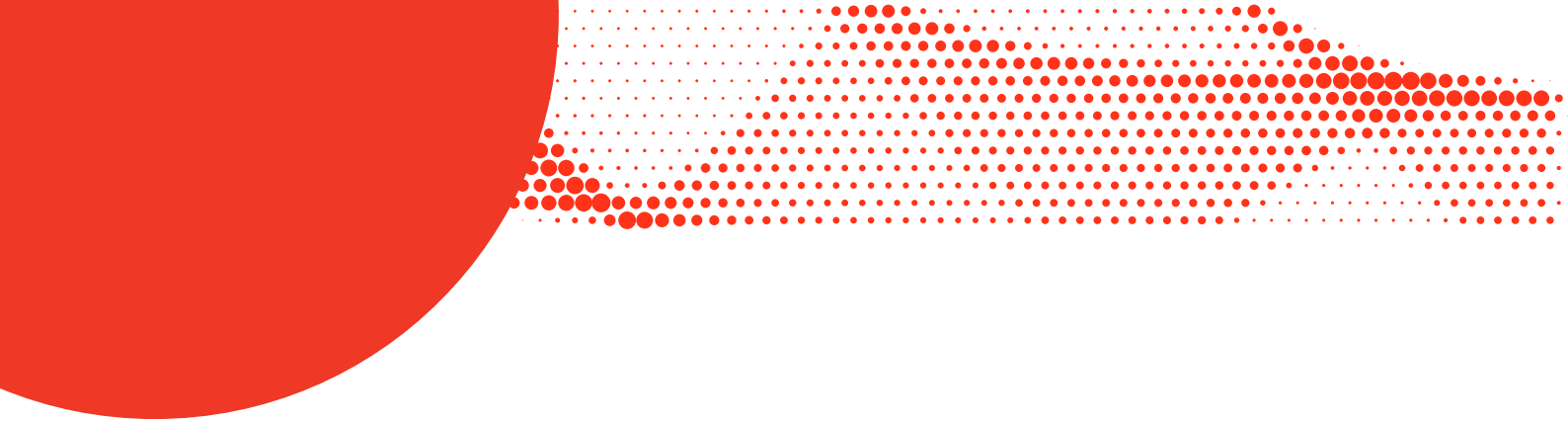
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**Acknowledgment:** We would like to thank the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Southeast Asia-Manila Office for the grant to conduct this research. We are especially grateful to the organizers, recipients, artists, and donors of Ayuda: Hope Through Action and the officers, volunteers, and donors of Kanlungan Filipino Consortium. We dedicate this paper to Rachelle Bascara, friend, scholar, and fearless fighter for justice and equality. Your spirit lives on.

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## The Philippines' Authoritarian Approach to the Pandemic and the Progressives' Mounting Resistance

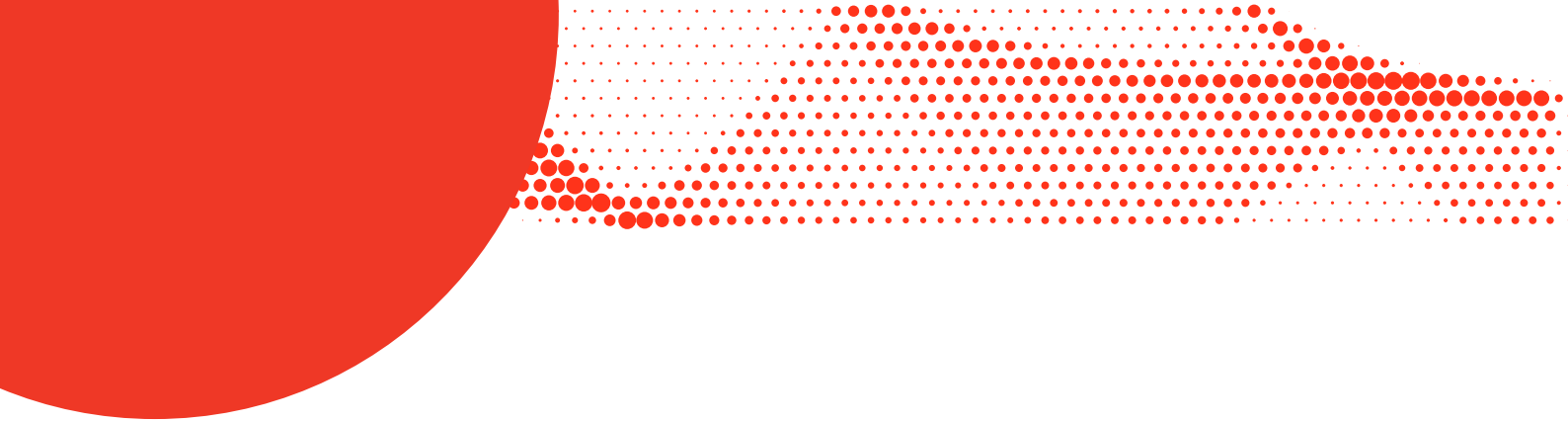
By: Grace Cantal-Albasin

Despite the layered challenges, Filipino progressives have continued to transform the pandemic crisis into a pathway for global solidarity. International solidarity is inevitable, and the only way forward post-pandemic is a unified global action that knows no border.



Filipino activists in Germany gather at Berlin in September 2021 calling for an end to killings in the Philippines. September also marks the commemoration of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos' declaration of Martial Law. (Photo by RESBAK Artists Collective)

Whether rich or poor nations, the Covid-19 pandemic responses from governments worldwide have exposed the sheer social divide that made the poor more vulnerable from the infection and loss of livelihood. Yet, most governments have focused on averting the ominous economic meltdown over addressing the human toll of the pandemic. As the Philippines reels from the impact of Covid-19, marginalized Filipinos have been grappling with the mounting human and social rights violations. Inequalities between those in power and the poor have become appalling. As the solidarity movement advances and strengthens worldwide, progressive groups have joined the global solidarity to assert the rights of oppressed peoples amid the pandemic. In these dangerous times in the Philippines, progressives have continually consolidated their forces here and abroad to resist authoritarianism.



The global health crisis is seeing no end. For a moment, the world eased up on quarantines and lockdowns as Covid-19 cases flattened. However, the situation quickly flipped, and the pandemic has been sweeping across countries again, overwhelming hospitals and medical frontliners around the globe. Worse, a global unified approach against the pandemic has not been achieved as governments worldwide have been scrambling to save economies rather than lives. Governments prioritized addressing the troubled world market over implementing comprehensive Covid-19 responses on a global scale because economic and military superpowers have continued to push their imperialist dominion and expand their greed amid shattered capital, wreaking immense destruction to global economies even before the pandemic.

Massive rights violations mark most of the approaches chosen to slow down the spread of Covid-19 especially in poor countries where rising dictatorships reign, fueled by disinformation and misinformation spread through social media to perpetuate this new wave of authoritarianism, while at the same time restraining the mainstream media from reporting realities on the ground.

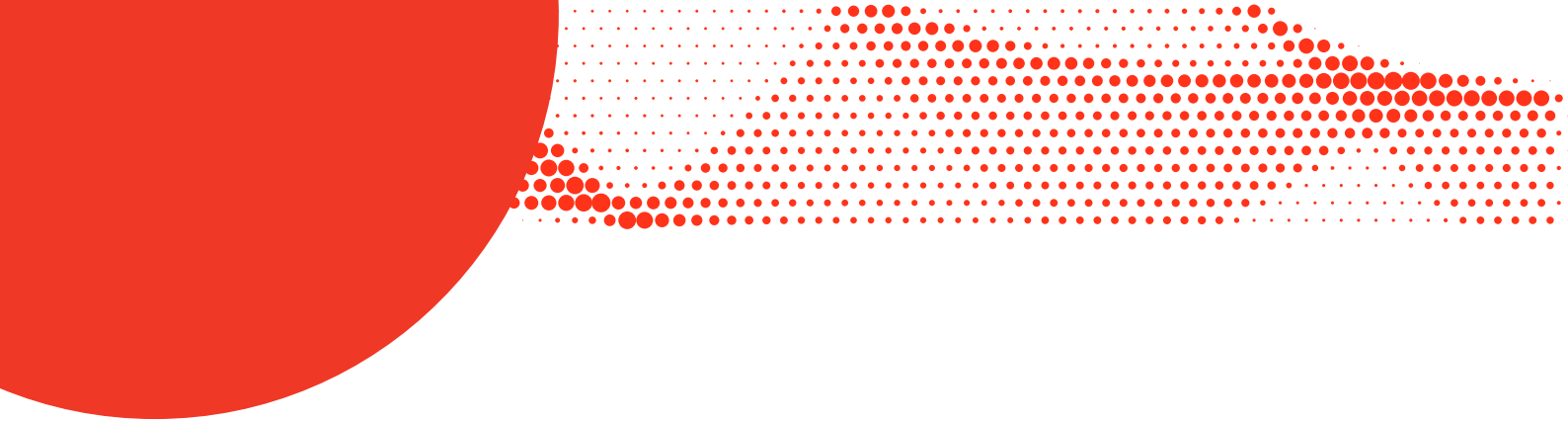
Tragically, the pandemic has just exacerbated the ongoing monopoly capitalism crisis, with imperialist powers mounting their economic and military might to re-establish their presence in their former colonies and re-divide the world to perpetuate their economic supremacy. The new cold war between China and the US and other major economic players taking sides and creating alliances with these two countries have deepened more than ever resulting in civil wars, nations on bankruptcy, famine, contagious diseases, and military-ruled or military-backed governments, and now the race to producing the vaccines for Covid-19.

These acts of aggression resonate to nations in the Global South in the way leaders govern these countries caught between the US and China. In the Philippines, retired top military officials head key government posts in the country since President Rodrigo Roa Duterte got elected in 2016. The country's Covid-19 response was made worse with the administration cobbling up a task force headed mostly by former military officers instead of healthcare experts from various fields to address the pandemic based on science and health. Instead of a medical solution, the government has opted for a militarist approach resulting in fatalities, both of medical frontliners and ordinary citizens bereft of health services, especially since the Philippine healthcare system was never ready for this contagion.

Since October 2020, Covid-19 cases in the Philippines have surged at an exponential rate. Several provinces, cities, and municipalities have begun implementing localized lockdowns as local transmissions spiraled because of returning stranded residents and overseas workers. The re-opening of essential businesses and the partial re-opening of non-essential services like tourism compounded the rise of Covid-19 infections. The Philippines is still far from recovering from the economic blow induced by the community quarantines and lockdowns imposed in the country since March 2020. The Philippines is now considered as one of the nations that imposed the longest and strictest lockdowns throughout the world.<sup>1</sup> Millions lost their jobs especially those who worked in the highly urbanized cities where manufacturing industries thrive. It also did not spare the rural areas dependent on crops where farmworkers have also suffered from the brunt of lockdown. The most affected are the marginalized populations in urban and rural poor communities, the old, the sick, people with disabilities, people in detention centers and prisoners serving time in jails, and those who live in communities recovering from disasters and conflict.

<sup>1</sup><https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/08/02/2032415/covid-19-deaths-may-beunderreported-due-poor-access-healthcare-leachon-says>





Amid the ballooning debt of the country at P11.6 trillion as of July 2021<sup>2</sup> blatant corruption has continued without letup, even as the government says otherwise. In August 2020, the government-owned Philippine Health Insurance (PhilHealth) faced a probe on the alleged disbursement of P30 billion for the Interim Reimbursement Mechanism (IRM), an emergency fund intended for Covid-19 patients, to hospitals catering to non-coronavirus infected patients.<sup>3</sup> This was followed by the anomalous P12 billion deal entered into by the government with a dubious supplier, Pharmally Pharmaceutical Corp., to procure Covid-19 supplies<sup>4</sup>.

The government had exhausted its P275-billion emergency fund released at the start of the pandemic. Yet millions of people still failed to get cash aid from the government-initiated social amelioration program. Worse, even the funds for immediate cash aid were not spared from controversies of fund misuse.<sup>5</sup>

Adding another dimension to the health crisis is the fact that many communities in the country are still recovering from recent disasters. Marawi City remains largely in ruins due to the siege that took place in 2017. The government's efforts to rebuild the city have gone on for so long, enabling Covid-19 to catch up and virtually halting all rehabilitation efforts. Conditions of displaced individuals due to calamities such as massive earthquakes and typhoons resulting in flooding and landslides have worsened with Covid-19. This pandemic worsened the devastation wrought by successive super typhoons, including the category 5 super typhoon Rolly (International name: Goni), the strongest typhoon recorded in 2020, that ravaged several provinces in Luzon, the country's biggest island. In the first week of November 2020, tropical depression Ulysses (International name: Vamco) pummeled Northern Luzon and even caused destructive flooding, as the said typhoon came right after Rolly.

The pandemic and the natural disasters have put the vulnerable in their worst state. But another layer of intricacy has made matters worse: the country's shrinking democratic space. Despite all these, progressives in the country continued to resist, fighting back even as the attacks continue unabated. Despite quarantine restrictions, progressives were able to launch creative ways to fight against the creeping. Protests were mounted both in the streets and online, and each perceived state-sponsored attack was met with resistance. Just as the government ensured that attacks targeted all fronts, progressive groups also continued the fight in various forms – from filing petitions one after another against the Anti-Terror Act (ATA) of 2020 in the Supreme Court, bringing to the Legislature pro-poor and pro-people policies, and even pleading to the United Nations (UN) and the international community to intervene on the worsening rights violations plaguing the country, the pushback against tyranny had all bases covered.

### **Military Response to Covid-19**

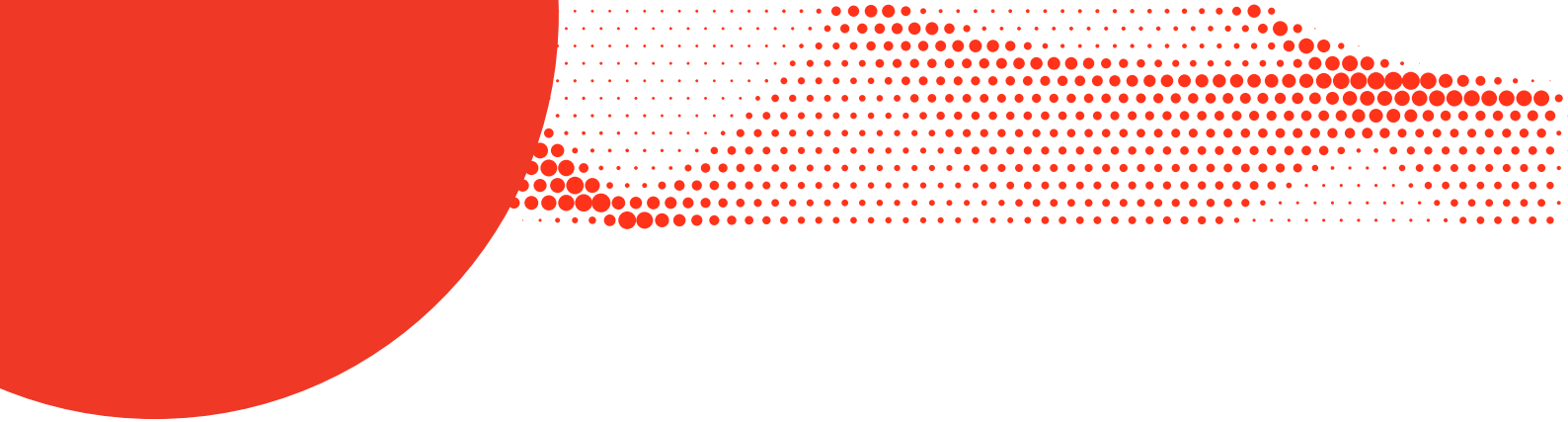
Like most countries around the globe, the Philippines took the Covid-19 virus lightly when it first entered the country. The first case was recorded on January 29 when a Chinese couple from Wuhan was hospitalized for showing Covid-19 symptoms. They were confirmed infected with the virus. The husband died; the wife survived. However, it would take months after that first case for the Duterte administration to take decisive action. Instead of opting to immediately respond to the emerging health crisis, Duterte continued ruling the country with an iron fist. And when the Duterte administration already had no choice but to confront the pandemic head-on, it had unsurprisingly chosen the militarist approach to address Covid-19.

<sup>2</sup><https://www.rappler.com/business/philippine-government-debt-july-2021>

<sup>3</sup><https://www.cnn.ph/news/2020/10/18/philhealth-probe-results-release.html>

<sup>4</sup><https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2021/09/20/2128331/billions-paid-pharmally-could-feed-16-million-families>

<sup>5</sup><https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/08/13/21/coa-flags-dswd-over-unused-p780m-intended-for-cash-aid>



Duterte, in his first few months in office, vowed to eradicate crimes and illegal drugs trade in the country within six months, immediately implementing a massive anti-narcotics crackdown. Since then, the Philippine National Police (PNP) and the Philippine Drug Enforcement Agency (PDEA) have racked up thousands of deaths related to the said bloody campaign. In Duterte's first two years, rights violations related to his drug war escalated prompting human rights organizations in the country to seek intervention at the UN and call the attention of the international community to scrutinize the conduct of this campaign because of alleged summary executions perpetrated in the anti-illegal drugs campaigns. As of writing, Duterte has served close to five years as president, yet his patently murderous "war against drugs" remains unrelenting.

The pandemic did not hamper but has instead given Duterte further justification to heighten his military campaign against insurgency and the illegal drug trade. The president formed a National Task Force (NTF) on Covid-19 headed by a former military general, Carlito Galvez Jr. who Duterte entrusted to negotiate for the Covid-19 vaccine purchase for the country. At the onset of Covid-19, Duterte designated the defense secretary as chief of the Inter-Agency Task Force-Emerging Infectious Disease (IATF-EID), the policy-making body of the Covid-19 operations. The IATF-EID is led by at least three former generals. Of the five-member Task Force implementing the National Action Plan (NAP-TF), four are former generals. In contrast, the medical community is only consulted on a need basis. The health secretary is only a member of the IATF.

Instead of widespread mass testing, effective contact-tracing, employing more medical frontliners, equipping government-run hospitals, providing personal protective equipment to medical frontliners, and providing substantial cash aid for the millions who needed help at the start of the Covid-19 pandemic, Duterte relied mainly on quarantines and a "hard lockdown" reinforced with strict measures that locked up violators, putting them in higher risks of getting infected. The quarantine may have helped slow down the spread of Covid-19, but soon after the restrictions were eased, it only took weeks for the virus to again spread rampantly. The government, meanwhile, has yet to catch up with medical approaches to address the pandemic, thus making it easy for the pandemic to rapidly overwhelm hospitals and the country's healthcare system.

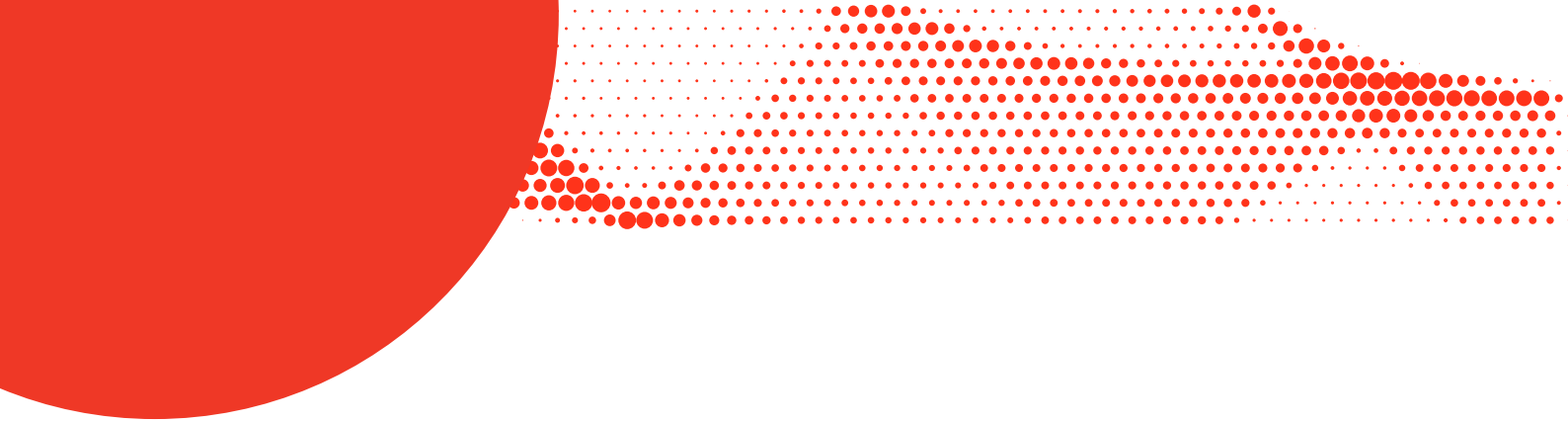
The breadth of rights violations during this pandemic did not only spike; it has widened. About 100,000 arrests<sup>6</sup> were made over violations of quarantine and lockdown measures the government has enforced, putting the vulnerable in more horrid situations as they face detentions and pay fines while grappling with finding ways to put food on their tables. Amid this backdrop, the state even enacted a new law – the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) of 2020, which critics have described as a draconian law meant to stifle dissent.

### **Breeding a Culture of Impunity and Violence**

With impunity and violence comes the escalation of extrajudicial killings, red-tagging of activists or anyone who resists, the locking up critics, and worsening repression on media freedom and the freedom of expression.

Public outrage sparked when police brutality in the shooting of an unarmed mother, Sonya Gregorio, and her son, Frank, on December 20, 2020 – arguably the most brazen image of violence seen in the country – went viral online. Many critics point to Duterte for enabling a vicious environment where state security forces are emboldened to commit such crimes. Since Duterte assumed the presidency, he has repeatedly coaxed the police and military force to use violence and impunity in their operations, guaranteeing protection for State security forces who commit crimes in the conduct of their operations.

<sup>6</sup><https://www.rappler.com/nation/arrested-quarantine-violators-philippines-2020>



The case of the mother and son prodded several senators to condemn police brutality, and belatedly admitting that leadership and a system that rewards misdeeds instead of punishment play a role in breeding a culture of impunity.<sup>7</sup>

Government records show at least 8,663 people have died since 2016, but human rights groups said the exact death toll is not known as they estimate the number must have been thrice over<sup>8</sup>. About 122 children are among the fatalities. UN Human Rights Chief Michelle Bachelet, in her report, warned that there exists “near impunity for widespread extrajudicial killings [in the Philippines] despite credible evidence and the vilification of dissent in the country.”<sup>9</sup>

The late Jose Jaime Espina, chairperson of the National Union of Journalists of the Philippines (NUJP) back in 2020, said the country has little media literacy, but an overwhelming social media presence has made it easy for enemies of press freedom and freedom, in general, to manipulate the public through disinformation, citing a TV guesting of Lieutenant General Antonio Parlade Jr., National Task Force to End the Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) spokesperson, where the general boasted that “nobody reads news nowadays and social media provides with a platform to project its messaging.”

Journalists like Espina fear that complete government control or silencing the media is the greatest possible danger against democracy, as such instance will result in a “chilling effect” that can seep into the psyche of many media owners, news managers, and reporters, resulting in the media appearing to be intimidated by Duterte’s brand of authoritarianism. Espina added that journalists in alternative media also face growing risks of arrests, false charges, and even death. “Overall, impunity for attacks on journalists remains the norm.” The government has red-tagged the NUJP as an “enemy of the state” since 2004 during the term of former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo.

In the post-Martial Law era, the media in the country has been touted to be Asia’s freest press, yet the killings of journalists continued. As of 2020, the NUJP has recorded 17 journalists who were killed under the Duterte administration. Two of these cases happened this year: Cornelio “Rex Cornelio” Pepino was killed on May 5,<sup>10</sup> just an hour after the ABS-CBN shutdown, and Jobert Bercasio, who was shot dead in Sorsogon City.<sup>11</sup> There have already been 189 journalists killed since 1986, after the restoration of democracy in the country.<sup>12</sup>

With Duterte in power, media repression has become deliberate as it does not go after individuals anymore. It even closed the country’s largest television network ABS-CBN, with Congress denying its application for franchise renewal in July 2020. The closure left thousands of workers of the network jobless, and it forced the network to close its regional offices. The network had a strong regional news affairs program, and its shutdown resulted in the deprivation of thousands of TV viewers in remote areas of news and entertainment. This same network was also shut down during the Marcos dictatorship.

<sup>7</sup><https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/12/21/20/pure-evil-senators-blame-impunity-for-cold-blooded-police-killing-of-mother-and-son>

<sup>8</sup><https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/DisplayNews.aspx?NewsID=25924>

<sup>9</sup><https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/oct/08/un-accused-over-failure-to-investigate-war-on-drugs-killings-in-the-philippines-duterte>

<sup>10</sup><https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/5/6/murder-of-radio-anchor-caps-turbulent-day-in-philippine-media>

<sup>11</sup><https://cpj.org/2020/09/journalist-jobert-bercasio-shot-and-killed-in-the-philippines/>

<sup>12</sup><https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2021/country-chapters/philippines>



## Red-tagging: Vicious Military Witch-hunt

Red-tagging is a centuries-old method perpetrated in authoritarian regimes to quell dissent. It gags free expression guaranteed by the Constitution. Tyrants despise free expression. Red-tagging is also tantamount to direct assault on a person's beliefs and worst one's life. What worsens it is the culture of impunity in the country that has also normalized the red-tagging of rights and land defenders and activists as "terrorists." Most victims of extrajudicial killings were first red-tagged before getting killed. Recent incidents have shown that the military has red-tagged practically anyone who speaks vocally against the Duterte's administration and anyone who uses any platform to advance people's issues.

After Duterte ended the peace talks with the Communist Party of the Philippines-National Democratic Front-New People's Army (CPP-NDF-NPA) in 2017, the Department of Justice (DOJ) issued a petition that labeled more than 600 people, among them was Victoria Tauli-Corpuz – the UN special rapporteur on the rights of indigenous peoples, and dozens of leftist activists, as members of the CPP-NPA, putting said individuals at risk of extrajudicial execution.<sup>13</sup>

Among the victims of extrajudicial execution was Zara Alvarez, a Karapatan (Rights) human rights worker, who was shot dead on a rainy night in Bacolod City in August 2020. Alvarez was red-tagged through posters distributed in various towns in Negros Island in 2018, while at the same time receiving death threats until her death. She and the other red-tagged individuals sought protection from the court on what they called state-sponsored red-tagging that put their lives and liberty at risk through filing the Petition for Writ of Amparo and Habeas Data, but the Court of Appeals (CA) denied said petition in June 2020 without hearing the witnesses' testimonies. Karapatan argued that Alvarez's killing proved that being tagged as a communist rebel or terrorist is an actual threat, but the CA ruled responded by saying, "there was no evidence the alleged killings and disappearances are on account of the victims' membership in organizations tagged as legal fronts."<sup>14</sup>

Workers have also experienced persistent red-tagging that makes them fear for their own and their families' safety. Anne Krueger of BPO Industry Employees Network (BIEN) recounted the horror she went through after her illegal arrest in the simultaneous Negros raids in November 2019. The arrest occurred after Krueger was red-tagged many times and detained for 12 days. She has been charged with illegal possession of firearms despite her not knowing how to hold guns. Worst, she has been accused of being a high-ranking NPA officer. Her case has not been processed by the courts due to several court hearing deferments. John Milton Lozande, president of the National Federation of Sugar Workers (NFSW), meanwhile, highlighted that 50 farmworkers have been killed on Negros Island under the Duterte administration.<sup>15</sup>

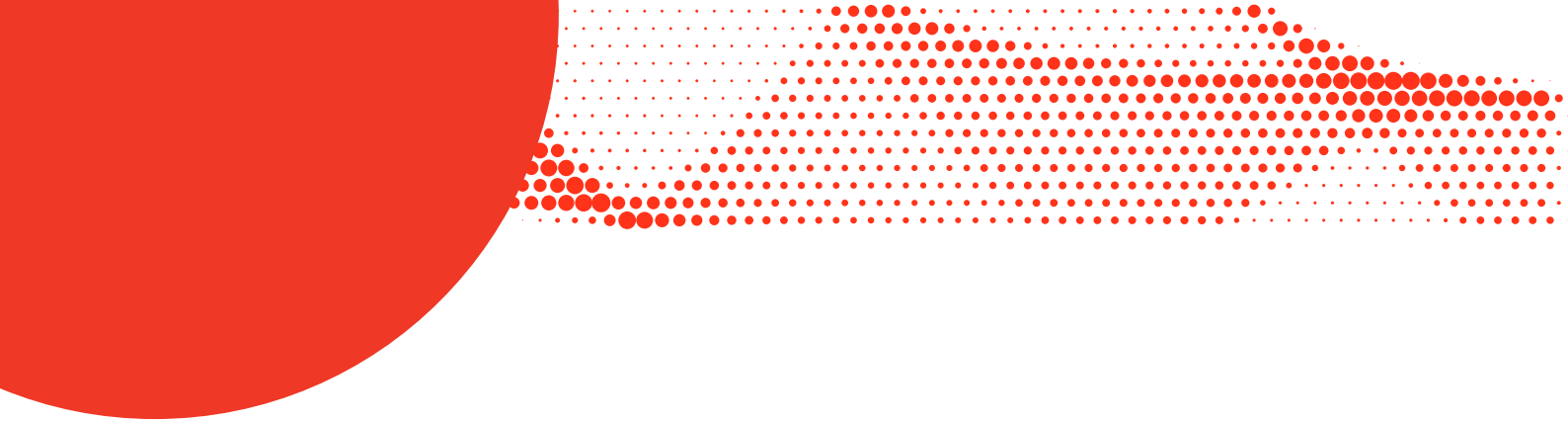
In October 2020, Lt. General Parlade also red-tagged famous women celebrities Angel Locsin, Liza Soberano, and Miss Universe 2018 Catriona Gray. Soberano got the ire of the military when she talked in a women's rights forum hosted by Gabriela, a progressive women's organization in the country, which has also been red-tagged as a communist legal front. But Locsin, Soberano, and Gray vowed no red-tagging would stop them in fighting for women's abuses and rights using their platforms.

The NTF-ELCAC, in defending its P19 billion in pesos budget for 2021, brought to the Senate in November and

<sup>13</sup><https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2019/country-chapters/philippines#1ff4dc>

<sup>14</sup><https://www.cnn.ph/news/2020/9/1/karapatan-zara-alvarez-petition-supreme-court.html>

<sup>15</sup><https://bit.ly/3meWJM4>



December its tactic of red-tagging people to justify the approval of its proposed budget. The NTF-ELCAC even went on to red-tag more people and organizations during the Senate hearing, which analysts have dubbed as “trial by publicity.”

Cristina Palabay, secretary-general of Karapatan, said that red-tagging is an age-old tactic that can be traced to the anti-colonial movements during the Spanish and American colonial regimes, as well as the post-colonial/neo-colonial governments to date. “From then to this day, all those who exercise their right to free expression and association, express dissent, call, or work for social change, are being red-tagged to isolate individuals and groups from the communities and the public and delegitimize the just demands and calls for change,” she explained.” Red-tagging has been used as a tactic by numerous dictatorships in the US, European states, Latin America, Middle East, African nations, and the Asia Pacific. The more contemporary sites where this is being practiced are in the US, Honduras, Brazil, Guatemala, Colombia, Turkey, Hungary, Cambodia, and India.

Sonny Africa, executive director of IBON, said red-tagging seeks to stop the outpouring of leftist ideas which are the floodwater of social change that wash away the structures of power, targeting activists and their organizations including their supporters and just anyone who dares think differently and takes a stand. “Red-tagging wants to reduce radical ideas to a trickle of disembodied voices embellishing a fake democracy but threatening no one,” he noted.”

Progressive ideas will be tolerated if spoken from armchairs or as rhetoric in speeches and policymaking. But red flags are raised when these ideas are connected to each other and, especially when they are borne by the organized power of politicized Filipinos in a mass movement for change. Capitalism and wannabe authoritarians do not want that. They need a blind and docile public that does not question why the economy leaves them behind, nor that opposes unrelenting corruption and the abuse of power.<sup>16</sup>

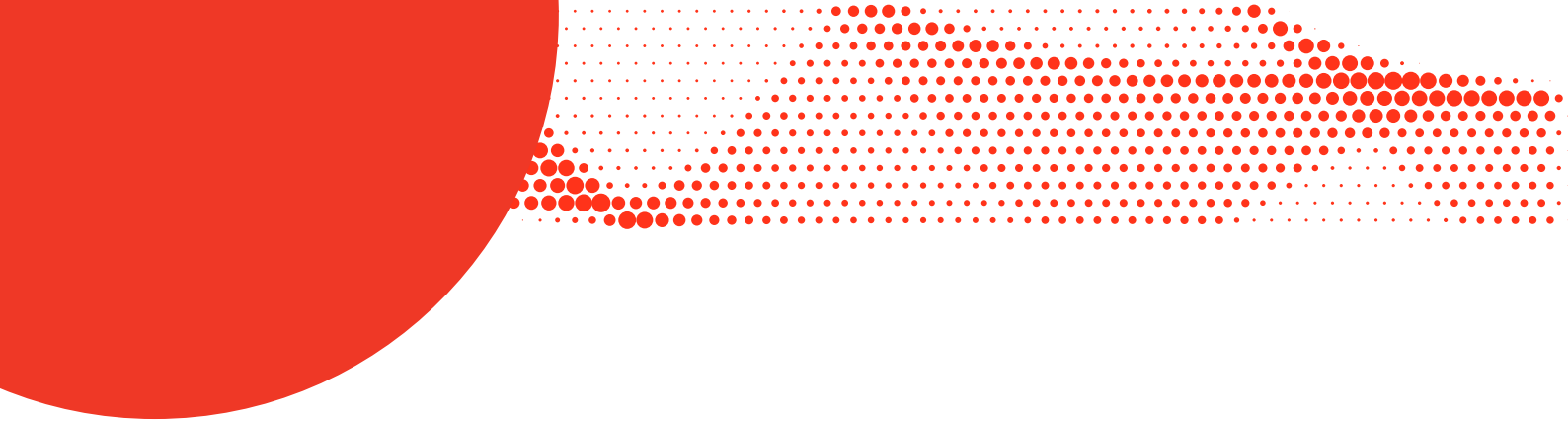
## **Decline of the Rule of Law**

Lawyers in the Philippines have also been targeted, no matter if they are engaged in private practice, activism, or working in government like judges and prosecutors. A CNN report citing data from the Integrated Bar of the Philippines (IBP) stated that as of July 24, 2021, 63 lawyers have been killed, a 500% increase compared to previous governments<sup>17</sup>. These killings took place while on their way to courts or inside courts, on their way home, or in their houses in broad daylight. Among the latest attacks on lawyers occurred in August and September 2021: Cebu human rights lawyer Rex Jesus Mario Fernandez together with his driver in Cebu City on August 26 and Public interest lawyer Juan Macababbad in South Cotabato on September 15.

The rising number of lawyers executed in the Philippines is seen as a sign of the decline of the rule of law, according to several human rights groups who reported the killings to the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) for investigation. However, in October 2020, the UNHRC released a “watered-down” resolution that shied away from initiating tougher international scrutiny against the Duterte government and even credited supposed efforts to abide by humanitarian laws to the DOJ.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>16</sup><https://www.ibon.org/red-red-whine/>

<sup>17</sup><https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2021/8/26/Cebu-City-lawyer-ambush.html>



The rule of law in the country has become despicable to a point where the disparity of the rich and poor has been staggering and glaring. The nation witnessed on live television and social media platforms the tragic story of a young activist mother, Reina Mae Nasino, and her baby River Emmanuel who died because of cruelty and inhumane treatment of the government - the presiding judge in Nasino's case, the police, the Bureau of Jail Management, and Penology (BJMP) personnel, and the Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG). Reina together with two other activists was arrested at the Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (New Patriotic Alliance) or Bayan office, a progressive organization, in Manila in November 2019. In July 2020, Reina gave birth to River who had low birth weight. A pediatrician instructed Reina to breastfeed baby River. The BJMP allowed it for six weeks, but forcibly separated Baby River and Reina after that period, citing rules of the jail facility supposedly not allowing mothers to breastfeed babies there. Reina's mother appealed to the Supreme Court (SC) and went there every day to ask the high court to release Reina on humanitarian grounds, so she could take care of Baby River. But the journey to save Baby River ended with her death.

Reina has been illegally arrested and charged with dubious crimes. She is supposed to remain innocent until proven guilty, but the government treated her like a convict. This stands in stark contrast to the case of former Senator Ramon "Bong" Revilla who was incarcerated for corruption. Revilla was granted furlough to see his dying father who also served the Senate. When former President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo was still in hospital arrest, the Court also granted her request to spend Christmas with her family. The Court also granted Zaldy Ampatuan, one of the main respondents in the heinous Ampatuan Massacre that killed 32 journalists in a single day, to attend the wedding of his daughter. Another stark contrast to Nasino's case is the tale of two former military officers who got posts in various government agencies after they appeared at the Senate, a glaring double standard as both figured in a P6.4 billion worth illegal drugs case<sup>19</sup>.

### **Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020: Targeting Dissent**

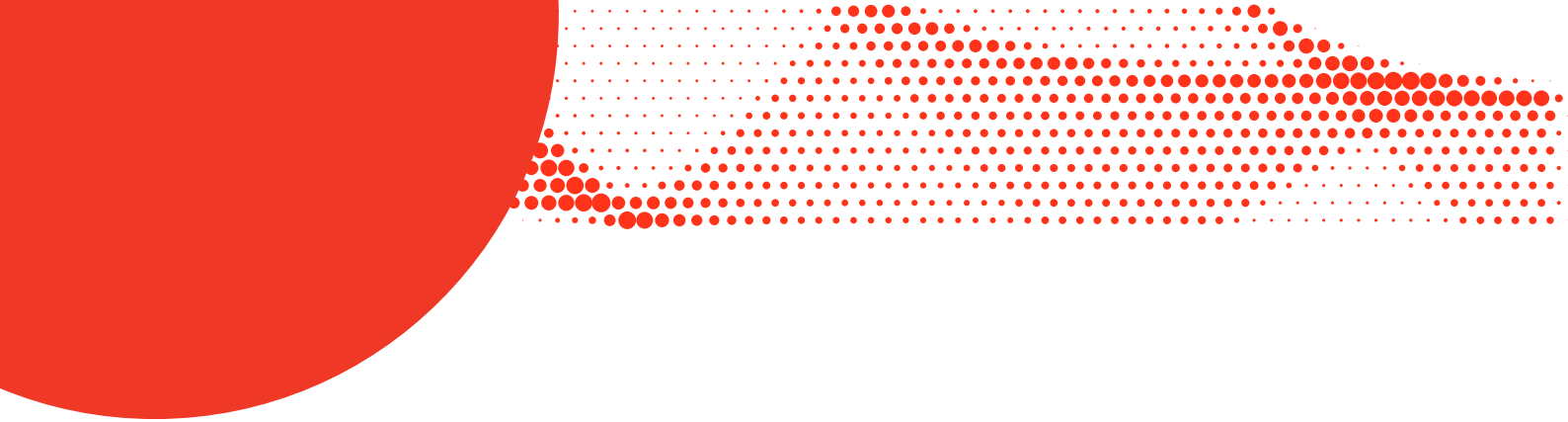
In October 2020, the Implementing Rules and Regulations (IRR) of the Anti-Terrorism Act (ATA) or RA 11479 has been released. The law supposedly empowers the government to go after terrorists. Apart from this law, Duterte also urged for the strengthening of the Anti-Money Laundering Act (AMLA) or RA 9160 to act in tandem with implementing ATA and ensure that individuals and organizations suspected to aid terrorist activities are caught. Before the ATA became law, progressives campaigned against it, arguing that the legislation gives the government blanket authority to tag practically anyone as a terrorist. The onset of Covid-19, however, stopped groups from launching massive protests against ATA's approval.

Despite this, 37 petitions were filed challenging Duterte's pet measure and urging the SC to issue a temporary restraining order (TRO), arguing that ATA engenders a climate of fear. The National Union of Peoples' Lawyers (NUPL) argued that ATA would result in a heavy crackdown on legitimate dissent and would subject people to intimidation, arrests, and jail time – if not death by vigilante groups akin to "tokhang" (knock and plead), which is the infamous method carried out in Duterte's deadly anti-narcotics campaign.

"If only for these, an expeditious and crucial (TRO) meanwhile can at least put a halt to such aggravations. Given the unprecedented number and diversity of the petitions contesting the law the respect and seriousness they deserve," the NUPL said in a statement.

<sup>18</sup><https://www.rappler.com/nation/what-is-being-done-rise-of-lawyer-killings-philippines>

<sup>19</sup><https://interaksyon.philstar.com/politics-issues/2018/10/29/136803/isidro-lapena-transfer-customs-tesda-drug-shipment/>



Different sectors including the religious, lawyers, indigenous peoples, the Moro, youth, women, teachers, urban poor, farmers, workers, and even former magistrates, among others filed these petitions posing a tough challenge to the Supreme Court to render the ATA void.<sup>20</sup>

The petitioners were wary of the law because the Duterte government's bloody human rights record, as pointed out by international entities and as portrayed in the daily news, point to a growing fear that the administration would weaponize the new law to the extreme to continue the spate of human rights violations. The ATA replaced the 2007 Human Security Act criticized as "one of the worst anti-terror laws crafted because many of its safeguards were never used or rarely used" like the payment of US \$10,000 by authorities who illegally detained suspects. Such provision is no longer stipulated in the new anti-terrorism law. How Duterte will use the law has worried analysts and rights advocates as countries led by populist leaders like him have used such laws to infringe on civil liberties and consolidate power.<sup>21</sup>

Aaron Sobel of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace noted that "the Philippines is extremely emblematic of that as Duterte's firebrand type of speech helped him get elected and for a long time he's been popular which he has used to erode civilian checks and balances."<sup>22</sup>

Lawyer Neri Colmenares of NUPL, one of the petitioners who asked the Supreme Court to issue a TRO against the ATA, warned of the dangers the new law possessed, as "it chills freedom of expression. It chills free speech. It chills freedom of the press. It chills freedom of association."<sup>23</sup>

The NUPL cited the case of four indigenous peoples belonging to the Aeta tribe, two of whom faced charges under Section 4(a) of ATA that "punishes a person who engages in acts intended to cause death or serious bodily injury to any person or endangers a person's life" which the lawyers called 'a test case.' The two also faced charges of illegal possession of firearms and explosives. The lawyers believed the two Aetas are being charged in retaliation for a soldier killed in August 2020. The NUPL said the Aetas underwent torture and were even fed with human feces. An encounter with the military and the NPA rebels forced the Aetas to evacuate which led to the arrest of the four.<sup>24</sup>

Espina of NUJP also stated the dangers the new law posed against the media, saying, "it's all too real, particularly with the provision that created the new offense of inciting to commit terrorism, which makes practically everything we say or do open to interpretation as incitement. The new rules on surveillance as well as on arrest without warrants and detention are also scary." Espina explained that the law essentially does away with many of the constitutionally guaranteed rights and freedoms, foremost of which is due process. "Which is why Lt. Gen. Parlade has no qualms about proclaiming that the ATA will make it easier for them to go after people and organizations they otherwise could not prosecute for lack of evidence."

## A Failed Covid-19 Approach

For the progressives, the government has failed in three aspects in handling its Covid-19 response. Dr. Gene Nis-

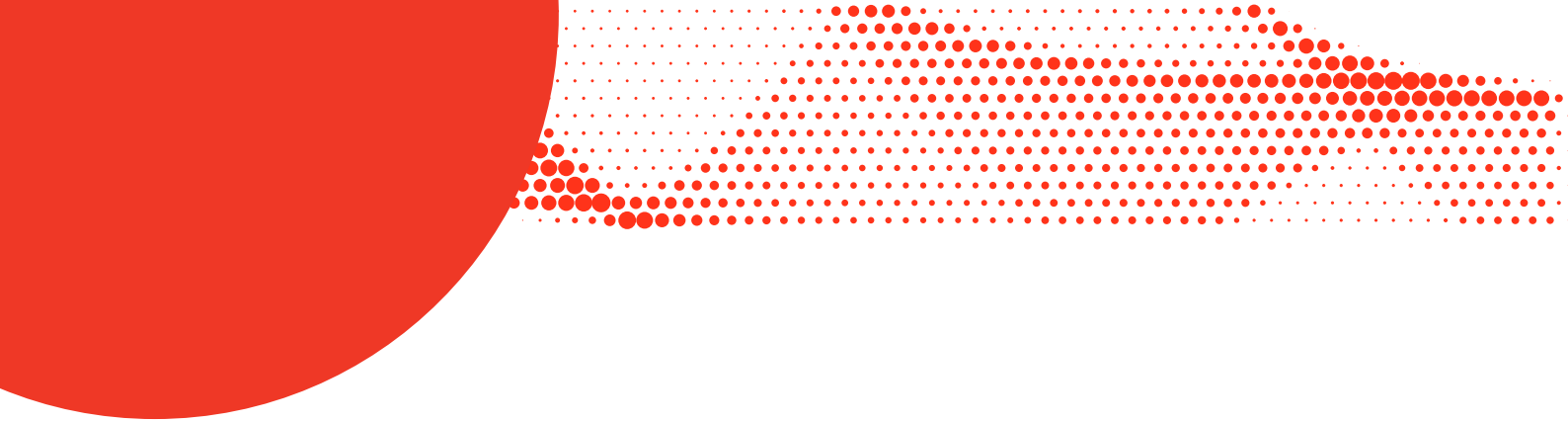
<sup>20</sup><https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/supreme-court-pandemic-performance-track-record>

<sup>21</sup><https://www.npr.org/2020/07/21/893019057/why-rights-groups-worry-about-the-philippines-new-anti-terrorism-law>

<sup>22</sup><https://www.npr.org/2020/07/21/893019057/why-rights-groups-worry-about-the-philippines-new-anti-terrorism-law>

<sup>23</sup><https://www.npr.org/2020/07/21/893019057/why-rights-groups-worry-about-the-philippines-new-anti-terrorism-law>

<sup>24</sup><https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1362348/anti-terror-laws-first-hit-two-aetas-from-zambales-group>



peros, the vice-chief of the Community Oriented Medical Education Unit of the College of Medicine of the University of the Philippines, sums it up in three points: leadership, approach and content, and implementation factors. Dr. Nisperos said leaving the pandemic response in the hands of a cabal of former military and police generals while health and medical personnel were relegated as consultants and advisers reflected the easing out of medical, health, or scientific data or evidence in the primary considerations in crafting the pandemic response policies.

Dr. Nisperos criticized the government's approach, as it was seemingly based on the flawed premise that the pandemic is a problem of discipline or the lack of it. "Taking from this flawed belief, the entire discourse regarding Covid-19 was boxed into the discipline narrative and made into the dominant narrative that the pandemic is spreading because of the people who lacked discipline thus violating quarantine restrictions. The approach is punitive, he says, as these people are rounded up and jailed while others were shot to death," Dr. Nisperos said. "There is a total disregard for human rights and the logical conclusion to the discipline narrative is the erosion of rights and freedoms in the name of health and safety."

In implementing the militarized government response to the pandemic, health personnel were sidelined in being the main implementers and were replaced by the police and military, a move consistent with the discipline narrative. With the military and police having a penchant for enforcing discipline and simply obeying commands, the entire pandemic response was conducted with little consultation with the health sector and with even less regard for the rights and welfare of the populace. "Many citizens were treated as criminals rather than as patients. Some were arrested. Others were put in cages. Members of an urban poor community who went out en masse because of hunger in the hope of getting food from a food distribution activity were hauled to jail and charged with criminal acts," Dr. Nisperos noted.

In a statement, Danilo Ramos, Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP) chairperson, said the incompetence of the government has resulted in killing and worsening the lives of the people more than curbing the surge of the virus. Ramos called on the government to account for the death of Michelle Silvertino, a 33-year-old house helper who died after days of taking refuge under a footbridge in Manila while waiting for transport that could bring her back to her family in Bicol. Ramos said that the government's failure to achieve the targeted mass testing, help bring back lost jobs and livelihood, and release the promised cash aid are some of the mounting reasons that fuel people Covid-19 to resist the militarist approach to Covid-19.<sup>25</sup>

The militarist approach can be gleaned even in simple incidents, such as the time when Covid-19 patients overwhelmed the second biggest urban center in the Visayas Islands, particularly in Cebu City, the national government sent the environment and natural resources (DENR) secretary who is a former military general and not anyone from the health department.<sup>26</sup>

Dr. Nisperos said that as capitalism moves from one crisis to another consolidating control becomes more imperative for the ruling clique, thus, reliance on state security forces becomes more acute. "The pandemic allowed Duterte to place loyal military forces in key positions regardless of their capacity to the Covid-19 response with loyalty as the primary consideration."

<sup>25</sup><https://peasantmovementph.com/2020/06/12/farmers-to-govt-stop-using-pandemic-as-an-excuse-to-curtail-peoples-freedoms/>

<sup>26</sup><https://interaksyon.philstar.com/politics-issues/2020/06/23/171279/why-cimatu-appointment-as-cebu-citys-covid-19-response-chief-was-questioned-online/>





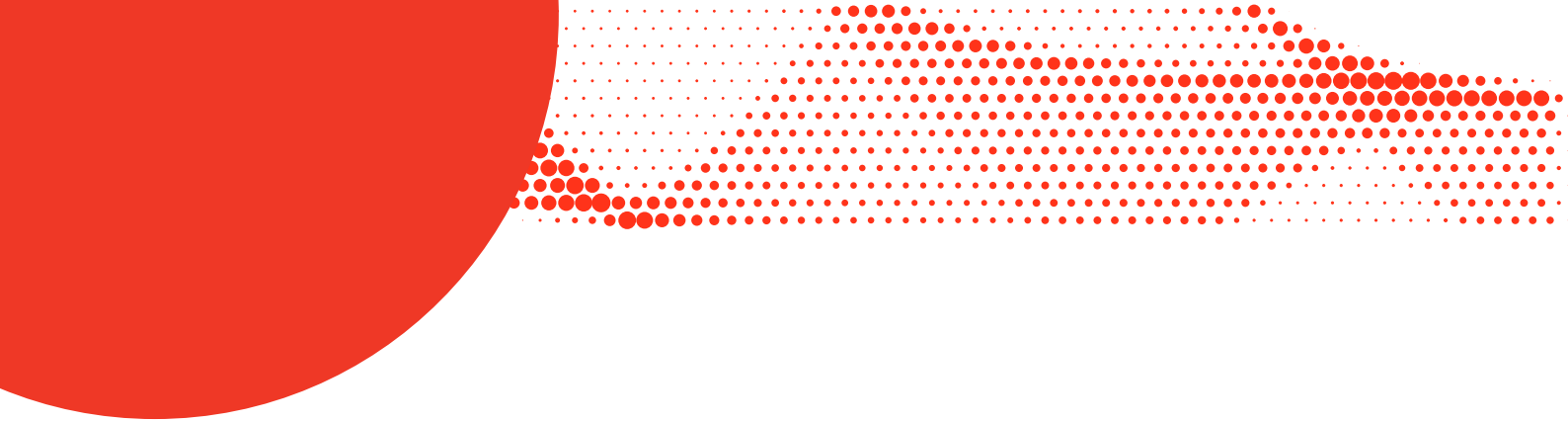
## Progressives' Resistance: Defying Oppression

In sum, Filipinos were not only facing a raging viral pandemic, but also an epidemic of human rights abuses. This double contagion is further compounded with the situation where millions battle every day for food to ease hunger made worst by the Covid-19 situation. The pandemic has been the government's best justification to restrict movements of dissent. But it did not deter the progressives to resist. They still were able to mount street protests. Protest mobilizations were not only confined online, but were creatively done at homes, and virtually anywhere and everywhere health protocols permit. The online platform has been maximized to expand educational sessions through webinars that discussed issues downplayed by the State to prevent any attempts to oust Duterte – a growing call and unifying cause of various groups that compel them to consolidate their forces and resist his tyranny. Various campaigns, local and global, have been launched to fight against oppression in the land.

In the health sector, the campaigns fall into two main areas: information and service. Dr. Nisperos believed that information is vital as Covid-19 is a new disease and much is still being learned about it and information is the best way to combat the "infodemic," and the spread of wrong or false information being peddled by the Duterte administration that causes harm to the public, as they spin their narrative based on lies and false information. To counter the infodemic, groups like the Second Opinion PH, Cure COVID, and the Coalition for People's Right to Health (CPRH) from the health sector have been spearheading regular video discussions and webinars to expose and condemn the government's failed pandemic response and demand better services. The pandemic brought a myriad of changes in the way services are provided and accessed, and the people need guidance to navigate through the healthcare system, Dr. Nisperos said, explaining that many government hospitals have strict protocols for patients. "Many, including activists, were initially confused about the quarantine rules, like when and how long," he said adding that "as changes in protocols were frequent during the early part of the pandemic such as sudden non-acceptance of non-Covid patients in Covid-19 referral centers or limiting their consults, all of these needed to be explained to the people."

Moreover, Dr. Nisperos noted that the sudden dearth of places where non-Covid patients can seek health services needed to be addressed. Patients, especially the poor, needed to consult health experts. For a while, groups like CPRH and the Council for Health and Development (CHD) filled this gap. But the growing number of people who needed access to health services compelled the health sector to find other solutions, such as training volunteer health personnel and tapping community health centers.

One of the most affected by this pandemic and the government's militarist approach are the indigenous peoples (IPs) in the country. In Mindanao, they are called Lumad. They inhabit the lands in the mountains where their ancestral domains are located, and where the vast resources of the country are situated. For centuries, the Lumad have protected their communities against the exploitation of their resources from wanton logging, mining, and plantations. They have been on the frontline in defending their ancestral lands from being desecrated because of the greed of multinational companies and the government working together to rake in huge profits from the resources that abound in these ancestral lands. Yet, basic services from the government do not easily reach them. Churches, non-government organizations, and peoples' organizations have been helping the Lumad through establishing schools, providing capacity-building to improve their methods of farming and enhance their traditional knowledge of medicine. The Lumad embrace a simple way of life, yet displacement hounded them because of the conflict between the government troops and the communist rebels. The military has targeted them as supporters or members of the NPA.



Since 2019, Lumad children have sought refuge in the urban areas – Davao City, Cebu City, and Metro Manila, to continue their studies despite the ongoing conflicts in their home communities. They fled after their schools were destroyed by paramilitary forces. Seeking refuge amid the pandemic, the Lumad children continue with their studies in these shelters with volunteers taking turns in teaching them. They have been compelled to bring their voices in the capital because they were slowly being slaughtered in their communities, marked as collateral damage under the intense counterinsurgency measures of the government. These children have braved the uncertainties of this pandemic, with their dreams of going back to their communities remaining intact. They are taking part in their campaigns in documentaries made for them, sustained their needs while in shelters, and continued despite the odds, driven by their desire to go back home without the threats, harassment, and executions that terrorized them.

However, some of the Lumad children who took refuge in Cebu City were taken from their shelter by force in February 2021 while the volunteer teachers, some of them Lumad, were arrested. In May 2021, these volunteer teachers were released after charges filed against them were dismissed.<sup>27</sup> While there are still others who remain being sheltered at the University of the Philippines in Diliman.

Palabay of Karapatan said there are formal and informal alliances growing to express dissent against Duterte. One is the Movement Against Tyranny (MAT) and the alliance of groups and individuals who filed the 37 petitions against the anti-terror law. “I believe that an organic mass outrage is possible in ousting Duterte, considering the massive impacts on the people’s economic and socio-cultural rights during the pandemic as well as the worsening human rights situation in the country,” Palabay stressed.

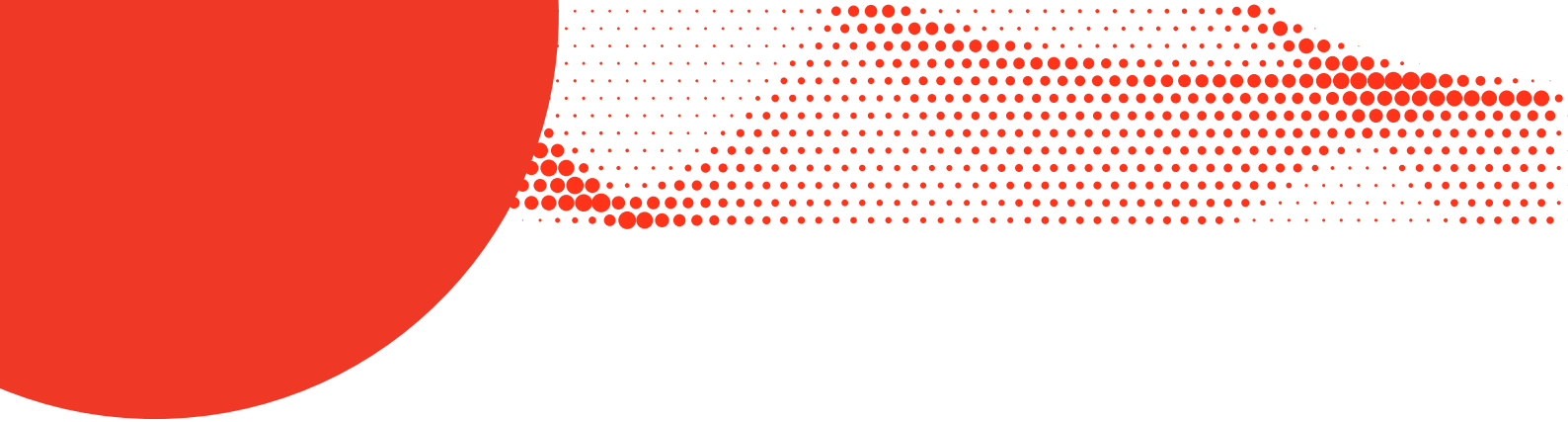
The Movement Against Tyranny (MAT) alliance was formed in August 2017, days after a 17-year-old died in an anti-illegal drugs operation, the only case where the policemen involved in the “tokhang” operation were convicted. This alliance, now spreading nationwide, is comprised of various sectors, progressive organizations, church leaders, lawyers, journalists, and political figures, all of whom organically joined together and snowballed into campaigning against Duterte’s tyrannical leadership. The alliance condemned the Duterte administration for terminating peace negotiations aimed at ending the armed conflict with the Bangsamoro and communist insurgents, dismissing human rights violations, undermining democratic institutions, lashing out at and attacking the media for critical reports, and placing the island of Mindanao under Martial law for about two years.<sup>28</sup>

One of the major components of the broader MAT alliance is the Youth Act Now Against Tyranny (YANAT), which is composed of student councils, student publications, national youth and student organizations, community-based youth, young professionals, artists, and prominent youth leaders and personalities advocating to end the killings, tyranny and fascist attacks against Filipinos.

On May 1, 2020, Filipino workers headed by Kilusang Mayo Uno (KMU), or the May 1 Labor Movement held protests on the streets and online, as the world commemorated the Labor Day global action in response to the unwarranted pandemic responses that put the vulnerable in the most appalling conditions – job losses, hunger, homelessness, lockdown violations, and Covid-19 deaths. The workers demanded guaranteed income and livelihood even under quarantine, mass testing and treatment for all, cash aid for working people, social protection for farmers and workers, and respect for democratic and human rights. Those who could not join the public protests were encouraged to post on their social media using the hashtag #PublicHealthNotProfit.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>27</sup><https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/timeline-plaint-lumad-evacuees-bakwit-cebu>

<sup>28</sup><https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/926201/president-duterte-drug-killings-movement-against-tyranny-martial-law#ixzz6fDyU0ynK>



On June 12, 2020, progressive groups held the Grand Mañanita Freedom Day protest to observe the 122nd Philippine Independence Day. They called for re-channeling of public funds toward public health and job creation instead of bailing out corporations, scrapping of ATA, equal implementation of the law, and the intensification of medical and scientific efforts to contain and mitigate the spread of Covid-19. The protest was a spoof of the birthday celebration of the then PNP chief which drew flak, as the said police chief hosted a party despite the prohibition of mass gatherings during the pandemic.<sup>30</sup>

The State of the Nation Address (SONA) of Duterte in July 2020 was also met with street and online protests dubbed as “SONAgkaisa.” This coalition started on July 17 which gathered representatives of multisectoral, progressive groups, former government officials, and other public figures who were known to have political differences. This protest was live-streamed on Facebook and dominated the online space through hashtags #SONA2020 and #SONAgKAISA, providing a united platform where grievances against the government were aired. The protest called for the ramping up of Covid-19 response through implementing science-based solutions, the scrapping of the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020, proper distribution of cash aid to workers who lost their jobs during the lockdown, bringing ABS-CBN back on the air, ending the spate of killings and red-tagging, protecting the rights of Filipino fishermen in the islands of West Philippine Sea, and ousting Duterte in office.<sup>31</sup>

On November 30, 2020, a broad alliance of Philippine trade unions affiliated with various global union federations held a protest to hold Duterte to account for his criminal negligence in handling the pandemic, disasters, and economic crisis. As part of the Global Day of Action for trade unions and human rights in the Philippines, the protest highlighted the worsening trade unions and human rights repression in the country. In an online seminar on November 23, workers shared how the ATA endangers people’s lives, liberty, and safety.

In Congress, the Makabayan bloc, according to Representative Carlos Zarate of Bayan Muna Partylist, campaigned for free mass testing for frontline workers and vulnerable sectors, calls which at the onset the government ignored but with the continued engagement and push from the grassroots and social movements compelled Covid-19 overseers to put mass testing at the center of the government’s pandemic interventions. As the country is mainly agricultural, the Makabayan bloc also continually pressed on prioritizing agriculture and food sovereignty and pushing for pro-people Covid-19 interventions in the 2021 national budget. Zarate noted that “the pandemic, while placing some limitations on our actions, has opened up some creative ways in galvanizing people to learn, organize, and mobilize into action to make government and officials accountable.”

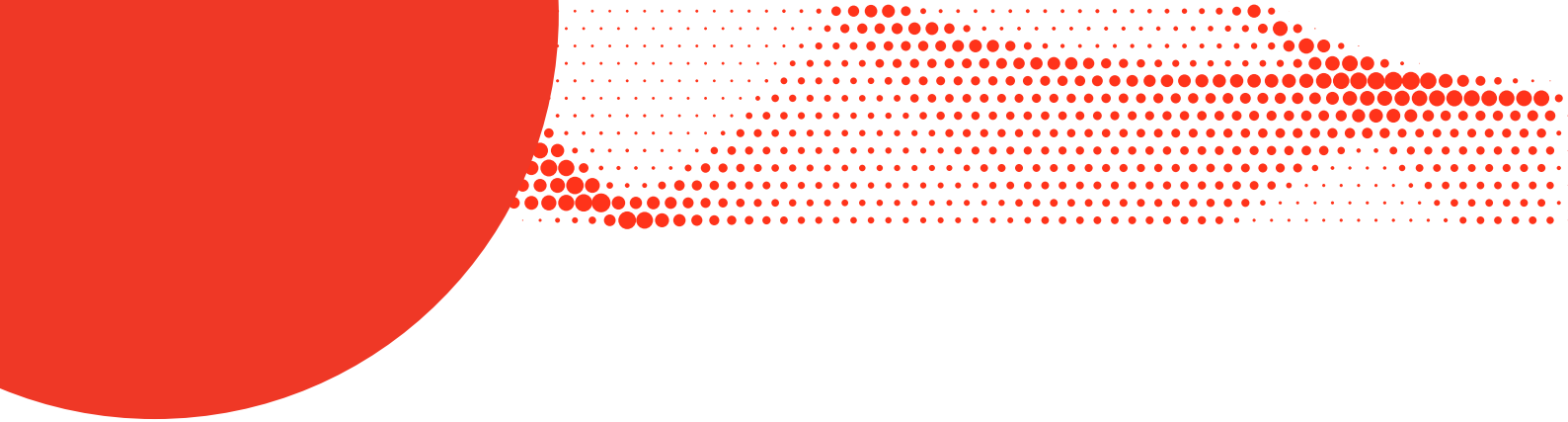
For the NUJP, the best way for media to resist the relentless attacks is to continue the truth narrative as they see it. The group noted that there is also an urgent need for journalists to close ranks and speak with one voice against repression. And most of all, NUJP stressed that the media community must reconnect with their audiences – the people.

Dr. Nisperos considered it vital to continue exposing and denouncing the oppressive and fascist nature of the Duterte regime as many still cling to their blind loyalties despite being disillusioned by the gross failure of the government in responding to the pandemic.

<sup>29</sup><https://mb.com.ph/2020/05/01/lightning-rallies-social-media-events-mark-workers-observance-of-labor-day/>

<sup>30</sup><https://mb.com.ph/2020/06/12/grand-mananita-freedom-day-protest-at-up/>

<sup>31</sup><https://interaksyon.philstar.com/politics-issues/2020/07/27/173723/how-the-massive-sonagkaisa-protest-vs-duterte-govt-was-organized/>



“Progressives can also present themselves as voices of reason and possible leaders, both online and in real life. Protests continue on both fronts. They can work with various groups to create a broad alliance against the ruling regime. The biggest problem in the country now is the ruling clique. Any pandemic response will fail for as long as this group is at the helm of government. People know this. What they need to see is a broad social movement that represents their aspirations and interest, and one that they can join.”

Palabay of Karapatan believed that harnessing the public’s knowledge and demanding transparency and accountability is key for the progressives to hold the government accountable for its actions, especially in using public funds. She noted that while more in-depth research and work on how these public funds were potentially misused, there is already compelling evidence to show how public budget mismanagement gravely impacts poor communities especially in the time of the pandemic.

“The only way forward for progressives during the pandemic is to strengthen the struggle and solidarity of domestic and international movements to insist that this current capitalist system that exploits and oppresses peoples is not the way to go and that a new system must be birthed to better respond to the root causes of the crisis.”

### **Transforming Global Crisis to Global Solidarity**

Despite the layered challenges, Filipino progressives have continued to transform the pandemic crisis into a pathway for global solidarity. International solidarity is inevitable, and the only way forward post-pandemic is a unified global action that knows no border.

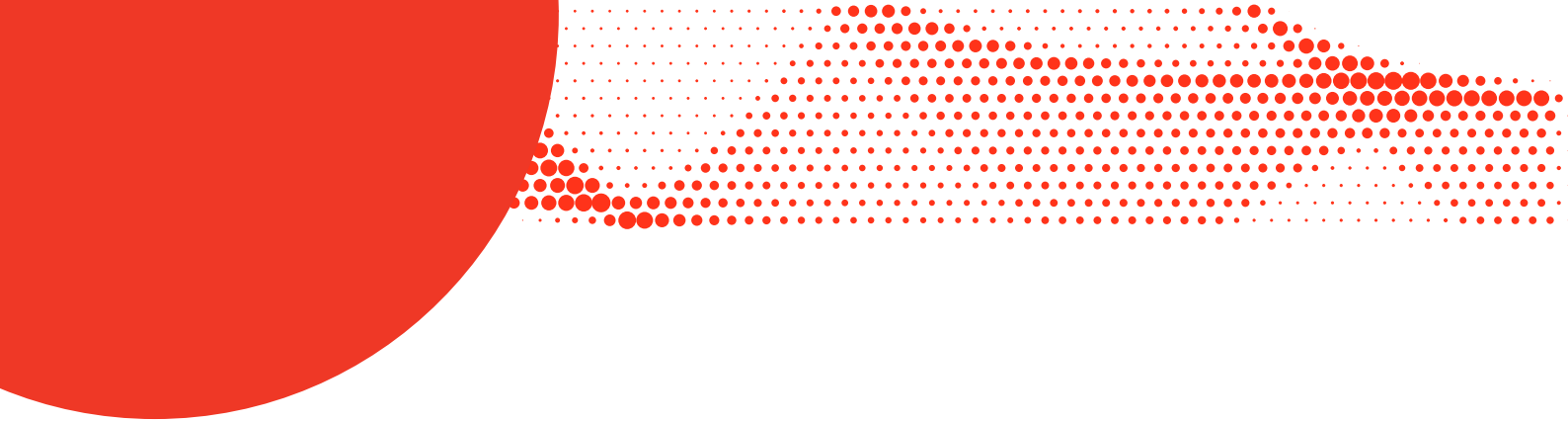
Strategic campaigns have flourished from spontaneous defiance of one issue to another that various progressive groups initiated to push for the Philippine government to impose a genuine Covid-19 response that is primarily science-based, people-centered, and feasible economic solutions without resorting to foreign loans.

The Filipinos who have been aiming for genuine reforms to attain economic emancipation and social cohesion toward a true Filipino identity were never decimated despite the draconian measures that suppressed the continuing resistance for more than a century from the clutches of imperialist powers, powers that still try to get hold of their hegemonic control over former colonies or re-establishing stronger alliances against one another to advance economic dominion at the expense of exploiting resources and garnering immense markets for trading.

In the four years of Duterte’s presidency, his populist stance has now been unmasked. Duterte has never been genuine in his promise to dismantle the capitalist reign of the ruling elite and the oligarchs he loathed. What he did was simply replace the reigning families with his cronies and allies. They are the new faces of an old and decrepit bureaucratic and corrupt capitalist system

The people’s growing restiveness amid the pandemic has been slowly but repeatedly ignited by the glowing embers of inequality and injustice and has now sparked to become a spewing organic mass outrage fueled by the desire to stop the abuses and bring back respect for human rights and basic civil liberties which have all been trampled upon by the Duterte military-backed authoritarianism.

For the NUJP, the greatest challenge for progressives is in continuously consolidating and strengthening their



ranks at home because, like any other country, Filipinos have always been politically divided. However, the present situation offered a chance for united action against a common enemy, as government abuses become more blatant and appalling.

Meanwhile, the Filipinos in the US have formed the Malaya (Filipino for “free”) Movement, an alliance that advocates against the spate of killings and Duterte’s iron fist rule. This broad alliance began forming just before its first US-wide protest on September 21, 2017. While it sought to broaden the opposition from the US to fascism, it also widened US-based support for freedom and democracy in the Philippines. Like their counterparts in the Philippines, Malaya called for ending Duterte’s war on drugs and attacks on activists and their organizations resulting in killings; the scrapping of Executive Order (EO) 70 and Memorandum Order (MO) 32 – regulations that gave a free pass for state forces to militarize communities; stopping the abuse of executive power and curtailment of democratic rights and civil liberties; ending political dynasties and corruption; standing for democracy; pursuing political, economic, and social reforms for Filipinos; promoting genuine sustainable development in the Philippines; and defending Philippine sovereignty against any foreign intrusion or domination.<sup>32</sup>

In April 2019, the Malaya Movement held its historic National Summit for Human Rights and Democracy in the Philippines. Hundreds of individuals and organizations from different sectors across the US gathered in Washington D.C. to unify their struggle against the rising dictatorship in the Philippines under Duterte, who was then fresh from unleashing a slew of anti-people policies such as the TRAIN Law that resulted in a 6.4 percent inflation rate – the highest in the decade, attacks on press freedom, bloody anti-narcotics operations that killed thousands, the continuing crackdown on dissent, executions of activists, priests, farmers, indigenous peoples, lawyers, judges, and the extended Martial Law on Mindanao island.<sup>33</sup>

In another part of the globe, the International Coalition of Human Rights in the Philippines (ICHRP) based in the Netherlands, formerly the International Coordinating Committee for Human Rights in the Philippines (ICCHR), also reflected the campaigns for justice, peace, and human rights. ICHR is a global network of organizations concerned with the human rights situation in the Philippines, committed to campaign for just and lasting peace in the country, and aimed at providing information about the grave human rights condition in the Philippines, while at the same time calling for international solidarity for the plight of the thousands of victims in their quest for justice. Its campaigns against violations of civil and political rights, the furtherance of people’s economic, social, and cultural rights, resistance to foreign intervention and militarism by the US in the Philippines, and support on peace negotiations have been continuing since 2013.<sup>34</sup>

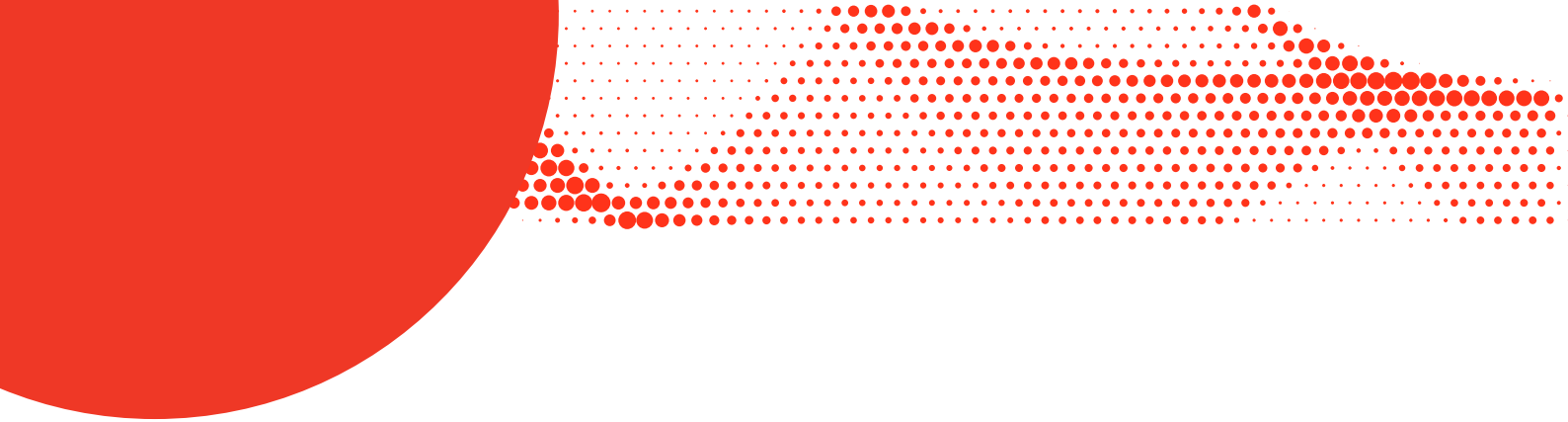
The ICHR has expanded to other countries like Canada, South Korea, Asia Pacific, and Belgium. Annually, to commemorate the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights, the ICHR mobilizes global solidarity with various activities. From December 1 until December 10, the ICHR-Canada held 10 days of solidarity with the Philippines through campaigns, most recent of which include the campaigning for the Parliamentary Petition Signing to Hold Canadian Mining Accountable, sharing information, film screenings, and online events. It has been in solidarity with the calls for justice amid the attacks on Negros Island and has joined the launch of the “Defend Negros Island” on November 5, 2020.

The ICHR also mobilized the following activities: #She Defends: Teatime with Women Human Rights Defenders

<sup>32</sup><https://www.malayamovement.com/about-malaya>

<sup>33</sup><https://www.malayamovement.com/about-malaya>

<sup>34</sup><https://ichrp.net/about/>



in the Philippines last November 29; a protest action for global solidarity for jobs, rights, safety, and accountability in the Philippines held in Australia organized in partnership with the Philippine Australian Union Link (PAUL) and the International Trade Union Confederation (ITUC) on November 30; the Post-humous Human Rights Award for Zara Alvarez by the National Council of Churches in Korea (NCCCK) on December 3; Solidarity Forum on Human Rights Situation in the Philippines in Hong Kong; Online forum on Defending Human Rights: Australia-Philippines by the Philippine Australia Solidarity Action; Peoples' Prayer for Justice, Human Rights, and Peace by the Promotion of People's Response-Hong Kong/Macau; Picket/Protest Action/Press Conference by Hong Kong Campaign for the Advancement of Human Rights and Peace in the Philippines; and Picket and Protest Action in the Philippine Embassy in South Korea by ICHRP Korea and KASAMMA KO.

As part of "Only Fighters Win," Quinoa and Viva Salud also hosted an online event dubbed "Resisting is not a Crime: Defending Human Rights in the Philippines" on December 2 with Yesha Ramos, widow of the murdered lawyer Benjamin Ramos in Kabankalan, Negros Occidental, who spoke on behalf of ICHRP.

The civil society groups also launched an independent international investigation dubbed #InvestigatePH to probe the human rights situation in the country on December 17, 2020. #InvestigatePH aimed to persuade the UN and the international community to do more about the worsening human rights situation in the Philippines and provide new data to update the report of the High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet which was released on June 30, 2020. During the online event on "The World Wants to Investigate PH" former Australian senator Lee Rhiannon said the attacks on the human rights of the Filipinos have escalated since she visited the Philippines in 2019, citing the jailing of government critics, planting of false evidence, and the displacement of the Lumad in Mindanao. She explained that these rights violations in the Philippines amount to crimes against humanity and must be investigated, and the perpetrators are held accountable, subtly implying her support to a possible official probe by the International Criminal Court (ICC).<sup>35</sup> Perhaps, one of the most successful outcomes of international solidarity is when the ICC has finally formally authorized an investigation into the crimes against humanity following campaigns by local and international civil society groups.<sup>36</sup> From Palestine to Germany, the #StopTheKillingsPH gained support from various international communities<sup>37</sup>.

The unity in the global solidarity movement was intensified with the presence of Filipino progressive groups, non-government organizations, and civil society in the different parts of the world connecting with other international grassroots initiatives. Wherever there are Filipinos, most Philippine consulates and embassies would always be frequented by protest mobilizations.

## Conclusion

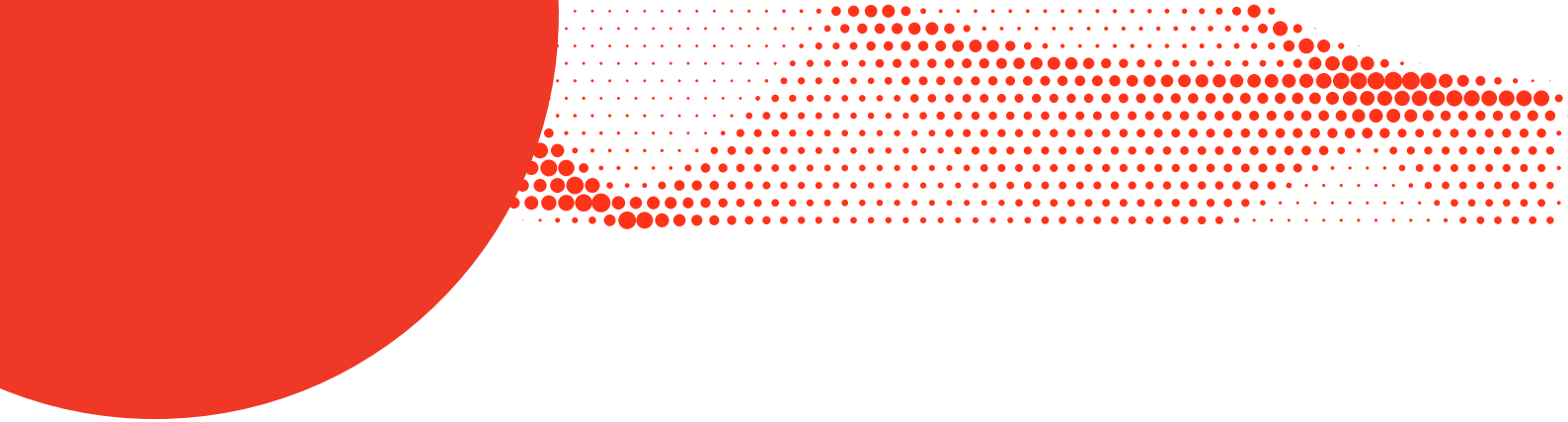
Regardless of whether the Philippine government plans to continue handling the pandemic sans humanity and compassion, what remains in the foreground is the fact that capitalism in crisis is almost certain and that the world's imperialists are racing to regain their territories while they re-divide the world to establish their economic and defense hegemony.

Such is seen in the race to creating Covid-19 vaccines. Getting vaccines saves lives, but whose lives would it be? Who would get it first? Certainly, it will secure the lives of the rich people in imperialist countries while other

<sup>35</sup><https://onenews.ph/investigateph-groups-launch-probe-press-international-community-to-do-more-about-human-rights-situation-in-phl>

<sup>36</sup><https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/15/philippines-icc-agrees-to-probe-dutertes-war-on-drugs>

<sup>37</sup><https://samidoun.net/2020/09/samidoun-supports-global-day-of-action-to-stopthekillingsph/>



nations especially those in the margins like the Philippines will have to wait in line for the surplus yet expensive vaccines while the poor populations in imperialist countries suffer the same fate. Multibillion dollars have been at stake since day one of researching for Covid-19 vaccines. As it gives hope and promises to control the spread of the virus, it does not come free. Nations have been allocating billions to procure this vaccine from multinational and transnational pharmaceuticals. The narrative we see right now is the race on which imperialist nation gets it done first; which nations can afford it; and which countries could barely get their people inoculated.

For Dr. Nisperos, the vaccine remains uncertain and a distant option, adding that it is “uncertain because much research is still going on and the basis for vaccination, the conferment of immunity by exposure to the virus, still has not been fully established yet. Worse, the virus may still mutate further, further rendering vaccines irrelevant.” The pandemic exposed the injustices wrought by a global economic order hinged on seeking profit, and in turn is leading to the turning point of creating systems, structures, and policies that offer protection to the marginalized and allow everyone to live with dignity.<sup>38</sup>

Various lessons can be drawn out of this pandemic. For one, resistance in the domestic front must be strengthened. The Duterte administration has weaponized all available avenues to quell dissent, even creating repressive laws such as the new ATA which can be used to suppress fundamental rights enshrined in the 1987 Constitution. To fortify domestic resistance, intensifying global solidarity without letup using all fronts – be it online or through physical protests – to defy Duterte’s militarist approach is another lesson the progressive movement must hold on to, and continue to strengthen through global solidarity.

The pandemic unmasked how unfit the capitalists are in responding to the impact of Covid-19 worldwide, and it also exposed Duterte’s incompetence in handling the impact of Covid-19 to the Filipinos, especially the vulnerable.

With the surging resistance movement, the Philippine government has become watchful in its decision-making. It has learned to heed advice from the health experts because that is the only option left for them to hold at bay raging responses from his previous decisions that worsened the impact of Covid-19. The findings of new Covid-19 variants have compelled Duterte to ban travels from the UK, Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia, and other countries where these variants have already spread.

Today’s resistance in the Philippines sees more women, indigenous peoples, and the LGBTQIA+ communities marching and raising their voices in protest. They are holding Duterte to account for the thousands killed in his brutal drug war, calling for justice for all the social and rights defenders, and the activists who were executed after they were red-tagged, and calling for accountability amid the rising death toll wrought by the pandemic and exacerbated by the Duterte administration’s sheer negligence.

The progressives’ mounting resistance signifies that no pandemic or the relentless spate of killings can silence the fortitude of the oppressed. Despite the odds, Filipinos continue to join hands with all the oppressed peoples in the world toward building strong solidarity based on equality, justice, and peace.

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<sup>38</sup><https://www.tni.org/en/article/coronavirus-the-need-for-a-progressive-internationalist-response>

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