

UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES  
CENTER FOR INTEGRATIVE AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES  
PROGRAM ON ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT



PUBLIC POLICY MONOGRAPH SERIES 2022-03

# Southeast Asian Peoples in Pandemic Times

## Challenges and Responses

COVID-19 Grassroots Report Volume 2

### EDITORS

Eduardo C. Tadem ▪ Benjamin B. Velasco  
Ananeza P. Aban ▪ Rafael Vicente V. Dimalanta  
Jose Monfred C. Sy ▪ Micah Hanah S. Orlino  
Ryan Joseph C. Martinez ▪ Honey B. Tabiola





UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES  
CENTER FOR INTEGRATIVE AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES  
PROGRAM ON ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT

**11.11.11**

VECHT MEE TEGEN ONRECHT

PUBLIC POLICY MONOGRAPH SERIES 2022-03

# Southeast Asian Peoples in Pandemic Times

## Challenges and Responses

COVID-19 Grassroots Report Volume 2

### EDITORS

Eduardo C. Tadem ▪ Benjamin B. Velasco  
Ananeza P. Aban ▪ Rafael Vicente V. Dimalanta  
Jose Monfred C. Sy ▪ Micah Hanah S. Orlino  
Ryan Joseph C. Martinez ▪ Honey B. Tabiola

The **UP CIDS PUBLIC POLICY MONOGRAPH SERIES**  
is published by the  
UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES  
CENTER FOR INTEGRATIVE AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES  
Lower Ground Floor, Ang Bahay ng Alumni  
Magsaysay Avenue, University of the Philippines  
Diliman, Quezon City 1101  
Telephone: 8981-8500 loc. 4266 to 4268 / 8426-0955  
E-mail: [cids@up.edu.ph](mailto:cids@up.edu.ph) / [cidspublications@up.edu.ph](mailto:cidspublications@up.edu.ph)  
Website: [cids.up.edu.ph](http://cids.up.edu.ph)

Copyright 2022 by UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies

The Program for Alternative Development acknowledges the support of the  
11.11.11 Coalition of the Flemish North-South Movement in the preparation of this  
report.

The views and opinions expressed in this monograph are those of the author/s and  
neither reflect nor represent those of the University of the Philippines or the  
UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies. No copies can be made in part or  
in whole without prior written permission from the authors/editors and the publisher.

ISSN 2719-0722 (print)  
ISSN 2719-0730 (online)

Cover image: UP CIDS Program on Alternative Development



# Contents

<b>Introduction: Southeast Asian Societies into the Third Year of the Pandemic</b>	<b>1</b>
ASEAN Responses	3
Southeast Asian COVID-19 Politics	6
Economic Outlook for Southeast Asia	8
Weak Social Protection	11
Southeast Asian Peoples' Responses	12
References	14
<b>Country Reports</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Cambodia</b>	
Worker's Information Center (WIC)	17
Voice Cambodia	19
Reference	20
<b>Northeast India</b>	
All Loktak Lake Areas Fishers' Union Manipur (ALLAFUM)	21
<i>External actions and community initiatives</i>	22
References	25

## Indonesia

Konfederasi Pergerakan Rakyat Indonesia (KPRI)	26
<i>Sustaining the organizing work towards a post-COVID-19 society</i>	28
Serikat Petani Pasundan (SPP)	28
<i>Amplifying local wisdom through agrarian barns</i>	30
<i>and posko solidaritas (solidarity place)</i>	
<i>Sustaining the peasant organizing work</i>	31
Konsorsium Pembaruan Agraria (KPA)	32
Jaringan Relawan Kemanusiaan (JRK)	33
<i>The Urban Poor of Jakarta</i>	34
<i>Patungan Rakyat (People's Joint Venture, Citizens Help Citizens)</i>	34
References	37

## Laos

Participatory Development Knowledge Agency (PAKA)	38
<i>The challenges of liberatory education amidst the</i>	38
<i>COVID-19 pandemic</i>	
<i>Online and remote learning during the pandemic</i>	39
<i>Alternative education in the future</i>	41

## Philippines

Panalsalan Dagumbaan Tribal Association (PADATA)	42
<i>Remote learning and the students</i>	42
<i>Farmers' situation during the pandemic</i>	43
Coalition of Teachers and Staff of Colleges and Universities of the Philippines (CoTeSCUP)	44
<i>Impact of COVID-19 on Private Education Workers</i>	44
<i>and Union Responses</i>	
Mactan Export Processing Zone (MEPZ) Workers Alliance	47
<i>COVID-19 Impact and Response: Export Processing Workers</i>	47
<i>in Mactan, Cebu</i>	
Metro Manila Vendors Alliance (MMVA)	49
<i>Engaging the local government</i>	52
<i>Fighting for a moratorium against clearing operations</i>	52

Save San Roque (SSR)	53
<i>Eskuwela Maralita</i>	54
<i>Tanimang Bayan</i>	55
<i>Protection of Rights of Informal Workers</i>	55
<i>Community Development Plan</i>	56
Samahan ng Kababaihan sa Rizal (SKR)	57
<i>Women's labor for a social and solidarity economy</i>	58
<i>Strengthening linkages with local governments and supporting organizations</i>	60
Kapatiran ng Dalawang Gulong (Kagulong) and National Confederation of Transport Workers' Union (NCTU)	60
United Cavite Workers Association and Pagkakaisa ng Manggagawa sa XY2 Clothing Bureau	64
References	67
 <b>Burma/Myanmar and Thai-Burma Border</b>	
Introduction	69
Confederation of Trade Unions in Myanmar (CTUM)	70
Mae Tao Clinic (MTC) and Burma Medical Association	71
Backpack Health Worker Team (BPHWT)	73
Help Without Frontiers	75
References	77
 <b>Thailand</b>	
Alternative Agriculture Network (AAN)	78
Southern Peasants Federation of Thailand (SPFT)	80
<i>Agroecology and social-environmental justice amidst the pandemic</i>	80
<i>What has SPFT done so far to respond to these tied problems of land ownership, environmental destruction, and health crisis?</i>	81
<i>Agroecology against climate change</i>	81
<i>Gender and development among the peasantry</i>	82
<i>Tied human and ecological rights</i>	82

Assembly of the Poor (AOP)	82
<i>Resistance through water management and ecological conservation of the fishes</i>	82
<i>Dam all year round, just compensation, the case of the People vs Pak Mun Dam</i>	84
<i>COVID situation and local response</i>	85
HealthNet Foundation	86
Stop Drink Network Association (SDNA)	87
<i>Alcohol drinking and COVID-19</i>	88
<i>Building a community working group</i>	88
<i>Community Action: Body and Mental Health</i>	88
References	89
<b>Timor-Leste</b>	
Uniaun Agrikultores Ermera (UNAER)	91
Asosiasaun HAK	94
References	95
<b>Regional</b>	
Asian Music for Peoples' Peace and Progress (AMP3)	96
<i>AMP3's response to the COVID-19 pandemic</i>	96
<i>Sama-Sama Music: Beyond Borders</i>	97
<i>Kumustahan at Diskurso</i>	97
<i>Community Outreach projects</i>	98
<i>Songs as Chronicles</i>	99
<i>Solidarity and Resistance</i>	99
<i>Conclusion</i>	100
<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>101</b>
References	102

# List of Figures

Figure 1	WIC in a press conference calling for the government to intervene with high water prices in workers' lodgings	18
Figure 2	Fisherwoman drying the Phabou fish in preparation for the fermentation process	23
Figure 3	Members of KPRI engage in the production of herbal medicine	27
Figure 4	Members of SPP at one of their posko solidaritas (solidarity place) for community members affected by COVID-19	29
Figure 5	KPA members repacking the harvest received from rural producers for distribution to allied peoples' organizations	32
Figure 6	JRK's relief efforts for underprivileged residents	35
Figure 7	PAKA instructors conducting learning sessions on sustainable and integrated farming with community development workers	40
Figure 8	IP members of PADATA performing a ritual for the spirits in their ancestral domain	44
Figure 9	CoTeSCUP's webinar on Collective Bargaining Agreement	46
Figure 10	Workers of First Glory protesting against illegal dismissal and forced leave	48
Figure 11	MMVA successfully asserted the Christmas moratorium with the local government of Quezon City	53
Figure 12	Sitio San Roque residents held a short solidarity event to welcome the efforts of the local government for a partnership	57
Figure 13	Women of SKR during the launch of their ice retailing business endeavor	59
Figure 14	"Unity ride" mobilization of Foodpanda riders	62

Figure 15	Workers at a meeting in the National Conciliation and Mediation Board—Cavite Office	66
Figure 16	MTC health worker administering the COVID-19 vaccine to a community member on the border of Thailand and Burma/Myanmar	72
Figure 17	BPHWT health worker providing primary health care in the rural area of Burma/Myanmar	74
Figure 18	A teacher conducting learning sessions outdoors at the migrant students' community	76
Figure 19	Fisherfolks filed in July 2021 a lawsuit against the governors of Ubon Ratchathani and the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand	84
Figure 20	Capacitated Volunteers of SDNA conducting COVID-19 test	86
Figure 21	Members of UNAER continuing their agroecological farming during this pandemic	92
Figure 22	HAK conducting a seminar on the improvement of court service to ensure prisoners' right to due process	94
Figure 23	Poster of AMP3 for its online regional solidarity event	96

## List of Tables

Table 1	COVID-19 Status, Southeast Asia as of January 14, 2022	2
Table 2	Non-ASEAN donations to ASEAN COVID Response Fund	5
Table 3	Global Freedom Ratings, 2021	7
Table 4	GDP Growth, Southeast Asia 2019–2021	9
Table 5	Asian Inequality based on Gini Index	10
Table 6	Aggregate Social Protection Coverage of At Least One Scheme	11

# Southeast Asian Societies into the Third Year of the Pandemic

Eduardo C. Tadem

## Introduction

On December 20, 2021, the World Health Organization (WHO) reported that the number of confirmed COVID-19 cases in Southeast Asia had reached an all-time low of 76,123 cases, representing a 12.3 percent weekly decrease (WHO 2022). The Philippines, for one, registered only 833 cases by December 20, a 33 percent drop. At this point, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) confidently announced the following on its online Briefing Page: “Note that from January 2022 we will be reducing this facility as most countries we cover have now received two-vaccine supplies and local and WHO coverage has improved. We will continue to provide some updates but not to the extent of previous coverage” (ASEAN 2022).

ASEAN’s optimism proved premature. On December 27, 2021, the number of weekly confirmed cases in the region spiked to 135,147, a 78 percent increase. By January 10, 2022, the number ballooned to 1,130,813, a 735 percent rise. The Philippines, as early as December 27, 2021, registered 9,134 weekly cases, a 1,000 percent rise. By January 10, 2022, the country’s weekly total reached 155,659 cases, a 1,600 percent

burst. These took place with the easing of once-stringent restrictions across the region which, in some countries like the Philippines, was related to the year-end holiday season and the arrival of a much more infectious Omicron variant.

Among the twelve Southeast Asian countries, the Philippines had the worst outcome—recording a seven-day average of daily new cases per million persons of 243.6 as of January 14, 2022 (see Table 1). Vietnam was in second (206.9), followed by Singapore (139.8), Laos (130.6), and Thailand (124.8). Other countries fared better led by Cambodia (1.6), Timor-Leste (2.0), Myanmar (2.9), and Papua New Guinea (3.7). Indonesia was a surprising performer, which had led the region in the number of cases throughout most of 2020 and 2021 but by January 10, 2022, only had 2.1 daily new cases per million.

Vaccinations across the region have also been uneven. Five countries had full vaccination rates exceeding the WHO-mandated standard of 70 percent. The best performers were Brunei (91.6%), Singapore (83.1%), Cambodia (81.9%), Malaysia (79.3%), and Vietnam (70.3%). The seven other countries were still below the 70 percent threshold with Papua New Guinea bringing up the rear with only 2.5 percent (See Table 1).

In terms of a third booster shot, however, the region still has a long way to go with only Singapore (45.5%), Malaysia (26.4%), and Cambodia (25.56%) registering progress, but only minimally. Furthermore, Bloomberg reports that in COVID-19 hotspot countries like Indonesia, Thailand, and the Philippines, “powerful and wealthier citizens are nabbing booster shots even as most people remain unvaccinated . . . thus worsening inequities at a time when they are grappling with vaccine shortages” (South China Morning Post 2021).

The WHO reported that total Southeast Asian COVID-19 cases from the one-week period from January 7 to January 14, 2022 reached 1,456,384 with 2,440 deaths (WHO 2022). For the region as a whole, the total cumulative cases since the start of the pandemic have reached 46,865,269. Full vaccinations, on the other hand, have reached 43.2 percent of the population.

**TABLE 1:** COVID-19 Status, Southeast Asia as of January 14, 2022

Country	Daily New Cases per million, 7-day average	% Fully Vaccinated	% with 3rd booster
Philippines	243.6	49.2	3.8
Vietnam	206.9	70.3	--
Singapore	139.8	83.1	45.5



Laos	130.6	50.1	--
Thailand	124.8	66.1	8.9
Malaysia	97.4	79.3	26.4
Brunei	71.2	91.6	--
Papua New Guinea	3.7	2.5	--
Myanmar	2.9	28.6	--
Indonesia	2.1	43.1	0.48
Timor Leste	2.0	41.3	--
Cambodia	1.6	81.9	25.6

Source: Nikkei Asia and statista.com

Philippine pandemic woes were compounded by Super Typhoon Odette<sup>1</sup> that struck thirty-eight provinces in Eastern Mindanao and the Visayas regions in late December 2021 (CNN Philippines 2021). The death toll reached 407, and about 532,000 homes were destroyed with 169,000 “completely in ruins”—displacing 4.4 million individuals, while damage to agriculture was estimated at Php6.68 billion and to infrastructure at Php16.71 billion.

Still in the Philippines, a major scandal erupted with revelations of anomalies related to the awarding of a two-year (2020–21) contract of pandemic funds in the amount of Php10 billion (USD200 million) to an obscure company. Pharmally Pharmaceutical Corporation is “a small newly-created firm that lacked the funds, track record, and credibility to handle big-ticket government procurement” (Cepeda 2021). Full-blown Congressional investigations followed, uncovering the ties of Pharmally’s management and financiers to high government officials, including President Rodrigo Duterte and his closest aide Bong Go. In the process, other anomalies and questionable deals surfaced in the government’s use and allocation of pandemic funds (Cepeda 2021).

## ASEAN Responses

ASEAN’s responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have been described as divisive, unclear, non-consultative, and impromptu—leading “member states to combat the virus independently” and adopting “disparate policies” (Kashyap and Bhattacharya

---

1 International codename: Rai

2021). Furthermore, “no regional vaccination drive exists to bridge the gap between ASEAN states in terms of the acquisition and production of vaccines.” That there was no regional “high-level concerted effort . . . belies the regional grouping’s highly publicized and projected image of a unified and people-caring ASEAN” (Vatikiotis 2020).

ASEAN conducted several meetings and summits, but it failed to deliver tangible results until infections were already soaring. Crucially, ASEAN lacked a proper mechanism to deliver relief packages to states that had depleted economic resources and health infrastructure (Kashyap and Bhattacharya 2021). The “intangible nature” of ASEAN regional cooperation clearly manifested itself in the vaccination drive. Once again, regional cooperation was absent as “ASEAN countries . . . negotiated vaccine access and other cooperation bilaterally more than regionally, with various international, multilateral, and bilateral interlocutors” (Moe Thuzar 2020).

The one major initiative of the ASEAN was to establish the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund in June 2020. The Fund had the objective of serving as “a pool of financial resources to provide support to ASEAN member states in the detection, control and prevention of COVID-19 transmission and in protecting the safety of medical professionals, health care workers, frontline workers, and the wider population from ASEAN Member States” (ASEAN 2020). The Fund was also meant to procure

[N]ecessary medical supplies and equipment which may include but are not limited to the following items: a. Test kits/diagnostic tools; b. Personal Protective Equipment, including gloves, medical masks, goggles, face shields, and gowns, etc.; c. Essential medical supplies, including medicines and vaccines; d. Other medical supplies and equipment for diagnostic and treatment procedures. (ASEAN 2020)

In addition, the ASEAN Fund was also created

[T]o support cooperation in research and development relevant to COVID-19, including research on virology, immunology, and other relevant studies, or research relevant to the development of medical treatments and preventive vaccines; technical support in the planning and implementation of containment and mitigation measures; sharing of best practices; as well as capacity and capability-building of health professionals and other frontline personnel. (ASEAN 2020)

Contributions from ASEAN member states to the Fund, however, have been tepid. By January 2022, only four ASEAN governments have pledged amounts totaling a mere USD400,000—Singapore (USD100,000, November 2020), Vietnam (USD100,000, November 2020), Thailand (USD100,000, June 2020), and the Philippines (USD100,000,

January 2022). Vietnam also contributed USD5 million of health equipment to the Fund.

Non-ASEAN states have contributed much more. By August 2021, it was reported that USD1.2 billion worth of COVID-19 aid has been granted to ASEAN by its eleven dialogue partners (Vietnam News Agency 2021). The biggest donor was the European Union with USD941 million followed by the USA with USD158.5 million. Other donations were USD50 million for the establishment of the ASEAN Center for Public Health Emergencies and Emerging Diseases and USD5 million from China “to strengthen the capacity of ASEAN member nations in response to the pandemic.”

**TABLE 2.** Non-ASEAN donations to ASEAN COVID Response Fund

Donor	Amounts	Donor	Amounts
European Union	USD941 million	South Korea	USD1 million
Germany	USD5 million	India	USD1 million
Italy	USD2 million	Australia	AUD1 million
USA	USD158.5 million	New Zealand	NZD1 million
China	USD6 million	Canada	CAD1 million
Japan	USD1 million	UK	GBP7.5 million
Total	USD1.2 billion		

Source: Vietnam News Agency & various news reports

It is not clear though what is the nature of the USD1.2 billion assistance from non-ASEAN countries—how much in the form of loans, how much in outright grants, and how much in kind. Earlier though, “it was revealed that the response fund would have to be accessed through loans from external donors like China, Japan, and South Korea” (Tadem et al. 2020). For instance, of China’s assistance in terms of 460 million vaccine doses to Southeast Asia in 2021, 90 percent was in the form of loans (CSIS 2021).

Also unclear is how much were coursed through the ASEAN Response Fund and how much was granted on a bilateral basis. Determining whether donations in kind and bilaterally is important to consider given that by January 2022, several assistance modes were granted directly to individual ASEAN member countries instead of through the ASEAN Fund. These were in terms of vaccine doses, heavy equipment, personal protection equipment, and institutional support granted to Indonesia, Laos, Philippines, Cambodia, and Myanmar from the COVAX facility, the UK, USA, Japan, and South Korea (CSIS 2022).

That not all COVID-related assistance has been given to a regional facility like the ASEAN Response Fund may be explained by the Fund's absence of "comprehensive guidelines, which means states are unable to draw from it promptly when making policy decisions" (Kashyap and Bhattacharya 2021). The other limiting factor is the ASEAN Secretariat which presumably would be the regional body in charge of the Fund. The Secretariat has long been considered a weak institution with "inadequate human and financial resources" and "weak monitoring capacity" (Siow Yue Chia 2013) and therefore would not inspire confidence among donors on its competence to handle a quick-response project related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

In any case, ASEAN has not been transparent and has failed to issue any public official report on the status of the Covid Response Fund and how amounts allocated to it have been utilized and disbursed. In the September 2021 ASEAN Senior Officials' Meeting, the Philippines' representative, Ma. Theresa Lazaro, had to issue an urgent appeal for ASEAN to "implement its key initiatives to COVID-19 response for regional recovery (and) stressed the urgency of purchasing vaccines through the COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund" (Department of Foreign Affairs 2021). Such appeal seemed to have fallen on deaf ears. In ASEAN's latest "COVID-19 Situational Report" of January 17, 2022, there is not a single mention of the Fund (ASEAN 2022).

In sum, Kashyap and Bhattacharya (2021) argue that "the divided responses of ASEAN states have delayed Southeast Asia's aspirations to quickly recover from the pandemic" and that "ASEAN's failure to act when confronted with a regional health security problem risks undermining its influence in the Asia Pacific over the long term."

## Southeast Asian COVID-19 Politics

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) recounts Southeast Asian governments' political measures to address the new pandemic surge in January 2022 (CSIS 2022). Draconian measures characterize some of these responses. In the Philippines, "President Rodrigo Duterte on January 6 ordered authorities to arrest unvaccinated individuals who disobey stay-at-home orders" while "the Department of Transportation on January 13 announced that unvaccinated individuals will not be able to use public transportation in the National Capital Region while the Covid-19 Alert Level 3 remains in place" (CSIS 2022). The latter directive drew the ire of civil society organizations who considered the directive on public transport to be "discriminatory of the many poor and lower middle class who don't own private vehicles."

**TABLE 3.** Global Freedom Ratings, 2021

	Score	Status
Brunei	28	Not Free
Cambodia	24	Not Free
Indonesia	59	Partly Free
Lao	13	Not Free
Malaysia	51	Partly Free
Myanmar	28	Not Free
Papua New Guinea	62	Partly Free
Philippines	56	Partly Free
Singapore	48	Partly Free
Thailand	30	Not Free
Timor-Leste	72	Free
Vietnam	19	Not Free

Source: Freedom House

Brunei, on the other hand, “shortened curfew hours,” mandated “house-to-house vaccinations for patients who have limited movement or are bedridden,” and partially reopened elementary and high school classes. Cambodia mandated “that businesses turn away customers without a vaccine card and customers who have not received the latest available vaccine dose after the required waiting period.” Indonesia resumed the Umrah travel pilgrimage to Mecca, canceled the “quarantine exemption measures for state officials . . . restricted incoming travel from 14 countries impacted by the Omicron variant, and focused on telemedicine for Omicron variant patients.”

In Malaysia, the police stepped up efforts “to identify and track down parties involved in selling fraudulent Covid-19 vaccination certificates.” Thailand “barred alcohol consumption after 9 pm in eight Thai provinces, including the capital Bangkok, and banned consumption at all other hours in the country’s remaining 69 provinces.” Vietnam announced that it “will no longer extend visas for foreign nationals who have stayed in Vietnam due to Covid-related health and travel complications.”

In Burma/Myanmar, meanwhile, the military junta launched a December 24, 2021 assault that killed thirty-five people including women and children in Kayah state where pro-democracy rebels have been fighting a guerilla war (Agence France-Presse

2021).<sup>2</sup> By mid-January 2022, the junta intensified its attacks by bombarding Loikaw City in Kayah, forcing 170,000 residents to flee from their homes to escape the fighting (Min and Ratcliffe 2022). Also in December 2021, a secret military “courtroom circus” sentenced Aung San Suu Kyi to a four-year jail term for allegedly breaking COVID-19-related rules and for “illegally importing and owning walkie-talkies” (Ratcliffe 2022). The verdict was met with public protests and condemned by human rights groups, the UN, the EU, and the US. The Guardian reports that

Almost one year since the military seized power in Myanmar, the junta faces widespread and defiant opposition to its rule, and to the heinous violence it has inflicted on the public. Alongside a peaceful protest movement, people across the country have resorted to taking up arms, sometimes with support from established ethnic armed organizations. The military is now battling armed groups on multiple fronts. This includes in Kayah state, where it has been met with strong opposition, and has in turn launched brutal crackdowns (Min and Ratcliffe 2022).

Political responses in Southeast Asia can be contextualized by the level of freedom in each country. Freedom House (2021) surveyed 210 countries worldwide, rating “peoples’ access to political rights and civil liberties, including individual freedoms ranging from the right to vote to freedom of expression and equality before the law affected by both state and non-state actors” (Freedom House 2021). For Southeast Asia, six countries were rated “not free,” five were “partly free” and only one was rated “Free” (See Table 3). This confirms the assessment by the CSIS that “democracy in Southeast Asia has been steadily backsliding for years, mirroring the global democratic recession” (CSIS 2021).

## Economic Outlook for Southeast Asia

The 2020 outcome for economic growth in Southeast Asia had shown negative growth for all but three Southeast Asian economies. For 2020, the worst performers were the Philippines (−9.6%), Timor-Leste (−7.6%), Thailand (−6.1%), Malaysia (−5.6%), and Singapore (−5.4%). All but Myanmar rebounded with positive growth rates for 2021 but the region is still far from going back to pre-pandemic economic performance indicators coming as they are from negative rates in 2020 (Table 4).

---

2 Kayah was formerly known as Karenni state.

**TABLE 4.** GDP Growth, Southeast Asia 2019–2021

Country	2019	2020	2021
Philippines	5.9	–9.6	3.2
Vietnam	7.0	2.9	3.8
Singapore	0.7	–5.4	6.0
Brunei	3.9	1.2	2.0
Laos	4.7	–0.4	2.1
Thailand	2.4	–6.1	1.0
Malaysia	4.3	–5.6	3.5
Papua New Guinea	5.86	–3.91	1.22
Myanmar	6.5	3.2	–17.9
Indonesia	5.0	–2.1	3.2
Timor Leste	1.8	–7.6	1.8
Cambodia	7.0	–3.5	2.1

Source: Center for Strategic and International Studies

According to the World Bank, the East Asia and the Pacific (EAP) region is suffering a “reversal of fortune” with the region “being hit harder by the disease (as) the multispeed recovery in the region is now facing a setback” and whose “recent economic performance . . . reveals once again the pattern of uneven recovery identified in the previous update, but in slower motion” (World Bank 2021).

In Southeast Asia, Vietnam’s output “had already exceeded pre-pandemic levels in 2020, but economic activity has been disrupted.” Indonesia and Malaysia “had come close to pre-pandemic levels, while Thailand and the Philippines were further away, but now all of them are showing signs of slowing down” with Myanmar being “the worst affected and the slowest in recovering” (World Bank 2021).

The World Bank sees the COVID-19 pandemic as reducing employment and increasing poverty “with the sharpest declines observed in Cambodia, Myanmar, and the Philippines.” Labor force participation has dropped, increasing the unemployment rate and the number of workers moving from urban formal jobs to informal work. The poor are expected to remain poor and “more than 90 percent of those who will remain poor are expected to come from Indonesia, the Philippines, and Myanmar—the only country where the number of poor people will increase in 2021.” The World Bank

further noted that in the Asia Pacific region as a whole, “inequality is increasing across several dimensions.” This only adds to Asia’s unenviable position as having one of the highest wealth gaps in the world (Forbes 2018). Within a select group of eighteen Asian countries, the Philippines has the highest level of inequality with a Gini index of 42.3 followed by Papua New Guinea, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Lao PDR, China, and Indonesia, according to the latest World Bank report based on the GINI Index<sup>3</sup> (Table 5).

The UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) reports that Southeast Asia has failed to reduce inequalities and of the “widening gap [in Southeast Asia] between the ‘haves’ and the ‘have not’ [while being] the only subregion in the Asia Pacific for which the situation is worsening for Goal 2 targeting zero hunger, food security, improved nutrition and sustainable agriculture” (ASEAN Post Team 2018). The World Bank (2021) further notes that “poorer [households] were significantly more likely to experience a loss of income than the wealthier” where “with little or no savings, poorer households have often resorted to coping mechanisms, such as the distress sale of productive assets and increased debt. The World Bank adds that

Poorer households also have greater food insecurity, raising the risk of increased child malnutrition and stunting. Children in poorer households were less likely to engage in online or other forms of interactive learning, raising the risk of losses in human capital. Each of these adverse effects on inequality today could have long lasting consequences. (World Bank 2021)

**TABLE 5.** Asian Inequality based on Gini Index

Country	Gini Index	Year	Country	Gini Index	Year
1. Philippines	42.3	2018	7. Indonesia	38.2	2019
2. Papua New Guinea	41.9	2009	8. Bhutan	37.4	2017
3. Malaysia	41.1	2015	9. India	35.7	2011
4. Sri Lanka	39.3	2018	10. Vietnam	35.7	2018
5. Lao PDR	38.8	2018	11. Thailand	34.9	2019
6. China	38.5	2016	12. Japan	32.9	2013

3 The Gini coefficient is an “index that measures the extent of inequality and is often used for the analysis of income inequality prevailing in a country.” It takes the value of 0 in the case of perfect equality (everybody has the same income), and 1 (or 100) in the case of perfect inequality. The Gini coefficient can also be expressed as a percentage ranging between 0 and 100.



Country	Gini Index	Year	Country	Gini Index	Year
13. Mongolia	32.7	2018	16. Korea, Rep.	31.4	2016
14. Bangladesh	32.4	2016	17. Myanmar	30.7	2017
15. Pakistan	31.6	2018	18. Timor-Leste	28.7	2014

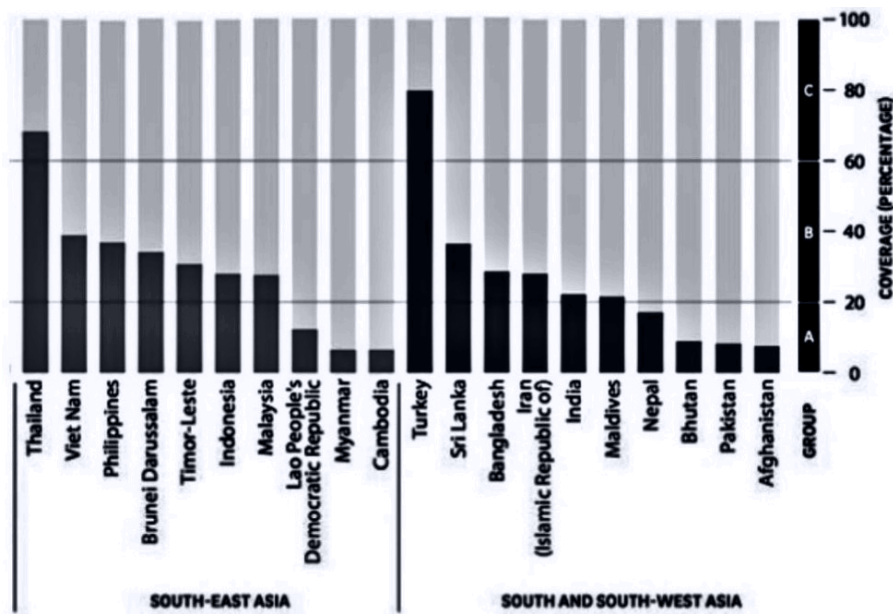
Source: World Bank Group (2022)

### Weak Social Protection

The UNESCAP and the UN International Labor Organization (ILO), in a 2020 Report, disclosed that “more than half of the Asia and Pacific region lack any social protection coverage, leaving populations vulnerable to ill-health, poverty, inequality and social exclusion (United Nations 2020). Many countries spend less than 2 percent of GDP on social protection, way below the global average of 11 percent. Also lacking are schemes for contingencies such as maternity, sickness, and employment injury benefits.

For Asia and the Pacific as a whole, only about 46 percent of the population is protected but Southeast Asia has an even lower protection level of only 33 percent with social spending accounting for only 6 percent of GDP. Thus, the robust economic growth that many Southeast Asian countries had been registering for several years has not translated into a more worry-free life for the region’s citizens.

**TABLE 6.** Aggregate Social Protection Coverage of At Least One Scheme



Source: UNESCAP-ILO Report

Table 6 shows that Southeast Asia fares poorly in social protection of at least one scheme. The “best” performer is Thailand with over 64 percent followed by Vietnam which just hovers above 40 percent and the Philippines which is below 40 percent. Brunei has about 36 percent followed by Timor-Leste with 34 percent. Indonesia and Malaysia are about equal at 30 percent. The bottom three are Laos, Myanmar, and Cambodia with less than 20 percent protection.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further exposed and heightened the weak social protection for Southeast Asian peoples over and above the aggravation of malignant social inequalities (Chen Lee 2020). Particularly vulnerable are marginalized groups such as urban poor, migrant workers, ethnic minorities, the elderly, people with disabilities, women and girls, and informal workers especially those engaged in part-time work.

Given the above, it is obvious that the 2013 ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection has remained a hollow statement despite proclaiming that “Everyone, especially those who are poor, at risk, persons with disabilities, older people, out-of-school youth, children, migrant workers, and other vulnerable groups, are entitled to have equitable access to social protection that is a basic human right and based on a rights-based/needs-based, lifecycle approach and covering essential services as needed” (as quoted in Chen Lee 2020). ASEAN defines social protection as covering, but “not limited to, social welfare and development, social safety-nets, social insurance, social assistance, social services.”

Specific schemes where Southeast Asia countries are wanting are universal health coverage, social insurance (e.g., pensions, unemployment benefits, health insurance), social assistance systems (e.g., welfare assistance, cash or in-kind transfers, health assistance, disaster relief, disability benefits, etc.), and access to quality and affordable services (Lee 2020). These cover practically the entire range of essential and necessary social protection measures. Despite promoting itself as a people-centered and people-oriented regional organization, ASEAN, in fact, has been a negligent non-player on the issue of social protection and more so in pandemic times. It has proven itself incapable of mitigating and reversing the damaging impact on its marginalized peoples of the COVID-19 pandemic. In this regard, it is left to vulnerable sectors in Southeast Asia to protect themselves and ensure that their lives and livelihood are secure and their basic needs are met.

## Southeast Asian Peoples’ Responses

It is within the context of the dire and foreboding situation described above that this present volume has been put together by the Program on Alternative Development

of the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS AltDev). The thirty case studies presented here recount the various ways marginalized and vulnerable sectors have coped with their respective government's strict and often discriminatory containment measures. At the same time, in the absence or deficiency of government assistance, they have also adopted their own creative strategies and innovative programs to alleviate their conditions and get through the crisis.

The case studies show how Southeast Asian peoples, on their own, have utilized principles related to community solidarity, self-help, sharing, alternative livelihood and production systems, network building, expanded organizing, alternative learning systems, social protection measures, and cultural upliftment. The cases narrate the grassroots-based experiences of (1) Cambodian workers and students; (2) fisherfolk and their CSO allies in Manipur, Northeast India; (3) Indonesian peasants, urban poor, and other marginalized sectors; (4) Laos students and their mentors; (5) Filipino workers, indigenous peoples, teachers, vendors, transport workers, urban poor, and women's groups; (6) Burma/Myanmar trade unions; (7) health workers and educators at the Thai–Burma border; (8) Thai peasants and health workers and activists; and (9) agroecology-oriented farmers and human rights groups in Timor-Leste. At the regional level, we have cultural activists promoting liberative and socially engaged musical experiences and models.

All these prove the resilience, creativity, and innate capabilities of basic sectors and communities to wage joint initiatives and alternative campaigns to meet and overcome the challenges posed by an unjust and oppressive structure that has been amplified by a pandemic of epic proportions. These are not meant, however, to free governments and political leaders from their responsibility of caring for their peoples' welfare. States must still be held accountable for their deficiencies and pressured to perform responsibly and competently.

## References

- Agence France-Presse. 2021. "Myanmar Massacre: Two Save the Children Staff Among Dead." *The Guardian*, December 28, 2021. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/dec/28/myanmar-massacre-two-save-the-children-staff-among-dead>
- ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). 2020. "Terms of Reference: The COVID-19 ASEAN Response Fund." Manuscript.
- . 2022. "COVID-19 Cases in ASEA and Asia – Regular Updates by Country." ASEAN Briefing, January 14, 2022. <https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/covid-19-cases-in-asean-asia-regular-updates-by-country/>
- . 2022. "COVID-19 Situational Report in the ASEAN Region." ASEAN Biodiaspora Virtual Center. January 17, 2022. [https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/COVID-19\\_Situational-Report\\_ASEAN-BioDiaspora-Regional-Virtual-Center\\_17Jan2022.pdf](https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/COVID-19_Situational-Report_ASEAN-BioDiaspora-Regional-Virtual-Center_17Jan2022.pdf)
- ASEAN Post Team. 2018. "Southeast Asia's widening inequalities." *The ASEAN Post*, July 17, 2018. <https://theaseanpost.com/article/southeast-asias-widening-inequalities>
- Cepeda, Mara. 2021. "List: Everything You Need to Know About the Pharmally Pandemic Deals Scandal." *Rappler*, December 27, 2021. <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/list-everything-need-to-know-pharmally-covid-19-pandemic-deals-scandal/>
- CNN Philippines. 2021. "Typhoon Odette Death Toll Climbs to 405, Damage Rises." December 31, 2021. <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2021/12/31/Typhoon-Odette-damage-death.html>
- Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). 2021. "The Latest on Southeast Asia: December 9, 2021." December 9, 2021. <https://www.csis.org/blogs/latest-southeast-asia/latest-southeast-asia-december-9-2021>
- . 2022. "Southeast Asia Covid Tracker." January 14, 2022. <https://www.csis.org/programs/southeast-asia-program/projects/southeast-asia-covid-19-tracker>
- Department of Foreign Affairs (Philippines). 2021. "Philippines Pushes for Regional Recovery at 7th Meeting of ASEAN Coordinating Council Working Group on Public Health Emergencies." September 29, 2021. <https://dfa.gov.ph/dfa-news/dfa-releasesupdate/29515-philippines-pushes-for-regional-recovery-at-7th-meeting-of-asean-coordinating-council-working-group-on-public-health-emergencies>
- Freedom House. 2021. "Countries and Territories." *Freedom in the World Report*. <https://freedomhouse.org/countries/freedom-world/scores>

- Kyaw, Min Ye, and Rebecca Ratcliffe. 2022. "Burmese Flee Bombardment as Junta 'Makes Example' of the City of Loikaw." *The Guardian*, January 14, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/14/burmese-flee-bombardment-as-junta-makes-example-of-city-of-loikaw>
- Kashyap, Shubhankar, and Anushka Bhattacharya. 2021. "ASEAN's divided response to COVID-19" East Asia Forum. November 12, 2021. <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2021/11/12/aseans-divided-response-to-covid-19/>
- Lee, Chen Chen. 2020. "The Coronavirus Crisis Is Laying Bare Southeast Asia's Inequality Problem" *The Diplomat*, April 8, 2020. <https://thediplomat.com/2020/04/the-coronavirus-crisis-is-laying-bare-southeast-asias-inequality-problem/>
- Ratcliffe, Rebecca. 2022. "Aung San Suu Kyi Handed Four-Year Jail Term in Military 'Courtroom Circus.'" *The Guardian*. January 10, 2022. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/10/aun-san-suu-kyi-sentenced-to-four-years-in-prison-for-walkie-talkie-and-covid-rule-breaches>
- Siow, Yue Chia. 2013. "The ASEAN Economic Community: Progress, Challenges and Prospects." ABD Working Paper No. 440. October 2013. Tokyo: Asian Development Bank Institute. <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/156295/adb-i-wp440.pdf>
- South China Morning Post. 2021. "Southeast Asia's Rich and Powerful Grab COVID-19 Booster Shots Before Many Have Had a First Jab." September 3, 2021. <https://www.scmp.com/news/asia/southeast-asia/article/3147394/southeast-asias-rich-and-powerful-grab-covid-19-booster>
- Tadem, Eduardo C., Karl Arvin F. Hapal, Venarica B. Papa, Benjamin B. Velasco, Ananeza P. Aban, Honey B. Tabiola, Rafael V. Dimalanta, Micah Hanah S. Orlino, Jose Monfred C. Sy, and Nathaniel P. Candelaria. Forthcoming. "Reinforcing People-to-People Solidarities Towards a Regionalism from Below: Alternatives from Southeast Asia Amid COVID-19." Quezon City: University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies.
- Thuzar, Moe. 2020. "ASEAN's COVID-19 Response. Policies and Perceptions." Heinrich Boll Stiftung Southeast Asia. September 15, 2020. <https://th.boell.org/en/2021/09/15/asean-covid-19>
- United Nations. 2020. "Social Protection Coverage in Asia and the Pacific 'Riddled with Gaps.'" October 15, 2020. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/10/1075422>
- Vatikiotis, Michael. 2020. "COVID-19 Exposes ASEAN's Fragility." *Nikkei Asia*. November 11, 2020. <https://asia.nikkei.com?Opinion/COVID-19-exposes-ASEAN-fragility>

- Vietnam News Agency. 2021. "ASEAN Collects COVID-19 Aid Worth Over 1.2 billion USD From Dialogue Partners." August 9, 2021. <https://ncov.vnnet.vn/en/news/asean-collects-covid-19-aid-worth-over-1-2-billion-usd-from-dialogue-partners/f2b0de10-8556-4536-941d-32c66ca23aef>
- World Bank. 2021. "East Asia and Pacific Economic Update: Long Covid." October 2021. <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/36295/9781464817991>
- . 2022. "Gini Index (World Bank Estimate)." *DataBank/World Development Indicators*. <https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?dsid=2&series=SI.POVGINI>.
- World Health Organization (WHO). 2022. "WHO Coronavirus Dashboard." Accessed January 16, 2022. <https://covid19.who.int/table>

# Country Reports

## Cambodia

### **Worker's Information Center (WIC)**

The garment and textile industries with women as the majority of the workforce have been the backbone of the Cambodian economy. Many of the global brands for clothing employed Cambodian labor for manufacturing. But they no longer account for the majority of the merchandise export. In 2020, the demand fell in the global market with the withdrawal of the market from the European Union (EU), the United Kingdom (UK), and the USA. Touch Sophort of the Workers' Information Center (WIC) shared that there were around 1,153 factories in Cambodia in 2019, with 840,000 workers who are mostly women from the rural area (the workforce).<sup>4</sup>

In 2020, Cambodia was not placed under lockdown owing to the government's containment of the pandemic. But the situation changed in 2021 when the state of COVID-19 infection became dire, necessitating a lockdown. This resulted in a less-than-ideal working situation for the garment and textile workers. They were expected to meet a rising quota while being forced to work overtime. Sophort also noted that there was no adequate enforcement of labor standards as many women experienced labor exploitation including long working hours, forced overtime, and restrictions on the formation of workers' associations to protect their rights. The living conditions

---

4 Partly based on the presentation during the 3rd Regional Conference on Alternatives with the theme "Advancing and Realizing Alternative Regionalism: Southeast Asian Peoples Solidarity and Resistance in COVID-19 Times" held online from November 13 to 15, 2021.

were also debilitating. Despite the pandemic, room rental fees were not reduced (most of them are small, unhygienic, and unsafe). The cost of living (e.g., food, basic commodities) has also increased, leading to poor health and rising debt of workers (i.e., 26.7 percent increase of debt to buy food and health needs).



**FIGURE 1.** WIC in a press conference calling for the government to intervene with high water prices in workers' lodgings. Photo courtesy of CamobJA News

The Cambodian government offered mechanisms to aid the situation of the workers. It provided workers in the lockdown area with USD40 per person. It distributed food aid and urged employers to provide additional bonuses to workers. It also suggested to landlords and water and power companies to offer discounts for workers under lockdown. On the other hand, people also have their own initiatives to help address the situation. The workers practiced solidarity by sharing food such as vegetables, fruits, and rice among themselves, as well as by lending money to one another.

WIC also actively responded to the times. WIC is an association of women garment workers (GWs) in Cambodia that promotes women's workplace rights. It advocates women's leadership, particularly in addressing issues that pertain to the garment sector, and space for GWs to express their grievances. It also provides capacity-building opportunities for women to gain knowledge that can be used to realize their workplace rights. Legal assistance and health care are also available for urgent concerns. The issues addressed by the WIC include "[l]ow wages, hazardous working conditions, sexual harassment, discrimination, short term contracts, and limited social security provisions" (Workers' Information Center 2015).



With the piteous plight of the workers dramatically affected by the pandemic, WIC Coordinator Panchakna Khlok shared that WIC continues to work closely with these women factory workers in Cambodia to help empower them. It continues to operate its drop-in centers for workers, a space especially dedicated for them to talk about their struggles and concerns on work and living conditions under the pandemic. In the drop-in center, WIC conducts “sharing sessions” with the workers to discuss and analyze government laws that directly impact them, their rights, and their living conditions. In addition, the drop-in center also serves as a temporary shelter for workers who lost their jobs and incomes and do not have a place to stay.<sup>5</sup>

WIC is also active in advocating for the improvement of the living conditions of the workers. For example, they advocated for reducing the charges for water under the pandemic after landlords collected water charges higher than what the government allows. WIC continues to amplify and bring the voices of the workers to relevant sectors and government authorities. It does this by producing press releases on urgent issues/campaigns, writing letters to concerned agencies and companies, and organizing activities that provide a platform for dialogue and discussion the workers’ problems and their possible solutions.

### **Voice Cambodia<sup>6</sup>**

Saophorn Phoeng of Voice highlighted issues of online students and contemplated on how members of the family can motivate their students in online classes, stressing the need for massive support for their needs. Saophorn emphasized that parents, especially those who come from marginalized communities, have been suffering economically, mentally, and physically under the pandemic, compounded by the challenge of supporting their children in their education.

Little wonder, the rate of dropout students in Cambodia is higher in communities with marginalized backgrounds than in well-to-do communities. In her input, she also makes the important point of bringing into the agenda the needs of marginalized sectors such as the LGBTQIA+ community in designing programs and projects, considering the discrimination and stigma they face in schools and in the workplaces which are only intensified by the pandemic.

---

5 This is based on an interview with WIC Coordinator Panchakna Khlok and the women leaders last December 2021 for this COVID-19 report.

6 Derived from Saophorn Phoeng’s presentation during the 3rd Regional Conference on Alternatives with the theme “Advancing and Realizing Alternative Regionalism: Southeast Asian Peoples Solidarity and Resistance in COVID-19 Times” held online from November 13 to 15, 2021.

## Reference

Workers' Information Center. 2015. "Worker's Information Center (WIC)." Accessed December 20, 2021. <https://www.unitedsisterhood.org/?page=detail&ctype=article&id=794&lg=en>

## Northeast India

### All Loktak Lake Areas Fishers' Union Manipur (ALLAFUM)<sup>7</sup>

With reports from Donald Takhell

Loktak Lake, India's largest natural freshwater lake nestled in Manipur state in the northeast, has its stories of struggle and survival during this COVID-19 pandemic.

This lake is known for its unique wetland ecosystem with *phumdis* as its special characteristic, a biomass that is a heterogeneous amalgamation of living as well as decayed aquatic and terrestrial plants. Sometimes referred to as "floating islands," *phumdis* change shape, size, and location around the lake to respond to the season, and as such, play a critical role in water cleansing, nutrient absorption, flood control, and carbon sequestration (People's Resource Development Association 2016).

Having very rich biodiversity, the lake is home to over 230 species of aquatic plants, over 100 species of birds, and some 425 species of animals including the endangered species Sangai "dancing deer" endemic to Manipur. These features have earned Loktak Lake its designation as a "wetland of international importance" under the Ramsar Convention, an international treaty for the conservation and sustainable use of wetlands (Satam 2017).

The lake also serves as an important life source for fifty-five community villages, with as many as 100,000 people who depend on the lake's ecosystem for their food, shelter, and livelihoods. These local communities still use traditional fishing gear and nets to catch fish in the lake. They utilize the *phumdis* for fishing through the traditional fishing technique known as *athaphum-namba* where patches of the biomasses are formed in a circle to act as a "pond" where fishes can be fed and harvested at the center using fish traps called *taijep*. These fishes are then sold in the nearest market which is about 1.5 to two hours from the lake transported by dugout canoe. The locals also build their

---

7 This report builds on the field-based report of Donald Takhell, the research associate of Indigenous Perspectives, an environmental organization based in Imphal, India. The report was entitled "Champu Khangpok Fishers in Post-COVID-19 Economic Recovery Scenario." Additionally, an online interview with Rajesh Salam, Ram Wangkheirakpam, and Donald Takhell held in April 2021 supplemented the initial documentation of the COVID-19 situation and response of fishing communities in Manipur's Loktak Lake area. They all represent Ngamee Lup, the federation of fishing unions of Manipur.

huts in these *phumdis* as demonstrated in the floating village of Champu Khangpok, the settlement of fisherfolks who are involved in Loktak's wetland conservation efforts (Satam 2017).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the settlers of Champu Khangpok are among those who were unprepared when the lockdown was imposed in late March 2020 and thus, suffered immensely. Local markets, schools, and even hospitals were shut down. People's mobility and public transportation were restricted to contain the spread of the virus. All communities residing in the lake, as a result, were effectively stuck there and could no longer travel to buy daily necessities nor sell their catch.

Although they have been relatively safe from the infection, the status of underdevelopment and neglect to these lake-based communities prior to the pandemic only provided greater insecurity and continuing socio-economic crisis. Since the 1980s, the hydropower project through the Ithai Barrage constructed at the confluence of Manipur and Khuga rivers impounded the water of Loktak and other adjoining wetlands which resulted in the lake ecosystem degradation and disruption of the locals' way of living and their livelihoods.

## External Actions and Community Initiatives

When the lockdown was imposed, fishing activities carried out by both men and women fisherfolks of Champu Khangpok continued. However, transportation and fish trading handled by the women have become exceedingly difficult with the closure of markets and limited transportation options. Further, the perishability of their fresh catch was another challenge due to the absence of spaces for commerce. Compounding these problems are the rapidly changing prices of daily necessities and fish products with the former increasing in price and the latter dipping sharply (Chakrabarty and Longkumer 2020).

To navigate around the problem of acquiring daily essentials, residents requested relatives outside the lake to acquire these for them. They have also maximized the role of *unjas* or middle persons who traditionally procure fishes from inside the lake and deliver them to the outside market for vending. *Unjas* have long existed in the trading practice of fishing communities in Loktak Lake and are in a reciprocal relationship with the fisherfolks. They usually have a partnership with a particular fishing household. During COVID-19, the *unjas* would acquire the daily necessities for the fishing household. Because of the lockdown, both parties would have to meet at odd hours, usually before dawn or in the middle of the night, to make the transaction without inconveniences.



**FIGURE 2.** Fisherwoman drying the Phabou fish in preparation for the fermentation process. Photo courtesy of Rajesh Salam

Civil society organizations (CSOs) and student organizations also provided help to Loktak communities. However, aid was severely restricted by government permits they had to secure first before bringing in daily necessities such as rice, cooking oil, salt, and vegetables to the area. These volunteers brought their donations to the edge of the lake where fisherfolks await in their dugout canoes to receive them. This, however, was also heavily regulated by the government, making it even difficult for outside aid to be brought in.

Emerging themselves from the suspension of market operations and the consequential and frequent spoilage of their catch, fisherfolks moved back to the age-old method of fermentation of the *Phabou* fish to *Ngari* (fermented fish) through sun drying and pressing it with heavy weights. This was done to extend the shelf life of their fresh fish items, making them viable for later consumption, and thus, more marketable. These COVID-19 times, fisherfolks also found drying as the simpler and more cost-effective method of fish preservation as it does not require the use of firewood (the price has recently surged dramatically) and enables longer storage compared to smoking.

When markets have slowly reopened in Manipur, the nearest one to Loktak Lake remained closed, adding the burden of finding buyers to the already struggling fisherwomen. In a recent interview with *ThePrint* (2021b), a New Delhi-based news outfit, Ningthoujam Uongbi Thasana Devi, a fisherfolk and resident at Champu Khangpok, said they have not only adjusted in terms of fish preservation but have also made price changes to accommodate what consumers can afford at the moment

and to entice hard-to-find buyers. She explained: “Now, we dry most of the catch and turn them into fermented fish. We have fish buyers . . . but we are forced to lower the price by 50% as compared to the [true] market value.” Meanwhile, local dugout canoe builders saw an increase in the demand of their canoe supply with the coming home of many city-based workers to their Loktak villages to return to fishing after having been displaced from work because of the lockdown. From the usual 250–300 canoes per year, since the pandemic, the builders have sold 600 canoes.

The education of children from Champu Khangpok was also greatly affected by problems of internet connectivity and gadget accessibility as the mode of learning shifted from face-to-face to digital. Devi explained, “Buying a smartphone for education would be the last thought on the mind of those who have been struggling to survive each day.” Space scarcity for livelihood, shelter, and study also became an issue upon the return of these migrating workers and students to their tiny village huts.

Having these problems, government aid in the form of rations, financial assistance, or health care services have reportedly been absent since the break of COVID-19, giving residents a more acute experience of being off-the-record. State neglect continued even after residents succeeded in having their village formally recognized by the Election Commission in November 2020 (after being written off from electoral records in the 1980s). Rajen Oinam, Secretary of the All Loktak Lake Areas Fishers’ Union Manipur (ALLAFUM), said in another interview with ThePrint (2021a): “Between 2020 and 2021, there has been no difference in terms of government help. We are . . . recognized by the Election Commission since 2020, but the Manipur government still doesn’t recognize us.”

For the Loktak villages, confronting government apathy and erasure is not entirely new. After the Ithai dam construction in 1983, efforts of the government to render them invisible and evict them have persisted, and they (1) merged separate wetlands to form one larger body—the Loktak Lake; (2) adversely impacted the wetlands’ biodiversity; (3) permanently altered the water levels of the wetlands; and (4) flooded agricultural lands around the area. These efforts have intensified with the creation of the Loktak Development Authority (LDA) in 1986, and the LDA’s implementation of the Manipur Loktak Protection Act in 2006, a law that deems all Loktak residents as encroachers and illegal occupiers of the lake, and hence, should be evicted (Satam 2017; Peoples Resource Development Association 2016).

In 2011, the LDA bolstered this policy through a “lake cleanup” which resulted in the burning of over 700 huts of villagers. Further, projects such as the Loktak Lake Inland Waterways Improvement Project (2019) and the Loktak Lake Ecotourism Project

(2020) continue to threaten the wetland's ecosystem and the villagers' welfare. Even during the pandemic, LDA continued to reinforce its development model through the Loktak Manipur and Integrated Plan for Wise Use (2020–25). Crafted together with the Wetlands International South Asia (WISA), the plan promotes the massive expansion of infrastructure for transport and tourism, extractive fishing on industrial modes of production, and a range of consumerist mass tourism. Ram Wankheirakpam, activist and researcher from Indigenous Perspectives, emphasized that this “wise-use” plan blatantly ignores the existence of the Loktak Lake residents.

In spite of these incessant government efforts for their eviction, Loktak Lake villagers, notwithstanding COVID-19, have continued their resistance through broadening their alliance networks and forming local fisherfolk unions in four wetlands adjacent to Loktak Lake namely: Pumlen, Ikop, Kharung, and Khoidum Lamjao, all of which are part of the greater Loktak Wetland Complex (LWC) that will be severely impacted by these projects.

## References

- Chakrabarti, Angana, and Yimkumla Longkumer. 2020. “This Manipur Village Floats Between Non-existence and a Hard Reality, Made Worse by Covid.” *ThePrint*, September 29, 2020. <https://theprint.in/india/this-manipur-village-floats-between-non-existence-and-a-hard-reality-made-worse-by-covid/512057/>
- People's Resource Development Association. 2016. *Issues on Loktak*. Manipur: People's Resource Development Association, 2016.
- Satam, Neeta. 2017. “Manipur: Where the Islands Float.” *Pulitzer Center*, December 1, 2017. <https://pulitzercenter.org/projects/manipur-where-islands-float>
- ThePrint. 2021a. “Govt Has No Record of This Floating Manipur Village in Loktak Lake, Now Frightened by Covid.” October 1, 2021. YouTube video, 9:38. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SLMj4wPPmPc>
- . 2021b. “Manipur's ‘Floating Village’ Has Been Untouched by Covid. And Yet, the Pandemic Has Hit It Hard.” June 24, 2021. YouTube video, 7:00. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L9eHt8iDiNY>

# Indonesia

## Konfederasi Pergerakan Rakyat Indonesia (KPRI)<sup>8</sup>

For social movements in Indonesia, the public health crisis occurred at a time when most people are resisting against the neoliberal hegemony of the government.

The crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed the state's failure in providing social protection for the people such as access to health services, food, education, and employment. Elite-oriented measures continue and are taken under the new normal policy. The Indonesian government keeps slicing the social protection budget. For example, using the lack of data accuracy and pervasive corruption of the social protection budget as a pretext, the Indonesian government has reduced the number of recipients for state funds that could cover insurance for the poor. In 2021, nine million potential recipients were excluded from the maximum list of eligible beneficiaries of the insurance, [out of 96.8 million] potential recipients according to the state budget for 2020–22. The government further aims to reduce the number of insurance recipients to 40 million in 2024. This has only compounded the problem when the government slashed the budget for the disabled by around 2.75% of the total social protection budget in 2019 to 0.78 percent in 2020 and 0.23 percent in 2021 respectively.

The crisis in Indonesia is exacerbated by the push for infrastructure development, a consequence of the implementation of the neoliberal policy, the Omnibus Law on Job Creation that promotes the deepening of capital-driven, investment-funded neoliberal development under the guise of job creation and economic development.

KPRI believes that in order to have political power that can match corporate lobbying, the working people must build national political organizations that focus on developing alternative practices and push for alternative policies and regulations through national action. Among others, alternative policies must include true agrarian reform and rural farm communities' industrialization, which will truly support food sovereignty.

---

8 Some of the data here were also included in the Resilience in the Face of COVID-19, volume 1 of the series Weaving Solidarity and Hope in Times of Crisis, co-authored by UP CIDS AltDev and KPRI, published by the Global Tapestry of Alternatives. See [https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org/\\_media/reports:pandemic:01-resilience\\_in\\_the\\_face\\_covid19.pdf](https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org/_media/reports:pandemic:01-resilience_in_the_face_covid19.pdf).



KPRI General Secretary Sastro Ma'ruf explained that the role of social movements is pivotal, especially in monitoring the utilization of the state budget and pushing for a different kind of economic model. A starting point is a push for a universal and comprehensive social protection policy. Crucial to implementing this political project are the four economic pillars, namely building (1) the production base, (2) the distribution base, (3) the consumption base, and (4) developing cooperatives as collective economic efforts within the three bases of economic activity.

These will be complemented by initiatives such as educating the working people and co-producing knowledge with them on the creation of the People's Council for the Development of a Social Economy Manifesto, democratic planning for economic production and sustainable industrialization agenda, building the movement's own banking system, and building a new alliance for a solidarity economy focusing on universal social protection, digitalization, climate change, among others. As Sastro puts it, these peoples' movements that became prominent during COVID-19 are revitalizing a "culture of solidarity also known as *Gotong Royong* (mutual cooperation)" (Ma'ruf 2021).



**FIGURE 3.** Members of KPRI engage in the production of herbal medicine. Photo courtesy of Rizki Estrada

During the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic which started in July 2021 in Indonesia, the KPRI leadership together with the member federations began discussing long-term possibilities in response to the pandemic. Its peasant federation member

Serikat Petani Pasundan (SPP) discussed the possibility of constructing a peoples' hospital. Meanwhile, for some immediate response, the Hapsari Federation (Women's Federation) produced herbal medicine to support health workers in Medan, North Sumatra. The Federasi Serikat Buruh Karya Utama-FSBKU (a federation of workers' unions) in the Lampung area supplied liquid smoked herbal medicine to friends who were COVID-19 positive and into *isoman* (self-quarantine) in various regions.

### Sustaining the organizing work towards a post-COVID-19 society

KPRI continues to organize the unorganized and consolidate their organized members—which is crucial for the sustainability and resilience of the organization. As part of the consolidation work in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, KPRI took the initiative to hold a series of workshops and discussions about the potential of cooperatives. Participants who attended (a blended online and offline method) were cooperatives from various unions and communities.

From this learning process, KPRI has compiled a module for education both for strengthening and forming union-based cooperatives or people's and community organizations. The module can be accessed by unions, both members and networks that need to form or strengthen cooperative unions and communities (JAKERNAS and KPRI 2021).

Peoples' movements in Indonesia are also becoming interested in the idea of economic solidarity during this COVID-19 pandemic. KPRI is among them that challenges the impact of neoliberal capitalism through the practice and continuing study of economic solidarity. Based on the abovementioned initiatives of its members, economic solidarity for KPRI is about citizen-helping-citizen solidarity, people helping people, citizen-led joint ventures, etc. The initiatives showed the solidarity network between the unions of farmers, indigenous peoples, fisherfolks, workers, and the urban poor, with health and food as two main issues central to the building of economic solidarity.

### Serikat Petani Pasundan (SPP)

The Pasundan Farmers Union (*Serikat Petani Pasundan*, SPP) is a movement that aims to protect the rights of farmers and promote ideas, initiatives, and technologies grounded in the movement's ideology and ethics. SPP was founded as a mass organization, a pioneer at a national level amid the impact of corporate-backed government interests in the agricultural sector. SPP's actions at the national level cater to the welfare of workers, farmers' organizations, and marginalized sectors as it envisions to serve

as “counterparts” of the government that offers its own framework of top-down governance.

The handling of the COVID-19 pandemic has become central to SPP’s work, after witnessing how workers have been fired and the informal sector struggled to survive the pandemic. In response, SPP forged partnerships among its networks in order to help its members understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their lives and how they can address this crisis. Among its networks are: the grassroots federation *Konfederasi Pergerakan Rakyat Indonesia* (KPRI), and the peasant-led network *Konsorsium Pembaruan Agraria* (KPA). In collaboration with these organizations, SPP focused on ensuring health and access to food and social services, and in proactively responding to the health concerns of people who have been affected by COVID-19.



**FIGURE 4.** Members of SPP at one of their posko solidaritas (solidarity place) for community members affected by COVID-19. Photo courtesy of SPP

## Amplifying Local Wisdom Through Agrarian Barns and Posko Solidaritas (Solidarity Place)

When Indonesia reached its peak number of COVID-19 cases in July 2021 with new cases averaging over 50,000 that resulted in the overload of the country's health care system and endangered local communities, the farmers' unions in the villages of Garut, Ciamis, Pangandaran, and Tasikmalaya in Pasundan (or West Java) built huts to house COVID-19 affected community members.

They called these huts *posko solidaritas* or solidarity places that function beyond just local quarantine facilities for the patients. These are entirely managed by SPP members. Initiatives are mostly community-based. SPP mobilized farmers as volunteer caregivers who will provide food and other essentials to the patients staying in these huts. These farmers also collected food and other donations from the union members. These huts also serve as centers for health care provisioning and training of these volunteer caregivers.

As of this writing, they have established a *posko solidaritas* for each of the fifty-two SPP-organized villages in rural Indonesia. The initiatives serve as an alternative community health care model in COVID-19 times which fills the huge gap of Indonesia's overburdened and insufficient health care system by decentralizing health care to local communities. These solidarity houses reflect the Indonesian values of solidarity with the community embracing the care work for fellow citizens during these challenging times.

SPP has been actively responding to the needs of communities from the very beginning of the pandemic. At the break of the lockdown in 2020 which constrained peoples' mobility, especially for work, SPP led a food solidarity movement called Gerakan Solidaritas Lumbung Agraria (GeSLA) or Agrarian Food Barn Solidarity Movement together with the Konsorsium Pembaruan Agraria (KPA). The initiative supplied fresh produce and farm goods to their allied labor and urban poor organizations living in the cities of Bandung, Jakarta, and other urban areas.

Farmers who still have buffer food in their respective barns for the next three to six months donated the food for free distribution through the GeSLA. SPP organizer Yani Andriyani explained: "We want to share what we have during this pandemic with people in urban areas who face difficulties due to the economic and food crisis. We also remember that this union (SPP) was started by people who faced the 1998 crisis and decided to return to their *kampong* (village) to consolidate the work to protect the land and produce food to fulfil the needs of the farmers, their families, and also the union" (Adriyanti and Rizqy 2020).

For these West Javanese farmers, this is amplifying their local wisdom on mutual support systems. Asep Sutiandi, an SPP farmer explained that the most common system is called *beras perelek*, in which a farmer saves a cup of rice a week in a bamboo tube placed in front of the house. Farmers would later accumulate all the rice savings from the community to help others or sell it to buy communal facilities. “It is our obligation, as members of the union, to build solidarity and help others regardless of their ethnicity and religion,” added Asep (Dipa, Muryanto, and Afrizal 2020).

### Sustaining the Peasant Organizing Work

Recognizing that the government acts on profit-based interests and not on the safety and security of the people, SPP has aimed to protect its members from policies that are detrimental to workers. SPP values the primacy of organizing, albeit through teleconferencing programs such as Zoom as well as other virtual modes of communication to meet with members and partners.

Witnessing the quality of health care that most people have experienced and the cry for help from health workers, SPP recognized that organizations from the national down to the local levels have to develop a sense of solidarity and ensure that no one is “sacrificed.”

SPP General Secretary Agustiana<sup>9</sup> recognizes its mission to protect not only its members but also society as a whole. Being a COVID-19 survivor himself, Agustiana had to endure having low oxygen levels and being denied hospital services. His fight against COVID-19, alongside other SPP members’ experiences, showed how the pandemic has led SPP to act on its own as an organization, especially in contributing to the general welfare of the community.

Agustiana further discussed that organizations have the responsibility to ensure that their members are safe, and to organize communities and marginalized sectors using all means, including social media. Organizations have to counter the neoliberal class interest of both government and corporations. Having a sense of solidarity is important for marginalized peoples to grow and take care of one another. Social movements in Southeast Asia have valued the importance of organizing people, strengthening them, and calling out the government for their failure in meeting the needs of people.

---

9 This data is based on Agustiana’s remarks during the 3rd Regional Conference on Alternatives on November 11–13, 2021 via Zoom video conferencing.



### Konsorsium Pembaruan Agraria (KPA)<sup>10</sup>

The main mission of KPA is to realize the implementation of agrarian reform (RA) and agrarian justice in Indonesia for small farmers, fishermen, and landless rural communities. KPA has monitored 1.7 million hectares fraught with agrarian conflict where their members are involved as of 2021. There are 654,854 hectares (37 percent) that have been mapped out and spread over 532 villages, 104 regencies, twenty provinces, controlled, occupied, cultivated, and guarded by 201,299 families in 413,837 hectares.



**FIGURE 5.** KPA members repacking the harvest received from rural producers for distribution to allied peoples' organizations. Photo courtesy of KPA

KPA believes that genuine agrarian reform is animated by the government's political will in the form of affirmative policies and institutions; strong people's organizations with a critical awareness of agrarian issues; strong public support and awareness of the issues; and a transparent and participatory national agrarian system.

KPA co-organized the Solidarity Economy Movement on the Agrarian Granary (GeSLA). The goals of this rural-urban food solidarity movement are to ensure food availability for groups affected by the pandemic, mobilization of healthy and

---

<sup>10</sup> The data on KPA is based on the presentation by Syamsudin Fujianti of KPA during the 3rd Regional Conference on Alternatives on November 11–13, 2021 via Zoom video conferencing.

affordable food by food producers for priority consumers (laborers, fishers, urban poor communities, small traders), and breaking the long and high-cost chain of food production, distribution, consumption dominated by food corporations. Food donation from farmers is one of the many solidarity actions of GeSLA which seeks to ensure the resilience of KPA members such as fishers, urban poor, and the unions.

To be able to concretize its vision, GeSLA undertakes the following steps: (1) conduct an assessment of farmers' costs and production capacity by the farmer's union; (2) identifying transportation costs from the location of the farmer union to the agrarian barn; (3) offering of the agricultural products by the farmers' union to the agrarian barn; (4) buying of the products by the agrarian barns; (5) packing of the products by the agrarian barn; (6) distribution of products from the barns to consumer cooperatives of labor unions, informal worker communities, and urban poor communities.

### **Jaringan Relawan Kemanusiaan (JRK)<sup>11</sup>**

From Sandyawan Sumardi

The second wave of COVID-19 infection in early June 2021 in Indonesia, especially in its capital, Jakarta was massively devastating. In just a short time, new positive cases were recorded almost every day. As of July 15, 2021, the number of active cases in Indonesia is 480,199 people leading the Ministry of Health to report the number of infections at 2,726,803 people—"making it the current epicenter of the global pandemic" (The Jakarta Globe 2021). In a span of fourteen days, the average number of new patients increased by 37,407 people per day. During this time, the pandemic really tarnished the face of Indonesia in the world. According to CNN Indonesia last July 12, 2021, Indonesia recorded the highest daily COVID-19 death record in the world with 1,007 people on July 7, 2021.

Undoubtedly, these infections exacted a heavy burden on the health care system in the country. And globally, Indonesia is ranked fourth. In fact, active cases in Indonesia are the highest in Asia, already higher than those in India. The second wave occurred so quickly, and in less than a month, the cases in Jakarta had far exceeded the first wave, which at that time took nine months to reach its peak.

---

11 Derived from his presentation during the 3rd Regional Conference on Alternatives with the theme "Advancing and Realizing Alternative Regionalism: Southeast Asian Peoples Solidarity and Resistance in COVID-19 Times" held online from November 13–15, 2021.

This drastic spike in cases was caused by the emergence of several new variants of COVID-19, causing the health systems of many public and private hospitals in the country to collapse due to overcrowding of patients and limited medical personnel.

### The Urban Poor of Jakarta

The COVID-19 pandemic has increased the population of poor people in Jakarta. According to the Badan Pusat Statistik (BPS), literally Central Statistics Agency, the number of poor people in Jakarta has reached 502,000 people or 4.72 percent of the total population of the city. The poverty rate in the province is the highest in the last 20 years. The mobility restriction policy of the Indonesian government implemented since early 2021, known as Community Activities Restrictions Enforcement (CARE)<sup>12</sup> also triggered this poverty issue. The policy has limited the number of community socio-economic activities, including business activities such as the buying and selling scheme where the poor are commonly engaged with.

In addition, many Jakarta residents have been affected by the termination of their employment. BPS data showed that the unemployment rate in Jakarta reached 8.51 percent in February 2021. Of that number, 119,824 people were unemployed due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is Jakarta's urban poor who have suffered the most under the pandemic as well as the surrounding buffer areas: Bogor, Tangerang, Depok, and Bekasi. The situation is a continuation of the impact of the neoliberal economic system adopted by Indonesia since the New Order (Suharto time) era that has tremendously displaced the poor, depriving them of their access to economic, social, health, cultural, and political resources.

### Patungan Rakyat (People's Joint Venture, Citizens Help Citizens)

Since the beginning of the first wave of the pandemic (the year 2020), Jaringan Relawan Kemanusiaan (JRK) has taken the initiative to help residents of urban poor villages in Jakarta, Bogor, Depok, Tangerang, and Bekasi (Jabodetabek), especially those affected by COVID-19. Most of these patients have no access to the hospitals, oxygen cylinders, medicines, and self-isolation facilities/spaces.

---

<sup>12</sup> Also referred to in Bahasa as Pemberlakuan Pembatasan Kegiatan Masyarakat (PPKM).



At the beginning of the second wave, the People's Joint Venture movement was launched to collect aid for underprivileged residents who have been in self-isolation without medical treatment, especially in the Jakarta area.

JRK has provided hazmat (hazardous material) suits and face shields as well as vitamins and medicines to health workers at regional hospitals, including those in cities in Central Java and in the island of Nusa Tenggara Timur (NTT) which has the difficulty of getting these basic facilities from the government during the second wave. JRK also provided basic food assistance (rice, cooking oil, instant noodles, etc.) to these urban poor communities.



**FIGURE 6.** JRK's relief efforts for underprivileged residents. Photo courtesy of COMPASS

All these efforts of JRK are based on its principles of a humanitarian solidarity movement:

- Unlimited humanitarian solidarity and cooperation
- Citizens Help Citizens
- Choosing Priority for the Poor (or "Preferential Option for the Poor")
- Clean Living, Take Safe Distance
- Rooted, Self-supporting, Sustainable

- Fasten your belt
- Alliance with Nature
- Solidarity and subsidiarity

There have been spontaneous responses in imbibing the spirit of this humanitarian solidarity movement starting from a simple donation of Rp. 1,000. There were also many donors—anonymous or not—who sent their prayers of encouragement.<sup>13</sup>

Here are some of the prayers from people who supported the fundraising:<sup>14</sup>

- *Bismillahirrahmanirrahim may this pandemic end soon and we will always be under the protection of Allah SWT*
- *Bismillah, may it be a blessing and be useful, may Allah facilitate all of our affairs, amen*
- *Hopefully this country will recover soon from the pandemic and the economic difficulties that hit it, amen.*
- *Hopefully it will lighten the burden of those who are already struggling. Hopefully things will get better soon for all*
- *Hopefully this little money can be useful for the affected people, amen! Stay sane, Jakarta!*
- *May the condition of the community be helped by this good movement.*
- *Hopefully it will lighten the burden of those who are already struggling. Hopefully things will get better soon for all*
- *Hopefully this little money can be useful for the affected people, amen! Stay sane, Jakarta!*
- *May the condition of the community be helped by this good movement.*

---

13 Sandyawan's fundraiser campaign may be found here: <https://kitabisa.com/campaign/patunganrakyat>.

14 The prayers and testimonials can be accessed here: <https://kitabisa.com/campaign/patunganrakyat/doa-orang-baik>.

JRK was also very supportive and ready to cooperate with similar humanitarian solidarity movements that emerged in other cities and villages. While the People's Joint Venture was relatively small compared to what the government authorities can provide, it was able to save the lives of 67 urban poor residents who had been in "terminal illness" and were infected with COVID-19.

Citizen solidarity and volunteer movements during this pandemic emerged across Indonesia in part getting inspiration from a 1945 speech of the late President Sukarno about *gotong royong* (mutual cooperation). This kind of volunteerism provides concrete assistance, interpreting *gotong-royong* as actions such as supporting a shattered public health system by making coffins, volunteering in funeral services, becoming ambulance workers, and so on. These initiatives fill the gaps in the policies and the aid program of the government.

## References

- Adriyanti, Yulia Dwi, and Raiz Rizqy. 2020. "Grasroot Solidarity to Fight the Pandemic: From Farmers to Queer Communities." Genderit.org. July 1, 2020. <https://www.genderit.org/es/node/5408>
- Dipa, Arya, Bambang Muryanto, and Jon Afrizal. 2020. "In Indonesia, Rural Helps Urban to Ensure Food Supply During Coronavirus Pandemic." *Jakarta Post*, April 27, 2020. <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/04/27/in-indonesia-rural-helps-urban-to-ensure-food-supply-during-coronavirus-pandemic.html>
- The Jakarta Globe. 2021. "Indonesia Suffers Another One-Day COVID-19 Case Record." *The Jakarta Globe*, July 15, 2021. <https://jakartaglobe.id/news/indonesia-suffers-another-oneday-covid19-case-record>
- JAKERNAS and KPRI. 2021. "JAKERNAS–KPRI: Discussion and Workshop Series: A Cooperative of the People Movement." February–July 2021.
- Ma'ruf, Anwar Sastro. 2021. "Indonesian People Movement Confronting COVID-19 Challenge." Confederation Indonesia People Movement (KPRI)/Koalisi JAMESTA.

## Laos

### Participatory Development Knowledge Agency (PAKA)<sup>15</sup>

#### The Challenges of Liberatory Education amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

With the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, education systems across the globe had to migrate online overnight. This has been especially burdensome for countries in Southeast Asia where the digital divide is a phenomenon—the majority of populations have little access to internet connectivity and electronic devices. While privately-owned schools have a better capacity to mobilize resources to face online and remote learning, alternative learning institutions, many of which are volunteer-run, struggle to practice online curricula and pedagogies countering the mainstream.

The Participatory Development Knowledge Agency (PAKA) in Laos is one such institution. As a nonprofit learning organization, it aims to promote sustainable development through active learning by helping young people engage in social transformation. Here, “active” means inclusive participation and field-based application of knowledge in different contexts and at different levels. According to Khampoui Saythalat, executive director of PAKA, they aim to “voice out the concerns and challenges faced by the people” by helping young people transform themselves as “agents of change.”

PAKA began its operations as a vocational school in May 2019 to provide a room for students to communicate their concerns on alternatives for society as well as government policies. In collaboration with the Laos Ministry of Education as a pilot for 5 years, PAKA teaches students to serve communities, with a curriculum and pedagogical principles different from the Laos government-run schools. Offering teacher training classes, their community-based curriculum focuses on the application of theories and concepts through fieldwork, on services associated with education,

---

15 This report draws from two engagements with PAKA. First is the presentation of Khampoui Saythalat of PAKA during the 3rd Regional Conference on Alternatives with the theme “Advancing and Realizing Alternative Regionalism: Southeast Asian Peoples Solidarity and Resistance in COVID-19 Times” held online from November 13–15, 2021. Second is an online interview with him about the operations of PAKA amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

on nonchemical agricultural practice, and on rural livelihoods. Discussion themes in classes span from climate change and deforestation to agriculture, gender, and environmental issues. Concerns related to peoples' rights and even LGBTQIA+ and reproductive rights are openly discussed in their classrooms.

Practicing a critical pedagogy, both students and teachers (called "trainers") learn from each other. Students are asked to reflect on social realities, while trainers reflect on the comments of students to better their educational system. Students are also encouraged to come up with their own concepts that can help them approach issues faced by communities.

Ultimately, PAKA assembles and draws from the output of students to form research about the grassroots. These studies are then sent to external institutions and nongovernmental organizations in order to communicate the concerns of people on the ground—the very communities where PAKA students integrate. To Khamphoui, this interconnected project of educational training, field research, and policy recommendation helps bring the voices of the people not only in classroom discussions but also in policy and intervention.

PAKA accepted its first batch in 2020. This batch comprised 50 students with ages ranging from 18 to 25 years old, coming from many Laos rural provinces. Face-to-face discussions were held in Vientiane, the capital and largest city of Laos. Announcements were disseminated publicly to invite youths to study with PAKA. Students are selected based on four criteria: (1) completion of high school education, (2) commitment to serving the community, (3) agreement to study for three to four months; and (4) open-mindedness to issues. Selected students receive their education for free. This includes student dormitory accommodation, study materials, and equipment. They also become active members in networks of grassroots and progressive organizations. Affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of students was reduced to 20 for the third batch who were engaged in online learning.

### Online and Remote Learning during the Pandemic

The peoples of Laos amidst the COVID-19 pandemic faced minimized mobility, susceptibility to the virus at the level of family, limited access to subsidies, and slow vaccination. According to Khamphoui, only about 50 percent of the population has been vaccinated (as of October 2021). School operations have also been hindered due to restricted movement caused by the lockdowns. PAKA faced the same challenges as any educational institution in Laos. Trainers and students must adapt to online and remote learning. However, PAKA tried to overcome these difficulties. They migrated

their classes online to the disadvantage of their field-based curriculum and onsite pedagogy. Two batches of students, one in 2020 and another in 2021, were trained by PAKA remotely. Students must stay in their own houses and access classes through platforms such as Zoom (all trainers and students have sponsored subscriptions to Zoom). At times, they must ask students to study in cafes where they can access better internet connectivity despite not being on the PAKA campus itself.



**FIGURE 7.** PAKA instructors conducting learning sessions on sustainable and integrated farming with community development. Photo courtesy of PAKA

With the field-based activities canceled, the challenge was on the trainers who needed to explain the lessons in detail by providing more examples. PAKA can only hope that this pandemic will end because their curriculum requires praxis, where theory-based learning is not enough. Nevertheless, external funders continued to support PAKA so that students can still study for free.



PAKA also enumerated other issues during online and remote learning. These include:

- Maintaining the mental motivation of teachers and students
- Students losing track of what they have learned in school
- Teachers losing track of students' learning
- Parents having to choose between supporting their families or helping their children with their schooling
- Adapting teaching tools and other learning materials to the digital medium
- The need to work with the national government for support

### Alternative Education in the Future

While PAKA helps students understand the needs of society today, the trainers are conscious that the needs of students must also be addressed. Khamphoui notes that alternative learning institutions must engage in collaboration with the private sector in addressing the technological needs of students. However, he acknowledges the dilemma between the private sector and nongovernment organizations, especially given that PAKA students are endowed with the knowledge to critique the problems caused by corporate intervention in communities.

PAKA calls for the exploration of online platforms that can facilitate student learning. While the English language continues to be a hindrance to many students in Laos, interactions with other organizations and communities across Southeast Asia may help solidify the solidarity among the youth and students' sector in the region. Online conferences and forums may be conducted as makeshift fieldwork for students. That PAKA continues to train students in service of communities and to conduct research based on actual experiences on the ground sends a message to the government that alternative learning institutions can and will overcome the limitations imposed by both policy and the pandemic. Indeed, an education that seeks to question the norm and transform current realities must liberate itself from any and all restrictions.

## Philippines

### **Panalsalan Dagumbaan Tribal Association (PADATA)<sup>16</sup>**

When COVID-19 hit the country, indigenous peoples (IPs) of Bukidnon Province in Mindanao were amongst those seriously affected by the imposition of mobility restrictions. The enforced lockdowns and subsequent effects on the economy jeopardized their livelihood and way of life. The punitive and militaristic government approach to the pandemic, along with weak social protection, and inadequate social amelioration programs, made it all the more difficult for them to cope with the adverse effects of the pandemic.

Since 2020, there have been cases when IPs were subjected to intense policing by authorities who carried out heavy-handed enforcement of lockdown protocols. Nevertheless, Bae Merlina Dumotan, Tribal Leader of the Panalsalan Dagumbaan Tribal Association (PADATA) said that protocols have become quite relaxed these days due to the fervent roll-out of the vaccination program in their municipality. “Ang mga kabataan sa amin ngayon, naglalaro na [sa labas]. Hindi tulad dati na takot at nasa loob lang ang mga tao” [The youth are now back to playing in the open. Unlike last year, people were afraid to go outside and had to stay indoors], said Bae Merlina. While many still had reservations about the vaccines due to the lack of effective public health information, many were forced to be inoculated because of the limitations that came with being “unvaccinated” in their municipality. Those who are not vaccinated are reportedly not allowed to go inside commercial establishments or attend meetings and dialogues which are important to their land rights advocacy.

### Remote Learning and the Students

Despite the relaxation of protocols, Bae Merlina said, student education, on the other hand, continues to employ remote modalities such as modular and online means. This remains to be a challenge for both the children and parents. Facilitating their children’s home-based learning becomes an added workload for parents, particularly for mothers who have multiple domestic obligations.

---

<sup>16</sup> This report draws mainly from the online interview with Bae Merlina Dumotan about their COVID-19 situation, held on October 30, 2021. Other information is also derived from her presentation during the 3rd Regional Conference on Alternatives with the theme “Advancing and Realizing Alternative Regionalism: Southeast Asian Peoples Solidarity and Resistance in COVID-19 Times” held online from November 13–15, 2021.



There were also cases of parents having difficulty in assisting their children with the learning modules due to unfamiliarity with the lessons, attributable to their low educational attainment (mainly due to the inaccessibility of education to IPs in the past). Because of the inefficacy of this learning approach, children are discouraged to complete their school requirements. Moreover, these cause added financial burden to families as these modalities require communication expenses and gadgets. This is aside from the recurring problems concerning network signal and internet connectivity that become cumbersome for those taking online classes.

### Farmers' Situation during the Pandemic

The longstanding problem among farmers and farmworkers continues to aggravate during the COVID-19 crisis. While the daily wage of agri-plantation workers in Bukidnon has been reverted to its pre-pandemic rate after having been reduced significantly at the onset of the pandemic, their working days are still irregular: only three days in a week.

For small food producers, Bae Merlina Dumotan explained that they hardly get a profit from their harvest due to the higher cost of farm inputs versus the lowered buying rate of their produce. This rather contributed to the drastic decrease in their already small income and has caused serious concern over food security among their families. As a result, some are forced to borrow money to be able to make both ends meet. She said: “Ang kita [namin] napunta lang sa [pag-bili] ng abono. Ngayon, sobrang mahal 'yung farm inputs. Bibili ka pa ng seeds . . . mag-labor ka pa. 'Di pa kami makabawi. Pagka-harvest, short pa din . . . [dahil] mura ang bili sa amin. Mag-uutang na naman.” [The income we earn only goes to the purchase of farm inputs because they have become extremely expensive. Seeds are also bought. We need to pay labor. After the harvest, we are still short of funds because the buying price is low. Thus, we need to loan.]

Amidst the worsening situation of the agriculture sector, support services from the government remain absent or at best, insufficient.

To augment the loss of income and supplement their earnings, they continue their indigenous practice of cultivating their crops for food sustenance and sharing portions of the harvest among community members in need. For Bae Merlina Dumotan, food insecurity, if not addressed, would be more devastating than the pandemic. She explained: “Pag hindi kami naghanap ng pagkain, mas lalo pa [na malala] sa COVID . . . mas malaking problema.” [If we are not able to find food, that would be worse than COVID-19.]



**FIGURE 8.** IP members of PADATA performing a ritual for the spirits in their ancestral domain. Photo courtesy of Bae Merlina Dumotan

For PADATA, the struggle for their ancestral domain rights remains to be central in addressing their food security concern. In 2021, despite mobility restrictions, PADATA resumed its application for a Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT) at the National Commission for the Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) as an expression of their assertion of their land claims. Bae Merlina said: “Ang importante makuha [muna namin] ang CADT” [What is important for us right now is to get our CADT]. However, there have been further delays in their application.

### **Coalition of Teachers and Staff of Colleges and Universities of the Philippines (CoTeSCUP)**

#### **Impact of COVID-19 on Private Education Workers and Union Responses**

The education system was severely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic as learning shifted from face-to-face to virtual. While the transition was needed to cope with the control and prevention of COVID-19 infections, discriminatory policies, and practices by the government and school administrations disadvantaged workers in the private education sector. Workers in state colleges and universities were partly shielded from the full economic impact of the pandemic as government employees were fully paid and allowed to work from home. However, this was not the case in private education

as the “no work, no pay” principle was applied and work-from-home was not always applicable to nonteaching staff. Nonetheless, even faculty were not spared from the deleterious impact as teaching load was increased without any commensurate pay hikes or additional benefits.

Finally, a number of smaller private schools suspended operations for the school year 2020–21 due to low enrollment and transfer of teachers to public schools. More than 3,000 teachers and 40,000 students were affected by the shutdown of 748 private basic schools. This was 5 percent of the total 14,435 private education schools in the country (CNN Philippines Staff 2020). At least one prominent higher education institution, the College of the Holy Spirit Manila, closed permanently due to the pandemic (Jazul 2020).

Private schools which did not close however passed on the burden of the pandemic to their employees and staff. Nonteaching staff were hit hard by the loss of income as they were furloughed at the height of the pandemic. Their accumulated paid leaves and benefits quickly run out as the lockdowns were repeatedly extended. When the economy was reopened, they were put on flexible work and thus were paid only for two or three days every week. The Department of Labor and Employment’s (DOLE) Labor Advisory 9 (LA 9) allowed the implementation of flexible work arrangements as a response to the pandemic. However, its application necessitated consultations with employees. But private school unions complained that such did not transpire and instead, administrations decided on it unilaterally. LA 9 provided that issues in the implementation of flexible work arrangements would be treated as grievances that can be filed for conciliation. However, two months after LA 9 was issued, DOLE Department Order 213 suspended the dispute resolution mechanism and thus workers and unions had no recourse for resolving grievances beyond the company.

Worse, DOLE Labor Advisory 17 allowed companies to cut pay and even collective bargaining agreement (CBA) benefits. Again, the rules provided that it should be subject to the voluntary agreement of workers and unions. But in reality, many private school administrations imposed this unilaterally. Schools withheld CBA benefits and refused to open collective bargaining negotiations on the argument that the institutions were suffering losses due to the pandemic. However, unions alleged that schools did not provide financial statements to buttress their contention of pandemic losses.

Meanwhile, faculty members complained of bearing added expenses of electricity and gadgets as part of the remote learning transition. Class sizes were enlarged even though studies showed that virtual classes should have a lower number of students. Intellectual property issues such as ownership of online modules and course packs developed by teachers were unresolved. Finally, academic freedom concerns arose as school administrations insisted on strict monitoring of online teaching and learning.

COVID-19 had become a weapon in the hands of private school administrations to denigrate academic freedom and labor rights. In a number of private educational institutions, labor disputes arose late in 2020 and into 2021. Unions filed preventive mediation cases or notices of strike over issues of retrenchment or CBA deadlocks. This was the case in Centro Escolar University, San Beda College Manila, and De La Salle Araneta University.

The Coalition of Teachers and Staff of Colleges and Universities of the Philippines (CoTeSCUP), which was formed in 2015 in the campaign to oppose the K-12 education reform, was reactivated to be a voice of private school workers. CoTeSCUP called for a stop to mass layoffs and wage cuts (Locus 2020). The group argued that pandemic losses by schools, if any, were not substantial to warrant drastic changes in employment conditions.



**FIGURE 9.** CoTeSCUP's webinar on Collective Bargaining Agreement. Photo courtesy of CoTeSCUP

Lobbying by CoTeSCUP and support by Senator Risa Hontiveros led to the insertion of a provision in Bayanihan 2 that schools receiving assistance from the government should not retrench workers within nine months after receipt of the funds. This was a key plank of CoTeSCUP's demands during the pandemic. Other major points of its agenda included respect for the right to collective bargaining and social dialogue, repeal of the DOLE issuances such as LA 17, and regulation by the Department of Education and the Commission on Higher Education on remote learning in terms of class size, teaching load, intellectual property and the right to disconnect. These demands remain pending up to now even as the education system prepares to slowly shift back to face-to-face classes.

## **Mactan Export Processing Zone (MEPZ) Workers Alliance**

### **COVID-19 Impact and Response: Export Processing Workers in Mactan, Cebu**

The Mactan Economic Zone (MEZ) is an export processing zone in Lapu-Lapu City in Metro Cebu that employs some 100,000 workers (Israel 2020), a majority of whom are women working in the numerous apparel and electronics factories. The MEZ was shut down when the local government declared a lockdown in late March 2020. However, along with the business process outsourcing companies, MEZ firms were among the earliest allowed to operate in consideration of the dollar revenues of these sectors. Unfortunately, the early reopening of the MEZ was without much regard for the occupational health and safety of workers.

MEZ workers suffered from a number of discriminatory policies implemented by both the government and companies during the pandemic. These discriminatory practices affected pregnant workers, hypertensive workers, workers in villages with COVID-19 cases, workers living near the export zone, and workers who had no means of transportation. Further, gender-based violence and harassment (GBVH) increased due to the “economic harm” produced by the loss of livelihood or decline in income as a result of the global brands’ decisions to cut orders or discount prices. Finally, both government and companies connived in denying workers their right to air grievances and freedom to unionize to improve their working conditions.

Workers who were pregnant or hypertensive were not allowed to go back to work by companies on the basis of the government guidelines on COVID-19 prevention in the workplace. For pregnant workers, this was a wrong interpretation by firms of the interim guidelines. For hypertensive workers, the guidelines themselves were discriminatory as the reasonable accommodation of working from home cannot apply to factory workers.

There was management arbitrariness in disallowing workers who lived in villages with known cases from going to work as supervisors and managers were exempted. In some garment factories, shuttle services were provided only for workers living far from the MEZ. Thus, workers living near the export zone had to walk to and from work. This was especially dangerous for women workers doing overtime as they had to walk at night. As a result, women workers did so in groups as a defense against possible GBVH in the streets.

Yet, the biggest form of GBVH was the economic harm done by the predatory practices of global brands during the pandemic and the response of supplier factories.



Global brands shifted the losses to their supplier factories by canceling orders or forcing production price cuts. The supplier factories then passed on the burden to workers through mass layoffs and job speed up for those still at work. For example, the biggest employer in the MEZ, the Sports City group of companies retrenched more than 4,400 workers in September 2020 (Sitchon 2020) while increasing the production quotas for the remaining 14,000 employees (Venzon 2020).

The ILO Convention 190 considers economic harm as a form of GVBH since mostly male supervisors and managers bully, harass and coerce mainly women apparel workers to work hard and fast in order to attain high production quotas. This was common in ordinary times and worsened amidst COVID-19. The flip side of this economic harm was that loss of employment or decline in take-home pay of women workers led to GBVH at home as family conflicts heightened amidst the economic difficulties.

As a result of the pandemic of workplace grievances, garment workers in First Glory and the three factories of Sports City formed unions. The awareness-raising of workers was boosted through the Mactan Export Processing Zone Workers Association Facebook page which became a platform for workers to air their complaints. The surge in unionization was also partly promoted by the distribution of *ayuda* (aid) by the group Partido Manggagawa, which donated a sack of rice each to more than 400 workers. This contrasted with Sports City which gave 10 kilos of rice to its workers and merely extended loans, not grants.



**FIGURE 10.** Workers of First Glory protesting against illegal dismissal and forced leave. Photo courtesy of *Daily Tribune*

In reaction to unionization, the management of First Glory summarily terminated 200 workers, including most union officers and members, in November 2020. When the workers twice protested their discriminatory and illegal firings, MEZ and local security personnel dispersed them. In the second rally, the union president and four union organizers were arrested for alleged violation of the social distancing ordinance (Partido Manggagawa 2020). In contrast, the presidential spokesperson convened a mass gathering in a nearby town of Cebu province just three days before (Luna 2020). This double standard and the weaponization of COVID-19 were a recurring pattern of President Duterte's authoritarian COVID-19 response.

Sports City did not resort to the termination of union officers since it supplied Adidas which was made aware early on of the unionization of workers. Instead, Sports City delayed the certification election by almost five months through an appeal to the DOLE using COVID-19 as an alibi, which according to the rules cannot postpone the proceedings.

In all those months of delay, an anti-union campaign was waged on social media. Despite the defeat of unionization in the garment factories, hundreds of workers who had undergone labor education during the pandemic are actively participating in the coming 2022 elections in order to secure civic and democratic space for the labor movement in the coming years.

### **Metro Manila Vendors Alliance (MMVA)<sup>17</sup>**

Community quarantines and lockdowns that were enforced by the national government at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic have heavily impacted the lives of millions of street vendors, other informal workers, and their families. In Metro Manila, a large segment of the urban poor population was forced into informal work such as street vending due to the lack of formal and humane employment opportunities (Purunganan 2020).

Due to COVID-19 measures that led to the abrupt suspension of public transport, as well as the closure of commercial establishments, workplaces, and schools, the previously bustling public spaces where they depend on for their earnings have become empty and bleak. With the imposition of various restrictions, those in the informal

---

17 This report draws from the multiple field and online interviews conducted with MMVA Coordinator Flora Assidao-Santos and MMVA Leader Amy Paderan from August to December 2021.

economy, according to Metro Manila Vendors Alliance (MMVA) Coordinator Flora Assidao-Santos, were the first to be cut off from economic opportunities. The situation of street vendors, in particular, had become dire when a total ban on selling and making a living on the streets had been implemented by various agencies, following the stay-at-home directives from the national government.

Daily wage earners, street vendors, and those in the informal economy were amongst the most affected by the restrictions as the daily sustenance of their families is dependent only on their daily earnings. They do not possess, if not have, meager savings or buffer funds to cushion the brutal impact of the pandemic. Street vendors, according to the MMVA, did not receive sufficient support from the government.

MMVA, in a statement, said: “Unless this government finds a speedy way of delivering its promise of support to the people, the struggling poor will continue to find ways to survive on their own.” While street vendors completely understand the rationale behind the directives, with the government aid being continuously insufficient and sporadic, street vendors are left with no choice but to take a chance to survive the crisis. Amy Paderan, a vendor-leader from MMVA, expressed the frustration of street vendors over these government restrictions:

Para sa amin, masakit [na may pagbabawal]. Kasi kita naman... may pandemic tapos 'di pa kami pinapayagan kahit sa sulok nalang magtinda. 'Di nila naiisip [ang lagay namin]. Gusto nila paalisin nalang [kami]. 'Di nila iniitindi ang mga tao [vendor] na maghahanapbuhay para mayroong pantawid-gutom. Ganun nalang naman ang gusto namin kahit tawid-gutom nalang para sa pamilya naming mga vendor. Noon [na wala ang pandemic] nakakapag-ipon . . . may natitirang pera sa amin. Sa pagkain palang ngayon [na may pandemic], hirap na. Kelangan pang manghiram ng pera para meron pa rin sa susunod na maipamili [at maibenta]. Kulang talaga ang benta [namin ngayon].

[For us it is insensitive that they continue banning us from working on the streets. It is obvious that people are all in dire straits. We are in a pandemic. We wish that they could just allow us to continue selling even in a small corner. They don't think about our welfare. They just want to drive us away. They do not try to understand why we are persistent in continuing our livelihood . . . it is for us to have food. That is simply what we want: for our families to have something to eat. Before [the pandemic], we were able to set aside some of our earnings . . . there is money to save. But now we are barely earning enough for food. We are pushed to borrow money to have capital and sell again. Sales have been extremely scarce during this time].

Street vending benefits a network of urban poor communities such as the pedestrians, daily wage earners, transport workers, and workers in the informal



economy who need affordable and accessible goods. While vendors are often viewed and portrayed as urban blight and law violators by authorities and the mainstream media, this informal economy is essential to the urban supply chain and to the food security of the general public, especially the low-income population (Roever 2020).

Despite their important role in the economy, the glaring exclusion and vilification of informal workers are evident in the prevailing urban development and labor protection policies in the country. Street vendors' rights are not recognized in the Philippines. They are still deprived of permanent vending sites from where they can provide goods, and are regularly subjected to violent clearing operations by authorities, often by the Metropolitan Manila Development Authority (MMDA). As explicated by Amy Paderan, the endless confiscation of their goods and destruction of their vending tools and instruments further sink them into poverty as it diminishes their capital funds and forces them to borrow from informal lenders or loan sharks that often charge huge interests, to continue their livelihood.

Despite these, street vendors continue to work through the difficult and precarious environment to earn a living. For street vendors, the conduct of clearing operations and eviction from their vending sites meant deprivation of their right to livelihood and the right to live humanely. As Amy Paderan emphasized, “Wala naman kaming hanapbuhay na iba bukod dito. Kahit pinagbabawalan kami, magtitinda kami dahil ‘yun lang ang pinagkakakitaan namin.” [We don’t have any other livelihood. Even though we are constantly harassed and prevented from selling, we will continue the job. This is the only work we have.]

The constant attack of government authorities on their livelihood moved street vendors to respond by forming vendor organizations. The formation of MMVA, a coalition of informal street vendors with membership across different cities in Metro Manila, is one of the responses with 32 different vendor organizations from various parts of the National Capital Region coming together to assert their right to livelihood and to stand in opposition to the authorities' prevailing framework of ‘development’ (Metro Manila Vendors Alliance 2009).

However, at the onset of COVID-19, additional challenges in MMVA's rights assertion and protection of livelihood have arisen due to the national government's framing of the pandemic as a security issue. Such framing justified the militaristic and draconian approach used by the armed military and police to “defeat” the virus while the urban poor, notably street vendors, have become the targets of punitive measures, violent policing, and worse, slander as “quarantine violators”. This skewed approach to the pandemic has exacerbated the extreme vulnerabilities and heightened the precarity of the street vendors' livelihood (Recio, Lata, and Chatterjee 2021). Expounding on the

interaction of street vendors with authorities before and during the pandemic, Amy Paderan recounted: “Noong bago ang pandemya, okay naman kahit papaano. Hinuhuli kami ng mga ahensya ng gobyerno [sa umaga] pero pag gabi nakakapagbenta naman kami . . . walang nanghuhuli. Ngayong nagkaroon ng pandemic, pinagbabawalan na [pati gabi]. Makapagtinda man kami, limitado na. Saka wala kaming pwestong talagang permanente.” [Before the pandemic, we were alright somehow. We were still apprehended by authorities [during the day] but somehow we make up for this by selling at night; they [the authorities] do not operate during the nighttime. However, after the pandemic struck, vending became prohibited even at night. Our time for selling has been severely limited. And also, we still do not have a permanent vending site.]

### Engaging the Local Government

In Quezon City, MMVA was able to establish a long-standing relationship with QC Mayor Joy Belmonte which was instrumental in the fruitful engagements of the coalition with the QC Local Government Unit (QC LGU) to secure the livelihood of their members during the pandemic.

In May 2020, MMVA was able to participate in the Fresh Market on Wheels Program of the QC LGU, a “moving market” project of the city that aims “to provide temporary livelihood to displaced vendors whose income was affected by the lockdown”. Through this project, MMVA members were able to earn a measly income after a couple of months displaced from the streets. Over the next months, the coalition was able to negotiate with the QC LGU to allow vendors to sell their goods.

When vaccination programs started rolling out in 2021, being vaccinated had become a central concern for MMVA. Following the imposition of stricter community quarantines in August 2021, vaccination became a “requirement” of street-level law enforcers before permitting vendors to sell on the streets. After coordinating with the Office of the Quezon City Mayor and discussing how this has deprived them of their livelihood, MMVA received a special avenue for the vaccination of its members and allies. More than 2,000 street vendors in QC were immediately vaccinated thereafter.

### Fighting for a Moratorium against Clearing Operations

The Christmas season, for vendors, is one of the most opportune times for their livelihood. As such, it is crucial for street vendors to operate uninterrupted in the months leading to December until January. Every year MMVA seeks a “Christmas Moratorium” or a temporary reprieve from clearing operations during the holiday

season. In 2021, MMVA was successful in having the QC LGU issue the moratorium after a dialogue with Mayor Joy Belmonte in October 2021. As stated in the agreement, from November 5, 2021, until January 15, 2022, there will be no clearing operations against street vendors. Emphasizing the inclusiveness of their lobbying efforts, Flora Assidao-Santos noted that aside from MMVA, there were also other vendors who have been assisted by this moratorium. She said: “Maraming nag-benefit [na] vendors and different groups from the action that we made” [Many vendors and even those from other groups have benefited from the action we made].



**FIGURE 11.** MMVA successfully asserted the Christmas moratorium with the local government of Quezon City. Photo courtesy of Flora Assidao-Santos

### **Save San Roque (SSR)<sup>18</sup>**

Since the COVID-19 crisis began, urban poor residents of the Sitio San Roque in Quezon City have been mired in a multitude of problems that exacerbate their vulnerability, worsen their living conditions, and deepen existing inequalities. While its network Save San Roque (SSR) still receives material and financial support from channels, this has greatly diminished in frequency and quantity as compared to the first year of the pandemic.

Government aid, on the other hand, has completely stopped. Even with the easing of transport restrictions and health protocols in 2021, the livelihood of the residents has not returned to a regular routine. With the price hike of basic commodities, their ability to secure essentials for the family became greatly limited.

---

<sup>18</sup> This report draws from the sustained engagement with Sitio San Roque community leaders and residents, as well as SSR volunteers.

The state has also capitalized on the pandemic to infringe peoples' human rights. There was an increased presence of state forces from the Philippine National Police and the Armed Forces of the Philippines in the community vicinity, reflective of the government's use of brute force as a pandemic response to the poor. Community members and their supporters have since received red-tagging and intimidation. Meanwhile, eviction threats from the National Housing Authority and private developers with their ongoing construction, continue to haunt the residents. The agents of private developers<sup>19</sup> have also set up measures that can force residents to leave their community such as fencing community spaces and access points, cementing waterways, and threatening to cut off basic utilities.

Fe Seduco, a community leader explained: “Ang ginagawa po ngayon sa amin lalong-lalo sa Area J... ginagawa kaming baboy! Nilalagyan nila ng halos maya't mayang bakod dito, bakod doon. Tao kami! Inilalaban namin ang aming mga karapatan! Ang kailangan po namin ay kalinga [...] itigil ang strukturang ginagawa ngayon sa loob ng komunidad. Pabahay ang kailangan namin, hindi pandarahas!” [We are being treated as pigs in Area J. Fences are pitched every now and then surrounding our houses. We are people fighting for our rights! What we need is care [from the government]! Structures being constructed in our community must be stopped! What we need is housing, not harassment.]

Despite all these challenges, Sitio San Roque remains steadfast through their diverse initiatives to mitigate the impact of the pandemic and protect their right to live in the city.

## Eskuwela Maralita

Difficulties of the distance learning approach have become even more evident. Expenses on communications such as internet use have doubled. The burden of learning facilitation was channeled to the parents, especially the mothers, despite their unfamiliarity with their children's lessons owing to their limited educational attainment. The quality of education among students has become highly questionable due to the many gaps in the learning approach. Together with SSR and AGHAM (Advocates of Science and Technology for the People) Educators, residents launched Eskuwela Maralita to address the learning gaps. The project was able to work on (1) recruiting volunteers as para-teachers and learning support aides; (2) formulating a

---

19 Private developers that were identified by SSR are Ayala Land, Inc. and Surestre Properties, Inc. (Solaire).

vision for this alternative school (3) identifying pilot areas for the initiative; (4) creating various committees for the implementation and creation of curricula; and 5) enrolling at least 200 parents with their children for each of the three pilot areas.

But with the onset of external challenges, the school shifted from enrolled public-school students to out-of-school youth. This initiative has opened an avenue to link with the Quezon City Education Affairs Unit (QC-EAU) for added support to learners in the community (Nalangan et al. 2021).

### Tanimang Bayan

Initiated by residents at the height of the community quarantine to address the growing food insecurity in the community, the Tanimang Bayan (community food garden) has steadily grown from a single plot to multiple plots in three areas of Sitio San Roque. Two more areas are being studied for expansion. The rapid growth of these gardens owes to the systematic division of responsibilities assigned by the mothers and the youth at the helm of this initiative. Harvest is divided among residents based on their cultivation work allocated into the gardens.

These gardens have become a venue for reclaiming inclusive spaces for the whole community. The initiative has improved their leadership, communication, and management skills, and created a window to continue their organizing work to defend their rights even during COVID-19 times (Rosilio et al. 2021).

### Protection of Rights of Informal Workers

Apart from their shelter insecurities, community members who work as street vendors and pedicab drivers (nonmotorized informal transport workers) also shared their anguish towards the violent clearing operations of the Metro Manila Development Authority (MMDA), the Quezon City Local Government Unit's (QC-LGU) Task Force Disiplina (TFD), and the Market Development and Administration Department (MDAD). A great number of families in Sitio San Roque depend on street vending and informal transport for their income.

Alma Esteban, one of the vendors, shared her experience: “Karamihan sa aming mga vendors, talagang walang kinikita sa ngayon. Kahit pandemic, hinuhuli kami. Nakikipagpatintero po kami para di lang kami mahulihan ng paninda. Ganoon kahirap po sa amin bilang vendor. Sa pang araw-araw naman natutugunan namin iyon, pero hanggang dun lang talaga: para lang makabili lang kami ng isang kilong bigas. Basta lang may makain...makaraos lang sa isang araw.” [Majority of us vendors cannot incur

profit. Even during this pandemic, clearing operations (and confiscation) persist. We are pushed to a mouse and cat game with the police just to secure our livelihood. It has been very difficult for us vendors. We are able to provide for our daily meals but that is as far as our current earnings can afford. It is only enough to buy a kilo of rice for our meals and survive the day.]

The *pedicab* drivers also bear the brunt of state directives. In 2021, a total of 25 *pedicab* units and 12 *karitons* (wagons) were confiscated and impounded by MMDA without citing any clear violations.

Lydia Munes, a pedicab leader expressed: “Ang sabi ng mga MMDA [samin], kailangan ang mga pedicab ng San Roque ay maubos kakahuli dahil salot daw sa daanan ng mga kotse. Ibig sabihin mayayaman lang pala ang dadaan sa kalsada, ginawa lang yan para sa mayayaman?” [The MMDA told us that all pedicabs from Sitio San Roque must be eradicated because they are a road obstruction for cars. Does that mean that roads are only for the rich and therefore they were constructed solely for them?]

Solidarity within the community has expanded to include the demands of these informal transport workers. Rights violations from the clearing operations were raised to the Commission on Human Rights (CHR). With support from SSR, Kariton Coalition, Urban Forum, and Metro Manila Vendors Alliance, the pedicab drivers were able to hold a dialogue with MMDA and get these demands: (1) recovery of pedicab units of those present in the dialogue, (2) clarification of legal process on retrieving impounded units, (3) moratorium on clearing operations until the following year. The MMDA also agreed to cooperate with CHR on its potential investigation regarding the violations committed by MMDA employees during the operations.

These collective actions have consolidated not only the pedicabs drivers but also residents from a neighboring urban poor community. And in order to capacitate them further, the CHR gave them a human rights training education in December 2021.

## Community Development Plan

Concretizing the housing proposal to safeguard their security of tenure emerged as the most important for the community during these turbulent times.

Community leaders from Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap–San Roque (Kadamay–SR), along with SSR held a dialogue with the Quezon City Housing, Community Development, and Resettlement Department (QC–HCDRD) and the Quezon City Legal Department to present the Community Development Plan—Sitio

San Roque's alternative housing proposal. The dialogue resulted in a commitment from the city mayor, Joy Belmonte, to work with Sitio San Roque community on their plan.



**FIGURE 12.** Sitio San Roque residents held a short solidarity event to welcome the efforts of the local government for a partnership. Photo courtesy of SSR

### **Samahan ng Kababaihan sa Rizal (SKR)<sup>20</sup>**

COVID-19 abruptly halted economic opportunities and further disenfranchised women across Southeast Asia. Women across the region were far worse off during the global pandemic as they face a disproportionate impact with regards to their health, economic security, and social protection. Aside from having to contend with issues of inadequate opportunities, they were also engendered with the responsibilities of maintaining each of their households and participating in extended care work.

---

<sup>20</sup> This report draws from the scheduled interview kumustahan with leaders of the Samahan ng Kababaihan sa Rizal last September 27, 2021 through the kind assistance of Nestor Diego from the Tambuyog Development Center.



Despite the multiple burdens of women and the farse pandemic response and hamfisted lockdowns, women organized themselves to fulfill their needs and to break free from their traditional roles. One such organization is the Samahan ng Kababaihan sa Rizal (SKR), a grassroots women organization composed mostly of wives of fishers in Sitio Balete, Barangay Rumbang. SKR was established in mid-August 2020, six months after the national government imposed a lockdown and community quarantine measure.

The small town of Sitio Balete resides along the coastline of the Province of Rizal in Occidental Mindoro. Its principal economies depend on fisheries and coastal harvesting. The fishing activities are predominantly operated by the men while the post-harvest processing, retailing in the local wet market (talipapa), and preparing for household consumption are run by the women on top of their care and reproductive duties. However, despite their important participation in the local economy, their labor is less appreciated and compensated which re-delegates them to their domestic duties.

The SKR was set up to support women in the realization of their potential and expand their opportunities in organizing the local economy of the community. They were assisted by the Tambuyog Development Center, a nongovernment organization established in 1984 to empower coastal communities and marginalized fisherfolk. Tambuyog, through their Women in Fisheries Initiative recognizes the predominant role of women in the fishing industry and coastal-based resource management and with that, designs campaigns for women's participation and entitlements (Tambuyog Development Center, n.d.).

## Women's Labor for a Social and Solidarity Economy

Among the initial programs of SKR is establishing their Group Savings and Loan Assistance (GSLA) in September 2020. The GSLA is comparable to the small credit cooperative model which adopts key lessons of microfinance to economically circulate member's contributions and invest in community needs-based local businesses. Tambuyog hosted the training seminars of SKR by inviting trainers and community organizers for knowledge-sharing sessions and workshops. Members provide regular contributions which grant them entitlements for loans, especially in cases of emergencies. They then nominated their organization's treasurer to oversee GSLA and keep the funds safe. Accountability is, however, monitored as most, if not all, members are concerned with the upkeep of GSLA's financial status based on their training and co-construction of GSLA guidelines. After a period of one year, the organization reimburses the contribution back to its members with generous interest. The year 2021 marked another fiscal year for the GSLA and membership contribution.



GSLA also allocates a portion of the circulated funds for the establishment of local businesses. Despite COVID-19 restrictions in the local economy, on February 17, 2021, SKR launched their business for ice retailing named “Rizal Ice Retailing,” also located in their barangay. This business was a result of their community needs-based investigation and planning along with local fishing coops and Tambuyog. Beforehand, local fisherfolk would have to immediately deliver their harvest to the market at the provincial centers, which can cost around Php500. Through their ice retailing business, they aim to contribute to the local economy by purchasing three to five ice blocks from the local ice factories which they process and sell to the fishers for storage at more affordable prices. Using this method, they can expand the shelf life of their fresh harvest that is not immediately brought to the local market.



**FIGURE 13.** Women of SKR during the launch of their ice retailing business endeavor. Photo courtesy of SKR

Since electricity is unreliable in Sitio Balete, storage freezers are replaced with local knowledge on preservation techniques by using palay (rice grains) enclosed in sako (sacks) and plastic as heat insulators. The local fisherfolk community deeply appreciated SKR’s efforts as it helped prolong their harvest and alleviated the expensive transportation cost to the market centers. Moreover, it provided employment to the women and contributed to the wealth of the local community and organization. On May 27, 2021, SKR also launched a community pantry in their locality inspired by the Community Pantry movement that sprung from the initiative in Maginhawa Street in Quezon City. The goods displayed in the pantry were donated in-kind by local organizations and partners of SKR and Tambuyog.

## Strengthening Linkages with Local Governments and Supporting Organizations

In addition to their initiated activities, SKR also prepared their consolidated proposals in conjunction with the provincial government. On February 16, 2021, SKR was one of the awardees of the Balik Sigla sa Agrikultura on Livestock and Poultry, Small-Scale Layer Module Dispersal Program of the Rizal Provincial Government Office. The award included 48 poultry stocks ready for egg production. After two months, they were able to harvest the first batch of eggs which they sold locally at an affordable price. The profits collected from this project were once again pooled in their GSLA for use of the organization and the membership. SKR and Tambuyog joined the National Fisherfolks Day Conference 2021 organized by the province last May 31 so they can continue their engagement in the provincial programs.

## Kapatiran ng Dalawang Gulong (Kagulong) and National Confederation of Transport Workers' Union (NCTU)

Discriminatory policies hobbled transport workers during the pandemic. From jeepney drivers and operators to food delivery riders, all of them experienced the heavy hand of biased rules enforced by the government under the cover of COVID-19.

Arguably, the most affected transport workers by these discriminatory policies were jeepney drivers and operators. For a decade, jeepney associations have resisted the Public Utility Vehicle Modernization Program (PUVMP) of the government due to its anti-poor character. Under the PUVMP, traditional jeepneys were to be transitioned to more fuel-efficient modern jeepneys that would be organized around fleets through corporatization. The PUVMP was rationalized as an adaptation to climate change and a solution to traffic congestion. But the jeepney groups have always seen it as a phaseout of the sector. The lack of participation by jeepney drivers and operators meant that the PUVMP was devoid of the voice of the marginalized. Jeepney groups held successful strikes over the course of a decade that delayed the PUVMP.

However, the lockdown created the perfect opportunity for the government to ram through the PUVMP. All public transport was banned amidst the enforced lockdown in 2020 in Metro Manila and surrounding areas at first. Later, the lockdown and ban extended to the rest of Luzon and other regions. In Metro Manila alone, an estimated 50,000 jeepney operators and their drivers were affected. Nationwide, the number could have gone up to 200,000 or 300,000 jeepney units unable to operate.

After two and half months of the lockdown, public transport was allowed to run as the economy slowly opened. However, jeepneys remained banned which was a clear case of discrimination. The first jeepneys returned to the streets only after more than three months. It was estimated that Metro Manila jeepney drivers (not including operators) lost some Php2 billion in income during the period of the ban. The impact on jeepney operators and drivers was no less than a humanitarian crisis. They, as previously self-employed workers, were reduced to begging for alms on the streets during the pandemic.

Although not of the same degree, motorcycle riders were also victims of discriminatory policies of the government. Amidst the strict lockdown and public transportation ban, many workers commuted to work using motorcycles. Usually, their partners would ride in pillion since other public transportation means such as jeepneys, buses, taxis, and trains were not operating. However, the government disallowed riding in pillion on the argument that such would lead to infection. Instead, the government ruled that barrier shields should be installed between the motorcycle rider and the passenger. Motorcycle riders and even workers groups were outraged at this patently irrational regulation. They argued that barrier shields are not only useless but are also safety hazards.

On August 1, 2020, the first day of implementation of the barrier shield, a group of motorcycle rider activists held a protest at the grounds of the Commission on Human Rights to publicly demand the repeal of this policy. The riders called themselves the Kapatiran ng Dalawang Gulong (Kagulong). The Kagulong founders had been previously active in other riders' rights organizations, which unfortunately were afraid to raise their voices amidst the chilling effect of the lockdown. This network of riders' rights groups had been formed before to wage the campaign against the *doble plaka* law<sup>21</sup> that was also a discriminatory policy that victimizes motorcycle riders by profiling them as criminals. But unlike this network, Kagulong complemented its campaign by advocating for workers' rights, too. This was because a large majority of riders were in fact workers.

---

21 Dubbed by motorcycle riders as the *doble plaka* (double plate) law, Republic Act 11235 or the Motorcycle Crime Prevention Act, which was signed in 2019, requires all types of motorcycles to install bigger number plates in the front and back, and sets penalties of up to Php100,000 and imprisonment for violators of the law. The rationale is to deter the riding-in-tandem modus of criminals. However, riders' rights groups acknowledged this as useless and a form of discrimination as it already profiles all innocent motorcycle riders as criminals.

And since many of these riders and workers are women, Kagulong also formed a Women's Collective which held a unity ride on March 8, 2021, that ended at the People Power Monument in Quezon City. To commemorate International Women's Day, Kagulong called for equality and nondiscrimination for women riders.

Kagulong also started organizing riders working in food delivery, courier service, and moto-taxi, whose services became significantly in demand during this pandemic. Kagulong joined the call for the legalization of the operation of moto-taxi which had previously operated on a *colorum*<sup>22</sup> or unregulated basis. In November 2020, Kagulong led some 700 Foodpanda riders in a “unity ride” through Metro Manila that ended in the national office of the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE). Kagulong and Foodpanda riders held a dialogue with labor officials on their grievances over reduced pay and opaque app policies.



**FIGURE 14.** “Unity ride” mobilization of Foodpanda riders. Photo Courtesy of Kagulong

In response to the Kagulong-led protest in 2020 and another one by Davao Foodpanda riders in 2021, the DOLE issued an advisory in July 2021 that, unfortunately, merely reiterated the vagaries of the status of delivery riders as independent contractors. Kagulong slammed the advisory as toothless and reminded DOLE officials of their commitment to convene a technical working group to thresh out platform riders’ complaints.

<sup>22</sup> The term *colorum* is slang for unregistered or illegal public land transport in the Philippines.

In response to the crisis in public transportation and the discriminatory policies, the advocacy group Move as One was formed in 2020. Kagulong and the jeepney organization National Confederation of Transport Workers' Union (NCTU–SENTRO) joined Move as One along with other grassroots associations and human rights groups. The focus of Move as One was the campaign for reforming the public transport system.

Among its calls was a just transition for the jeepney sector. This meant that the livelihood and conditions of jeepney drivers and operators should be improved, not sacrificed as public transport transitions to greener technologies. Thus, Move as One and NCTU lobbied for increasing the state subsidy for modern jeepneys, which normally cost Php1 million each. As a result of the campaign, the original Php80,000 subsidy was hiked to Php160,000. Move As One and NCTU continue to demand a Php500,000 subsidy. Further, the two groups pushed for recognition of jeepney cooperatives as part of the fleet consolidation component<sup>23</sup> of PUVMP. Since jeepney associations had a hard time complying with the fleet requirements, though no fault of their own, they successfully lobbied for a deadline extension so that many more jeepney cooperatives would be issued franchises and finally operate.

Another key advocacy of both Move as One and NCTU in its just transition demand is the normalization of service contracting in the public transport system. As a result of lobbying, the government granted two rounds of funding for service contracting, Php5.5 billion in 2020 and Php3 billion in 2021. While thankful since this ensured the temporary livelihood of many jeepney operators and drivers, Move as One and NCTU however criticized the service contracting scheme for being a short-sighted *ayuda* (aid) program. Instead, the two groups proposed that service contracting be the new normal. In this scheme, the government pays jeepney cooperatives to operate the routes and also collects fares from passengers. Thus, service contracting would be a self-sustaining program, not a one-time *ayuda* scheme. Moreover, service contracting would ensure the transition of jeepney operators and drivers from informality to formal employment arrangements. Operators organized in jeepney cooperatives would have guaranteed income while drivers would be formally employed by cooperatives with mandatory rights and social protection.

---

23 This component encourages jeepney drivers and operators to merge and form a corporation or a cooperative.

## **United Cavite Workers Association and Pagkakaisa ng Manggagawa sa XY2 Clothing Bureau**

The historical pattern of repression of labor rights in the export processing zones continues to this day. In fact, it has worsened amidst the pandemic as COVID-19 was weaponized by capitalists to violate labor standards, and for the government to exercise social distancing instead of social dialogue with trade unions and labor organizations. In the face of these challenges, workers have organized, engaged with the government for a redress of grievances, and participated in awareness-raising activities to promote labor and women's rights.

The experiences of the workers of two factories, organized by the United Cavite Workers Association, are relevant to this. The two firms are Rainbow 21 Apparel, Inc. and JL Imex Philippines Corporation.

Rainbow 21 Apparel, Inc. is a Korean-owned factory that used to manufacture clothing apparel and accessories for export under brands such as Amy Byer. Its erstwhile facilities were located at Anabu Coastal, Imus, Cavite. It employed about 400 workers including those in third-party service providers until it suddenly closed operations in the middle of 2020.

Workers were not paid their 13th-month pay, overtime premium, holiday pay, the mandated minimum wage, and separation pay and as such, they filed complaints with the National Labor Relations Commission (NLRC). The case was raffled as early as January 2021 but the union did not receive the labor arbiter's order for the submission of the position paper. The long-delayed actions of government agencies concerning workers' grievances were an alarming pattern during the pandemic. Further, Rainbow 21's case reveals how companies have used the pandemic to run away from their obligations with the workers. In response, the workers formed a union in order for them to act collectively to seek redress of their complaints.

Korean-owned JL Imex Philippines Corporation manufactured various products, from dog carriers to bags, that were sold locally as well as for export before it stopped operating last February 2021. It is one of the locators<sup>24</sup> at First Cavite Industrial Estate in Dasmariñas City, Cavite, a privately developed economic zone.

Sensing that their employer would evade paying its obligations due to them, the workers organized the Pagkakaisa ng mga Manggagawa sa JL Imex Phil. Corp. on

---

24 Locators are investors who established factories within the economic zone (or ecozone)..



February 5, 2021. Their fears came true when termination letters stating “effective immediately” were handed to them on February 22, 2021, because it is shutting operations citing serious financial losses brought about by the pandemic. However, the provincial office of the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) neither received an establishment report nor notice of permanent closure from the company.

Individual cases of nonpayment of 13th-month pay, nonimplementation of the service incentive leave, and other complaints were filed separately with the National Conciliation and Mediation Board and the NLRC but the management did not respond to notices of conference. The union filed cases of illegal closure, illegal dismissal, and unfair labor practice (for union-busting) at the NLRC. The workers were not allowed by the Philippine Export Zone Authority (PEZA) officials to picket at the factory premises despite clear guidelines allowing protest activities.

Meanwhile, before the case was raffled to labor arbiters, the company’s properties were auctioned. But the proceeds were not sufficient to cover the workers’ separation pay because a portion of the money was paid for unsettled customs duties of the firm’s equipment. Under pressure from PEZA, the union withdrew its case filed at the NLRC. Once more, the JL Imex case exposes how locators have weaponized the pandemic to violate labor standards and how PEZA has suppressed workers’ rights to peaceful assembly and picketing.

The case of the two Cavite firms is mirrored in another labor dispute in the province of Bulacan. XY2 Clothing Bureau Inc. is a garment firm that produces children’s and women’s apparel located at Barangay Tabo, Guiguinto, Bulacan. The company employs approximately 400 workers. The workers organized a union, the Pagkakaisa ng Manggagawa sa XY2 Clothing Bureau, to facilitate the fight for their regularization and payment of mandatory benefits. But in response to the unionization, management terminated the workers. The union filed an illegal dismissal case at the NLRC Region 3 Pampanga on behalf of 126 workers.

As part of the process of union formation in Rainbow 21 Apparel, JL Imex Philippines, and XY2 Clothing Bureau, workers held labor education sessions to increase their knowledge about labor rights and dispute resolution. The training included their assertion of labor and human rights as claim holders. As a result of this awareness as rights holders, workers of these three companies participated in the pre-International Women’s Day (IWD) 2021 rally organized by the group Partido Manggagawa and the labor coalition Nagkaisa in front of the national office of DOLE in the City of Manila. Even without any previous experience of engaging in dialogue with labor officials, the women leaders of the three unions called on the DOLE to respond to their demands.





**FIGURE 15.** Workers at a meeting in the National Conciliation and Mediation Board–Cavite Office. Photo courtesy of Partido Manggagawa.

The rally and dialogue however were marred by police repression. Despite the presence of a DOLE official, police tried to disperse the protest by confiscating the protest paraphernalia including the sound system of the women workers. Days later, the same modus operandi was conducted by police in the IWD 2021 rally of Nagkaisa in Plaza Miranda, also in the City of Manila.

Another more insidious form of police harassment was visiting unionists in their homes or workplaces. In February 2021, a metal factory in Cavite was visited by the police to ask the union president about his union activities. This incident fits into the so-called *tokhang*<sup>25</sup> modus operandi of the police. Days after this, an anti-union seminar was called by management in which an alleged former union leader spoke. Previously, when the union was first organized in 2016, management also threatened and harassed union officers. Recently, management discriminated against union officers in the promotion of employees.

In the face of increasing repression and to adapt to the mobility restrictions during the pandemic, activities of the three unions continued through online education such as a podcast. Partido Manggagawa started a weekly podcast in late 2021 titled Women's Day Off whose target audiences are women ecozone workers. Topics discussed in the podcast included expanded maternity leave, gender-based violence in the workplace,

---

25 Tokhang is a Filipino colloquial term for "knock and talk."

freedom of association and human rights, and due diligence commitments of global brands. This social media tool became leverage to facilitate women's empowerment even during these multiple crisis situations. The podcast allowed interaction by women workers through posting questions and comments. On several occasions, women leaders either cohosted or spoke as resource persons during the podcast. This online initiative remains operational up to now.

## References

- CNN Philippines Staff. 2020. "748 Private Schools Suspend Operations This School Year, DepEd Says." CNN Philippines, September 9, 2020. <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/9/9/Private-schools-temporary-closure-DepEd.html>
- Israel, Dale G. 2020. "Mactan Export Processing Zone Records First Wave of Retrenchment." *Inquirer.net*, September 26, 2020. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1340251/mactan-export-processing-zone-records-first-wave-of-retrenchment>
- Jazul, Noreen. 2020. "10 Catholic Schools Announce Closure Due to COVID-19." *Manila Bulletin*, November 24, 2020. <https://mb.com.ph/2020/11/24/10-catholic-schools-announce-closure-due-to-covid-19/>
- Locus, Sundy. 2020. "Education Frontliners: No to Private School Layoffs, Wage Cuts." *Daily Tribune*, August 17, 2020. <https://www.pressreader.com/philippines/daily-tribune-philippines/20200817/281956020147895>
- Luna, Franco. 2020. "Roque Washes Hands of Speech Before Mass Gathering in Cebu." *Philstar.com*, November 29, 2020. <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/11/29/2060281/roque-washes-hands-speech-mass-gathering-cebu>
- Metro Manila Vendors Alliance. 2009. "History of Metro Manila Vendors Alliance, From the News." September 26, 2009. <http://metromanilavendorsalliance.blogspot.com/2009/09/history-of-metro-manila-vendors.html>
- Partido Manggagawa. 2020. "Partido Manggagawa Demands the Release of Five Unionists Arrested in Cebu." November 30, 2020. <http://partidongmanggagawa2001.blogspot.com/2020/11/partido-manggagawa-demands-release-of.html>
- Nalangan, Line, Gelyn Rosilio, Joshua Pangilinan, and Niki Graziella Baroy. 2021. *Education for the Marginalized a Year After COVID-19: Reflections on Sitio San Roque's Eskuwela Maralita (Community-Based School), and DepEd's Distance Learning*. Quezon City: Save San Roque.
- Purugganan, Joseph. 2020. "Philippines: Informal Workers Face Brunt of COVID-19 Lockdown." *Focus on the Global South*, April 21, 2020. <https://focusweb.org/philippines-informal-workers-face-brunt-of-covid-19-lockdown/>

- Recio, Redento, Lutfun Nahar Lata, and Ishita Chatterjee. 2021. "Rising Inequalities, Deepening Divides: Urban Citizenship in the Time of COVID-19." *Geographical Research* 59, no. 4 (November): 500–513. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1745-5871.12495>
- Roever, Sally. 2020. "New Crisis Underscores Old Injustices in the Global Economy." *Women in Informal Employment: Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)* (blog). March 30, 2020. <https://www.wiego.org/blog/new-crisis-underscores-old-injustices-global-economy>
- Rosilio, Gelyn, Weng Bautista, Janine Lopez, Ervin Grana, Gabby Martinez, Rafael Dimalanta, and Maxine Faminiano. 2022. *Grassroots-Led Agroecological Urban Farming as a Strategy for Ensuring Food Security and Defending Land Rights in COVID-19 Times: The Experience of the Tanimang Bayan (Community Food Gardens) in Sitio San Roque, North Triangle, Quezon City*. Quezon City: Save San Roque.
- Sitchon, John. 2020. "Sportswear Manufacturer Lays off 4,420 Workers in Cebu Due to Pandemic." *Rappler*, September 8, 2020. <https://www.rappler.com/business/sportswear-manufacturer-lays-off-4420-workers-in-cebu-due-to-pandemic/>
- Tambuyog Development Center. n.d. "Women in Fisheries." Accessed February 24, 2022. <https://www.tambuyog.org/campaigns-and-projects/women-in-fisheries/>
- Venzon, Cliff. 2020. "Philippine Garment Makers Expect 21,000 Layoffs as US Orders Fall." *Nikkei Asia*. September 8, 2020 <https://asia.nikkei.com/Business/Business-trends/Philippine-garment-makers-expect-21-000-layoffs-as-US-orders-fall>

## Burma/Myanmar and Thai–Burma Border

### Introduction<sup>26</sup>

The year 2021 marked the beginning of another era of political unrest in Burma/Myanmar after the military junta seized government power on February 1, at a time when the country was still battling the COVID-19 pandemic. The military commander-in-chief turned ruler Min Aung Hlaing staged a coup d'état to reject the results of the 2020 general elections, which was a historic moment that confirmed the civilian candidates as winners in a landslide electoral victory led by Daw Aung San Suu Kyi of the National League for Democracy (NLD). The junta reasoned that the election results were rigged, and so they threatened to take action on that matter and surrounded the Parliament with soldiers (Goldman 2021).

With the global pandemic still threatening the health of many societies and crippling the socio-political economies of many countries, Burma/Myanmar was left in a more devastating, vulnerable, and marginalized situation. The military halted the distribution of vaccines and humanitarian aid to many citizens, including the border communities. According to some accounts, during the leadership of Suu Kyi, the government purchased vaccines in the latter part of 2020 and was supposed to launch its vaccination program in January 2021. With the ongoing civil disobedience movement against the junta, this did not prosper. Health care workers were among those on the frontlines to protest against the military coup. In the middle of the year, a total of 6 million people died because of COVID-19. With the mismanagement under the military regime, everything turned into disarray (The Irrawaddy 2021).

As an act of resistance to the return of draconian military rule, millions of people flooded the streets of Yangon, Mandalay, Nay Pyi Taw, and other key cities, to express their dissent to the military takeover through sustained protests and mobilizations. However, since the coup was declared, thousands have been killed, while tens of thousands have been arrested and remain in unlawful detention, and numerous other human rights violations to induce a climate of fear across Burma/Myanmar. Grassroots leaders, duly-elected government officials, pro-democracy activists, and members

---

26 Reference can also be made to the documentation report of the online event: Solidarity for Burma/Myanmar: Uphold Democracy, No to Military Rule! Situationers, Solidarity Messages, Protest Songs, and Noise Barrage held last March 22, 2021 prepared by the UP CIDS Program on Alternative Development: [bit.ly/3z7F9Ax](https://bit.ly/3z7F9Ax).

of civil society became targets of the junta's brutal crackdown, disrupting various communication lines and effectively eliminating the shrinking democratic space in the country.<sup>27</sup>

Despite the pandemic and the authoritarian government, the efforts of the local communities to respond to the pandemic continues and are even more appropriate to their needs. The succeeding section highlights five community-based organizations, namely: the Confederation of Trade Unions in Myanmar (CTUM), Mae Tao Clinic, Burma Medical Association, Backpack Health Worker Team, and the Help Without Frontiers (HWF) located on the Thai-Burma border. CTUM is composed of labor organizers and trade unions. HWF helps operate the learning centers for migrant and stateless children, while the rest are allied health organizations that cater to the needs of refugees, migrants, internally displaced peoples, and stateless peoples now living in the border areas. Their narratives reflect the effects of the pandemic compounded by the political turmoil in their country and showcase how their alternative practices stand out under these current conditions.

### **Confederation of Trade Unions in Myanmar (CTUM)<sup>28</sup>**

The CTUM led the participation of workers in the resistance against the military coup since February 2021. Factory workers organized by CTUM were active in mass mobilizations and work stoppages from the early days of the coup and have sustained opposition up to the present. As a result, the repression by the military junta of the labor movement has been ferocious. Union leaders and active workers have been arrested or have been forced underground. Meanwhile, employers are collaborating with the military regime by passing information about union activities to the military even as collective bargaining agreements have been suspended. The intersection of respect for labor rights and the exercise of political freedoms is clear in the case of Burma. The CTUM is calling on the international community for economic sanctions on the military regime and for global brands to act on grave violations of labor and human rights.

---

27 Assistance Association for Political Prisoners (Burma): <https://aappb.org/>.

28 Derived from the presentation of Khaing Zar of the Confederation of Trade Unions in Myanmar during the 3rd Regional Conference on Alternatives with the theme "Advancing and Realizing Alternative Regionalism: Southeast Asian Peoples Solidarity and Resistance in COVID-19 Times" held online from November 13–15, 2021.

## **Mae Tao Clinic (MTC) and Burma Medical Association**

In its inception, the Mae Tao Clinic (MTC) was then a medical referral center where individuals suffering from malaria, wounded people, and pregnant women can seek health care. The role of MTC was to refer these sick people to the hospitals in Thailand, especially those who needed immediate care. With the increasing call to address the health care demands of the “border community,” Dr. Cynthia Maung, founder of MTC, together with her medical team, started to provide primary health care services in 1989 for those who were then affected by the political and military conflicts on both sides of the borders. Included in their services are maternal care and childcare, health care services for infectious and noncommunicable diseases, and training programs for ethnic health workers. Until today, MTC remains in service for the sick and stateless notwithstanding the perils and challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Similar to its neighboring Southeast Asia countries, Thailand also imposed strict restrictions on the movement of people, including the coming in and out of migrants. One of the most affected groups among the migrants is the informal sector. Many of them became unemployed because of the pandemic. This has also affected the number of patients MTC is serving because 50% of their overall patients are migrants living in Thailand. The other half came from the cross-border populations from Myanmar to Thailand. With the restrictions both in Thailand and Myanmar, the number of patients of MTC reduced to 30 percent from 2019 to 2020.

Another challenge that this pandemic posed to MTC was the need to shut down the migrant learning centers which provided service to 6,000 children. Around 300 teachers mobilized their resources during the home-based learning program, as well as the online study program for children. They believe that access to education and protection of the marginalized population is extremely crucial, especially in this COVID-19 crisis. Although both health workers and teachers had mobility restrictions, through the network, they were able to access and provide essential services.

MTC’s goal is to maintain the basic essential services such as health, education, and protection for all marginalized populations in the area. At the same time, its task is to assess their available facilities and capacities to deal with the COVID crisis.

MTC also conducted food drives for the people who faced irregular food supply. With their wide network, they were able to organize teachers, health workers, and social workers who headed the drive. Around 1,000 people in Mae Sot and those who are on the border benefited from this effort.



Moreover, starting April 2020, MTC started training its almost 300 health workers stationed at the health center, among those are from BMA. They were trained regularly for infection, prevention, and public health messaging. MTC also works with the non-health sector to look after the workplace, whether the facility is the school or the health center. Occupational health and safety are among MTC's major concerns. Given their very limited resources, MTC was still able to overcome the challenges of the pandemic.

Given the need for regular screening, contact tracing, and testing of COVID-19 cases, MTC has set up a health screening center and isolation space for suspected cases. This was in collaboration with a local NGO that performs COVID-19 tests.



**FIGURE 16.** MTC health worker administering the COVID-19 vaccine to a community member on the border of Thailand and Burma/Myanmar. Photo courtesy of MTC

MTC also provided services for the returning migrant workers who crossed Mae Sot and continued living in their local villages. With the influx of returning community members, MTC trained more community health workers to prepare for the quarantine and screening of these returning migrants.

In a webinar on COVID-19 in March 2021, Dr. Cynthia explained the situation of Burma/Myanmar concerning the military takeover and the current health crisis. "Sadly, on February 1st, the military coup in Burma has been taking all these important works



being undertaken by the communities. The Burmese army has escalated the military violence both in the cities, like in Yangon and Mandalay, and in the border area. Now, leaders like Daw Aung San Suu Kyi, the elected president, and many other politicians are detained by the military regime.<sup>29</sup>

She also stated that all the COVID-19 testing, vaccination, and the reporting system have been stopped because the reported number of cases was very few. However, before the coup happened, all the states and regions regularly submitted their reports. Health workers from the Burma/Myanmar side worked very hard to protect families and the nation. Now, the teachers, civil society groups, and (especially) the young people, have actively joined the CDM (Civil Disobedience Movement).

Finally, Dr. Cynthia described the situation of Burma/Myanmar: “Burma is now in a crisis, both due to this public health emergency and the complexity of the militarization in the country. Military forces and attacks have now expanded in the ethnic area. The media is repressed, and practitioners are now being arrested. The public health crisis is intensified by the political and economic crisis. People lost their jobs and are very insecure.”

### **Backpack Health Worker Team (BPHWT)**

During the online solidarity gathering for the peoples of Burma/Myanmar also in March 2021<sup>30</sup>, Saw Win Kyaw, Director of the Backpack Health Worker Team (BPHWT) shared his organization's experience as community health workers during the COVID-19 crisis and the resurgence of the military regime in Burma/Myanmar. BPHWT staff are also trained by MTC under Dr. Cynthia.

He explained that the BPHWT has three (3) main programs: (1) Medical Care, (2) Community Health Education and Prevention Program, and (3) Maternal and Child Health Care Program. But with the emergence of COVID-19, the BPHWT has extended its programs to also respond to the needs of the people during the pandemic.

---

29 Summary of presentation during the “Southeast Asian Peoples' Alternatives in Pandemic Times” Webinar. This webinar is part of the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies Webinar Series on Philippine Public Policy in a Time of Pandemic. Watch the webinar here: <https://fb.watch/arB2dhTuxv/>.

30 Reference can also be made to the documentation report of the online event: Solidarity for Burma/Myanmar: Uphold Democracy, No to Military Rule! Situationers, Solidarity Messages, Protest Songs, and Noise Barrage held last March 22, 2021 prepared by the UP CIDS Program on Alternative Development: [bit.ly/3z7F9Ax](https://bit.ly/3z7F9Ax).



**FIGURE 17.** BPHWT health worker providing primary health care in the rural area of Burma/Myanmar. Photo courtesy of BPHWT.

As the violent crackdown intensified in the urban areas of Burma/Myanmar, thousands have fled to the Thai–Burma border to seek refuge in the region’s rough and jungle-like terrain. According to Win Kyaw, there were already 3,000 people at that time, from the cities who arrived in the Karen ethnic area. Among these citizens were high-level government officials as well as police and military deserters. The number is in addition to the current population of internally displaced persons (IDPs) of around 3,000 in the Northern Karen state as a result of sporadic fighting between the military and the ethnic armed group.

Responding to this influx, BPHWT has openly welcomed IDPs into their care and provided them food and shelter. He added that the BPHWT not only provided the basic needs of the arriving IDPs but also ensured their safety and health care by employing a system that would allow their quarantine and isolation.

With the government hospitals and clinics shutting down as medical professionals also joined the anti-coup protests, BPHWT has also prepared their clinics for the surge of citizens hoping to access health care during this time, particularly maternal and child health care. They prepared for contingency medicine, supplies, and equipment, promoted primary care level to intermediate secondary care level, coordinated with local authorities for the citizens’ evacuation plan, conducted advance first aid training to volunteer field health workers, and provided a steady supply of first aid kits.

To augment these efforts, the BPHWT has also set up a new clinic that provided immediate medical assistance to those at the urban centers. According to Win Kyaw, the BPHWT has also coordinated with the International Committee of the Red Cross based in Thailand because of the worsening situation at the borders. The Thailand government, on the other hand, has also prepared for this border crisis by setting up quarantine and COVID-19 testing centers in its periphery. It was reported to have also prepared a settlement place alongside the Thai–Burma border to accommodate around 30,000 displaced people. However, Win Kyaw clarified that most IDPs were rather forced back to Burma/Myanmar [or in other cases, sent abroad] instead of getting safe shelter on the Thailand side of the border.

Ending his sharing, Win Kyaw called the international community: (1) to support initiatives that aim to end the military coup and the call for a federal democracy in Burma/Myanmar, (2) for international agencies such as the United Nations High Commission for Refugees to provide cross-border aid and direct support, and (3) to understand the real situation of the underground community.

### **Help Without Frontiers<sup>31</sup>**

Around 20,000 children from Burma/Myanmar study in Migrant Learning Centers (MLCs) which are learning spaces for migrant school children. There are 66 MLCs in Tak Province, Thailand from nursery to Grade 10, teaching formal and nonformal classes. In June 2020, MLCs closed due to the pandemic.

These prompted the Help Without Frontiers to think of ways to respond to the learning needs of the students, namely home-based learning, online classes supplemented by paper worksheets, provision of sanitary and hygienic support, support for teachers and parents through various training and awareness-raising programs, and student mapping.

These initiatives have been fraught with challenges having to do with teacher and parent energy and mental well-being, child protection, contact time per student, and social-emotional well-being of stakeholders. These challenges have been addressed

---

31 Derived from the presentation of Jonathan Jordan during the 3rd Regional Conference on Alternatives with the theme “Advancing and Realizing Alternative Regionalism: Southeast Asian Peoples Solidarity and Resistance in COVID-19 Times” held online from November 13–15, 2021.

by means of conducting regular meetings with teachers, parents, and communities; provision of social and emotional support for teachers and students; strengthening the social connection among stakeholders; and provision of training and donor support for alternative methods of learning and organizing classes.



**FIGURE 18.** A teacher conducting learning sessions outdoors at the migrant students' community. Photo courtesy of Health Without Frontiers

## References

- Goldman, Russell. 2021. "Myanmar's Coup, Explained." First published February 1, 2021. Updated November 29, 2021. <https://www.nytimes.com/article/myanmar-news-protests-coup.html>
- The Irrawaddy. 2021. "Myanmar to Receive Over 6 Million COVID Vaccine Doses Through GAVI Alliance." The Irrawaddy, October 21, 2021. <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-to-receive-over-6-million-covid-vaccine-doses-through-gavi-alliance.html>
- Min Ye Kyaw. 2021. "Myanmar's Shadow Government Plans US\$300 Million Vaccination Drive to Cover '20 Percent of Population.'" *South China Morning Post*, September 22, 2021. <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3149608/myanmars-shadow-government-plans-us300-million>

## Thailand

### Alternative Agriculture Network (AAN)<sup>32</sup>

Thailand, being the world's second-largest rice exporter, has often been called the "Rice Bowl of Asia." Isan, its northeast region, historically the biggest rice producer in the country, continues to be so. Despite this wealth of resources, the region remains one of the poorest in the country.

Although there are high rates of land ownership among the people of Isan, several factors that critically affect their agricultural production contribute to the prevalence of poverty in the region. Lack of irrigation systems and poor soil beset the region's agricultural production. While these can be remedied through improvements in the irrigation mechanisms, and additional supplements and systems for healthy soil, these require financial resources that the food producers, particularly, the small-scale rice farmers, themselves could not afford. Meanwhile, there is a continuous increase in the cost of agricultural inputs (i.e., seeds, fertilizers, pesticides) and basic necessities, making it increasingly difficult for them to reach adequate economic returns to cover primary expenses for rice production. This dire economic situation conditions the small-scale rice farmers to take out loans and potentially fall into debt, which may exacerbate their precarity (Phakdeewanich 2015).

Moreover, additional problems have surfaced due to the extensive use of agrochemical inputs in Thailand's conventional agricultural production. The heavy use of agrochemical inputs has damaged the soil beyond repair, leading to lower agricultural productivity in the long run. This added to the farmers' financial burden and posed greater health issues to their communities and consumers (Lee 2021). These negative consequences are the result of the "Green Revolution" Policy created by the Thai government in the 1960s. This program started the massive importation of farm chemicals to the country and encouraged small-scale rice farmers to grow high-yielding rice varieties that necessitate agrochemicals. Since then, the Thai government has promoted market-oriented agricultural production, education, and infrastructure centered on chemical use (Lee 2021).

---

32 This report draws from the presentation of Kassirin Phiboon of Alternative Agriculture Network during the 3rd Regional Conference on Alternatives with the theme "Advancing and Realizing Alternative Regionalism: Southeast Asian Peoples Solidarity and Resistance in COVID-19 Times" held online from November 13–15, 2021.

As a response and countermeasure, farmers and nongovernment organizations in the 1980s initiated an alternative agricultural movement. In 1984, the Alternative Agriculture Network (AAN) was established in Isan. AAN is a network of more than 3,000 farming households in the eight provinces of the northeastern region of Thailand, devoted to small-scale, sustainable organic agriculture that supports the land and promotes fair trade, and empowers both farmers and customers.

The movement works to replace the market-oriented and chemical-dependent food system with an alternative model that is sustainable and environment-friendly. It also rejects exploitative contract farming and ecologically harmful farming practices such as monocropping and extensive use of agrochemicals. It refocuses agricultural production to (1) respond to the needs of the community, (2) make use of local indigenous knowledge, and (3) nurture the ecosystem (Heis 2015; Alternative Agriculture Network 2009).

Despite the progress made by this movement, the situation of small-scale rice farmers worsened even further after the Thai government enacted the ‘Rice Pledging’ Policy in 2014. Small-scale rice farmers, as a result, suffered from frequent rice crises and intense competition of rice production at the international level.

When COVID-19 hit Thailand in 2020, Isan small-scale rice farmers (both conventional and organic rice farmers) were amongst the most affected by the imposed interprovincial travel restrictions as it made the delivery of agricultural produce improbable, contributing to the further decline of rice’s farm gate price. While both the conventional and organic rice farmers were able to mitigate food security issues through growing their own food, and foraging in their localities, it was apparent that the adverse impact was more on the conventional farmers than the organic practitioners.

The organic rice farmers aided by AAN were able to utilize other marketing channels (e.g., use of online platforms) and reach out to alternative markets (e.g. organic markets, community markets, health shops, hotels and restaurants, universities, schools, and government agencies). They were able to negotiate and sell their agricultural produce at a fair price even amid the crisis. According to Kassirin Phiboon, a researcher from AAN, organic rice farmers only suffered a 10–20% income decrease during the pandemic compared to their conventional counterparts whose income dropped by 50–60 percent.

Despite the added vulnerability and uncertainty that COVID-19 caused to food producers, the organic rice farmers managed to keep afloat and resilient because aside from accessing alternative markets and other marketing channels, they used agrochemical fertilizers sparingly which means lesser expenses on inputs. They



supplemented their income from the sale of agricultural produce through rice processing. They have also diversified their crops and raised livestock in their farms. This agricultural model has created a community between food producers and consumer circles by learning and sharing knowledge together. It further created a more self-sufficient and sustainable economy as well as a healthier environment for food producers, their communities, and consumers. Their ways of farming that follow the sustainable organic agriculture community model have proven to be effective in sustaining themselves amid the crisis.

### **Southern Peasants Federation of Thailand (SPFT)<sup>33</sup>**

#### **Agroecology and Social-Environmental Justice amidst the Pandemic**

“We need to think about how to resist these governments and the capital that destroy our communities and our environments,” explained Suraphon Songruk, Secretary-General of the Southern Peasants Federation of Thailand (SPFT). He was referring to government responses to agrarian and environmental crises amidst the health crisis that is the COVID-19 pandemic, which is a special concern in the South of Thailand where private companies such as oil palm plantations have controlled land for cash crops and an export-dependent economy.

Disregarded by the national government that facilitated policies implying land grabs, many small-scale Thai peasants have been withheld access to land. The agro-industrial monocrop-based plantations operating in the country have not only controlled land ownership but have also exploited natural resources by rapaciously draining soil nutrients, leaving what used to be arable lands suitable for a variety of food crops for local consumption. These issues of peasant and ecological injustices have worsened amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

Many marginalized Thai communities since 2020, including the peasantry, struggled to earn a living due to the restrictions on movement and lockdowns imposed under the State of Emergency placed by the national government as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Government allocation in the form of financial assistance and food aid was implemented poorly especially given the delayed access to information

---

33 This report draws from the presentation of Suraphon Songruk of the Southern Peasants Federation of Thailand during the 3rd Regional Conference on Alternatives with the theme “Advancing and Realizing Alternative Regionalism: Southeast Asian Peoples Solidarity and Resistance in COVID-19 Times” held online from November 13–15, 2021.

in rural communities. Members of SPFT were not even able to receive any aid because of their “unofficial” status as community settlements.

### What has SPFT Done So Far to Respond to These Tied Problems of Land Ownership, Environmental Destruction, and Health Crisis?

Suraphon pointed out that SPFT has been building communities to achieve food sovereignty where peasants can sustain themselves and their communities without the intervention of corporate entities. SPFT enforces its own collective land management that ensures farmers and agricultural workers access to food produced with their own labor on their own land. This is being realized through Collective Land Titles (CLT) that act as the basis for collective responsibility for land and natural resources.

SPFT also puts into practice the peasantry’s struggle for self-determination by allowing their members to enjoy their right to livelihood and common properties including the soil, water, and forests. By doing all these, SPFT has championed community-based governance that goes against the mainstream development paradigm and even prepared them for the current COVID-19 crisis. For many years now, SPFT has been fighting against Thailand’s centralized land management system that only begets inequitable land distribution and land concentration to a few powerful elites (Clima Fund, n.d.).

Prior to the pandemic, SPFT has already prepared and expanded collective lands for diverse food crops such as rice and vegetables. Besides seed banking, livestock raising has also helped sustain the nutritional food needs of members. They have also ventured into other income-generating farm practices such as goat breeding and the production of dairy products.

### Agroecology against Climate Change

As Suraphon suggests, their practices do not only address issues of land ownership and food sovereignty, but also respond to the global climate emergency. Through agroecology, or the practice of sustainable, organic, and diversified farming, SPFT continues to rehabilitate the land that used to be chemically-intensive oil palm plantations. Unlike these large-scale plantations oriented towards export and big profit, peasant members have sustainably utilized the land not for huge profit-making but rather for local food consumption and livelihood opportunities.

Especially in the last two years, however, climate change has been affecting weather patterns that also shape food production. Suraphon explained that while

monocultures of rubber and oil palm are commonly operated with greenhouse-gas-emitting equipment, people-led organic farming helps mitigate the effects of changing patterns through small-scale cultivation and the use of locally made organic inputs. Agroecology for SPFT liberates farmers and agricultural workers from the control of corporate-based agro-industries.

## Gender and Development among the Peasantry

Women also contributed greatly to SPFT's agroecology. Beyond their role of securing food for their families, women also supply labor in the collective farms that produce enough income for their communities. Moreover, as Suraphon explained, women play a key role in securing and protecting seeds through seed banking, and in working towards food sovereignty.

## Tied Human and Ecological Rights

SPFT maintains its stance that grassroots communities and organizations must come together to campaign for democratic rights. Aside from climate and food sovereignty, these include human rights and the rights of nature. To amplify these rights, SPFT calls for the codification of these rights and speeding up political campaigns about them.

Amidst the pandemic, many governments in Southeast Asia have responded to the crisis with an iron fist, harming both human individuals who do not support authoritarian power, and ecosystems that are disturbed by continued mass production. According to Suraphon, many communities have already been committed to resistance in order to interconnect social and environmental justice, and this is a statement that peoples on the ground can actually determine their own futures.

## Assembly of the Poor (AOP)<sup>34</sup>

### Resistance through Water Management and Ecological Conservation of the Fishes

The case of the Pak Mun River Dam has been one of the defining hydroelectric power issues of peoples in Southeast Asia in recent years. Construction began on May 15, 1991, with financing from the World Bank under its Third Power System Development

---

34 This report is based on an interview with Kridsakorn Silarak of the Assembly of the Poor in cooperation with Don Tajaroensuk of the People's Empowerment Foundation (Thailand) last August 21, 2021.

Project. It was built intersecting the Mun–Mekong river system, near the border between Laos and Ubon Ratchathani, located in the northeast region of Thailand.

The dam continues to be operated by the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand (EGAT), which commissioned the feasibility study attached to their proposal to the Thai government under former Prime Minister Chatchai Choonhavan. The dam was completed in 1994 and was expected to resolve the energy demand in the northeast region of Thailand.

The construction of the dam was heavily contested by people's organizations and affected local communities along the Mun River. Among the organizations that participated in the series of mobilizations against dam projects is the Assembly of the Poor (*Samatcha khon chon*), a grassroots peoples' network of organizations representing rural poor, farmers, urban poor, workers, indigenous peoples, and NGOs (Assembly of the Poor 2001).

Succeeding governments have come and gone with promises of land distribution and reparation for those directly and indirectly affected by the dam. Before the dam existed, the river was a natural home for the fish—a food source, spawning grounds, and natural refuge (International Rivers 2014). It was stated in an independent study conducted by the World Commission on Dams in 2000 that the critical lapse of the Pak Mun Dam construction by EGAT is observed in its impact on fish and fisheries:

The absence of [a] comprehensive assessment of the households whose fishing occupation, fishing income, and subsistence was affected by the dam at appraisal meant considerable unplanned cost escalation in terms of compensation. The participation of affected communities and civil society was elicited late in the process of compensation, mitigation. (Amornsakchai et al 2000, 99)

The Assembly of the Poor and organizations involved in the dam struggle stood united in the campaign for just compensation of affected resident fisherfolks who lost their livelihood as an impact of the continued dam operation. The movement also called for the year-round opening of the dam for the safe migration of fishes crossing the Pak Mun River.



**FIGURE 19.** Fisherfolks filed in July 2021 a lawsuit against the governors of Ubon Ratchathani and the Electricity Generating Authority of Thailand. Photo courtesy of AOP

## Dam All Year Round, Just Compensation, the Case of the People vs Pak Mun Dam

On May 22, 2014, former general Prayut Chan-o-cha of the Royal Thai Army staged a coup and declared himself as the new Prime Minister of the now-defunct military junta of the National Council for Peace and Order. This event forced democratic organizations to focus on local organizing in communities and rural sectors due to the military-led witch-hunting. Now under the banner of the People's Movement for a Just Society, or P-Move, the coalition sought to revive the rural peasant and land rights movement from the harsh lessons of historical injustices under the Thai military junta government.

One P-Move-led initiative is the “ecological conservation of fishes.” This project continues from the decades-long organizing and struggle among residents in response to the construction of the Pak Mun Dam and its subsequent damages. The nature of the project is ecological yet remains political as it aims to address the ecological decline of the Mun River, which has directly affected the socioeconomic welfare of the communities in the fifty-five villages in four subdistricts of Kongjeam (โขงเจียม),

Pitboonsongkram (พิบูลสงคราม), Sirittorn (สิรินธร), and Tansum (तालसुम) whose primary source of livelihood relies on the Mun river system.

The “Save the Fishes” project or *Kae-Rak Sak Pun-Pha*, as it is locally referred to, aims to address the pressing needs of the fisherfolk communities by organizing conservation and monitoring activities along the Mun River. To achieve this, they employ methods based on scientific and local indigenous knowledge. Their monitoring activities are based on tell-tale data from fisherfolk, examining caught fishes, both in the natural and local market, and using trawling nets (Silarak 2018). More recently since 2018, they partnered with the Rangsit University College of Engineering to develop specialized submersible which can observe the fish behavior in their natural environment (RSU Media Rangsit University 2018). This initiative has since grown and adapted in 10 areas in Ubon Ratchathani province, 8 along the Mun river and 2 in its adjacent river tributaries in Tung Lung and Dom Noi respectively (Silarak 2019 quoted in Tadem et al. 2020).

## COVID Situation and Local Response

The COVID-19 only added to the already burdened situation in this northeast region. In an interview with UP CIDS AltDev, Kridsakorn Silarak, a local community organizer with P-Move, described their depressing situation: “Fish is difficult to find. The fish market is closed. Supply of fish went down. Local people do not have much money and they rely mostly on remittances.” These remittances are from family members who worked in Bangkok or outside their local community. Mobility was restricted and compensation from the government, amounting to ฿2500 (Thai baht) was just good for 3 months and barely enough to meet the residents’ daily needs. The local government also provided a program wherein residents were given an allowance of ฿150 per day which they can use to purchase for goods in select stores. However, this program seems not needs-based which consequently received low community affirmation. The locals told Kridsakorn that they would rather need money to purchase fishing supplies and fuel for their boats.

Despite the pandemic, the local communities remain adamant in organizing on issues related to the Pak Mun Dam. This attitude led to the monumental filing of a class-action lawsuit on July 30, 2021, by the Assembly of the Poor, represented by Kridsakorn, against the governor of Ubon Ratchathani as chair of the Pak Mun Dam Water Management Subcommittee, and authorities of EGAT on administrative grounds (Sarakadee Magazine 2021). Their litigation states the failure of the duty bearers to open the dam from June 17 to July 27 despite recent formal agreements, 95 meters above sea level criteria. The Assembly of the Poor described this recent litigation as

opening a new battlefield in seeking accountability for the fisherfolk communities and against “liberalizing the genocide of fish” (Sarakadee Magazine 2021).

### HealthNet Foundation<sup>35</sup>

HealthNet is a public charity organization aiming to develop networks, particularly among health care organizations in the northeast of Thailand. It also serves as a coordinator for government organizations (GOs), nongovernment organizations (NGOs), and community-based organizations (CBOs) to work together and support one another in developing health care staff and the quality of life of local people especially those with vulnerabilities.



**FIGURE 20.** Capacitated Volunteers of SDNA conducting COVID-19 test. Photo courtesy of SDNA

Thippawan Mokpa, the director of HealthNet, shared that the organization’s key strategy is establishing a core team in their partner communities who will organize and facilitate the activities. Establishing the core team entails improving the members’ mindset in healthy living with dimensions such as mental health, economic, social, culture, and gender; building their capacities such as communication skills, leadership skills, and teamwork skills; and facilitating cooperation among the community, government, and NGOs.

35 Derived from the presentation of Thippawan Mokpa of HealthNet Foundation during the 3rd Regional Conference on Alternatives with the theme “Advancing and Realizing Alternative Regionalism: Southeast Asian Peoples Solidarity and Resistance in COVID-19 Times” held online from November 13–15, 2021.



Once the core team is equipped with the necessary skills, it then disseminates knowledge on COVID-19 and relevant policies in the community through materials such as posters and audio drama which are available in various dialects and local languages. The core team also disseminates COVID-19 prevention, distributes sanitation items for the community such as cotton and surgical masks and thermometers, and produces alcohol hand gel. The village leader and health volunteers visit people in the community to provide information on COVID-19, some hygienic items, school supplies, and food items.

Reflecting upon the experiences of the organization in their community-based health care practices, Thippawan suggested that the good relationship of the organization with the GOs, CBOs, and NGOs is essential. Also foundational is strengthening the skills of the core team in organizing activities and bringing the services to the community. Finally, what is equally important is making sure that there is enough budget, materials, and staff in addressing the COVID-19 at the community level.

### **Stop Drink Network Association (SDNA)<sup>36</sup>**

Stop Drink Network Association (SDNA) is a nongovernment organization established by the Thai Health Promotion Foundation in 2003. SDNA focuses on health risks and social costs linked to alcohol consumption. It works in the areas of policy advocacy, youth networking, community base, capacity building, and social campaign for behavior change. It is present in 10 sites in Bangkok, mostly in slum areas populated by workers.

According to Teera Watcharapranee, Executive Director of SDNA, the third wave of the pandemic in Thailand started in July 2021 and peaked in August and September. The Bangkok health services failed to handle new cases well, as infection reached more than 5,000 people per day (the highest at 10,000 cases per day). Some patients claimed that they were endlessly waiting for an ambulance, a hospital bed, a doctor, oxygen, and eventually for their death.

---

36 This is a synthesis of the presentation of Teera Watcharapranee of Stop Drink Network Association during the 3rd Regional Conference on Alternatives, November 11–13, 2021.

## Alcohol Drinking and COVID-19

Alcohol drinking is one of the factors that contributed to the spread of the coronavirus, considering that the infection spreads quickly inside pubs, bars, and entertainment venues. The practice has also adversely affected a person's immunity against viral infections. Further, alcohol is an unnecessary commodity in crisis situations. And importantly, there is a piece of misinformation being spread that alcohol drinking will actually help kill the virus in the throat.

During the first wave of the pandemic in 2020, the Thai government banned the sale of liquor in the country for a month. And during the third wave in 2021, the government closed pubs and bars and prohibited the sale of hard liquor in restaurants. Only buying and consuming alcohol at home was allowed.

## Building a Community Working Group

According to Teera, the vitality of SDNA's partnership with the community can be traced to its social capital already cultivated before the pandemic. SDNA has been running a campaign in the community to reduce alcohol consumption in the community by educating the community on the health risks of alcohol. There is already an existing club of people composed of community members who have stopped drinking and are doing volunteer work to advance the advocacy of SDNA. It constantly communicated with the communities through online meetings to facilitate the sharing of experiences and support their needs.

## Community Action: Body and Mental Health

In order to help address the problem of increasing COVID-19 infection in the community, SDNA established a team and a coordination point area, provided personal protective equipment; supported access to food, water, and herbal alternative medicine; gave advice and encouragement; maintained an information center where people can discuss and share experiences and lessons; coordinated severe patients with agencies or organizations providing primary health care to obtain access to oxygen tanks and referrals; facilitated access to Favipiravir (a medicine that can only be obtained from medical doctors); and provided an RT-PCR test obtained from concerned agencies. Although food is free in the community kitchen, people may choose to pay for it with any amount, which SDNA accepted and used to buy food supplies for the next round of community sharing.

Teera explained that SDNA's strength generates from the strong relationship between the organization and the communities, the pride and confidence that its volunteers have in the work they do, and the vital contribution of the previous drinkers and alcoholics who now volunteer and help convince other members of the community to reduce or quit drinking.

SDNA continues to mobilize its volunteers to help the communities confront the "next crises" in "economy, education, and emotion" brought about by the pandemic. It is also steadfast in working with the communities to prepare for the next waves of COVID-19 infections by connecting them to the local government, local health service, and other NGOs.

## References

- Alternative Agriculture Network. 2009. "About the AAN." August 2009. <https://aanesan.wordpress.com/about/>
- Amornsakchai, Sakchai, Philippe Annez, Suphat Vongvisessomjai, Sansanee Choowaew, Thailand Development Research Institute, Prasit Kunurat, Jaruwan Nippanon, et al. *Pak Mun Dam, Mekong River Basin, Thailand*. Cape Town: World Commission on Dams. <https://www.mrcmekong.org/assets/Publications/Council-Study/Amornsakchai-et-al-2001-Case-Study-PakMunDam-MRB-Thailand.pdf>
- Assembly of the Poor. 2001. "A Long March Against Dam by the Assembly of the Poor." Nadir.org, October 13, 2001. [https://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/free/dams/moon/1017march\\_aop.htm](https://www.nadir.org/nadir/initiativ/agp/free/dams/moon/1017march_aop.htm)
- Clima Fund. n.d. "The Southern Peasants' Federation of Thailand – SPFT (Southern Peasant Cooperatives)." Accessed February 24, 2022. <https://climasolutions.org/partner/the-southern-peasants-federation-of-thailand-spft-southern-peasant-cooperatives/>
- Heis, Alexandra. 2015. "The Alternative Agriculture Network Isan and its Struggle for Food Sovereignty: A Food Regime Perspective of Agricultural Production in Northeast Thailand." *Austrian Journal of South-East Asian Studies* 8 (1, January): 67–86. <https://doi.org/10.14764/10.ASEAS-2015.1-5>
- International Rivers. 2014. "Pak Mun Dam: A Struggle of Fishers, An Epic of River Protection." December 2014. <https://archive.internationalrivers.org/resources/8483>

- Lee, Suyeon. 2021. "In the Era of Climate Change: Moving Beyond Conventional Agriculture in Thailand." *Asian Journal of Agriculture and Development* 18, no. 1 (June): 1–14. <https://doi.org/10.37801/ajad2021.18.1.1>
- Phakdeewanich, Titipol. 2015. "The Challenging Circumstances and Future Prospects for Thai Rice Farmers." *Kyoto Review*, March 2015. <https://kyotoreview.org/yav/the-challenging-circumstances-and-future-prospects-for-thai-rice-farmers/>
- RSU Media Rangsit University. 2018. "โดรนสำรวจใต้น้ำ สำรวจพันธุ์ปลาในแม่น้ำมูล" ("Underwater Survey Drone Explore Fish Species in the Mun River"). April 25, 2018. Video, 3:32. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EPXBvIbCPo8>
- Sarakadee Magazine*. 2021. "ไขปริศนาการเปิดและปิดประตูระบายน้ำเขื่อนปากมูล" ("Solving the mystery of opening and closing the door of Pak Mun Dam Drainage"). August 2, 2021. <https://www.sarakadee.com/2021/08/02/%e0%b9%80%e0%b8%82%e0%b8%b7%e0%b9%88%e0%b8%ad%e0%b8%99%e0%b8%9b%e0%b8%b2%e0%b8%81%e0%b8%a1%e0%b8%b9%e0%b8%a5/>
- Silarak, Kridsakorn. April 2018. "ภาพปลาใต้น้ำ วังปูลายโคตร" ("Underwater Fish Picture, Wang Pu Chan Kot"). April 22, 2018. Video, 1:01. <https://youtu.be/buj2Z3wV-RY>
- . 2019. "Peoples vs. Pak Mun Dam: A Fisherfolk Movement for Justice." Presented at the 2nd International Conference on Alternatives: Building Peoples' Movements in Southeast Asia, Quezon City, Philippines, October 24, 2019.
- Tadem, Eduardo et al. 2020. "Deepening Solidarities Beyond Borders Among Southeast Asian Peoples: A Vision for a Peoples' Alternative Regional Integration." Conference Proceedings. Quezon City: UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies. <https://cids.up.edu.ph/download/conference-proceedings-2nd-southeast-asian-conference-on-alternatives-building-peoples-movements-in-southeast-asia-towards-an-alternative-model-of-regionalism-2/>

## Timor-Leste

### Uniaun Agrikultores Ermera (UNAER)<sup>37</sup>

The Uniaun Agrikultores Ermera (UNAER) or Ermera Peasant Union was officially established in 2010, predominantly composed of coffee farmers who were affected by land conflict in the municipality of Ermera that started during the Portuguese colonial rule until the Indonesian occupation that ended in 1999. Since its inception, UNAER has been known for the peasant struggle for agrarian reform and the practice of agroecology.

UNAER envisions “to obtain a just agriculture society and sovereignty, live in the spirit of collectivism, social solidarity and sustainability from generation to generation” (Guterres 2018). UNAER also believes in two important strategies: defending and fighting for popular and genuine agrarian reform policy; and defending and promoting sustainable agriculture policy or model.

Anchored in these strategies, UNAER has expanded its members, now having a total membership of 40,000 farmers coming from the 28 different communities within Ermera. These farmers not only organize themselves to broaden their scope, but also provide several programs to the union. These include popular education on sustainable agriculture, nursery building, and community training such as integrated farming.

With the pandemic still disrupting the day-to-day lives of people, the communities in Ermera are also greatly affected. During the earlier stage of the pandemic, the government of Timor-Leste imposed a total lockdown restricting and prohibiting the movement of people from one place to another. From an outside perspective, Timor-Leste was hailed for successfully controlling the COVID-19 infection through tight border security and effective contact tracing (King 2021). But internally, the socioeconomic impact of the pandemic on the people has strongly challenged government accountability.

Income was scarce due to restrictions to markets, mostly centered in the capital Dili. For this reason, Ermera farmers could not organize their regular social activities like market distribution. The produce that was supposed to be sold in the market was not delivered to customers leading to income loss. In some areas of Ermera, there

---

37 This account of UNAER's response to COVID-19 came from an interview with Leo Soares of UNAER on 02 December 2021.

was food insecurity mainly because farmers only grow a single crop such as coffee or potato. The income supposed to be generated from the harvest of this single crop was hindered by mobility restrictions to market access.



**FIGURE 21.** Members of UNAER continuing their agroecological farming during this pandemic. Photo courtesy of UNAER

The urban centers suffered the most. Many lost their jobs and experienced inadequacies of basic necessities such as food. At one time, hunger has resulted in suicide. Simultaneously, the devastating flood in April 2021 worsened the crisis. On the other hand, the government responded poorly to the pandemic. Leo Soares, researcher and technical adviser of UNAER in an online interview narrated that a US\$200 subsidy and some food packages were given to citizens per household. However, these were not enough especially for families with more than 10 members. The support only lasted for about two to three days.



Leo added that they were bothered by the authoritarian tendencies and militarism in enforcing lockdown policies. The government entrusted its military force and police officers to ensure that people are following health protocols, they get the vaccines, and in some cases beat people (vendors) if they sell outdoors. Many citizens were deprived of their right to speak, and they were forced to follow whatever the government imposed. Because Ermera is one of the districts that have a low turnout of vaccinated population (during the time of this interview), the government, with its military and police forces, coerced citizens, particularly the unorganized communities to get the vaccines. Leo added that FONGTIL,<sup>38</sup> the umbrella organization of civil society in Timor-Leste that has been monitoring the vaccination program, raised the issue of rough military enforcement. In response, the government tried to change their ways by socializing in the villages.

In contrast to government responses, UNAER approached the pandemic in a more people-centered way. Those practicing agroecology or diversified farming with four or more types of crops had a better situation. Food scarcity was not an issue. Under the leadership of UNAER, farmer communities responded to those in need by coming in solidarity with one another through the exchange of their farm produce. They also distributed food aid along with face masks and hand sanitizers donated by their support groups.

One of the programs they conducted in the community is the continuing education and awareness building about the COVID-19 pandemic along with safety and health protocols that people need to follow. Concurrently, they organized discussions on vaccines such as the importance and benefit of vaccination. UNAER also directly visited the villages to survey the situation on the ground and conduct direct interviews. Results of these interviews revealed that despite the lack of financial sources, many of their members survived the situation because of the diverse food they have cultivated in their lands. This fact pushed them to encourage the members to continue the production in order to overcome the pandemic. Furthermore, UNAER strengthened the consumption of herbal medicines as an alternative health protection measure.

---

38 FONGTIL means Timor-Leste NGOs Forum





**FIGURE 22.** HAK conducting a seminar on the improvement of court service to ensure prisoners' right to due process. Photo courtesy of Radio Comunidade Cova Taroman

### Asosiasaun HAK<sup>39</sup>

The Asosiasaun HAK or Association for Law, Human Rights, and Justice is a human rights organization that monitors human rights violations in Timor-Leste. With the total lockdown imposed by the government, organizations like HAK further experienced the shrinking space for democracy. Face-to-face mobilizations and other organizational activities were halted. The government took the pandemic as an opportunity to even restrict the movements of social movements like HAK. Intensive negotiations with the government have to be done in order to continue the work of the association.

Sisto Dos Santos, the executive director, noted the effects of the pandemic not only on their organization but also on the education sector, particularly the students. He said Timor-Leste had an extremely bad internet connection. In 2019, a report showed that Timor-Leste is second to the last among the 207 countries with slow internet

---

39 This report is a summary of the discussion of Sisto Dos Santos of Asosiasaun HAK (HAK Association) as a panel reactor during a workshop session at the 3rd Conference on Alternatives organized by UP CIDS AltDev held on November 11–13, 2021.

speed (Seasi.co 2019). This problem has hindered the organizing of students. Sisto stated that the government politicized the pandemic by sowing fear which caused confusion among the students. Many citizens and these young people were afraid of going to the hospital because of a possible viral infection. People were even scared of getting a swab test for COVID-19. At the height of the lockdown, some students started living in hotels and cabs while the government took advantage of the situation. In response, Asosiasaun HAK, together with other nongovernment and human rights organizations, provided temporary shelter to these students in Dili. They also arranged logistical support for these students to return to their respective provinces.

The government has sown fear and trauma among its citizens that despite being sick, the people would rather stay in their homes instead of getting hospitalized. There were no medicines available in the hospitals because the government only allotted 10 percent of the total budget to the health sector.

## References

- Guterres, Alberto Martins. 2018. "Ermera Peasant Union and Tara-Bandu: a Practice to Preserve and Protect the Land Struggle." Presented during the Conference on Alternatives in Southeast Asia: Rethinking Cross-border Regionalism, November 27–29, 2018, Quezon City.
- King, Chloe. 2021. "A Crisis in Timor-Leste Reveals the Hollowness of 'Build Back Better' Rhetoric." *The Diplomat*, April 16, 2021. <https://thediplomat.com/2021/04/a-crisis-in-timor-leste-reveals-the-hollowness-of-build-back-better-rhetoric/>
- Seasi.co. 2019. "Rank of Countries with Fastest (and Slowest) Internet in The World 2019." July 12, 2019. <https://seasia.co/2019/07/12/rank-of-countries-with-fastest-and-slowest-internet-in-the-world-2019>

## Regional

### Asian Music for Peoples' Peace and Progress (AMP3)<sup>40</sup>

#### AMP3's response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

A year before the pandemic, the Asian Movement for Peoples' Peace and Progress or AMP3, a collective of artists with a network of socially engaged musicians across Asia, organized a week-long songwriting workshop in Bangkok, Thailand. The idea was to write and produce new songs through a process of co-creation of new songs and cross-translation of existing material.



**FIGURE 23.** Poster of AMP3 for its online regional solidarity event. Photo courtesy of AMP3.

---

40 This case was written by Joseph Purugganan of AMP3.

“Sama-Sama: Asian Co-Creative Gathering” brought together singer-songwriters associated with AMP3 from Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Timor-Leste, and Thailand to produce songs about social, political, cultural, and other issues they and their communities face.

Buoyed by the release of the album *A Village in the Making: Peoples’ Music from Southeast Asia*, a collection of original songs composed and recorded by the AMP3 members, the plan was to quickly follow that up with a second album of songs from the Sama-Sama workshop.

Like everything else, those plans changed with the pandemic. The first response was to regroup and check in on how the members were doing. Zoom calls were organized for members to share updates on the health situation, and how communities that we belong to or engage with closely are doing, across our respective countries. We also discussed how governments across the region are responding to the crisis, with serious concerns raised against militarized and heavy-handed responses, particularly in the implementation of lockdowns. The particular situation of full-time, working musicians and so-called gig-economy workers also became a topic of discussion.

### Sama-Sama Music: Beyond Borders

These discussions eventually turned into brainstorming sessions that led to the conceptualization of Sama-Sama: Music Beyond Borders, a series of online performances aimed at building regional solidarity through music in the time of the COVID-19 crisis.

A total of fourteen online performances were conducted from March to April 2020 with performances from Cambodia, Indonesia, Philippines, Thailand, Timor-Leste, Japan, and Filipino migrant groups in Canada.

### Kumustahan at Diskurso

Aside from performances, AMP3 added another element to its online response—cross-cultural sharing of experiences and exchange of views and perspectives among artists and activists on key issues faced by communities during the pandemic.

The online spaces allowed artists to report on the situation in their respective communities as well as how they themselves are coping with the crisis. They shared about anxieties that cultural workers are feeling over an uncertain future, but also how their music and art have provided an outlet for them to cope and help others to overcome the crisis. There was a discussion on the impact of the pandemic on indigenous communities, with Karen musician and AMP3 member Dr. Suwichan

Phatthanaphraiwan (Chi) from Thailand, and Judy Pasimio, Coordinator of Lilak, Purple Action for Indigenous Women's Rights in the Philippines. Another discussion among Bali-based artists highlighted local efforts of artists to raise funds to buy protective equipment for health workers through concerts and cultural performances of local artists, all posted online as well.

## Community Outreach Projects

AMP3 members also initiated local community outreach projects during the pandemic. One such project was the Rice for Fish, Fish for Rice Project initiative. Chi Suwichan and Jenny Kueuwa from the Karen indigenous community pioneered the idea of “cultural economy” in their food-exchange project that aimed to build cross-sectoral solidarity and mutual aid between indigenous farmers and sea people in Thailand.

As explained by Chi, “Karen people provide their rice in exchange for fish caught by sea people. The program is a mutual help and solidarity project during the COVID-19 period. The sea people are struggling to make ends meet and secure their own food, as they cannot sell their fish because of the lockdown imposed by the government.” Chi added that the project was designed “so that the dried fish can be exchanged with Karen rice in the mountain because Karen people have also been preoccupied with the effort to stop the wildfires that have devastated our areas (prior to COVID-19). So we also need dry food to eat in the forest during this crisis.”

Another project initiated by Thai musicians, Nitithorn Thongthirakul (Ae) and Pakapol Kornkranok (Pik) from Bangkok, Thailand, provided children, especially in the rural areas, access to musical instruments, to help them cope with the restrictions of the pandemic, as well as giving them skills to pursue a career in music. The Messenger Band from Cambodia, who works with garment factory workers, sex workers, farmers, and cultural workers, continued to use their music to give voice to community aspirations and raise awareness of social issues.

Among the countries in Southeast Asia, Cambodia had a relatively smaller number of cases in the early part of 2020, which meant fewer restrictions. This allowed the band to continue their grassroots community work, facilitate community-level discussions on issues, and join efforts to document their impact. The band channeled these interactions with the community to the writing and production of new songs, that touch on themes related to the COVID-19 induced health and economic crisis. In the Philippines, the bands Village Idiots and Musikang Bayan spearheaded and supported efforts like Kayakap: Fundraising Campaign for Working Musicians, and Lilak's Babayanihan: Women's Solidarity for indigenous communities to raise funds in support of fellow artists, as well as communities in dire need of economic relief.

## Songs as Chronicles

Musicians channeled their creative energies into new compositions dealing with themes related to the pandemic and the economic crisis. The plight of medical frontliners became a central theme that inspired the creation of new songs from the Messenger Band in Cambodia, Village Idiots, and Danny Fabella in the Philippines. Songs of resistance and defiance also emerged in reaction to militarized responses in the Philippines. Danny Fabella's composition "Unseen Enemy" for example lamented the loss of lives and the failed State response:

We continue to lose precious lives every day  
But the people in power, who are supposed to care, don't dare  
So it's up to us to come together  
With kindness and reason, understanding and love to share

## Solidarity and Resistance

New songs about resistance also emerged during the crisis as communities challenged increasing authoritarianism and militarization across the region. Nitithorn "Ae" Thongthirakul's song "The Birds Haven't Stopped Calling," based on a poem by Thai activist Wisa Kanthup, was shared in various online solidarity events for activists in Myanmar.

AMP3 members Bong Ramilo and the Village Idiots also helped set up Resistors Radio, a social media platform to share songs of resistance from and outside the Philippines. Resistors Radio organized live chats as well with musicians to discuss their songs, and how their music and art contribute to advancing local and international struggles. One episode of Resistors Radio Chat featured a discussion with Myanmar journalist Mon Mon Myat, on the role of music in the new wave of protests that erupted across Myanmar in opposition to the military coup.

AMP3 also expressed its solidarity with musicians experiencing repression across the region. In August 2021, AMP3 issued two solidarity statements in support of musicians and their communities. In early August, AMP3 expressed solidarity to Hong Kong-based musician Anthony Wong, who was arrested over trumped-up corruption charges. AMP3 asserted that "the democratic exercise by musicians, poets, and other cultural workers to use culture to enlighten and, educate people is a right guaranteed under international human rights law."

On the occasion of the International Day of World's Indigenous Peoples, AMP3 issued a statement supporting the struggle of the Karen community in Kaeng Krachan, Thailand. This Karen community is fighting efforts to drive them out of their ancestral lands. As AMP3 founder Jess Santiago remarked: "As we all know the pandemic has caused a lot of fear and anxiety among people. I believe that musicians, in particular, can help give expression to these fears and anxiety of people through songs." Santiago also pointed out how songs are being used to promote the necessary health protocols like proper washing hands, proper physical distancing, helping to effectively convey these messages through public service announcements.

## Conclusion

AMP3's response to the COVID-19 pandemic started with the idea of music as an expression of regional solidarity. "In our experience, we saw that music can provide relief to help ease the feelings of anxiety that many of us were facing in the wake of the unprecedented global crisis," according to AMP3.

The pandemic and the lockdowns posed huge challenges to musicians. For full-time musicians relying on regular gigs/concerts as a source of income, the indefinite closure of venues and the absence of concerts was a major problem and source of anxiety. But artists across the region were also motivated by the crisis to do their part in helping others cope and overcome the many challenges.

Producing home recordings and sharing these through online platforms became key strategies facilitating the artists' response. Working closely with communities, other like-minded groups, and organizations on collaborative projects that responded to concrete needs emerged and were implemented across the region.

The new songs that came out and will continue to come out in the context of the pandemic, represent important historical documentation. This is not just of the peoples' shared and collective experiences in dealing with the pandemic—the fear, anxiety, but also the aspiration that more inclusive, kinder, and just societies could be built in the aftermath of the crisis.



## Conclusion

Haruhiko Kuroda (2013), President of the Asian Development Bank, concluded that “the forces driving Asia’s rapid growth—new technology, globalization, and market-oriented reform—are also fueling rising inequality.” He also noted the “visible side-effects of Asia’s rapid growth” on a “damaged environment” due to “the reliance on fossil fuels,” the educational deficits for the poor, and the lack of social protection and essential public services.

Kuroda then identified three groups that have benefited the most from the rapid growth: (1) the owners of capital, (2) urban and coastal dwellers, and (3) the better-educated graduates. The first is entirely logical but the next two have to be properly nuanced as there also exists a vast army of urban poor and marginalized coastal fisher communities. One may also be better educated but opportunities lie more in the market-oriented economic sectors thus discriminating against social science and humanities graduates.

Nevertheless, Kuroda’s thoughts and revelations are still surprising, coming from the head of an institution that had long turned a blind eye to social inequality while focusing almost exclusively on supporting and financing projects anchored on a trickle-down economic growth model lassoed to the neoliberal strategies of liberalization, deregulation, and privatization.

Social inequality and its accompanying deficit in social protection for vulnerable sectors, however, have never been a primary concern for governments and their corporate allies, that is, until the COVID-19 pandemic unleashed its brutal effects on the whole world in 2020. The rapid growth of Asian economies and the interlocking relationships brought about by globalization have facilitated the exponential spread of the coronavirus. The neoliberal model had no answers in its repositories other than to (temporarily) reverse the globalization process by imposing severe lockdowns and closing both national and intra-national borders. The result was catastrophic as the global economy virtually came to a halt and growth rates went into a negative mode.

As a *Fortune Magazine* commentary pointed out, “the pandemic has revealed the fault lines in Asia’s economic success story” which have been long hidden from the public view—the distinction between a “utopian high income Asia” and a “dystopian low and middle income Asia,” primarily in Southeast Asia, where declining output, loss of jobs and “absence of viable safety nets” have been “turbocharged” (Shastry 2021). The Fortune writer also mocks a “predatory political and business class . . . a small group of self-satisfied regional elites (who) declared the 21st Century to be an Asian

century, glossing over much of the region's profound economic, social, and political challenges" (Shastry 2021). At the same time, he warns that "without addressing these challenges, it is only a matter of time before unrest becomes more common, and more widespread."

Establishment-bound critics such as Kuroda and the *Fortune* writer, however, merely see the solution in terms of tweaking the system to produce piecemeal reforms while standing firm on the very foundations of modern capitalist market society. Kuroda (2013, for example, talks of making growth more inclusive but pointedly ignores redistributive goals. The *Fortune* writer talks about repairing the system but only in order to return to the high growth patterns of yesteryears (Shastry 2021).

If there is anything basic and fundamental about what the case studies in this volume of alternative practices and responses to the pandemic teach us, it is that the search for remedies and solutions to the multiple crises must start at the ground level—in the real-life experiences among the grassroots, local communities, and basic sectors of working classes.

It is in these sectors and areas where genuine people-oriented and people-focused initiatives are being undertaken and experimented. It is also here where the practices are distilled and developed further for other communities and sectors to share with, learn and replicate across intranational and national boundaries. Nothing beats social practice.

In contrast with the ASEAN model and corporate-led globalization, these practices will also form the building blocks for new regional integration and globalization that stems from below. This is true and genuine bottom-up development.

## References

- Kuroda, Haruhiko. 2013. "Asia's Challenges." *OECD Forum*, 2013. <https://www.oecd.org/forum/asia-challenges.htm>
- Shastry, Vasuki. 2021. "How the Pandemic Revealed the Fault Lines in Asia's Economic Success Story." *Fortune Magazine*. July 15, 2021. <https://fortune.com/2021/07/14/covid-pandemic-asia-economic-development-income-inequality/>





## EDITORIAL RESPONSIBILITIES

The Editor-in-Chief, the Deputy Editor-in-Chief, and the Program Editors ensure that the monographs contain findings on issues that are aligned with the core agenda of the research programs under the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS).

The Editor-in-Chief, the Deputy Editor-in-Chief, and the Program Editors are responsible for maintaining high standards of scholarship, and for generating and disseminating new knowledge that can be utilized for the public good.

## ABOUT UP CIDS

Established in 1985 by UP President Edgardo Angara, the **UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS)** is a policy research unit of the University that connects disciplines and scholars across the several units of the UP System. It is mandated to encourage collaborative and rigorous research addressing issues of national significance by supporting scholars and securing funding, enabling them to produce outputs and recommendations for public policy.

The UP CIDS partakes in the University's leadership in knowledge creation and public service. This is carried out through the dissemination of research-based knowledge through activities such as fora, symposia, and conferences, and through its public policy-oriented publications. These research activities are initiated by the Center's twelve (12) research programs.

## ABOUT THE PROGRAM

The **Program on Alternative Development (AltDev)** aims to look at paradigms, policies, practices, and projects largely marginalized and excluded from the mainstream. As these alternatives challenge dominant modes, they do not figure prominently in the national and

international discourse. Hence, AltDev aims to bring these voices out of the margins and into the mainstream, leveling the playing field so that they may be regarded on an equal footing with the dominant discourse and thus offer alternatives to the existing system.

The **UP CIDS Public Policy Monograph Series** is published by the **University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies**.

**Editorial Office:** Lower Ground Floor, Ang Bahay ng Alumni,  
Magsaysay Avenue, University of the Philippines,  
Diliman, Quezon City 1101  
**Telephone:** (02) 8981-8500 loc. 4266 to 4268 / (02) 8426-0955  
**Email:** cids@up.edu.ph / cidspublications@up.edu.ph

## EDITORIAL BOARD

Teresa S. Encarnacion Tadem  
**EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**

Janus Isaac V. Nolasco  
**DEPUTY EDITOR-IN-CHIEF**

### PROGRAM EDITORS

#### ► EDUCATION AND CAPACITY BUILDING CLUSTER

Dina S. Ocampo  
Lorina Y. Calingasan  
Education Research Program

Fernando dI.C. Paragas  
Program on Higher Education  
Research and Policy Reform

Marie Therese Angeline P. Bustos  
Kevin Carl P. Santos  
Assessment, Curriculum, and  
Technology Research Program

Jalton G. Taguibao  
Program on Data Science for  
Public Policy

#### ► DEVELOPMENT CLUSTER

Annette O. Balaoing-Pelkmans  
Program on Escaping the  
Middle-Income Trap: Chains for  
Change

Antoinette R. Raquiza  
Political Economy Program

Eduardo C. Tadem  
Benjamin B. Velasco  
Program on Alternative  
Development

Antonio Miguel L. Dans  
Jose Rafael A. Marfori  
Program on Health Systems  
Development

#### ► SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND CULTURAL STUDIES CLUSTER

Maria Ela L. Atienza  
Jorge V. Tigno  
Program on Social and Political  
Change

Darwin J. Absari  
Islamic Studies Program

Herman Joseph S. Kraft  
Strategic Studies Program

Marie Aubrey J. Villaceran  
Frances Antoinette C. Cruz  
Decolonial Studies Program

## EDITORIAL STAFF

Virna Liza O. Guaño  
George G. Deoso  
**SENIOR EDITORIAL ASSOCIATES**

Mika Andrea O. Ramirez  
**EDITORIAL ASSOCIATE**

Jheimeel P. Valencia  
**COPYEDITOR**

Mikaela Anna Cheska D. Orlino  
**LAYOUT ARTIST**



The UP CIDS PUBLIC POLICY MONOGRAPH SERIES features original scholarly work on themes relevant to Philippine public policy that aims to provide research-based advice and recommendations in addressing national issues and concerns.



**UNIVERSITY OF THE PHILIPPINES  
CENTER FOR INTEGRATIVE AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES**

Lower Ground Floor, Ang Bahay ng Alumni  
Magsaysay Avenue, University of the Philippines  
Diliman, Quezon City 1101

Telephone: (02) 8981-8500 loc. 4266 to 4268 / (02) 8426-0955

Email: [cids@up.edu.ph](mailto:cids@up.edu.ph) / [cidspublications@up.edu.ph](mailto:cidspublications@up.edu.ph)

Website: [cids.up.edu.ph](http://cids.up.edu.ph)