

**Monograph
Series**

2023-02

University of the Philippines
Center for Integrative and Development Studies

PROGRAM ON ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT

Reinforcing People-to- People Solidarities Towards Regionalism from Below:

Alternatives from Southeast Asia Amid
COVID-19

*Eduardo C. Tadem • Karl Arvin F. Hapal • Venarica B. Papa
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**CENTER FOR
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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
SOUTHEAST ASIAN SITUATION AND STATE RESPONSES	3
Citizens' Sentiments	5
GRASSROOTS COVID-19 RESPONSES AND PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE SOLIDARITIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA	7
The Philippines	7
AMANO and NAFWA	
Collective farms and the Negros sugarcane plantation economy	9
PATAMABA-WISE (Homenet Philippines)	10
COVID-19 effects and responses	10
The informal workers in the Philippines	11
Mobilizing resources	12
Proposal to the Philippine government	12
Baclig Farmworkers Association (BACFA) and Panalsalan Dagumbaan Tribal Association (PADATA)	13
The state of Mindanao's Lumad before the pandemic	15
The Lumad reclaiming their ancestral territory	16
Sustainability and Participation through Education and Lifelong Learning (SPELL)	17

Alyansa Ng Mga Samahan Sa Sitio Mendez, Baesa Homeowners Association, Inc. (ASAMBA)	23
Maigting Na Samahan Ng Panlipunang Negosyante Ng Towerville (Igting)	27
Compromised livelihood	28
Coping with the crisis	28
Preliminary recommendations	29
Ayta Mag-indi Community of Porac, Pampanga	30
Health and medical support from the government	30
Non-health support from the government	31
Social Amelioration Program	31
Further marginalization and widening of societal divide	32
Lumad and Bakwit School	33
Bantay Kalusugan Pampamayanan (BKP)	34
Sitio San Roque Community and Save San Roque (SSR) Alliance	36
Nagkaisa Labor Coalition	41
Nagkaisa's response to the COVID-19 crisis	44
THAILAND	48
Overview of the country situation	48
Southern Peasant Federation Of Thailand (SPFT)	49
Revisiting Thailand's peasant-led land movement	50
Homenet Thailand	53
People's Empowerment Foundation (PEF)	53
THAI-BURMA BORDER	54
Mae Tao Clinic (MTC) and The Back Pack Health Worker Team	54
The migrants' learning centers during closed borders	56
BURMA/ MYANMAR	58
Thandaunggyi Women's Group	58

COVID-19 Policy in Myanmar and the Karen State	58
Crisis across sectors	58
The burden on women	59
The women of Thandaunggyi	60
INDONESIA	61
Overview of the country situation	61
Konfederasi Pergerakan Rakyat Indonesia (KPRI)	62
Grassroots initiatives	62
Urgent and creeping challenges during the pandemic	63
Homenet Indonesia	65
Perhimpunan Petani Sorgum Untuk Kedaulatan Pangan, NTT	65
Koalisi Seni Indonesia (KSI)	66
MALAYSIA	66
CIVICA Research and Interns of The Rural Internship Training Programme (RITP)	66
CAMBODIA	68
Focus on The Global South (FGS)–Cambodia	68
Homenet Cambodia	69
LAOS	69
Homenet Laos	69
Green Community Development Association (GCDA) and Lao Farmer Network (LFN)	70
TIMOR LESTE	70
K’dadalak Sulimutuk Institutu (KSI) and Fundasaun Hafoun Timor Lorosae (FHTL)	70
Arcoiris Timor Leste	71

VIETNAM	71
Homenet Vietnam	71
Vietnam Peace and Development Foundation (VPDF)	72
REGIONAL REPORTS	72
ASEAN SOGIE CAUCUS (ASC)	72
Homenet Southeast Asia	73
Asian Solidarity Economy Council–RIPESS-ASIA	75
OTHER REPORTS	76
Midsayap IP Youth	76
Farmers’ Situation in Southeast Asian Countries	76
CAMBODIA-Farmer and Nature Net	77
Indonesia-Aliansi Petani Indonesia (API)	77
MYANMAR-Agriculture and Farmer Federation of Myanmar (AFFM)	78
PHILIPPINES-Pambansang Katipunan ng mga Samahan sa Kanayunan (PKSK) Pambansang Kilusan ng mga Samahang Magsasaka (PAKISAMA)	78
THAILAND-Assembly of the Poor (AOP)	79
VIETNAM-Viet Nam Farmers’ Union (VNFU)	80
OTHER REGIONAL REPORTS	81
Women’s Legal and Human Rights Bureau (WLB)	83
REPORTS FROM THE GRASSROOTS AND COMMUNITIES	86
POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS	90
CONCLUSION	91

Reinforcing People-to-People Solidarities Towards Regionalism from Below: Alternatives from Southeast Asia Amid COVID-19¹

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As the whole world reels under the impact of an unprecedented health crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been little attention paid to its effect on grassroots communities and marginalized sectors. This is particularly important given the haphazard and erratic manner of official measures that have been implemented to contain the contagion and amidst a situation where health systems face serious challenges to confront a crisis of these proportions. While national reports are extensively documented and macronumbers are often reported, there is a need to look more closely at underprivileged sectors and communities. This report documents what marginalized communities in Southeast Asia are engaging in, and how they have responded to the pandemic. Results are varied, conditioned by the location, existence of community and sectoral organizations, and levels of social solidarity and collective consciousness.

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- 1 This is the expanded version of the publication, “A Preliminary Report on Southeast Asian Community and Grassroots Responses in COVID-19 Times,” which was published last May 29, 2020 by the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies Program on Alternative Development (UP CIDS AltDev). Some of the data are lifted from the earlier UP CIDS AltDev COVID-19 Report submitted to the Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung (Southeast Asia) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (Jakarta Office). This longer version, first written in April 2021, was prepared with the support of the 11-11-11 Coalition of the Flemish North-South Movement. The publication also draws on earlier essays written by UP CIDS AltDev.
 - 2 Eduardo C. Tadem, Ph.D. is Convenor of UP CIDS AltDev. Benjamin B. Velasco is the current Co-Convenor of UP CIDS AltDev and is an Assistant Professor at the UP School of Labor and Industrial Relations (UP SOLAIR). Karl Arvin F. Hapal was Co-convenor until 2020 of the UP CIDS AltDev and is an Assistant Professor of Community Development at the UP College of Social Work and Community Development (UP CSWCD). Venarica B. Papa was Project Leader until 2020 at the UP CIDS AltDev and is an Assistant Professor of Community Development at the UP CSWCD. Jose Monfred C. Sy is a Project Leader at UP CIDS AltDev and a faculty of the UP Department of Filipino and Philippine Literature. Ananeza P. Aban, Honey B. Tabiola, Rafael V. Dimalanta, and are Research Staff of the UP CIDS AltDev. Both Micah Hanah S. Orlino and Nathaniel P. Candelaria are former UP CIDS AltDev staff.

1. INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented global health crisis due to the COVID-19 pandemic caused the world economy to come to a virtual halt. This prompted projections of an impending economic depression. Southeast Asia was no exception to this pattern, as governments declared stringent quarantine measures. While national reports were extensive, there was less attention to what was happening among local communities, marginalized sectors, and underprivileged populations. As one of the programs under the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS), the Program on Alternative Development (AltDev) looks at paradigms, policies, practices, and projects that are largely marginalized and excluded from the mainstream. It foregrounds these alternatives and level the playing field so that they can be regarded on equal footing with dominant discourses and offer alternatives to the existing system.

This report documents the independent initiatives undertaken by AltDev partner organizations and civil society networks during the COVID-19 crisis. Since 2018, AltDev has partnered with these organizations to undertake various modes of participatory research and documentation of such alternative practices as responses to their marginalized socioeconomic, political, social, and cultural situation. Reports from other civil society organizations, their partner grassroots organizations networks, and responses to the health crisis were also included. This report extends support and solidarity to the research partners of AltDev across the Southeast Asian region, who have played key roles in the evolution of a movement of alternative practitioners. Beyond data gathering and research writing, AltDev has always been committed to solidarity work with, and support for, these communities whose practices and timely innovations are viable solutions during a global pandemic. In a way, this endeavor is part of a bigger effort to achieve an empowering and alternative research process. This report helps find out how communities, through their alternative and sustainable practices, have stood out and manifested resilience amidst the pandemic, and under other modalities of the current global crisis.

Through this mapping, AltDev was able to obtain a preliminary identification of the strengths, vulnerabilities, opportunities, and threats confronting these communities. Reports from other national and regional organizations, with whom AltDev has been engaging over the past three years, were also included.

2. SOUTHEAST ASIAN SITUATION AND STATE RESPONSES

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

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

Concerns were raised on the state of human rights in Southeast Asia during the pandemic.⁶ Troubling patterns, adds Michael Vatikiotis, include (1) "reduced preparedness" due "to poor leadership and governance," thus "putting lives of citizens at greater-than-necessary risk," (2) weaponizing COVID-19 and using the pandemic as "an opportunity to crack down on dissenters and restrict fundamental freedoms" and deepen authoritarian rule, and (3) using the crisis "as an excuse to amass power" (See footnote 5).

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

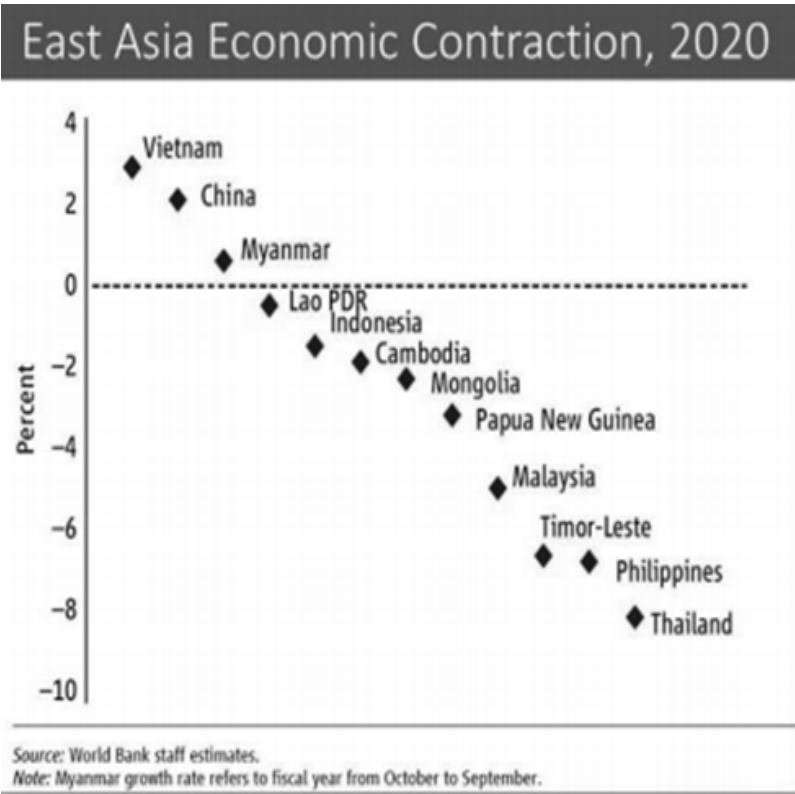
4 Asean Peoples' Forum, Joint Statement on 'Southeast Asian Peoples' Solidarity for an Inclusive, Cohesive, and Responsive Community,' November 5-7, 2020, Hanoi, Vietnam, Typescript.

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

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

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

Table 1: East Asia Economic Contraction



7 Tom Allard, “Southeast Asia Poverty to Surge in ‘Socio-economic Crisis’: U.N.,” *Reuters*, July 31, 2020, <https://news.yahoo.com/southeast-asia-poverty-surge-socio-023013653.html?>

In particular, the Philippine economy contracted by 9.5 percent for the whole year of 2020, according to official government figures, the worst performance since the end of the Second World War in 1947. Meanwhile, the only economies expected to grow are Vietnam and Myanmar, albeit with lower projections than previous years' performance.⁸

Citizens' Sentiments

A Blackbox survey of citizens' sentiments in 23 countries, as to how their leaders in government, business, community, and media have responded to the COVID-19 crisis, included six Southeast Asian countries: Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand (Table 2).⁹ Of the six, Vietnam and Malaysia were favorably assessed with cumulative scores of 77 percent and 58 percent, respectively. The other four, the Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand, yielded unfavorable cumulative ratings below 50 percent.

Table 2: Blackbox Global Opinion Survey

Country	National Leadership	Business Leadership	Community Leadership	Media Leadership	Cumulative Scores
Vietnam	82	64	66	95	77
Malaysia	59	37	43	93	58
Philippines	45	37	36	78	49
Indonesia	37	29	39	87	48
Singapore	41	25	35	92	48
Thailand	22	19	36	72	36

Source: Blackbox Global Opinion Survey May 2020¹⁰

8 Nikkei Asia, "Philippines GDP shrinks 9.5% in 2020, worst since 1947," *Nikkei Asia*, 28 January 2021, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Economy/Philippines-GDP-shrinks-9.5-in-2020-worst-since-1947>.

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

10 The Singapore-based Blackbox Research "carried out an online nationally representative survey of n=12,592 across 23 countries, aged between 18 to 80 with a statistical margin of error of 3-6 per cent. The survey was conducted between April 3 to April 19," <https://blackbox.com.sg/everyone/2020/05/06/most-countries-covid-19-responses-rated-poorly-by-own-citizens-in-irst-of-its-kind-global-survey>.

In terms of national leadership, Vietnam scored high at 82 percent, with Malaysia barely making it to the favorable section, with 59 percent and Thailand ending at the bottom with only 22 percent. The Southeast Asian business leaders fared even worse, with only Vietnam having a favorable perception at 64 percent. Malaysia and the Philippines were tied at 37 percent, while Thailand came last, again, with 19 percent. At the community level, there was minimal improved perception. Vietnam was leading, with a favorable rating of 66 percent, while the rest of the countries had negative perceptions. The pattern, however, shifts when perceptions of media leadership are assessed. All six countries had highly favorable ratings, led by Vietnam, followed by Malaysia, Singapore, Indonesia, Philippines, and Thailand.

The race to procure vaccines against COVID-19 saw ASEAN member governments exerting individual efforts with virtually no regional coordination or joint cooperation.¹¹ As of December 29, 2020, some countries including Brunei, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, and Indonesia had already secured contracts with vaccine manufacturers such as Sinovac, Pfizer, AstraZeneca, Medigem, and Arcturus. Indonesia already administered nine million doses by November 2020, while Laos has been trialing Russia's Sputnik V vaccine. Singapore and Vietnam, on the other hand, are developing their own vaccines. Meanwhile, the Philippines, Cambodia, and Myanmar (Burma), lagged behind in securing access to vaccines. In Manila, Interior Secretary Año confirmed that some members of the Cabinet and the Presidential Security Group received the vaccine early and claimed that it was administered under emergency use authorization (EUA), despite the fact that the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) had not yet granted EUA to any COVID vaccine manufacturer at that point.¹²

11 Dezan Shira & Associates, "COVID-19 Vaccine Roll Outs in ASEAN and Asia – Live Updates by Country," ASEAN Briefing, December 29, 2020, <https://www.aseanbriefing.com/news/covid-19-vaccine-roll-outs-in-asean-asia-live-updates-by-country/>

12 Neil Jayson Servallos, "Some Cabinet, PSG Men Have Received Vaccine." *Philippine Star Global*, December 29, 2020. <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/12/29/2066815/some-cabinet-psg-men-have-received-vaccine>

3. GRASSROOTS COVID-19 RESPONSES AND PEOPLE-TO-PEOPLE SOLIDARITIES IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

The Philippines^{13 14 15 16 17 18}

AMANO and NAFWA

The historical and longstanding struggle of farmers for land ownership has always been fought with sweat and blood. In particular, the case of Negros farmers has been an inspiration and a model of collective power and organizing. The *Asosasyon sang mga Mamumugon sa Nolan* (AMANO) or the Association of Farm Workers in Nolan and Nakalang Farm Workers Association (NAFWA) are living proofs of the success of a workers-owned and workers-managed enterprise. Their practices showcase the viability of the social solidarity economy within the worsening global crisis, now even compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic.

These associations have repeatedly proven the effectiveness of their *bayanihan* system (the Filipino cultural practice of community cooperation

13 Asosasyon sang mga Mamumugon sa Nolan (AMANO), "Community Development Plan," (Negros: AMANO, 2017).

14 B. S. Bacaoco and A. J. Ligahon, "Workers-owned, Workers-managed Enterprise: Workers Working for Rural Development in Negros," "A study initiated by Sentro ng mga Nagkakaisa at Progresibong Manggagawa (SENTRO), Partido Manggagawa-Negros/ Workers Development Council (PM/WDC), and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung (FES)."

15 Dionisio Sanchez and Gina Barcinal, "Updates on Partners' Response to Covid-19," Interview by Micah Hanah Orlino, and Honey Tabiola, November 2, 2020.

16 Eduardo Tadem, Karl Arvin Hapal, Venarica Papa, Ananeza Aban, Nathaniel P. Candelaria, Honey B. Tabiola, and Angeli Fleur Nuque, "Deeping Solidarities Beyond Borders Among Southeast Asian Peoples: A Vision for a Peoples' Alternative Regional Integration," (Quezon City: UP CIDS, 2020).

17 UP CIDS Program on Alternative Development, "2nd Southeast Asian Conference on Alternatives: Building Peoples' Movements in Southeast Asia towards an Alternative Model of Regionalism," (Quezon City: UP CIDS, 2019).

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

and solidarity) through their programs and projects in response to the inefficiency and inadequacy of state-led programs, especially on the agriculture sector.

AMANO and NAFWA have not escaped the adverse impact of the pandemic. The Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), which began in March, coincided with the sugarcane harvesting season. It constrained their mobility, particularly in transporting the harvests to sugar mills. These resulted in unnecessary delays and a decrease in the quality of their produce. Moreover, the organization had difficulty claiming the payments for their sugarcane harvest. Only a few members received the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) subsidy from the government. It is vital to point out that those who received them were dismayed by its insufficiency.

The failure of the national government to address the basic needs of many Filipino citizens, especially in establishing the social protection infrastructure during the pandemic, pushed AMANO and NAFWA, together with their partners and networks, to resort to their own funds and programs for their rising needs and concerns.

They bolstered livestock raising and the cultivation of various root crops, which provided them daily sustenance during the strict lockdown. They also opted to distribute in advance the dividends of the members, and create an emergency fund from their 'organic premium.'¹⁹ These are distributed fairly among the members. Additionally, the women's organization of NAFWA set up a feed-supply store which was sourced from the financial assistance that their partner organizations gave. The two associations requested their Korean and Japanese fair-trade partners, as well as Alter Trade Philippines, to set aside an emergency fund to be sourced from their fair-trade premium.

Achieving a certain level of control over their means of production and tapping the strengths of their networks and alliances, AMANO and NAFWA have significantly demonstrated the practice of collective and communal management of their production activities. This contributed immensely to addressing their needs under the pandemic. Both AMANO and NAFWA followed health protocols in continuing their farm activities.

19 An organic premium is a specific amount added to the buying price of their product (such as sugar) which is remitted back to the organization.

Collective farms and the Negros sugarcane plantation economy

The efficient methods of both organizations, in dealing with the pandemic, are a product of their persistent struggle to reclaim land and resources. The formation of workers-controlled and workers-managed enterprise is an expression of resistance of the landless Negros peasantry to the decades-old landlordism in the province that has perpetuated abject poverty, landlessness, and continuing dominance of elite families and landlords (*hacenderos*).

Established in 2000 and 2005 respectively, AMANO and NAFWA are among the ten Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries (ARBs) that radicalized the concept of collective and family-based farming as the foundation for their community-driven enterprise economy. This collectivization of the parcels of lands, through the agrarian reform program, is a departure from the government concept and mainstream practice of land parcelization into small individualized farms. Parcelization weakens the capacities of small farmers to organize and form unions or cooperatives.

For many years, landlord families of Negros owned the large-scale sugarcane plantations in the island. Having absolute control over the means of production, these *hacenderos* lorded over the farmworkers. Wages are viewed patronisingly as an act of generosity. The landlords exploit the workers under the guise of favors which form a lifetime debt of gratitude. This culture of indebtedness made these Negros farmers contain their dissent; otherwise, it would have cost them their livelihood and shelter.

The pitfalls of the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law (passed in 1988), are evident in the continuing dependence of many farmer-beneficiaries on the owners of big landholdings who control the chain of production and market. Having no access to capital, technical knowledge, and the market, many among the Certificate of Land Ownership (CLOA) holders cannot make their land productive; therefore, they cannot pay amortization and real property taxes. This later resulted in the return of lands to either the landlords or the usurers as a lease to farmer-beneficiaries.

To collectively address this disempowering scheme, the ten ARBs have now translated this concept of workers-managed and workers-owned enterprise into a reality in Negros. Today, their continuing practice has brought substantial economic improvement to their families. Although a portion of their land is still planted with sugarcane, the enterprise

mechanism has encouraged them to diversify their crops and develop livestock production that ensures their daily food consumption. This practice deviates from a heavy reliance on sugarcane production, and also creates other economic opportunities. Through this process, AMANO and NAFWA exemplify the solidarity economy. What they do is not limited to their organizations, but extends to their communities. Their experiences and struggles provide substantial lessons in building the peoples' economy, which banks on the principles of bayanihan (civic unity), *tangkilikan* (patronage), and *damayan* (mutual aid). They have supported community projects, such as roads and water and irrigation systems. These principles also translate into social and welfare services to their members, which include educational assistance, burial, and hospitalization, among others.

PATAMABA-WISE (Homenet Philippines)^{20, 21, 22}

COVID-19 effects and responses

The imposition of the ECQ forced the Rizal Chapter of the *Pambansang Tagapag-ugnay ng Manggagawa sa Bahay* - Workers in the Informal Sector Enterprise (Rizal Chapter) to stop its regular production of various goods, such as clothing, footwear, homecare and beauty products, rugs, bags, candles, and fashion accessories, among others. As a community-based organization of women workers in the informal economy, they need to adapt to the emerging needs of the people and their community; thus, they decided to shift to the production of emergency goods. According to Josephine Parilla, one of the Executive Committee Leaders of Homenet Philippines and active informal worker-leader at national and local levels of PATAMABA-WISE (National Network of Informal Workers-Workers in the Informal Sector Enterprise).

[May] dalawang mukha ang pandemya sa amin. Noong una talaga malaking shock sa amin ang pandemya dahil hindi namin akalain na malaki ang epekto [nito] lalo na sa mga manggagawang impormal” (For us, the pandemic has two faces. At first, the pandemic was a big shock to us because we did not expect [it] to have a huge impact, especially on the informal workers).

20 “HNSEA Reports on COVID-19 Impact on Homebased Workers in Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Philippines, Thailand and Vietnam,” HomeNet South-East Asia, April 2020, 1–8.

21 PATAMABA & Homenet, “SSE Initiatives Pre and During COVID-19,” [PowerPoint slides, 2020].

22 Rosalinda Pineda-Ofreneo, Josephine Parilla, and Lourdes Gula, “Participatory Research on the Impact of COVID-19 on Workers in the Informal Economy: Documenting Solidarity-Based Action as Social Protection Response,” (Hong Kong: Asia Monitor Research Centre, 2020).

With the restrictions on mobility and closure of nonessential establishments, PATAMABA-WISE's regular net income significantly dropped due to limited market opportunities. However, the organization, together with the other chapters under Homenet Philippines, started interventions in the second month of the quarantine to reverse its economic impact and use them to their advantage.

Homenet Philippines started to produce face masks made of washable fabric to augment their income. It gradually opened the production centers to its seamstresses on a rotation basis to observe health protocols. Later on, the workers started to produce Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), and cleaning and sanitizing products, such as bleachers and hand sanitizers. Other members also ventured into local food production (rice cakes, dumplings, and honey).

Prior to the pandemic, they had been regularly selling their products to local malls and their partner institutions. But with the restrictions in the local economy, PATAMABA-WISE depended on online platforms to advertise their products.

The informal workers in the Philippines

There is a persistent inadequacy of data on the total number of informal sector workers in the Philippines. While there are estimates, these do not capture the entire informal economy workforce given their varying subsectors. For instance, in the 2008 survey, the latest available from the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), there were 10.5 million informal workers.

This insufficient data is one of the reasons for the inadequate, if not absent, social protection programs for the informal sector, which makes them most vulnerable to various types of crises and risks, especially during the pandemic. For instance, Josephine explained that most of their members are older people. But because they faced a high risk of infection, they could not even go to local marketplaces. Having no other means to buy their medication, the pandemic marginalized them even more. Many also complained of the high cost of hospitalization, especially among private health service providers. As a result, they chose to stay home than seek proper medical attention. Moreover, mental health has been put at stake, as the level of stress, fear, and anxiety began to build up given the

uncertainty of the situation. On the other hand, households with children who participated in either online classes or modular learning faced the ordeal of transitioning to the remote learning set-up, which requires the use of gadgets.

Mobilizing resources

The pandemic has not derailed the survival attitude of the women. In fact, PATAMABA-WISE leaders mobilized their networks with various public offices, private partners, and individuals. They solicited cash and noncash donations to be distributed among their members. The leaders facilitated the access of members to medical support and food packages from their barangays and local government offices. According to a report, the communities received food packages at least four to five times from the barangay, and once each from the municipal and provincial offices. Furthermore, PATAMABA-WISE conducted skills training and various educational and religious activities to help members cope with the situation. At least 20 to 30 members participated.

Proposal to the Philippine government

When asked about her recommendations to the government, Josephine answered, “I hope all government programs should go beyond compliance of memos and circulars (referring to the national programs being implemented by local government units). These programs should rather make an impact on the lives of the people.”

Josephine proposed to have an integrated approach that does not end with cash assistance distribution in addressing COVID-19. She said that the government should shift its focus to strengthening the economic recovery program that addresses the impact of the pandemic on workers who have lost their jobs. Josephine also demanded that national government officials adhere to the various conventions the Philippines has already ratified. Additionally, she emphasized the need for participatory governance, wherein programs are created using a bottom-up approach, especially during a global crisis. She explained that the people should be involved in the decision-making process. She added that the government should create programs based on the real and immediate needs of the people.

Baclig Farmworkers Association (BACFA) and Panalsalan Dagumbaan Tribal Association (PADATA)

Ang [bigat ng] labor sa tinatanim namin tapos ‘yun lang ang presyo [..] Masakit talaga sa amin kasi halos wala kaming kita. Walang naiiwan. Walang naibabalik kasi utang ang binhi, abono, at input...para makapagbenta kami. Wala talagang natitira samin. Ngayong pandemya, ang presyo mas bumababa. Marami ang napapagod na magsaka dahil ganito ang ginagawa sa magsasaka. (We expend heavy labor in our farms; however, the price being offered for our produce is extremely low. This pains us. This is disheartening for us because we barely earn. Nothing is left for us because we need to pay for the seeds and farm inputs which are all acquired through loans. During the pandemic, the buying price has gone even lower. Many farmers are giving up because of this vicious cycle).

This was how Bae Vilma Monera, chairperson of Panalsalan Dagumbaan Tribal Association (PADATA), described the longstanding impoverished condition of their farming community in Bukidnon Province in Mindanao that was aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. During the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) period, when strict mobility restrictions were imposed and social protection remained weak, this persistent problem deteriorated.

At the start of the ECQ, members of PADATA and BACFA, belonging to the Talaandig and Higaonon tribes, reported the insufficient and selective provision of food rations. Only beneficiaries of the government’s conditional cash transfer program or Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) were assured of food packs. When the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) pay-out started nationwide, many members were disappointed after hearing that not all were qualified. Although most of them eventually received the SAP, the distribution, however, was delayed.

Having experienced this unequal distribution and delay of emergency relief and cash assistance, they have turned to other ways to survive, particularly through helping one another. While they stayed in their ancestral domain, they cultivated and shared their harvest, especially root crops, instead of solely depending on the government’s food rations.

Bae Merlina Dumotan, the chairperson of BACFA, credited this Lumad or indigenous peoples (IP) culture of social solidarity for the sustenance of their health and well-being.

Maraming pamilya ‘yung dapa ngayon pero nagsu-survive kasi nagsasaluhan, nagbibigayan para maitawid ang araw-araw. Tulad nung turo ng aming mga ninuno.” (Many families are down on their knees in hardship but survived in a way because they share and cooperate as a community. This is what our ancestors have taught us.).

For Merlina and Vilma, this experience highlighted the sustainability and importance of having land, and utilizing it for community consumption. Bae Merlina emphasized.

Ang lupa ang pinaka-importante. ‘Pag mawala ang lupa, mamamatay talaga kami. Buhay namin ang yutang kabilin. Ito lang ang kayamanan namin (Land is the most important for all of us. If we lose our land, we will die. Our ancestral land is our life. It is our only treasure).

Furthermore, the emergence of COVID-19 in the absence of sufficient social protection, effective health response, and functioning public health systems, especially in the rural areas, exacerbated their austerity. Measures taken to mitigate the damage of the crisis have instead caused adverse effects to many IPs who are farmworkers already subjected to precarious labor in the nearby agribusiness plantations.

Bae Merlina, herself a plantation worker, said daily wages and the number of working days were reduced. A number of farmworkers were told to stay at home. Those suspected to be sick were automatically put on forced leave, and were only allowed to return to work after undergoing a 14-day quarantine and COVID-19 testing. It is crucial to point out that they themselves had to financially shoulder the testing.

The punitive and militaristic approach of the government did not help either and, in fact, proved to be an additional strain. “Mahirap ngayon kasi kailangan sumunod sa protocol... hulihin agad yung hindi sumusunod sa batas ‘pag nagpalakad-lakad sa daan” (It is difficult now because we have to strictly follow protocols. Those who are caught violating the law and loitering around are immediately detained), Bae Merlina said.

Those reprimanded are instantly brought to the nearest police station and charged with an offense. Although supposed violators can pose bail, this would require a hefty sum for most IPs, she added. She also stressed the problem of acquiring face masks. “Wala man silang [gobyerno] pang bigay na mask. Mahirap kumuha ng face mask mula sa amin.” (The government did not distribute free face masks. Access to face masks is difficult for us).

Schools were temporarily closed during the ECQ. While education for the Lumad has proven to be of utmost importance in combating illiteracy and defending their ancestral lands, many IP families have called off their children's participation in remote learning exercise and brought them to work in the fields with them.

Bae Merlina explained that this is due to the difficulty brought by the gaps inherent in the Department of Education's (DepEd) Distance Learning approach:

Mahirap ang pag-aaral ngayon na module kasi walang makaturo. Ang mga nanay, naghahanap-buhay din sila. (Studying using the printed module is hard because nobody among us in the family can guide our students. The mothers also have to find a livelihood).

She added that the majority of the parents could not complete primary school due to the inaccessibility of basic education to IP communities in the past. These parents, as a result, cannot guide their children with school work.

The state of Mindanao's Lumad before the pandemic

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, a chronic crisis brought by government neglect, low prioritization, and the implementation of neoliberal policies has been ravaging the Philippine agriculture sector. In particular, the reasons for the sector's near demise and destitution in many rural communities include the government's evasion of free land distribution; conversion of agricultural lands; refusal to seriously acknowledge IPs' collective rights and implement ancestral domain laws; and its bias toward commercialization, trade liberalization, and price deregulation favoring local and foreign big business.

This state orientation, and the system they established, have historically pushed the poor in deeper suffering. And they have kept the Filipino people, especially the indigenous peoples (IPs), in an incessant crisis.²³

The state-supported corporate takeover of lands in Mindanao, resulting in grabbing and plundering of ancestral domains, has facilitated the extraction of cheap raw materials and the monetization of natural

23 Rosario Guzman, "Why Can't Food Self-sufficiency Be Our New Normal?," IBON, May 8, 2020, <https://www.ibon.org/why-cant-food-self-sufficiency-be-our-new-normal/>.

resources through destructive “development” projects, such as large-scale mining, dam infrastructure, logging, and corporate plantations. In this process of violent resource dispossession, IP communities are inhumanely subjected to militarization, violence, and forced displacement.²⁴

Bukidnon is dubbed as Mindanao’s “food basket” because of its fertile lands and abundance of food and natural resources. The province, unfortunately, has also attracted big agribusiness plantations, logging concessions, and mining corporations. The proliferation of a plantation economy, mostly owned and operated by transnational corporations for the production of high-value crops such as oil palm, banana, and pineapple, have problematically encroached on Lumad farming communities.²⁵ In Mindanao, 79,501 hectares of land comprise pineapple plantations, while 31,607 hectares are banana plantations. Specifically, in Bukidnon, there are at least 50 existing plantations that have already posed a threat to the survival of small farmers.²⁶

The Lumad reclaiming their ancestral territory

Bukidnon is locally known as the ancestral domain of a diverse Lumad population, who in the past had already launched episodes of resistance against corporate investments and land concentration to a few elites. BACFA and PADATA are two Lumad communities who made history when they occupied two adjacent former cattle ranches (now converted into agribusiness plantations) to reclaim their ancestral land from local elite families and corporate capture.

Despite numerous cases of harassment, death threats, and killings, they continued their defense of their land occupation movement. BACFA, after getting a tenurial arrangement through a Community-based Forest Management Agreement, and PADATA, through a government resolution to gain access to their ancestral land, are now pushing for the approval of their unified claim through the Certificate of Ancestral Domain Title (CADT) application. This was submitted to the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP).

24 Jerry Imbong, “‘Bungkalan’ and the Manobo-Pulangihon Tribe’s Resistance to Corporate Land-grab in Bukidnon, Mindanao,” *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 17, no. 1 (October 2020): 23-31, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1177180120967724>.

25 Ibid.

26 Mark Saludes, “Landlessness Brings Hunger, Unrest to Rural Philippines,” UCA News, April 14, 2016, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/landlessness-brings-hunger-unrest-to-rural-philippines/75751>.

The pandemic, however, has slowed down the processing of their claim. Meanwhile, BACFA and PADATA's situation reveals that despite reclaiming their ancestral domain, the hegemonic practices within the capitalist market economy continue to subvert their efforts to achieve food sovereignty and become a self-sustaining community. Frustrated, Bae Vilma stated,

Ang pagtatanim matrabaho. 'Pag binenta na [sa middleman], halos hinihingi nalang nila. Mahal [para makapagpatubo] pero mura nila binibili. Sila ang malaki ang kita kaysa sa farmer.' (Farming is extremely laborious. However, when it is time for us to sell our produce, the middle buyers would only buy them if they're dirt cheap [...] almost free. Farming is so costly for us. These buyers get more at the expense of the farmer).

She further emphasized,

Mga negosyante pa din ang nagtatakda. 'Yung magsasakang nagbebenta lang ng ani ang naapektuhan ng husto. (The businessmen dictate the price of our harvest. Farmers whose only source of income is just their farm produce are the most vulnerable).

During the pandemic, when agriculture remains the backbone for national survival and sustainability, both women leaders underscored the state's responsibility to regulate farmgate prices, which should benefit the farmers, provide continuing assistance to small food producers, facilitate land distribution, and recognize ancestral domain claims. With that, Bae Merlina said, "Kailangan patuloy kaming kumilos." (We need to continue our struggle.)

Sustainability and Participation through Education and Lifelong Learning (SPELL)

Even before the pandemic hit the Philippines, around 3.6 million Filipino youth, ages 6 to 24, are already out of school.²⁷ Sadly, the figures of out-of-school youths and children increased by around 4 million as a result of the ongoing global crisis.²⁸

27 PSA (Philippine Statistics Authority), "Nine Percent of Filipinos Aged 6 to 24 years are Out of School (Results from the 2017 Annual Poverty Indicators Survey)," Philippine Statistics Authority, June 6, 2018, <https://psa.gov.ph/content/nine-percent-ilipinos-aged-6-24-years-are-out-school-results-2017-annual-poverty-indicators>.

28 CNN Philippines, "DepEd Official: Close to 4 million Learners Did Not Enroll for Next School Year due to COVID-19 Crisis," August 12, 2020, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/8/12/4-million-out-of-school-youth-covid-crisis.html>.

The education sector proved to be one of the main manifestations of the government's failed response to the pandemic. According to the official figures, 2.4 million opted to stop schooling in 2020, leading to an enrollment rate of 83.1 percent compared to the previous academic year; 400,000 students transferred to public schools; salaries of 330,000 private school elementary and high school teachers, of 77,000 private college and university faculty, and of more than 53,000 public school teachers and state university faculty were disrupted and reduced.^{29,30} Sadly, there is reason to believe that actual numbers may be greater than those already reported by state institutions.

Among those gravely affected are small private schools (440 of which have suspended operations and temporarily closed down) and grassroots education programs implemented in urban poor communities across the country.³¹ Included in these private schools are community-based learning centers supported by the Sustainability and Participation thru Education and Lifelong Learning (SPELL), a nongovernment organization advocating for inclusive lifelong learning and quality education in a globalized and climate-challenged 21st century and beyond. In its effort to promote an alternative pedagogy, resist the reduction of people to capital goods, and empower community members, SPELL "assists 25 community-based learning centers situated in the barangays within Quezon City, with high concentrations to urban poor households" (Brgy. Holy Spirit, Brgy. Batasan Hills, Brgy. Commonwealth, Brgy. Payatas, and Brgy. Bagong Silangan, among others).

At the helm of these Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) daycare centers is the Parent Initiative for Social Awareness and Mainstreaming Advocacy (PINASAMA), formerly *Pinagkaisang Samahan ng mga Magulang* (Literally, "United Association of Parents"). PINASAMA is a women-led people's organization with beginnings in the urban poor struggles of the Samahang Maralita para sa Makatao at Makatarungang

29 Christian Deiparine, "How Will Learning for Out-of-school Youth Continue amid COVID-19 Pandemic?," Philippine STAR, October 12, 2020, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/10/12/2049043/how-will-learning-out-school-youth-continue-amid-covid-19-pandemic>.

30 Gabriel Lalu, "Over 300,000 Private School Teachers May Also Need Government Aid — Recto," Inquirer, May 22, 2020, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1279509/over-300000-private-school-teachers-may-also-need-government-aid-recto#ixzz6iwwkqRRUf>.

31 Bonz Magsambol, "440 Private Schools Suspend Operations This Year – DepEd," Rappler, August 24, 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/dep-ed-report-private-schools-not-opening-2020-2021>.

Paninirahan (Literally, “Poor People’s Organization for Just and Humane Housing” or Sama-sama); the latter initiated the movement to assert land and housing for the urban poor families in the National Government Center (NGC), one of the largest agglomerations of urban poor families in Quezon City.

While Sama-sama’s primary goal is the prevention of large-scale demolition, the acquisition of NGC land, and people-centered development in the NGC, it also initiated an education program that responds to the needs of their community members. Thus, the community-based learning center of PINASAMA was established.^{32,33}

Teacher Tess, a daycare teacher of PINASAMA in Brgy. Commonwealth, affirmed the irrevocable ties of their organization and education program to the housing and land rights movement and community development. She said,

‘Yun talaga ang pinag-umpisahan nito [daycare]—sa mga komunidad na may isyu ng demolisyon.” (The beginnings of the daycare centers emerged from the issue of land and housing [...] it started in communities threatened by demolition).

Teacher Diding, another daycare teacher at Brgy. Holy Spirit, added,

Since ang mga sumasali [sa PINASAMA] ay mga nanay, mga buntis, mahirap para sa kanila kaya nagcome-up sila ng daycare. Noong una, babantayan lang talaga. Wala munang turo-turo pero napag-isipan na habang andyan sa daycare, turuan na. (Since those who joined PINASAMA were mostly mothers, they found it difficult to bring in their children during organizational activities, thus, they decided to set up a daycare. Later on, they realized it would be better if the children who were gathered together were also taught academic lessons).

Since its inception, PINASAMA has evolved into a daycare center providing affordable, quality, and holistic education for children in urban poor communities. However, during the pandemic, relying mostly on community resources, PINASAMA members found themselves struggling to meet their basic needs. During the earlier months of the quarantine,

32 Raquel Castillo, “An Alternative Learning Framework: Women-led, Community-owned Lifelong Learning of PINASAMA and other SPELL members,” PowerPoint Presentation presented during the “Conference on Alternatives in Southeast Asia: Rethinking Cross-border Regionalism,” organized by UP CIDS Program on Alternative Development, 2018.

33 Gavin Shatkin, *Collective Action and Urban Poverty Alleviation: Community Organizations and the Struggle for Shelter in Manila*, (London: Routledge, 2007).

SPELL estimated that the temporary closure of their 25 centers gravely affected the education of around 1,000 preschool children from mostly urban poor communities.

Teacher Tess explained that the effects are wide-ranging and to some extent, life-altering. “Hindi lang trabaho, edukasyon [ang naapektuhan], pati pamumuhay natin—ang lahat” (Not only work and education were adversely affected, but also our way of life—everything), she emphasized.

Compounding the socioeconomic strains caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are the pre-existing challenges of the PINASAMA daycare centers in the advent of the K-to-12 Basic Education Curriculum, and the country’s neoliberalized system of education. There are also difficulties in acquiring the Learner Reference Number (LRN) for students, additional fees linked to the large private schools’ adoption of the daycare centers, financial distress in running the daycare center, and the struggle to get DepEd’s recognition as a community alternative to the provision of ECCD education. Teacher Diding remarked,

Malaki ang epekto ng pandemic sa school. Paano yung utang namin [para sa school]? Para kaming lupaypay lahat [...] may mga obligasyon pa kaming hindi natapos. (The pandemic really affected the school. How will we pay our debts? All of the teachers were downhearted. There were many obligations left unfulfilled).

Teacher Diding explained that the sudden imposition of the lockdown in early March caught them off-guard. Deliverables, as well as financial obligations to the daycare, were left unaccomplished. According to her, many parent-members of PINASAMA were relieved from work. As a result, they lost their capability to pay what they owed the school, eventually putting the daycare and its teachers in a more precarious situation. Nonetheless, the teachers chose to give temporary reprieve to the unfulfilled financial obligations of parents, demonstrating their solidarity to their fellow PINASAMA members. “Nasa krisis lahat kaya dapat may konsiderasyon [sa kasama]. Sabihin lang, kung wala e ‘di syempre, icoconsider natin” (Everyone is in deep crisis so we need to be considerate to our members), she maintained.

Hardly surprising is the extreme decline of student enrollment in these centers. For instance, in Teacher Diding’s daycare center in Brgy. Holy Spirit, only 32 out of the 200 students rejoined PINASAMA in school [year 2021](#). Similarly, Teacher Tess’ daycare center in Brgy. Commonwealth only registered six students. Teacher Kitay, from another daycare in

Commonwealth, reported that only four students registered out of the 68 she had in the previous school year. With this extreme decline in the number of enrollees, and the financial strains exacerbated by the crisis, a substantial number of PINASAMA daycare teachers switched careers temporarily, and took on other livelihood opportunities.

Despite teaching only a handful of students, a significant number of PINASAMA daycare centers continued to operate in their respective communities, employing distance learning modalities. This, however, came with serious obstacles for teachers, students, and their parents. Teacher Kitay emphasized.

Tuloy-tuloy naman ang school pero napakahirap talaga ng distance learning. Miski ang parents, stress na stress sila” (The schools are continuously operating but the distance learning is really hard for us. The parents are truly stressed out)

Parents, as explained by Teacher Cristy, are especially burdened in this set-up. To be specific, the role of learning facilitator has been inadvertently transferred to the parents who also attend to other responsibilities, such as taking care of the children, maintaining the house, and providing income, among many others.

Furthermore, the financially drained stakeholders, who are the teachers, students, and parents, had to incur additional expenses in mobile data consumption and ensure stable internet, thereby worsening their financial bind.

Lamenting over this unfortunate shared experience, Teacher Diding said, “I-uulam nalang [sana].” (The money could have been spent on our main dish.) This line is perhaps the most telling of the current predicament of both learning facilitators and students. It reflects the quality and quantity of education in the time of COVID-19 crisis, as well as the overall well-being of its stakeholders.

Feeling deliberately deserted by the government, at a time when social safety nets and adequate cash subsidies were desperately needed by urban poor households, PINASAMA undertook a collective self-help project to mitigate the adverse effects of the pandemic. With the help of SPELL and the Philippine Business for Social Progress, a corporate-led social development foundation, a number of PINASAMA daycare teachers since June 2020 have engaged in the production of washable face masks. Teacher Tess called this their ‘temporary alternative.’

Through this project, the teachers regained the ability to secure dividends for their daily household expenses. At the same time, PINASAMA also received a fraction of the sale from each face mask created by their teachers. “Kahit papano nakakaraos kami sa paggawa nitong mask [...] May inaasahan [kami] linggo-linggo. Malaking bagay din ang paggawa namin nito” (We somehow managed to survive by producing these masks. We earn a weekly wage that is immensely helpful to us), Teacher Luz, a PINASAMA daycare teacher from Brgy. Commonwealth, explained.

While they have demonstrated immense resiliency, struggling to navigate through the pandemic-induced impairment, the teachers ultimately wished to move past post-COVID-19 times, wherein face-to-face is the ‘normal’ learning modality that provides affordable, quality, and holistic education to these poor children.

The PINASAMA teachers, in the meantime, anticipated and prepared to continue their advocacy for the recognition of their community-based learning program as a suitable alternative to the [neoliberal] traditional schooling. Teacher Diding expressed, “Laban lang, sige lang para ma-recognize. Sana kaming [alternative] schools na sinimulan ng komunidad ay kilalanin din” (We fight on to be recognized. My wish is for our schools built by communities to be recognized).

Earlier on during the height of mobility restrictions, SPELL was able to share the plight of its chapters in other provinces. SPELL members in Talavera, Nueva Ecija, reported that a municipal-wide lockdown caused widespread economic distress among their members who are mostly seasonal farmers and workers doing menial construction jobs in their locality. SPELL uncovered cases of barangay health workers irregularly sifting through the list of cash assistance (SAP) beneficiaries before passing it on to the barangay officers.

SPELL members in Bohol worry about the future of the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in their province, the curriculum of which integrates training on dairy farming in partnership with the Department of Education and the Philippine Carabao Center. The ALS schools, like other learning centers, had to temporarily close down. The pandemic complicated the issues they already had about the complexity of ALS as a mode of delivery of instruction vis-à-vis the K-to-12 curricula. An increase of school drop-outs among the poor is expected under ALS. However, the government’s capacity to accommodate these drop-outs is questionable.

SPELL members initiated their own donation drives upon noticing that government food rations had nothing nutritious for children and senior citizens. From the cash donations they collected, they bought and distributed milk (not infant formula) to their constituents. Their distribution was halted after the government cautioned them to secure a permit from DSWD for their relief operations, and the DOH for their milk distribution. SPELL finds this directive unrealistic, as the lockdown and quarantine situation prevent them from going to government offices to get the mandated permits.

Meanwhile, Bohol members were able to secure donations from their overseas Filipino friends, which they shared with the other SPELL chapters (such as in Quezon City). For monitoring and documentation, they took photos of their relief drives. They perceived this as the real spirit of giving and solidarity.

**Alyansa Ng Mga Samahan Sa Sitio Mendez,
Baesa Homeowners Association, Inc. (ASAMBA)**

“Communities living in the urban margins are undocumented and largely ignored by mainstream media. In the past and in the present, they have seized opportunities to reclaim spaces and resources, and fight for their rights. This is evidence that the urban poor are capable agents, and are not idle players waiting for government support or subsidy.”³⁴ Undoubtedly, there are exceptional possibilities and alternatives that the poor can do in the face of worsening urban poverty and complex socioeconomic issues.

Despite uncertainties, the homeowners of ASAMBA in Quezon City, Philippines, “devised their own ways of mobilizing effectively in response to the health crisis.”³⁵ This case study draws from stories of ASAMBA members and illustrates their creativity and resilience.

34 Tadem, Eduardo, Micah Hanah Orlino, Karl Hapal, Ananeza Aban, Erlinda Sapiandante, Mina Amata-Justo, Eduardo Roldan et al., *Marginalized Societies and the State in the Time of a Pandemic: The Philippine Case*, University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) Public Policy Monograph Series 2021-01, (Quezon City: UP CIDS, 2021), 23, <https://cids.up.edu.ph/download/marginalized-societies-and-the-state-in-the-time-of-a-pandemic-the-philippine-case/2>

35 Ibid.

“Biglaan ang ECQ, maraming nagutom kaya nag-food rationing kami” (“The enhanced community quarantine was sudden. We immediately distributed food rations because many went hungry”), said ASAMBA President Eduardo “Eddie” Roldan.³⁶ After the Philippine government declared the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) across the country in mid-March 2020, ASAMBA leaders convened an emergency meeting to discuss urgent responses to the public health crisis. Mindful of the debilitating effects of COVID-19 on the one hand, and exhibiting courage drawn from their collective agency, histories, and struggles on the other, the entire ASAMBA leadership mobilized to serve as community frontliners amid the pandemic.

Immediately, a group of women leaders proceeded to their village’s portals to strictly monitor the movement of every resident (*bantay sa gate*). They made sure that people were staying at home and practicing physical distancing. Some officers volunteered to retrofit the ironworks of their second gate. These gatekeepers constantly reminded residents to wear face masks and carry their identification cards (IDs) when entering or leaving the community. Otherwise, they would not be allowed to enter. They also screened the entry of nonresidents. For important public announcements, they maximized the use of a public address system with seven (7) speakers (*trompa*) around their whole community.

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

In the months that followed the lifting of the ECQ in Metro Manila, mobility restrictions eased. Many among the workforce were allowed to go back to work. In the absence of free mass testing, the whole community become more exposed to the virus. In July, ASAMBA monitored two (2)

36 Ibid., 25.

COVID-19 cases within their neighborhood. The infected were employees of private companies. Both have reportedly recovered. At the beginning of August, four (4) more asymptomatic cases were identified. Since there were no observed cases within the community during the ECQ (although no mass testing was conducted), the community concluded that these residents were infected when they began to return to their workplaces.

The threat of contracting COVID-19 created an atmosphere of distress. People were fearful that their own barangay might soon be included in the list of the city's COVID-19 hotspots that may eventually result in another painful lockdown. While they recognize that lockdowns are a necessary preventive measure, they worry that lockdowns are often not complemented with sufficient social services. ASAMBA residents continue to worry about their health situation that is aggravated by the increasing problem of food insecurity, unemployment, lack of livelihood opportunities, and the "no work, no pay" policy.

Given the prolonged quarantine period, with no assurance of economic recovery in the coming months, ASAMBA members started to set up their own livelihood shacks in front of their houses. Others resumed paid household work, such as doing the laundry. A few like Mina Justo (one of ASAMBA's officers) also tried online selling. Since biking has become an alternative means of transportation, Mina started an online retail of bicycle parts, and her son delivered them to online buyers within their reach. Her plea is addressed to the country's trade and industry department; she wants them to reconsider the proposal to tax small-time sellers whose incomes are inadequate to support a family's basic needs during quarantine.

Erlinda 'Ka Linda' Sapiandante, another leader, added that one of its positive outcomes is the circulation of money within their community. With residents buying food and other basic necessities from the neighborhood, this scheme allows them to patronize each other's product and appraise everyone's skill, such as specialty cooking, food preparation, and online selling. She mentioned that (vegetable) urban gardening also found a revival. This somehow contributed to addressing the food shortage, that is, growing their own food for the meal's main course (*pang-ulam*).

The children's education was another cause of worry. They believed that the DepEd's decision to begin classes by September 2020 was premature. Moreover, the shift to blended learning did not consider the situation of the poor. Eddie explained, "Uunahin ng mga pamilya ang pagkain kesa sa cellphone o gadget." (The poor families' priority is food

security instead of cellular phones or gadgets needed for online learning). He estimated that in the ASAMBA community alone, around 50 percent of the school children will approximately drop out this school year. For those who have enrolled, they might still drop out in the middle of the term when classes resume. Eddie discussed,

“Yung nanay, hindi niya maasikaso ang mga bata dahil magbabantay at maglalako pa siya ng paninda niya. Ang tatay, 3 days na lang ang pasok. Magbabayad pa ng renta sa bahay. May mga kaso na ng renters na umuwi na ng probinsya dahil sa kakulangan ng budget para panggastos sa pamilya at pambayad sa renta ng bahay.” (The mother cannot attend to this home-based education of her children because she has to peddle goods for a living. The father has only 3 working days. There is the house rent that has to be paid. There have been cases of families deciding to return to the province due to lack of budget for household expenditures including rent).

Amid this prolonged health crisis, ASAMBA has not wavered in providing service to its community. It has done so primarily through collective action and volunteerism. This has allowed them not to be overly reliant on dole-outs from the government; they have responded to various issues in the community. To sustain this initiative, ASAMBA has religiously collected PhP 20.00 monthly dues from its members and from the households who are considered renters and sharers. Other sources include parking fees from those with motor vehicles. ASAMBA’s COVID-19 response demonstrates their autonomy and ability to self-govern. This has made them flexible in addressing the immediate concerns of their community.

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

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

For Eddie, Mina, and Ka Linda, a redeeming factor in the quarantine period was the opportunity for the members to grow closer. They tested their collective capacities and governance skills, and pushed them further to new heights of self-discovery of what they can achieve as a peoples' organization. Overall, the pandemic has surfaced the often-underestimated capacities of grassroots communities in addressing the community's needs. This collective agency is enabled by their deeply ingrained perspectives and practices based on solidarity, cooperation, and sharing of resources.

Maigting Na Samahan Ng Panlipunang Negosyante Ng Towerville (Igting)

Igting or Maigting na Samahan ng mga Panlipunang Negosyante ng Towerville Inc. (Literally, Strong Organization of Social Entrepreneurs of Towerville Inc.) is a social enterprise which sells quality garment products and provides custom sewing services.³⁷ In 2014, Igting began as a livelihood project of CAMP Asia, Inc., a nongovernment organization and subsidiary of CAMP International. As a platform for income generation and community empowerment, Igting aims to provide employment opportunities to residents of a resettlement area in Towerville, San Jose Del Monte, Bulacan, Philippines. Many of the residents were once informal settlers who were compelled to relocate due to urban development projects of the government, or whose dwellings were devastated by typhoons and floods. Ninety-eight percent of the members are women. Igting specializes in sewing custom-made uniforms, and men and women's apparel, bags, and pouches. Igting's sewing center is located at Lot A-2 Upper Quarry, Brgy. Minuyan Proper, San Jose Del Monte, Bulacan.

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

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

For mothers, who largely depend on their earnings from Igting (for their daily necessities), the COVID-19 pandemic caused them grave economic distress. As such, they looked forward to receiving the food packs and cash aid under the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) of the government. However, due to the delays, Igting employees had to rely on other social support systems to put food on the table, such as the relief program of the employers of their spouses or children, and money transfers from relatives.

Three weeks after the declaration of the ECQ, the first of the three rounds of food packs from the local government arrived. It contained five (5) kilos of rice, eight (8) cans of sardines, and four (4) packs of instant noodles. Meanwhile, the first of the two pay-outs of the cash aid (PhP 6,500.00) was made in the third week of May. Members of Igting agreed that the barangay could still improve the implementation of these social amelioration measures. The residents were asked to line up in long queues under the heat of the sun just to simply submit their completed forms to the barangay hall.

For the distribution of family food packs, the barangay tasked the block (unit) leaders to come up with a list of beneficiaries. However, the identification process for food packs seemed arbitrary and subjective, instead of carefully considering the eligibility requirements of the potential beneficiaries.

Compromised livelihood

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

Coping with the crisis

After a month of halted operations, CAMP Asia approached Igting to produce 100,000 face masks, which were to be given as donations to

various nongovernment organizations (NGOs). This initiative of CAMP Asia was deeply appreciated by Igting members. As they resumed their operations, they came up with a list of occupational safety and health measures, which were strictly enforced and carefully followed. Every day, members of Igting produced at least 6,000 face masks. A piece rater may earn from PhP 300.00 to PhP 900.00 per day, depending on the speed of production. In the following weeks, CAMP Asia had two subsequent orders of about 60,000 and 45,000 face masks, respectively. Furthermore, Igting is currently planning and learning to sew PPE as another product. In addition, Igting received subsidies from the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) to sustain their operations. However, the officers of Igting started to be concerned again as they were about to finish the face mask production, and no new job order was in sight.

Preliminary recommendations

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

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

Ayta Mag-indi Community of Porac, Pampanga

This report recounts the experiences of indigenous peoples (IPs) of Barangays Camias and Planas, highlighting how the existing pandemic-related policies exacerbated the already marginalized status of IPs in Philippine society. Barangay Camias is located in the ancestral domain of the Ayta, and is mainly governed by Ayta leaders. It comprises around 700 Ayta families. Barangay Planas, on the other hand, is the relocation site where about 400 Ayta families are residing after the eruption of Mt. Pinatubo in 1991. Bordering their relocation, the area they occupied was called the Katutubo Village to delineate them from the non-Ayta residents (mostly Kapampangans or natives of Pampanga) of the barangay.

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

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

Health and medical support from the government

The only support group the Ayta Mag-indi peoples could count on in their community are the Ayta Barangay Health Workers who, themselves, are not fully informed about the pandemic. “They can take your blood pressure and temperature, and they will advise you to rest and not work when sick,” said Benny Capuno, Ayta Mag-indi Cultural Master. However, their ability to physically visit the community was limited while the quarantine measures were in force. Prior to the pandemic, the higher-ranking health official in the community’s health center, who is a midwife, used to pay regular visits. However, these stopped upon the declaration

of the lockdown. Visits only resumed recently after the province had been placed on General Community Quarantine (GCQ) status. When asked what service the midwife gave during her visits, the Aytas said that she simply distributed milk to identify malnourished children, and gave Vitamin A supplements to both the youth and the adults.

The Ayta have become aware of the health protocols to stop the spread of the disease. On the other hand, as much as they want to comply with these protocols, they barely have the resources or means to do so. In the context of a community quarantine, where their mobility was restricted, and many establishments temporarily closed down, sourcing protective equipment such as masks was a challenge. In response, leaders from both barangays innovated to produce their own face masks. Similarly, they began to gather leaves from medicinal plants, which, based on their indigenous knowledge and experiences, can serve as disinfectants. They admitted, however, that wearing face masks is not yet a popular practice among the community members, especially when they are in their homes or in their ancestral domain, where they felt safe from the virus.

Non-health support from the government

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

Social Amelioration Program

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

As many families were left out in the two aforementioned government programs, the Ayta Mag-indi leaders were pleased to hear that more assistance would come from the Department of Social Welfare and Development. On the contrary, this sense of relief soon evaporated when they received only 70 packages of hygiene kits from the agency. Mindful not to be accused of being ungrateful and hard-to-please, the leaders expressed appreciation for the assistance. However, since the hygiene kits came only four months after the lockdown was announced, their problems now went far beyond hygiene concerns.

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

Further marginalization and widening of societal divide

The insensitivity to the needs of the Ayta Mag-indi community was manifested in the government programs previously mentioned. This, in many ways, reinforces cases of discrimination to the indigenous community. Further discrimination also occurred with the spread of misinformation on the pandemic. Early into the news of the health crisis, the non-Aytas (*umat*) of Pampanga were reportedly spreading the rumor that the COVID-19 virus came from the indigenous peoples, since they also eat bats, where the virus is reported to have emanated in China. The Ayta Mag-indi felt the impact of this discrimination whenever they were in the lowland areas, as non-Aytas openly avoided having close contact with them. On the other hand, they have similar reservations in making contact with outsiders, as they believe they are more prone to the infection, which they do not want to carry back to their community.

Many Ayta Mag-indi families decided to retreat to the mountains (“*umatras sa bundok*,” as they would say), believing that it is a safer place and a more sustainable source of staples, such as root crops, among others. Where food security is a major concern of the national government in the lowlands, the Ayta Mag-indi are confident that they will never go hungry in the land of their ancestors. Apart from food security, they also believe that the mountains are a safer place—since it caters to lush forest growth, which serves as a barrier to any form of virus or bacterial infection. They believe

that the leaves of the trees in these forests absorb the harmful elements even before they get in contact with humans.

Lumad and Bakwit School

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

As an example, the Lumads, as they call themselves in the southern Philippines and comprising of thirty-five (35) non-Muslim ethnic groups in Mindanao, have built clinics and schools to serve their communities in place of long-distant government hospitals and schools. "Before, only one out of ten Lumad children knew how to read, write, and count."³⁸ To combat the alarming incidence of illiteracy and its dangerous consequences, religious groups, along with human rights organizations and IP advocates, built community schools where Lumad people of all ages could learn literacy and numeracy.³⁹ Many of the Lumads welcomed these schools and soon helmed their establishment and development.

According to the Save Our Schools (SOS) Network (see footnote 38), the government's "haphazard policies" during the ECQ severely disrupted the everyday lives of the Lumads, such as securing food and other basic necessities, especially considering their already militarized tribal communities. The SOS Network further claims that the state weaponized the pandemic to force the Lumad to return to their still militarized ancestral domains.

Despite the hostility and violence from armed state elements, the students, teachers, and staff of these alternative tribal schools continue to campaign for the Lumad youth's right to education. The SOS Network

38 Save Our Schools Network SOS, "Locking down Lumad Education: Schools under Attack amid Pandemic," *Likhaan: The Journal of Contemporary Philippine Literature* 14 (2, 2020): 122, <https://www.journals.upd.edu.ph/index.php/lik/article/view/8621>

39 Save Our Schools Network (SOS), "Save Our Schools: History and Background," Primer, 2019, 25

will continue to pursue dialogue with government units and organizations as well as to conduct activities beyond protest actions that contribute to the well-being of indigenous students and to the success of their social causes. These activities include remedial classes on important skills and competencies (e.g., intermediate reading comprehension); donation drives initially focusing on the provision of healthy foods for the evacuees and eventually extending to hobby-related materials such as reading texts and musical instruments; cultivating hobbies, such as sports events, beadwork, and other hobby tasks related to music and the arts, to provide temporary comfort to students; psychosocial support from allied health and children's welfare organizations to equip the students with psychosocial knowledge and techniques to help soothe themselves and their peers; and alliance work such as conducting film screenings and arts and craft commissions which encourage youth formations to volunteer for the campaigns of the SOS Network.⁴⁰

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

Bantay Kalusugan Pampamayanan (BKP)

The Bantay Kalusugan Pampamayanan (BKP, literally “Community Health Watch”) has its roots in the relocation of urban poor communities from Metro Manila to a site in Towerville, San Jose del Monte City, Bulacan in 2012. The foundation of BKP can also be traced to the community work of CAMP Asia. Through a partnership with CAMP Asia, the community was able to establish a health clinic. Aside from the clinic, an emergency transport system (ETS) was set up as a component of the health project spearheaded by CAMP Asia. The BKP has since evolved into a community-based and volunteer-led organization of health advocates. On June 30, 2018, BKP was formally launched as a community health organization. Starting with only 88 members, the BKP has gained more than a thousand members within the community. BKP is composed of the following

40 “Locking down Lumad Education: Schools under Attack amid Pandemic,” pp. 131–133

committees: health, monitoring, health education, rescuers, and an ad hoc committee comprising the secretariat.

During the ECQ, BKP members found it difficult to earn a living. Most members were dependent on daily income to meet their basic necessities. Survival issues were further compounded by the slow and ineffective delivery of social services from the government. Despite the fears brought by the pandemic, BKP members were resolute in continuing their role as community-based health advocates. This entailed the continued provision of services to their fellow community members. These services included several activities, such as checking, monitoring, and documenting the health of its community members, particularly their blood pressure, sugar level, and temperature. Serious conditions were immediately referred to the nearby health center.

As previously mentioned, BKP had performed these monitoring activities prior to the pandemic. However, amid the onslaught of COVID-19, BKP members considered it necessary to remind their members to monitor residents showing any symptoms associated with the coronavirus. If they exhibit any, the cluster leaders were instructed to inform the health center immediately. BKP's health monitoring activities were considered key in minimizing the spread of the virus.

Complementing BKP's health monitoring activities were its health education activities, which they intensified in response to the pandemic. During the early stages of the health crisis, BKP was active in providing preventative pieces of information to the residents of Towerville. Because of mobility restrictions and physical distancing guidelines, BKP pivoted to digital technologies to easily coordinate with their members.

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

Amid the pandemic, BKP has not wavered in providing relief and health services to the residents of Towerville. They have accomplished it through collective action and by tapping into social networks that they built prior to the public health crisis. Despite this, BKP admits that the workload overwhelmed their capacity. However, this limitation did not deter them. Instead, they reflected that there is a need to strengthen their capacity to better respond to crises. In the meantime, there is an urgent need to scale-up their health monitoring. BKP saw the need to get access to COVID-19 tests to inform their health-related advocacies and interventions in the community. However, the cost of these tests remains a significant roadblock for BKP. It is crucial to point out that the organization has yet to maximize their social media accounts for information dissemination, and promote their health advocacies remotely.

The story of the BKP members during the pandemic serves as an eye-opener on the devastating impact of the coronavirus. The imposition of the ECQ has caused members of the urban poor communities to lose their sources of income and livelihood. Moreover, not all of them were able to receive help from the government during their most vulnerable situation. Nevertheless, the BKP persevered to continue its task of monitoring the health of the community.

Significantly, BKP is at the forefront of securing the needs of their community—in terms of health, relief operations, and livelihood. Despite these, they still need help in terms of accessing vital services to alleviate the fears of the community.

Sitio San Roque Community and Save San Roque (SSR) Alliance

COVID-19's emergence in the Philippines aggravated the poverty experienced by the Filipino urban poor. This has been the case for Sitio San Roque, whose residents are mostly low-wage earners, with little to no job security, e.g., construction workers, laborers, vendors, transport workers, and other workers in the informal economy. “Hindi kami mamamatay sa virus. Mamatay kami sa gutom” (We will not die because of the virus. We will die because of hunger) has become the common adage in Sitio San Roque since the community quarantines started.

On April 1, more than two weeks after the declaration of the lockdown, more than a hundred residents of Sitio San Roque gathered along EDSA to express their plea for the delayed government relief. This

organic mobilization relied on the struggle of the already poverty-stricken and marginalized communities.

A day after the dispersal and detention of residents seeking government relief, food packs from the local government finally reached the community. Four thousand (4,000) food packs were sent and distributed by staff from the Barangay Bagong Pag-asa and the Quezon City Hall. Some residents regard this as a triumph of their radical collective action in EDSA. In an interview⁴¹ by GMA News, one resident said,

Ngayon lang po [kami nabigyan], kung hindi kami nag-rally [para sa ayuda] kahapon sa labas, hindi kami nabigyan ng pansin. (We only received aid when we mobilized in the streets [to seek government aid]. If not for the protest, we wouldn't have been noticed [by them]).

Despite belonging to the vulnerable sectors and meeting the criteria to be a recipient of the DSWD's Social Amelioration Program (SAP), a significant number of families in Sitio San Roque were still 'left out' of the government cash aid. Many families have only received it once.

As a response to the spread of COVID-19 in the country, the DepEd implemented a distance-based learning approach. However, this approach did not come without challenges, especially for urban poor communities like Sitio San Roque.

Residents identified three major problems they experienced with DepEd's current approach: (1) availability and ability of parents to serve as learning facilitators or educators, (2) complications and inconsistencies of online and modular learning, and (3) economic and technological limitations in urban poor communities (lack of ample studying space, poor internet signal, and added costs for online use).⁴²

In the absence of ample and regular aid from the government and with support from Save San Roque and the cooperation of the barangay, the community spearheaded their own donation drive and community self-help projects to collectively alleviate their struggles. A plan was formed

41 Julia Ornedo, "Sitio San Roque Residents Finally Get Aid, Believe It's Because of Their Protest," *GMA News*, April 2, 2020, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/metro/732436/sitio-san-roque-residents-inally-get-aid-believe-it-s-because-of-their-protest/story/>

42 Save San Roque, *Eskuwela Maralita: Buod ng Rekomendasyon para sa Pagbubuo ng Pansamantalang Pansuportang Eskuwelahang Pangkomunidad sa Sitio San Roque*, (Quezon City: Save San Roque, 2020).

to create three phases of relief, with community leaders and residents taking the lead. The first phase was the distribution of relief goods, which commenced at the start of the ECQ, to address the immediate effects of the lockdown. One thousand families in the first two weeks received relief goods, which contained food and hygiene products that had been repacked and distributed by the mothers (*nanays*) of the community. As the second week of the quarantine ended, it was clear that conventional relief packs were not only expensive, but logistically taxing to source and laborious to deliver.

The second phase of the relief came with the establishment of the *Kusinang Bayan* (Community Kitchen), a kitchen providing meals for the community and by the residents themselves. Through the collective effort of the different People's Organizations (POs) in the community, twenty-seven (27) community kitchens were established in Sitio San Roque, and its adjacent urban poor communities in NIA road, near DENR, San Isidro, and Sitio Belmonte. The *Kusinang Bayan* provides warm nutritious meals to an estimated 5,000 urban poor residents a day, mitigating the issue of food insecurity and even empowering the community in the time of heightened vulnerability.

According to Cecille Fernandez, community leader and *Kusinang Bayan* volunteer, unity and collective action are strengthened in these kitchens. Work is distributed and done collectively. The residents purchase ingredients at the market, cook and distribute food, as well as clean the cooking stations. According to them, because residents saw the necessity of setting up a community kitchen, they intuitively organized themselves into a functioning collective.

Furthermore, to transition into a more sustainable and long-term form of community-led relief, community leaders with SSR have come up with another project, the *Tanimang Bayan* (Community Garden). They are collective urban agroecological food gardens, which are set up in different locations of the community. At present, one (1) food garden is being prepared for the pilot implementation. In particular, it is already undergoing land preparation processes. The third phase of the community relief will enable Sitio San Roque to generate their own produce that can be used for the *Kusinang Bayan*, and to form a holistic community health response to the pandemic-induced crisis.

The residents crafted their own COVID-19 mitigation plan with the aid of public health experts and medical doctors from Coalition for People's

Right to Health (CPRH) and Save San Roque. The result is a Community Health Response Team (CHRT) composed of at least six (6) volunteer residents. Every day since its inception, CHRT volunteers wearing PPE look out for symptoms of COVID-19 in different areas of Sitio San Roque. Gelyn, a CHRT volunteer, explained,

Tatlo sa amin may dalang thermal scanner para mag-check ng temperature [...] yung iba naman nagbibigay ng alcohol atbp. maibibigay. (Three of us [CHRT volunteers] used thermal scanners to check the body temperature of residents while the rest provided alcohol and other supplies, such as face masks).

She said that they also monitored residents recorded to have above-normal temperatures (37.5°C and above) and provided grocery items to them. This provision removed the need of these residents to go outside for basic necessities and allowed them to completely recover indoors.

Moreover, the CHRT volunteers also served as health officers to remind residents to wear masks and practice doable health protocols. Posters were made visible in strategic locations of the community, while pamphlets were disseminated during the tri-weekly rounds of the CHRT. These health information, education, and communication (IEC) materials contained easy-to-understand visuals (proper wearing of masks, coughing and sneezing etiquette) and health guidelines, which integrated existing barangay health systems, for residents experiencing COVID-19 symptoms.

Despite Sitio San Roque's initiatives through self-help programs, community volunteers, residents, and leaders working to implement these have not been spared from state policing, harassment, and intimidation.⁴³ It was further intensified because of the national government's militaristic response to the pandemic.

On the third day of the *Kusinang Bayan*, at least fifteen (15) armed police officers stormed kitchens and tore down the community's legitimate calls for assistance such as "*Ayuda, ibigay na!*" (Distribute cash aid now!) and "*Tulong, hindi kulong!*" (Assistance, not imprisonment!) adjacent to the community kitchens. Similarly, CHRT operations were again met with constant state policing. Gelyn recalled,

⁴³ Save San Roque, "Puwede na Namin Kayong Arestuhin Diyan... Sumama na Kayo sa Presinto." Facebook, January 21, 2021, <https://b.watch/3fj661a5-s>

Minsan may mga pulis na sumama samin [...] nagtatanong anong ginagawa namin at para saan. (Sometimes, police officers would approach us [...] asking what we are doing and for what reason).

She explained that the already limited capacity of the CHRT was even reduced because of this interference. Last January 18, 2021, members of the Philippine National Police (PNP), without warrants of arrest, threatened to arrest SSR volunteers and youths while the latter were creating a mural which states, “All Cops are Bastards” (ACAB).⁴⁴

This was in response to another *tokhang* (drug war operation) incident in the community, agitating the youth further “against the police expressed through the mural.” According to Nanoy Rafael, SSR’s Education Committee Co-head, the PNP even threatened that they would come back (every day) to eliminate the youth organizations in the community.

The mural is “part of the Eskuwela Maralita project that requires the beautification of demolished spaces, to be used as makeshift classrooms for children in the community who have been challenged by distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic.” The National Housing Authority (NHA) also made efforts to shut down the community initiative before the scheduled opening of Eskuwela Maralita classes in February 2021.

Almost a year after the lockdown, the once vigorous and steady surge of donations—from civil society organizations, corporate foundations, church and religious institutions, personalities and influencers, private individuals, and urban poor advocates—dwindled due to various reasons, specifically ‘donor fatigue’ and reduced interest in community issues. Further, gradual disengagement of community volunteers from the initiatives was observed because of the militarization, coupled with the dwindling of pooled resources.

It was evident in the initiatives of Sitio San Roque that economic and other tangible forms of support from the Local Government Units (LGUs) were necessary for their sustained operations. Without such support, the empowering and unifying community initiatives, such as *Kusinang Bayan* and CHRT, would come to a halt.

44 Franco Luna, “San Roque Volunteers Paint over ‘ACAB’ Mural; Preps for Community Learning Continue,” *Philippine Star*, January 19, 2021, <https://www.philstar.com/nation/2021/01/19/2071553/san-roque-volunteers-paint-over-acab-mural-preps-community-learning-continue>.

Nonetheless, the success of community initiatives, as a rapid and effective response to address the needs of the residents at the height of the community quarantine, is a testament to the extraordinary possibilities when solidarity and collective action are translated into practice by the marginalized sector.

Nagkaisa Labor Coalition

The first year of the pandemic saw it mutate from a health emergency into a humanitarian crisis and an economic disaster. The economy plummeted to an extraordinary recession. Job losses and hunger incidence did not just escalate but rose to historic highs. At first glance, the economic crisis was a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic, but a more granular analysis reveals that it is directly connected to a particular response by the authoritarian regime of Rodrigo Duterte. In contrast, an effective response left countries like Vietnam only marginally affected economically.⁴⁵

The number of jobless Filipinos peaked at 7.3 million, an unemployment rate of 18 percent, in April 2020.⁴⁶ As the lockdowns eased and workers streamed back to work, unemployment declined to 4.5 million. The official unemployment rate however hid the fact that 2.2 million Filipinos left the labor force and thus were not counted as jobless.⁴⁷

While the economy slowly recovered, jobs were even slower in improving, quantitatively and qualitatively. Many of the new jobs created were part-time, temporary and informal, and so incomes and well-being of workers suffered as a result. This decline in living standards is bluntly revealed in the growth of families experiencing hunger as the pandemic wore on. Some 4.2 million families reported being hungry in May 2020⁴⁸ during the worst period of the lockdown.

45 Yen Nee Lee, "This is Asia's top-performing economy in the Covid pandemic — it's not China," *CNBC*, January 27, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/01/28/vietnam-is-asias-top-performing-economy-in-2020-amid-covid-pandemic.html>

46 Ralf Rivas, "PH Unemployment at All-time High with 7.3 Million Jobless in April 2020," *Rappler*, June 5, 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/business/unemployment-rate-philippines-april-2020>

47 Ben De Vera, "4.5 Million Pinoys Jobless in 2020," *Inquirer.net*, December 4, 2020, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1367928/4-5m-pinoys-jobless-in-2020>

48 CNN Philippines Staff, "SWS Survey Reveals 4.2 Million Families Suffered Involuntary Hunger amid COVID-19 Pandemic," *CNN Philippines*, May 22, 2020, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/5/22/sws-survey-four-million-families-involuntary-hunger-covid-pandemic.html>

Surprisingly, by September 2020, hunger incidence climbed to 7.6 million households.⁴⁹ In other words, hunger had an inverse relationship to unemployment. Nonetheless, this seeming contradiction can be explained once the decrease in labor force participation, decline in job quality and intensification of inflation are considered. By the end of 2020, the price of a kilo of pork was higher than the minimum wage in the export processing zones of Cavite,⁵⁰ a heavily-industrialized province just outside of the capital Metro Manila.

Aside from the authoritarian response of the Duterte administration which treated the pandemic as a peace-and-order problem and not a health emergency, the discriminatory behavior of employers and the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) exacerbated outcomes for workers. Numerous employers took advantage of COVID-19 to deny workers their mandated entitlements such as leave benefits, separation pay, social security remittances, and other monetary benefits. Others refused to negotiate collective bargaining agreements or unilaterally cut already agreed-upon and contract-mandated benefits. Even worse, employers busted unions and dispersed strikes.

The DOLE enabled the employer misbehavior through pandemic-period issuances that allowed firms to implement wage cuts, contract suspensions, and lengthen forced leaves. Employers were only encouraged, not required, by the DOLE to provide pandemic assistance to their workers so that only a handful were granted assistance on top of advancing mandated benefits. Finally, a DOLE order suspended the labor dispute resolution mechanism that effectively left unorganized workers—who are the vast majority of the working class—defenseless against employer abuses. This pattern of employer abuse can be seen in the experience of workers in the Mactan Economic Zone in Cebu. In possibly the largest mass layoff of the pandemic, more than 4,000 workers, equivalent to one-fourth of the workforce, were terminated across the garment factories of the Sports City group of companies,⁵¹ the biggest employer in the Mactan

49 Krissy Aguilar, “7.6 Million Families Hungry in Past 3 Months, Highest Hunger Rate since 2014 — SWS,” *Inquirer.net*, September 27, 2020, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1340772/7-6-million-families-hungry-sets-phs-highest-hunger-incidence-since-2014-sws>

50 Dona Z. Pazzibugan, “Minimum wage earners decry high food prices,” *Inquirer.net*, January 20, 2021, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1385895/minimum-wage-earners-decry-high-food-prices>

51 Partido Manggagawa, “Mother of All Layoffs at Cebu Ecozone Slammed as 4,000 Fired,” September 5, 2020, <https://partidomanggagawa2001.blogspot.com/2020/09/mother-of-all-layoffs-at-cebu-ecozone.html>

Economic Zone. Sports City supplies global brands such as Adidas, Under Armour, Lululemon and Saucony. Another factory supplying to Adidas, Yuenthai, also shed some 200 employees.⁵² The companies stated that the losses during the pandemic precipitated the mass layoffs.

However, the labor group Partido Manggagawa (PM) alleged that the wave of retrenchments in Mactan, Cebu also intersected with labor standards violations and unfair labor practices. The group averred that the garment firm FCO International shed 124 workers without paying separation benefits.⁵³ Further, in the companies First Glory Philippines and Kor Landa, 300 and 67 workers were illegally terminated, respectively, as part of efforts to bust existing unions.⁵⁴

The trend of employer misbehavior was also revealed in other industrial areas. In Bataan, two export firms did not pay salaries on time. A firm in Cavite shut down without giving workers their salaries and other benefits, including severance pay. Likewise, a Laguna glass factory filed for closure despite maintaining a skeletal force, which workers resisted as a ploy by management to refuse contract negotiations and bust the union.⁵⁵ Elsewhere in Luzon, a power plant and a university both turned down scheduled collective bargaining.

Organized labor derided the DOLE for carrying out “social distancing” instead of social dialogue. Issuances were released during pandemic without consultations with workers or even in the face of opposition by trade unions.⁵⁶ Among these issuances was Labor Advisory 17 (LA 17), which permitted employers to reduce wages and benefits. Meanwhile, Department Order (DO) 213 shelved the acceptance of worker complaints and petitions for certification elections precisely at a time when employer abuse was rampant. Both these issuances would later be effectively repealed as a result of vocal challenges by organized labor. Still, another DOLE order, DO 215, extended the allowable period for putting workers on forced leave to one year, contrary to a Labor Code provision limiting such to six months and despite vehement opposition by the union movement.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Partido Manggagawa, “Labor Yearender: Workers are in the Frontlines of a Fight against the Pandemic of Rights Violations,” December 29, 2020, <https://partidongmanggagawa2001.blogspot.com/2020/12/labor-yearender-workers-are-in.html>

55 Ibid.

56 Ibid.

Trade unions did not limit themselves to simply lobbying and complaining. In several instances, workers exercised agency by launching protests and strikes. However, security personnel were also quick to ensure that labor unrest was quashed immediately so that it did not spark a prairie fire of worker discontent. The picketline of workers of the firm Sejung Apparel in the First Cavite Industrial Estate was disbanded by a combined force of local police, security guards, and barangay *tanods* (Barangay Police Security Officers) in the early weeks of the lockdown.⁵⁷ Two attempts by First Glory workers to demonstrate in the Mactan Economic Zone were dispersed by the police. As a result, five union leaders and organizers were detained on trumped up charges of violating quarantine rules and resisting arrest.⁵⁸ Police also harassed a rally of delivery riders of Foodpanda at the DOLE national office.⁵⁹ Every time, security forces justified their suppression of the workers' right to peaceful assembly and redress of grievances as the enforcement of COVID-19 health protocols.

Nagkaisa's response to the COVID-19 crisis

The labor coalition Nagkaisa was formed in 2012 as an alliance of the largest labor centers in the country. It counted as members the Trade Union Congress of the Philippines, Federation of Free Workers, Sentro ng mga Nagkakaisa at Progresibong Manggagawa (SENTRO, literally "Center of United and Progressive Workers"), Partido Manggagawa (PM) and around forty other labor federations and institutions. The unprecedented unity of a full political spectrum of workers' groups was forged in the wake of the solidarity movement for the biggest labor dispute of that period—the fight against the outsourcing in Philippine Airlines. Since its founding, Nagkaisa has been at the forefront of the campaign against contractualization and other working-class issues pertaining to wages, unemployment, the price of electricity, freedom of association, and industrial policy.

At the onset of the pandemic, Nagkaisa called for *ayudang sapat para sa lahat* or sufficient aid for all. The coalition immediately foresaw the need

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Lorraine Ecarma, "Police Arrest 5 Cebu Activists in Bonifacio Day Protest," *Rappler*, November 30, 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/police-arrest-cebu-activists-bonifacio-day-protest-november-30-2020>

⁵⁹ Jamil Santos and Ted Cordero, "Foodpanda Riders Protest Alleged Unfair Labor Practices in Front of DOLE Office," *GMA News*, November 18, 2020, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/metro/764627/foodpanda-riders-protest-alleged-unfair-labor-practices-in-front-of-dole-office/story/>

to provide income supplement to workers, formal and informal, who will be left without jobs and livelihood amidst the strict lockdown implemented by the Duterte administration. Nagkaisa also anticipated the limitations and problems in a targeted distribution of *ayuda* that the government was planning. Specifically, Nagkaisa demanded that PhP 10,000 per month be provided to all affected workers to tide them over the lockdown. It also asked that employers be mandated to grant paid leave for their furloughed workers, instead of the government simply encouraging companies to offer aid or advance mandated benefits such as the 13th month pay.

By the latter half of the year, Nagkaisa highlighted its advocacy for *balik trabahong ligtas* or safe return to work, amidst the easing of mobility restrictions and the gradual opening of the economy. This call included demands for free mass testing, protective personal equipment, health insurance, and hazard pay for frontline and essential workers. The group also advocated a service contracting scheme for the jeepney sector as a means to revive the jobs of informal drivers and operators, and also to transition them into formal employment arrangements. Service contracting also aimed to restore the broken public transport system, which is necessary for the safe commute of returning workers. Unfortunately, the Duterte administration turned a blind eye to these demands; resuscitating businesses took precedence over public health.

Nonetheless, not all of Nagkaisa's proposals were unmet by the authorities. LA 17 and DO 213 were later repealed, although it took months of lobbying by Nagkaisa and suffering by workers. The opening of the labor complaints system saw thousands of workers filing claims for unpaid salaries, separation pay, and other benefits. Late in 2020, an initial DOLE suggestion to defer the release of the 13th month pay was also withdrawn in the wake of organized labor's campaign and outrage from unorganized workers. As a whole, Nagkaisa's demands were constrained by its inability to provide leverage to its lobby due to the lockdown restrictions on mass mobilization.

In the darkest days of the pandemic and at the height of the lockdown, Nagkaisa conducted its activities through online means. The transition from traditional physical and collective events to online platforms like Zoom, Facebook Messenger, and chat groups necessitated a steep learning curve for labor groups comprising Nagkaisa. Still, it was able to hold successfully a virtual Labor Day commemoration in 2020 that had thousands of participants.

Nagkaisa slowly but surely returned to mass gatherings and collective actions as restrictions started to ease in the second half of 2020. It tested the waters by holding a face-to-face action at the grounds of the Commission on Human Rights on Independence Day in June. Next, it joined the SONAgkaisa rally at the campus of the University of the Philippines, together with other progressive and sectoral groups, to demand an alternative and rationale pandemic response, and denounce the government's crackdown on political rivals and civil liberties amidst the pandemic. To maneuver around the restrictions by the police on mass gatherings, motorcades were held in different areas such as the ABS-CBN compound in Quezon City, Ayala in Makati, and the DOLE national office in Intramuros.

Nagkaisa's pandemic response can be summarized as a call to prioritize workers welfare instead of employers' interests. This translated into a demand for *Manggagawa Naman* or workers' first. This slogan was concretized into a detailed platform embodied in Nagkaisa's "State of Labor and its Agenda on Recovery" or SOLAR.⁶⁰ SOLAR was released in late 2020 and argued that responding to workers' demands and instituting labor protection was the road to a sustainable and equitable economic recovery. Among the innovative proposals in SOLAR was the call for an unemployment support and work assistance guarantee or USWAG.⁶¹ USWAG was a recommendation for government to provide public sector jobs for the unemployed, including those furloughed during the pandemic, for a minimum period of 100 days to a maximum of nine months. Climate jobs should be a priority for public employment under USWAG. While SOLAR necessarily focused on workers' welfare, the platform was also animated by a vision of transformative social change and of challenging the neoliberal status quo. Among its radical demands was the imposition of a wealth tax to fund the generous social protection schemes in SOLAR. This was arguably the first time that a wealth tax was propounded in the Philippines. At the end of 2020, the sharp rise in prices led Nagkaisa to call for a P100 across-the-board wage increase so that workers could recover the lost value of their salaries. The coalition also reaffirmed its call for USWAG amidst reports of a new wave of retrenchments in the last three months of that year.

60 Melisa Serrano, Wilson Fortaleza, Jude Esguerra, James Matthew Miraflor and CJ Castillo, "State of Labor and its Agenda on Recovery," (Nagkaisa, 2020).

61 Nagkaisa, "Unemployment Support and Work Assistance Guarantee (USWAG)," (Unpublished manuscript, 2021)

Complementing Nagkaisa's advocacy for workers' demands and policy changes, the coalition's constituent organizations also undertook their own version of *ayuda* in the face of the humanitarian crisis spawned by the government's pandemic response. Unions affiliated with SENTRO provided *ayuda* to their own members and to nearby communities. Through the generosity of donors, PM dispensed sacks of rice to some one thousand workers in the export processing zones of Laguna, Cavite, and Mactan. In conjunction with *ayuda*, the groups also launched awareness campaigns on labor and human rights.

Aid distribution and labor education made a significant impact among workers in Cebu. This was evident in a surge in membership in the Mactan Export Processing Zone Workers Association. Unrest had festered among economic zone workers due to the mass layoffs and lack of assistance by employers. Unions were formed in the factories of Sports City and First Glory, which was followed by petitions for certification elections by the end of 2020. Employers quickly maneuvered to bust the unions by harassing workers and conducting a disinformation campaign through social media. The First Glory union officers and active members were terminated en masse and subsequently, the union lost the election. The Labor Secretary allowed the delay in the conduct of the elections in the Sports City factories by almost six months, enabling management interference. In the end, the unions in Sports City also lost the elections since the initial worker unrest gave way to fear of factory closure.

In conclusion, Nagkaisa's COVID-19 response was triggered by the failed authoritarian policies of the Duterte administration. Nagkaisa's response was characterized by a coherent set of alternative reforms codified in SOLAR; consolidation of its membership around this platform through online and offline advocacy activities; engagement with the government on the repeal and reversal of its disastrous policies; raising awareness via social media and traditional mass media; and finally, limited *ayuda* distribution to its membership. Overall, Nagkaisa's demands were visibly without leverage and were mostly ignored by government. Nonetheless, its advocacies did have a significant impact in educating masses of its organized membership and new groups of discontented workers around an alternative COVID-19 response.

THAILAND

Overview of the country situation^{62, 63, 64, 65}

Thailand is among the few countries in Southeast Asia that have substantially contained the surge in COVID-19 cases, with records of only about 4,000 before December.⁶⁶ However, what worries the Thai public is the turbulent political climate under the government of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-ocha and his Thai junta who capitalized on the pandemic to unnecessarily extend the State of Emergency to enforce censorship and crackdown on protesters.

Frequent targets of such draconian state measures are young activists, human rights defenders, and community organizers from grassroots movements. Declared in March and extended last October 15, the State of Emergency, under the guise of “ensuring peace and order,” is observed to have posed serious threats to civil and political rights, and freedoms of citizens who are already bearing the impact of the COVID-19 crisis.

Public outcry against the violence of Thailand’s military-monarchy alliance has grown steadily since the promulgation of the 2014 Interim Constitution.⁶⁷ Beginning that year, political repression continues to flourish. It particularly targets those who are critical towards the government and the monarchy. The series of demonstrations, by students and the peoples across Thailand in 2020, revealed the multiple and interconnected issues of the country that are rooted in the longstanding inequality and injustice prevalent in society. Various groups of people have suffered from unequal access to benefits, rights, and power.⁶⁸ Under the State of Emergency, other restrictive measures were observed, including

62 Netiwit Chotiphatphaisal and Suphanut Aneknumwong, “Why Thai Students are Prepared to Risk Everything,” *Nikkei Asia*, August 18, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Opinion/Why-Thai-students-are-prepared-to-risk-everything>

63 BBC, “Thai Protests: How Pro-democracy Movement Gained Momentum,” October 16, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-54542252>.

64 Duncan McCargo, “Can Thailand’s Protest Movement Broaden Its Appeal? Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Policy*, September 25, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/25/thailand-protest-regional-class-generation-divides/>.

65 Wasant Techawongtham, “Critical State of Emergency Not Justified,” *Bangkok Post*, October 17, 2020, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2003619/critical-state-of-emergency-not-justified>.

66 BBC, “Covid-19: Thailand Tests Thousands after Virus Outbreak in Seafood Market,” December 21, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-55391417>

provincial lockdown, the closure of land borders, limitation of civilian mobility, and a widespread closure of businesses. These measures have disproportionately impacted the lives and livelihoods of peoples living in Thailand, including migrant workers.

Unfortunately, after months of managing to keep the COVID-19 infection from local transmission, the country in December struggled again with an outbreak among migrant workers. The surge of cases was identified in Samut Sakhon province, with 23 other provinces as high-risk zones.⁶⁹ Prime Minister Prayuth blamed this latest surge of infections on illegal immigrants, without presenting any proof. On the contrary, Andy Hall, a specialist of migrant workers' rights, explained that it is they who have a high risk of contracting and spreading the virus since they are less likely "to practice physical distancing, both at their labor-intensive workplaces, and often insanitary living accommodations."⁷⁰

Southern Peasant Federation Of Thailand (SPFT)⁷¹

"Is COVID-19 the problem or the government's refusal of democratization in Thailand?," asked Suraphon Songruk, the Secretary-General of the Southern Peasants Federation of Thailand (SPFT), as he underscored the need to identify the root cause of the problem in the country.

Suraphon asserted that the government, in its current exploits, shrouds the real problems and curtails the rights of peoples. Suraphon also expressed that the Thai Junta resorts to using diversionary tactics and taking advantage of the ingrained vagueness of the law to quell the peoples' movement.

67 Sunai Phasuk, "Unending Repression Under Thailand's Military Junta," Human Rights Watch, May 22, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/05/22/unending-repression-under-thailands-military-junta>.

68 Thai Academic Network for Civil Rights, "Addressing Thailand's Deadlock [Press release]," October 20, 2020, <https://www.facebook.com/ThaiAcademicNetworkforCivilRights>.

69 "After Months of Calm, Thailand Grapples with COVID-19 Outbreak," *The Associated Press*, December 26, 2020, <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2020/12/26/after-months-of-calm-thailand-grapples-with-covid-19-outbreak/>.

70 Ibid.

71 Interview with SPFT last December 2020 is in coordination with Focus on the Global South-Bangkok Office.

Like other neglected and marginalized communities in Thailand, who endured this State of Emergency, SPFT community members, located in the southern part of the country, struggled to earn money due to the provincial lockdown and mobility restrictions.

The allocation for the government support was severely insufficient, needless to say, and less prudent in its implementation. The serviceability of the relief programs, in the form of financial assistance and food aid, was greatly diminished. Suraphon recounted that this was due to a number of unresolved issues, such as poor internet availability, weak signal strength, and delayed access to information. Rural communities were deprived from access to these programs. As a concrete example, SPFT members have rejected any COVID-19 support from the government because of their unofficial status in their community settlements. In particular, they have no household registration records to present.

State neglect compelled these farmers to rely on themselves and on the solidarity of their allies and consumers who patronize their agricultural products. They showed a high degree of self-reliance because of grassroots-based practices, particularly alternative land and natural resource management and sustainable food production.

SPFT has expanded collective lands for food crops, which include rice and vegetables. They started a rice bank and embarked on livestock raising to ensure that their members remain resilient against the COVID-19 crisis. These projects served as a social safety net amidst the pandemic. Suraphon said that they managed to pull through by venturing into other agricultural practices, such as goat breeding and selling dairy products.

Revisiting Thailand's peasant-led land movement

SPFT's capacity to strategize various ways to confront a complex crisis was galvanized from their years of struggle for land, specifically for the benefit of many landless peasants in the country. Formed in 2008 to "re-establish the land rights movement in Surat Thani province," the SPFT is an umbrella organization comprised of five different farming communities, namely Klongsai Pattana, Nam Daeng Pattana, Phoem Sap, and Khao Mai in Chai Buri District, and Santi Pattana.

SPFT advocates for "community land titling, a progressive land tax, a national land bank to support landless peasants, and the protection of

agricultural lands for farmers.”⁷² It has negotiated these proposals with government agencies several times.⁷³

In 2003, the former peasant group Southern Poor People Network (SPPN) discovered through their land inventory (with the government) that more than 70,000 rai (approximately 11,200 hectares) of land concession, for oil palm plantation, had already expired. The network decided to occupy unused lands. It demanded the Thai government expropriate land from these companies with expired contracts and redistribute it to landless peasants and workers.⁷⁴

Until now, SPFT’s land movement has faced resistance from the landed elites who have held great power in Thai politics and economy. Farmers continue to brave harassment and violence to advance their cause.⁷⁵ The Thai government remains indifferent to SPFT’s demand for equitable land distribution. More than eight million population of landless farmers, in contrast to “nearly 80 percent of private land owned by only a fifth of the total population.” Issuance of community titles is slow. Farmers do not get ownership rights.⁷⁶

As a result, the country became a hotbed for land conflicts and agrarian unrest. SPFT members and leaders, over the years, have endured multiple cases of intimidation, arrest and detention, crop destruction, eviction, judicial harassment, and killings believed to be “carried out by gunmen hired by the local real estate mafia” or the corporate plantations.⁷⁷ According to Suraphon, the sustained state-sponsored attacks against critics is a clear indication of the hollow democracy pervading in Thailand. Since the worsening of the political environment, SPFT members and leaders have experienced a surge in death threats, intimidations, and other harassments.

72 Rina Chandra, “Thai Farmers Brave Bullets, Prison for Community Land Titles,” *Reuters*, October 6, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-landrights-crime-idUSKBN26R00R>.

73 Supatsak Pobsuk, “Alternative Land Practice in Thailand: A Study on the Southern Peasants’ Federation of Thailand,” in *Solidarity through Cross-Border Regionalism: Alternative Practices across Southeast Asia 1*, eds. Eduardo Tadem, Karl Hapal, Venarica Papa, Jose Monfred Sy, Ananeza Aban, Nathaniel Candelaria, and Honey Tabiola, 157–176 (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies, 2020).

74 Ibid.

75 Ibid.

76 Rina Chandra, “Thai Farmers Brave Bullets, Prison for Community Land Titles,”

77 Ibid.

Last October 20, while the State of Emergency was still enforced, the latest incident of an attempted killing occurred in the Santi Pattana community. Fortunately, the SPFT member targeted for the attack was able to dodge the bullet from a gunman believed to be an employee of a transnational company.⁷⁸ Suraphon connected this recent incident to the established culture of impunity and the growing climate of fear.

“There is a direct linkage between the condition of Thailand under the military dictatorial rule and this attempted killing on October 20. They do this to sow fear in the communities.” The government has attained monopolized power by expelling critical and opposing political formations. “Because they [government] have dissolved the opposition, there is no one to investigate the government’s work and action,” he added.

SPFT is concurrently facing cases of judicial harassment from corporations that seek to evict them from their occupied compounds.⁷⁹ Despite these continued attacks, SPFT stays resolute in asserting their rights and protecting their land claims. Suraphon said the Bangkok protests have motivated them to amplify the calls in their locality, and through organizational discussions, display solidarity even from a distance. SPFT supported the demand for systemic reforms that should address the fundamental problems across Thai society.

Suraphon also expressed apprehension over the government’s overreliance on loans from international financial institutions and on superpowers to fund the Thai COVID-19 aid. Foreign aid, ultimately, is an apparatus for the continuance of the global superpowers’ conquest in postcolonial times.⁸⁰ Veneered as a humanitarian concern and development assistance to recipient countries, it is rather wielded to maintain control and establish systems of administration that will restructure the politics and economy of these resource-rich countries.⁸¹ “Instead, it is better for the government in the long term to support local peoples’ food production for their community and self-reliance,” Suraphon emphasized.

78 Protect International, “[Thailand] Urgent Alert: Attempted Murder of SPFT Community Member,” October 20, 2020, <https://www.protectioninternational.org/en/news/thailand-urgent-alert-attempted-murder-spft-community-member>

79 Ibid.

80 Arturo Escobar, “The Invention of Development,” *Current History* 98, no. 631 (November, 1999): 382–86, <https://commons.wvc.edu/jminharo/pols101/Articles%20to%20Choose%20From/The%20Invention%20of%20Development.pdf>

81 Ibid.

Homenet Thailand

On March 23, 2000, under a State of Emergency, the Thai government implemented its special measures for informal workers. This included a cash of 5,000 baht (Thai baht equivalent to 50 percent of minimum wage) for three months; reduction in the interest rate of state pawnshops; skills training with per diem; a loan for 10,000 baht payable in 2.5 years (with interest of 0.1 percent/month); and a loan for 50,000 baht payable in 3.5 years (with interest of 0.35 percent/month). Informal workers who are covered by the Social Security Scheme get daily cash for lack of income.

Homenet Thailand worked closely with their members to help them access the online registration and submit the application for these government special measures. They prioritized those who do not have access to the technology and reside in remote areas. In its effort to reduce the impact of COVID-19 on informal workers and low-income earners, Homenet Thailand continues to press for special measures in relation to financing, taxation, employment, health, and social security.

People's Empowerment Foundation (PEF)

People's Empowerment Foundation (PEF), an NGO based in Bangkok, was able to donate and distribute food packs in nearby areas. Their grassroots partners are the following: (1) Assembly of the Poor in Ubol, which focuses on the impact of the Pak Mun Dam construction; (2) the People's Movement for Just Society (P-Move) Bangkok communities, which work against urban poor demolition; and lastly, (3) the Nusantara Foundation, a civil society group based in the deep south, which is working for the welfare of Muslim communities. After reports came that there was no more local transmission of COVID-19 in Thailand, representatives of these communities were able to meet face-to-face to attend the online events of the ASEAN Peoples' Forum, which was organized last October.

However, in Pattani Province of Southern Thailand, the Nusantara Foundation expressed difficulty working in the community due to COVID-19 restrictions, particularly during the onset of the state of emergency. They could not cross provinces due to the emergency declaration by their provincial government. Moreover, there were strict check points, which made the situation even more complex.

THAI-BURMA BORDER

Mae Tao Clinic (MTC) and The Back Pack Health Worker Team

Stateless peoples and migrant workers in the Mae Sot border of Thailand rely mostly on Mae Tao Clinic for access to affordable health care. At the start of the state of emergency, before Thailand locked its borders, there was a massive return of migrant workers to Burma/Myanmar, many of whom were based in Thailand for employment or livelihood. In March 2020, the Thai government declared a state of emergency to mitigate the spread of the coronavirus. The authorities extended it until January 2021. During this period, immediate access to health care, among migrants in this part of Thailand, became hugely problematic. In particular, a Bangkok Post report by Maggi Quadrini reports that either health officials have difficulty reaching migrants or migrants are “reluctant to approach” health care providers for many factors, which include language barrier, outright rejection, high fees, or fear of being reported to the police (see footnote 82).

Migrants, especially the undocumented ones and stateless peoples who have no registration from any government, are usually the last to get state assistance; hence, they are the least priority to receive PPE when distributed in the community. Migrants who have returned to Burma/Myanmar also worry about unemployment or visa security after the pandemic.^{65,82} Many lost their jobs/livelihood after months of a closed border.

In a group discussion, Dr. Cynthia C. Maung, MTC’s founding director, described the challenges the migrants and refugees in the border were facing during and because of the pandemic, from health care to food security. As MTC’s operations continued, they also needed to monitor the health situation of both Thailand and Burma/Myanmar. As a precaution, MTC enhanced their health protocols, screening, and isolation areas for patients under investigation. Dr. Maung said,

We also started coordinating with our community organizations, teachers, and other health institutions, especially, one of the NGOs affiliated with Mae Tao University [...] So, we started working with the organizations in which we can get technical support. Together with them, we developed

82 Maggi Quadrini, “Anti-virus Measures Hurting Migrants,” *Bangkok Post*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/1893995/anti-virus-measures-hurting-migrants>.

our procedure and protocol for screening, surveillance, and referral guidelines, including the management for persons under investigation.

MTC maximized its referral system because, says Dr. Maung, there was no clear agreement among the government, hospital, and NGOs over keeping COVID-19 patients when infection cases arise in MTC's facility. Thus, if there were positive cases in MTC, it had to be immediately consulted on and responded to. However, half of MTC's total patients decreased significantly due to mobility restrictions and the border closure. Dr. Maung said that this was because the total number of COVID-19 cases in Burma/Myanmar continued to increase, with reported cases ranging from 1,200 to 1,500 daily.

Earlier, MTC epidemiologist Dr. Vit Suwanvanichkij said that the situation in the border changed abruptly which requires them to mobilize and adjust just as quickly. MTC's agility continued despite facing financial constraints; its international funding had been cut. Dr. Suwanvanichkij said COVID-19 would expose the most vulnerable. It already imposed stress that was not anticipated, namely the fear of medical workers over hospital visitors who might carry the coronavirus.^{66 83}

Having faced this funding challenge, MTC referred their patients to government hospitals in Thailand. Nevertheless, it has maintained its primary healthcare services, such as vaccination and curing minor illnesses, while referring its emergency obstetrics patients and HIV patients to their networks. Dr. Maung mentioned how their community volunteer negotiated with government hospitals to receive HIV patients. Dr. Maung said that there were 200 patients; however, MTC is uncertain whether the government hospital will support these patients.

Mae Sot Hospital does not keep patients for a long period. So, we have to work with them in caring for long-time patients. We have to re-arrange the beds, and the number of staff and their shifting time. We set up COVID work [...] We have to enhance our screening and surveillance, and help keep patients in their isolation area. We have to make sure that all food, accommodation, clothing, toilet, and everything are safe, and we are safe as well.

83 Marwaan Macan-Markar, "We Should Have Been More Prepared, and I Don't Know Why We're Not," *Nikkei Asian Review*, April 8, 2020, <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Cover-Story/We-should-have-been-more-prepared-and-i-don-t-know-why-we-re-not>.

Volunteer health workers inside Burma

MTC tapped community volunteers to disseminate COVID-19-related information on the ground.^{67,84} One of its partners is the Back Pack Health Worker Team (BPHWT), a community-based organization of health care volunteers that has been “providing primary health care” for two decades in the conflict-affected rural areas of Burma, where access to quality and affordable health care is far from reach.^{68,85}

The BPHWT has three main health programs, namely the Medical Care Program (MCP), Maternal and Child Healthcare Program (MCHP), and the Community Health Education and Prevention Program (CHEPP). However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, BPHWT needed to shift its focus on COVID-19 response activities, such as conducting online COVID-19 training and workshops for field health workers. Technology challenges were, however, encountered due to the remoteness of the rural areas. In the field, the health workers used hand loudspeakers to provide health education to the communities. They also demonstrated proper hand washing and use of face masks. At the clinical level, the BPHWT distributed the following: surgical masks, hand sanitizer, noncontact thermometers, examination gloves, chlorine, soap, gown, rubber boots, spray bottle foggy, 450 ml of 70% alcohol, goggles, rubber brown glove, and N95 masks.

The migrants' learning centers during closed borders

Meanwhile, the Children's Development Center (CDC) and the other migrant learning centers managed by MTC at the border remain closed. The Thai Ministry of Education has not given permission to open them as of September 30. On the contrary, schools in Thailand have started opening in June. Children living in this area became even more marginalized. According to Dr. Maung, the Thailand government released 44 criteria before the school could reopen. These include having a local COVID-19 committee, requiring all teachers to be tested, and conducting a 14-day temperature check on children, among others. The community in Mae Sot part of the border complied with these criteria. As Dr. Maung claimed,

There are 9,000 children who are registered already. [We] did the temperature check, planned for the public prevention measures, all teachers have been tested, but until now, the school [the migrant learning

84 Ibid.

85 Information given by the Back Pack Health Worker Team (BPHWT) based in Burma, 2020.

center] is not allowed to be opened yet. All other schools are open except the migrant schools.

Asked whether there has been any form of consultation with the Thailand government on the population border regarding these regulations, Dr. Maung answered,

In Mae Sot area, there has been a long relationship between the Ministry of Education and the Migrant Center. They form the Migrant Coordination Education Center. [The] focal [person] must contact all migrant learning centers. They have a regular meeting on COVID-19 response and further security.

She explained further that typically, nongovernment organizations (NGOs) are invited when there are discussions and consultations about the restrictions. However, there are sensitive border-related issues that must be addressed. The border in Mae Sot has been the home of many traders from different nationalities, including the Chinese, who have contributed to the local economy for many years. Nonetheless, migrants, in general, are considered marginalized and became even more vulnerable during the pandemic. Thus, these issues affect the extended closure of migrant learning centers in Thailand. In her concluding statement, Dr. Maung said,

There is a limitation to physical contact, but people can still communicate with each other [...]. Regular communication is essential [to make] sure that social cohesion remains. There needs to be understanding of people. Not everybody has to be afraid. [There should be] more opportunity for health promotion for a multi-sectoral approach so that people will become more confident in protecting themselves.

Dr. Maung, a medical doctor, is one of the many displaced peoples who fled from her homeland, Burma, when state suppression of the pro-democracy movement peaked in 1988. Upon her arrival in Mae Sot, she initiated the establishment of Mae Tao Clinic, realizing the need to provide immediate medical attention to injured refugees.

BURMA/ MYANMAR

Thandaunggyi Women's Group

COVID-19 Policy in Myanmar and the Karen State

Myanmar confirmed its first case of COVID-19 in March 2020. Daily life was disrupted. In the words of a SaferWorldUK report (see footnote 89), strict “public safety had been measures imposed by both the Myanmar government and by ethnic armed organizations” (EAOs) in their respective territories. While the “official number of positive cases in Myanmar remains relatively low,” local transmissions eventually rose. At that time, it seemed unlikely for the state to conduct widespread testing, especially on migrant workers from Thailand and China who returned to Myanmar.^{69,86}

Members of the parliament associated with the Tatmadaw, or the military government, proposed a measure to convene the security council to address the situation. However, this was rejected by the Speaker of the Parliament, averting potential problems related to the responses to the crisis.^{70,87} At the same time, the civilian government led by State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi headed two new committees that steered local regional governments and civil society to enforce COVID-19 measures.^{71,88}

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

Crisis across sectors

According to a SaferWorldUK report, “community-wide lockdowns, widespread quarantining, curfews, international border closures, and domestic travel restrictions” in Myanmar adversely affected the income and food security of the peoples of the Karen State.^{72,89} Agricultural work

86 Kyaw San Wai, “Myanmar and COVID-19,” *The Diplomat*, May 1, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/myanmar-and-covid-19/>.

87 Moe Moe, “Myanmar Speaker Rejects Call to Summon Military-Majority Security Council to Address COVID-19,” *The Irrawaddy*, March 25, 2020, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-speaker-rejects-call-summon-military-majority-security-council-address-covid-19.html>.

88 San Wai, “Myanmar and COVID19.”

89 Saferworld UK, “Gender and COVID-19: Economic Impacts in Northern Karen State, Myanmar,” September 27, 2020, <https://www.saferworld.org.uk/resources/news-and-analysis/post/907-gender-and-covid-19-economic-impacts-in-northern-karen-state-myanmar>

comprises the livelihoods of many communities in Karen. The COVID-19 crisis and the lockdown measures that came with it decimated local markets and interrupted the transportation system, weighing down crop prices. The pandemic, which hit during harvest periods, “worsened people’s access” to their farms and other forms of livelihoods.

Stringent COVID-19 prevention measures also disrupted the everyday life of locals. “[W]aves of arrests related to public safety violations have hit” the countryside and border areas, further worsening the “people’s access to jobs, farms, and markets.” This militaristic and punitive form of governance is not at all dissimilar to what other countries in Southeast Asia experienced (and still do).

Migrant workers seemed to have drawn the shortest straw. More than a thousand “[returning] Myanmar nationals have lost their jobs due to COVID-19.”⁹⁰ Aside from the restrictions on mobility that levy a burden on returning migrants, many of them had already suffered with problems on income and debt even before the pandemic hit. Since the pandemic, others saw their debts worsened.⁹¹

The burden on women

While COVID-19 impacts everyone across the gender spectrum, women in particular face added burdens. The challenges of domestic, income-generating, and community work constitute the triple burden. As families are usually at home the whole day, women have been levied additional domestic and hygiene-related tasks to prevent infection. The blurring between home and work under the pandemic exacerbated insecurity. Fighting among family members and neighbors has become common. Documented cases of domestic abuse and intimate partner violence rose as well.

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

90 Ibid.

91 IOM, “IOM Myanmar. COVID-19 Response. Situation Report 11,” IOM Myanmar COVID-19 Response Sitrep 11 (6 August 2020).

Community and women's organizations are "calling for government-led initiatives," such as cash transfers to households, massive food distribution, transparency in the selection of beneficiaries of support, and the prioritization of women-headed households for loan programs and unconditional cash transfers.⁹²

The women of Thandaunggyi

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

During the earlier period of the strict community quarantine, all the coffee and fruit harvests of the women farmers in the Group were wasted because there were no buyers. The Group worked as a member of the COVID-19 response committee in their town. Due to the influx of returning migrants passing through the state, community volunteers set up quarantine facilities in nearly all towns. They worked round the clock to contain the virus.

Restrictions and lockdowns were major obstacles to the Group's operations, yet the women of Karen persisted. They engaged in nine villages and five wards. Provisions to the communities include face masks, hand gels, and some food for quarantine centers. While such community work is expected of women, the act of establishing organizations such as the Thandaunggyi Women's Group reveals their collective strength and their capacity to govern.

Health awareness programs, for those hardly reached by government agencies and even EAOs, were conducted alongside charity work. These activities did not only assist communities but also empowered them. In a COVID-19 prevention and control event, quarantine centers received some food and materials from the Group. These include the townships of Thandaunggyi, 13 Miles, Laketho, Bawgale, and Pyae sa Kham. Sectors of

92 SaferWorld UK, "Gender and COVID-19: Economic Impacts in Northern Karen State, Myanmar," September 27, 2020,

the community that the Women's Group prioritized include youth, women, and elderly. As of this writing, there were five townships under quarantine.

The efforts of the Thandaunggyi Women's Group and of other women's and grassroots organizations in the Karen State offer possibilities of what COVID-19 prevention and isolation could be. Knowledge of gendered socio-economic impacts must be the backbone of gender-sensitive pandemic responses. Given that organizations, such as the Thandaunggyi Women's Group, began effective health and charity programs to alleviate the situation not only of their own women farmers but also of other disenfranchised communities, we could say that the grassroots, once organized, are ideal to plan and execute recovery plans. As in the case of the Karen state, the people know and govern themselves best.

Its partner NGO, the Karen Development Network (KDN), also intervened in COVID-19 prevention by establishing a mechanism to handle the arrival of people in the Thai border. The mechanism included setting up a quarantine facility and transporting them directly to their towns once they were declared to have no signs of COVID-19.

INDONESIA

Overview of the country situation^{93,94,95,96}

At the end of 2020, the Indonesian archipelago remained at the top of the list of Southeast Asian countries with the highest number of COVID-19 cases. The country then seemed to be far from flattening the curve, despite the government's efforts to contain local transmission by implementing physical distancing and enforcing partial lockdown policies in several

93 I Nyoman Sutarsa, I Md Ady Wirawan, and Putu Ayu Astuti, "'Nine Months and No Progress': What Went Wrong in Indonesia's COVID-19 Responses and What Can Be Done," *The Conversation*, December 2, 2020, <https://theconversation.com/nine-months-and-no-progress-what-went-wrong-in-indonesias-covid-19-response-s-and-what-can-be-done-145850>.

94 Adrian Akhla, "Indonesia's GDP Could Shrink 2% in Q4: Airlangga," *The Jakarta Post*, December 15, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/news/2020/12/15/indonesias-gdp-could-shrink-2-in-q4-airlangga.html>.

95 Center for Strategic & International Studies, "The Latest on Covid-19 in Southeast Asia: December 3, 2020," December 3, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/latest-covid-19-southeast-asia/latest-covid-19-southeast-asia-december-3-2020>.

96 Center for Strategic & International Studies, "The Latest on Covid-19 in Southeast Asia: December 17, 2020," December 17, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/blogs/latest-covid-19-southeast-asia/latest-covid-19-southeast-asia-december-17-2020>

cities. It had already suffered economic recession “for the first time in two decades—as its economy shrank 5.32 percent, and 3.49 percent in the second and third quarters respectively” due to the global pandemic.

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

President Joko Widodo announced free access to COVID-19 vaccinations for Indonesians once vaccines were procured and made available. However, this pronouncement confronted challenges due to the bureaucracy, corruption, vaccine refrigeration, infrastructure, and logistical hurdles arising from the country’s archipelagic composition.

Konfederasi Pergerakan Rakyat Indonesia (KPRI)

Grassroots initiatives

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

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

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

Urgent and creeping challenges during the pandemic^{97,98,99,100}

On October 5, 2020, Indonesian lawmakers abruptly passed the Omnibus Law. In response, labor groups and peasant unions under KPRI led their respective constituents in a three-day national protest to expose the adverse implications of the said law. The protesters claimed that it is a repressive policy that is a push by Indonesia's oligarchs and their big corporations for their political and economic interests.

One of the Law's champions is President Widodo, who saw the law as a key to averting the global economic downturn and boosting the country's dwindling economy. The law was expected to streamline business

97 Thomas Rookmaaker, "Omnibus Law Boosts Indonesian Growth Prospects," The Jakarta Post, October 19, 2020, <https://www.thejakartapost.com/academia/2020/10/19/omnibus-law-boosts-indonesian-growth-prospects.html>.

98 Stania Puspa, "Jokowi and the Oligarchs: Indonesia's Elite Set to Win from Omnibus Bill," Southeast Asia Globe, October 13, 2020, <https://southeastasiaglobe.com/omnibus-bill-oligarchs-indonesia>.

99 Maikel Jefriando and Tabita Diela, "Indonesia Parliament Passes Lagship Jobs Bill, Critics Vow Protests," Reuters, October 5, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-indonesia-economy-law-idUSKBN26Q1TM/>.

100 AlJazeera, "Indonesian Workers Stage Protests Against New Labour Laws," October 6, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/economy/2020/10/6/indonesian-workers-stage-protests-against-new-labour-laws>

regulations and eradicate red tape, which are seen as impediments in ease of doing business in the country. Moreover, it aimed to provide a conducive business climate, which enhances market flexibility and improves the country's international competitiveness. Its trajectory of market enhancement was expected to encourage direct foreign investment and subsequently, bring Indonesia back to its glory as Asia's rising giant and Southeast Asia's largest economy. On the contrary, for KPRI and the Indonesian civil society, while this law was expected to primarily benefit the banks and export-oriented industries, it dismissed the growing concern over the consequent displacement of an already precarious labor force and the disenfranchisement of workers' rights. While the law purported to be part of a wider project to bolster Indonesia's extractive industry (which will benefit a handful of political elites), it would only allow for massive "deforestation and land rights abuses, and reverse recent successes in reducing forest loss."¹⁰¹

The said report adds that the law will similarly dilute regulations on foreign investment by removing the "three-year maximum duration of contracts," and workers' protection by cutting their severance benefits. What also triggered public outrage is the revision of no less than 70 existing laws in the guise of hastening economic reforms.¹⁰²

The Indonesian public has further rejected the rosy promises surrounding this law that is anchored on neoliberal principles of deregulation and liberalization. In fact, the reported incidents of violent dispersal of protesters, and the arrest and detention of hundreds of people did not silence the people in the midst of a global pandemic. These protests of peoples' movements in Indonesia were able to gather international solidarity, as shown in the various support statements of civil society groups in the region.¹⁰³

101 *ibid.*

102 Konfederasi Pergerakan Rakyat Indonesia, "Statement: Confederation of Indonesian People's Movement (KPRI) - President Must Revoke Job Creation Law!," Facebook, October 21, 2020, https://web.facebook.com/KonfederasiPergerakanRakyatIndonesia/posts/statement-confederation-of-indonesian-peoples-movement-kpri-president-must-revok/3201316073311123/?_rdc=1&_rdr.

103 "Statement of Solidarity with the Indonesian People against the Anti-People Omnibus Law," Asia-Europe People's Forum, n.d., <https://aepf.info/solidarity-with-indonesia-against-anti-people-omnibus-law>

Homenet Indonesia¹⁰⁴

The Indonesian government imposed a semi-lockdown which mandated policies such as relaxing the loan terms for one year, especially for informal workers, relaxing taxes for all workers (those with incomes under Rp16 million Indonesian rupiah per month will be free from tax), and increasing the cash transfer for the poor (who have a PKH Card) by Rp 200,000 per month, for six months. Unfortunately, street vendors, waste pickers, homeworkers in the putting-out system, and construction workers did not benefit from these policies.

Additional government interventions included basic food assistance in some regions; restructuring and accelerating credit programs; more flexible and accessible payment schemes for micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises; and the issuance of pre-employment cards to facilitate the disbursement of training funds for workers. Several gaps in these cards were pointed out, as they excluded some homeworkers, and only subsidized training programs, not the basic necessities during a crisis situation.

The lockdown seriously affected Indonesia's informal sector, which constitutes more than half of its workforce. Loss of their incomes took place with the decrease of customers' orders and the closing down of traders and medium-sized companies that sell nonbasic commodities. The lack of social and health protection exacerbated the situation. To keep up with the crisis and not depend on assistance from the government and the private sector, homeworkers shifted online to sell homemade food. Many also turned to producing face masks and other PPE for medical personnel.

Perhimpunan Petani Sorgum Untuk Kedaulatan Pangan, NTT

Sorghum farmers of Nusa Tenggara Timur continued with their usual farming activities. Meanwhile, they started harvesting sorghum when the national government ordered all citizens to work from home (WFH) and observe other health protocols. Farmers were, however, reacting to this WFH policy—given that farming requires them at all times to be on the field. However, as ordered, they were compliant with physical distancing, frequent hand washing, and wearing of face masks.

104 "HNSEA Reports on COVID-19 Impact on Homebased Workers," 1–8.

Koalisi Seni Indonesia (KSI)

As the Indonesian government ordered its citizens to stay at home, artists and cultural workers under the KSI needed to postpone 234 arts events due to COVID-19.¹⁰⁵ The major downside was the loss of income from their arts-related activities, especially for the stage crew, lighting engineers, sound engineers, curators, and others in the workforce.^{106, 107} For KSI, the restriction on travel and social gathering directly and tangibly impacted the arts scene in Indonesia—given that almost all art activities in the production and exhibition stages require interaction with many people. The creative process of artists is disrupted. The inspiration to make art was hampered by the compulsory measure to stay home. In the performing arts, for example, a series of concerts was cancelled or postponed. Artist-activists also felt the paucity when their art exhibitions could not be held.¹⁰⁸ KSI believes that art plays a vital role in fostering and maintaining the resilience of peoples to survive this time of crisis. As such, it offered several policy recommendations for policy makers to help artists and art workers reduce their burden in this time of pandemic.¹⁰⁹

MALAYSIA

CIVICA Research and Interns of The Rural Internship Training Programme (RITP)¹¹⁰

Malaysia went into COVID-19 lockdown mode on March 17, 2020 after the country was given a mere 48 hours' notice. Called the Movement Control Order (MCO), all businesses and factories were temporarily closed (except for food outlets and pharmacies), while all movement of people were limited, except for medical and other essential personnel. Meanwhile, the general population was allowed to go out under strict rules, and limited only to buying food, and/or seeking medical services or supplies.

105 Koalisi Seni, "Arts Events Canceled and Postponed Due to Pandemic," Koalisi Seni, April 21, 2020, <https://koalisiseni.or.id/advokasi/seni-semasa-krisis/>.

106 Aquino Hayunta, formerly of KSI, also provided some information.

107 Hafez Gumay, "Art (Must) Live Against Pandemic," Koalisi Seni, March 30, 2020, <https://koalisiseni.or.id/seni-harus-tetap-hidup-melawan-pandemi/>.

108 Ibid.

109 Ibid.

110 Data provided by Dr. Andrew Aeria of CIVICA Research.

Within two days, messages were sent from a group of 14 young Penan indigenous peoples (IPs) in Kuala Lumpur who were stranded without food and money to survive the lockdown. They had only recently travelled to KL to join a welding course in a technical-vocational school, and had not even started their schooling when the lockdown was enforced. Cramped in a small apartment, the stranded 14 IPs needed food, funds, cooking utensils, and other daily necessities. CIVICA Research alerted two of their former RITP interns working in KL, who had lived among these IPs in their villages, to respond immediately.

These former interns quickly organized an immediate food relief operation and coordinated a longer-term plan for support. With funds from CIVICA, despite great physical and logistical difficulties in purchasing food, cooking utensils, basic medicines, and traversing roadblocks in KL, the former interns managed to organize food deliveries to the 14 IPs for two weeks until early April. Additionally, they coordinated with a local church group, located closer to the 14 IPs, which agreed to regularly deliver food to them. The former interns continue to monitor the health, food, financial, and living conditions of the 14 IPs.

In early April, the Action Against Hunger Lawas (AAHL), a local activist group in Sarawak near Brunei, requested assistance from CIVICA to raise funds for their food assistance program for the poor, disabled, and other marginalized communities of the division. As a partner, CIVICA launched a WhatsApp appeal and raised over RM 10,000 (Malaysian ringgit) from civil society friends and former interns.

CIVICA linked up with the Academic Staff Association of University Malaysia Sarawak (ASA/UNIMAS) to address the shortage of PPE in Sarawak public hospitals and rural district health centers. While some of their scientists are linked to research networks of international scientific/medical collaborators, CIVICA has networks with various rural district health centers in Limbang, Lawas, Bintulu, and Belaga Divisions. The successful collaboration gathered over 1,000 pieces of N95 masks and 100 PPE gowns.

CAMBODIA

Focus on The Global South (FGS)–Cambodia¹¹¹

The pandemic disproportionately impacted already vulnerable segments of the Cambodian population, both in the formal and informal sectors, especially in sex and entertainment industry and the garment sector, whose workers are mostly women. The Cambodian government came up with various public policies that attempt to address the pandemic, including “the emergency law.” But concerns regarding its unintended consequences were highlighted by civil society and human rights experts, who also noted the insufficiency of provisions on social protection for those who were hardest hit by the pandemic.

One segment of the population who was rendered even more vulnerable are the people in sex and entertainment work, mostly women. With the sudden closure of beer gardens, night clubs and karaoke clubs, they immediately lost their jobs and incomes, subjecting them into dire situations such as facing eviction, food shortages, and heavy burdens of debt repayment. There was also no available compensation package to them or any guarantees of reinstatement of employment once work resumed.

The same story unfolded in the garment sector. The adverse impact of the pandemic on companies in the Global North (e.g., the European Union) reduced the production of garments in the Global South. In Cambodia, this translates to factory closures that lead to loss in jobs and incomes. The workers also experienced difficulties paying rent and repaying their debts to microfinance institutions.

After the imposition of travel ban by the government, there were also observations that suggest double standards and differential treatment towards various workers. The garment workers are reportedly subjected to stricter standards owing to the perception that they are potential transmitters of COVID-19 more than others. Meanwhile, necessary measures for safe working conditions were not in place. For example, the garment workers were crowded in trucks used to transport them from their rented rooms to their work stations.

111 Sokunthy Ros, “Women Workers in Cambodia under the COVID Pandemic,” Focus on the Global South, May 7, 2020, <https://focusweb.org/women-workers-in-cambodia-under-the-covid-pandemic/>.

Homenet Cambodia¹¹²

To stem the cases of infection, the Cambodian government closed the boundaries of provinces and cities in April 2020 as a trial measure, and implemented physical distancing measures. Despite the border closures, most of the home-based workers continued to produce their products from home, and sell locally either in wholesale or retail through local trade fairs or social media (Facebook). They worried, however, about their plummeting sales. In April, members of the Artisans' Association of Cambodia (AAC) closed down their businesses.

The relief programs of the Cambodian government, which include food relief and PPE, are only given to the poor with Health Equity Fund cards. Moreover, the government appealed to banks and microfinance institutions to rearrange repayment terms only to employees of the following sectors: tourism, garments, transportation, and construction. Given this situation, Homenet Cambodia continued to work closely with other informal economy groups, advocating for a plea extension in lieu of the government's short-term and long-term support to informal workers.

LAOS

Homenet Laos¹¹³

Informal workers in Laos were gravely hit when the government ordered a lockdown. They could no longer access raw materials for production and sell their products. The lockdown was enforced particularly in the key cities, such as Vientiane. Particularly, the lockdown began during the last weeks of March, and extended further to early May. As a supplementary action, the Lao government implemented relief measures, such as a 50-percent discount on electricity rates and suspension of tax payments for low-income groups. Free medical treatments and consultations were also provided to address the COVID-19 health crisis. Nevertheless, these measures did not sufficiently address the need for food, especially of poor home-based workers who face involuntary hunger. In response, Homenet Laos applied for a grant with Oxfam, an international NGO, for the provision of food and face masks.

112 HNSEA Reports on COVID-19 Impact on Homebased Workers," 1–8.

113 Ibid.

Green Community Development Association (GCDA) and Lao Farmer Network (LFN)

When Laos was in lockdown, the government authorities suspended all social events deemed unnecessary, such “as weddings and Lao New Year celebrations. The government advised the Lao people to avoid large gatherings. Farmers were not able to bring their produce to the market because there was no transportation.” In addition, many shops in the market were closed.¹¹⁴

Since Laos had a lower rate of reported COVID-19 cases, farmers in the community continued to trade their organic agricultural products in the market. As a pioneering social enterprise, and leader of clean agricultural development and promotion for sustainable development and agroecology, GCDA continued to focus on providing services in organic farming, training, women empowerment, local production, climate change, ethnic minority groups, and other related social issues.

On the other hand, the Lao Farmer Network (LFN), a GCDA partner, reported problems of other farmers. These included throwing away eight tons of produced carrots (Hoaphan province), zero sales of their produce when normally they could sell 20 tons per day (Champasak province), suspension of organic vegetable production due to poor sales (Huayoun Organic Group), and lack of government support for domestic farmers (Thongmung Organic Group).¹¹⁵

TIMOR LESTE

K'dadalak Sulimutuk Institutu (KSI) and Fundasaun Hafoun Timor Lorosae (FHTL)

When the country was in a state of emergency, all residents were advised to stay home. Civil society organizations, under Timor Leste's

114 Excerpted from “Southeast Asia FO Initiatives amidst COVID-19 Pandemic,” Reports from the Asia-Pacific Farmers Forum and the Asian Farmers Association for Sustainable Rural Development (AFA), May 7, 2020, <http://www.asiapacificfarmersforum.net/southeast-asia-fo-initiatives-amidst-covid-19-pandemic/>. Note: UP CIDS AltDev and AFA worked together in the “Knowledge Learning Market and Policy Engagement (KLMPE)” in celebration of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) International Decade of Family Farming, UP Campus, November 13-14, 2019.

115 Samphanh Lathsakid, “Impact of COVID-19 on Smallholder Farmers in Laos,” ALiSEA, April 30, 2020, <https://ali-sea.org/impact-of-covid-19-on-small-holder-farmers-traders-in-lao-pdr/>.

national NGO alliance FONGTIL (Forum NGO Timor Leste), supported the government by providing field support for COVID-19 prevention, such as handwashing facilities in public spaces, monitoring the socioeconomic impact of the lockdown period, and public dissemination of information about virus prevention. Twice a week, FONGTIL conducted public information campaigns on the impact of the pandemic on the socioeconomic rights and other human rights of citizens.¹¹⁶ As managing leaders for COVID-19, the two organizations regularly submitted their recommendations for alternative solutions to the government.

Arcoiris Timor Leste

On the other hand, Arcoiris, as an LGBTQ+ advocacy group, announced that their NGO registration certificate was released in early 2020. For them, this was good news. For safety, their members were working from their homes. At the time of writing, Timor Leste had zero COVID-19 casualty.

VIETNAM

Homenet Vietnam¹¹⁷

The Vietnam government's policies and measures only covered the formal workers. The implementation of physical distancing policies became more difficult for home-based workers, especially in the garment sector supply chains, where 70 percent of contracts between Vietnam and the European Union (EU) stopped. Street vendors lost their opportunity to earn, while the waste collectors, aside from having the highest risk of infection, continued to suffer economic insecurity.

Homenet Vietnam monitored the policy implementation of the provision of subsidized packages for vulnerable groups that should include home-based workers, domestic workers, and street vendors. The group produced a policy brief addressed to concerned key ministers. Homenet Vietnam worked closely with international NGO Oxfam to secure emergency support for vulnerable persons. It planned to conduct research on the impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers and other groups.

¹¹⁶ Data from Valentin da Costa Pinto of Fundasaun HTL.

¹¹⁷ "HNSEA Reports on COVID-19 Impact on Homebased Workers," 1–8.

Vietnam Peace and Development Foundation (VPDF)

With Vietnam's cost-effective containment strategy, the organization committed to write on the experiences of the country, with emphasis on the importance of people's solidarity action as a dynamic response to the public health emergency. For VPDF, the government owed much of its success to its people.

REGIONAL REPORTS

ASEAN SOGIE CAUCUS (ASC)¹¹⁸

ASC conducted a rapid assessment of the impact of the global pandemic on 15 LGBT organizations across the region. During the pandemic, the narratives shared by LGBT activists gave an initial indication of the limited reach of local support. LGBT activists, as part of the region's workforce, whether part-time or full-time, or engaged in unrecognized work and the informal economy, were expected to be seriously affected by this pandemic. Many of them contended with trying to compensate for the lost income of other members of their households. A common concern was the problem of access to food. They had similar difficulties accessing face masks, alcohol, and other hygiene supplies due to lack of financial assistance and shortage of supplies.

Some members of the LGBT community did not have access or had limited access to the internet, impeding sustained online interactions with friends or community. A sense of helplessness was felt because of their inability to extend assistance and comfort to others. Needless to say, their mental health was also at risk. All the ASC organizations stated that the crisis forced them to rethink the conduct of their activities. Some groups cancelled their planned activities altogether. Others decided to reschedule them to a later date. Those who decided to reschedule also considered redesigning the activity, such as moving it to an online platform.

In lieu of cancelled or suspended activities, groups shifted their focus to addressing the pressing concerns of the members of their communities. Some groups conducted relief missions. Others initiated emergency fund drives for their members who belong to the most vulnerable groups.

118 ASEAN SOGIE Caucus, "Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic on LGBTIQ Organization in ASEAN: Rapid Needs Assessment," (Unpublished document, 2020).

Homenet Southeast Asia¹¹⁹

Homenet Southeast Asia emphasized that “home-based workers constitute a significant percentage of the workforce worldwide,” majority of whom are women who contribute to the well-being of families and economies. Despite their vital contributions, they remain largely invisible and unrecognizable economic players, which made their right to secure, stable, and decent livelihood elusive. This rendered them highly vulnerable to the adverse impact brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Equally important, most of them live in poverty and rely on precarious work to survive. Given the lockdown, “the inability to continue working literally means starvation for their families.”

“We [HomeNet International Working Group] therefore support the common demands of home-based workers globally, noting that these demands take different forms in different countries:

1. From governments we demand:

- **Health and Safety**

- ◇ Provision of constant water supply and sanitation services
- ◇ Provision of soap, sanitizers and masks
- ◇ Free testing and good quality medical treatment for those infected even if they have no health insurance
- ◇ Freedom from violence by police and security forces
- ◇ Support for victims of domestic violence

- **Income and Food Security**

- ◇ Cash grants, so we can feed ourselves and our children
- ◇ Provision of free food
- ◇ Relief from payment of taxes, rentals, and social security contributions
- ◇ Regulation of financial services such as freezing loans, micro credit

119 “Home-based Workforce Calls for Protection to Survive the COVID-19 Crisis,” Homenet South-East Asia, April 2020, 2–3.

- ◇ Payments and other debt repayments
- ◇ Use of home-based workers' skills to produce emergency personal protective equipment
- Information
 - ◇ Regular, accurate and accessible information, taking into account language and literacy levels, on how to protect our health and safety
 - ◇ Access to free/ affordable data so we can communicate
- 2. From local employers and contractors subcontracted homeworkers demand:
 - ◇ Income replacement
 - ◇ Honouring of existing contracts: payment for goods already produced
 - ◇ The provision of hygiene and safety products
- 3. From big brands subcontracted homeworkers demand:
 - ◇ Income replacement
 - ◇ Provision of hygiene and safety products and/or donations to governments to provide such
- 4. From financial service providers we demand:
 - ◇ Freezing of loans, micro credit payments and other debt repayments
 - ◇ Provision of short-term low interest loans to augment our loss of income

In the longer term governments must recognise home-based workers through laws and policies which protect them and provide opportunities for improved livelihoods. Employers, including big brands, must recognise homeworkers as part of their supply chains and provide minimum wages and social protection.

We call on governments, employers, contractors to listen to the voices of home-based workers by consulting with their organizations, and ensuring that measures adopted to protect them actually fulfil their needs.”¹²⁰

Asian Solidarity Economy Council–RIPESS-ASIA

According to RIPESS.org, “the Asian Solidarity Economy Council is the Asian hub for enhancing the responsibilities of stakeholders in co-creating a compassionate solidarity economy. It brings together 18 national and continental networks in 21 Asian countries.” At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the network turned to social media and online platforms to discuss RIPESS-Asia’s analysis and responses to the crisis. Webinars, through Zoom and YouTube, were organized:

1. “People-oriented economy: case studies from 6 Asian countries,” May 16, 2020;
2. “Beyond COVID-19 Emergency: Food sovereignty and the right to Food,” April 30, 2020;
3. “Solidarity in livelihood and development program: Philippine case study and relevance for Asia during and post-covid-19,” April 25, 2020; and
4. “Beyond COVID-19 Emergency: Building collective and lasting responses through SSE,” April 17, 2020.

In their Philippine chapter, ASEC tried to reach out to the Department of Agriculture (DA) to improve the Kadiwa marketing program the agency had created during the ECQ. Their group wanted to mainstream the concept of consumer-supported agriculture, a basic form of Social Solidarity Economy (SSE), through the Kadiwa Centers. The purpose was to effectively shorten the value chain between food producers and consumers.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

OTHER REPORTS

The following reports, gathered from March to May 2020, were gleaned from other grassroots-based organizations at the national and regional levels. They issued updates on the situations in their constituencies, notably farmers and indigenous groups.

Midsayap IP Youth¹²¹

To weather the COVID-19 pandemic, various indigenous communities drew on their cultural resources and traditions to address food security, strengthen social bonds within the community, and protect ecological integrity of the natural environment. One such community is the Erumanen Menuvu in Barangay Milaya, Midsayap, Province of Cotabato. Organized by their youth, *suragad* is a traditional farming practice for the survival of the tribe. In preparation, the seeds are wrapped with *pandi* (white cloth), and then the leaves of the patikan tree are positioned in the four corners of the *perueniao* (the hearth of the land where the seeds are to be planted).

In the *perueniao*, the Weliyan leads the *penawagtagwag*, the ritual where Apo Kelayag Ivevasuk (God) is invoked to bless the seeds in hopes of a plentiful harvest. A chicken will be offered in this ritual. The IP Youth is committed to keeping this tradition alive not just as a matter of respecting their ancestors, but also as a vital way of cultural preservation and community-making. This commitment is solidified by the decision of the SK Federation of Midsayap to include the ritual in their priority projects.

Farmers' Situation in Southeast Asian Countries

The Asia Pacific Farmers Program (APFP) “regularly conducts virtual sharing sessions on how family farmers are affected by the COVID-19 issues, and how their organizations try to respond to the challenges they face. The sharing sessions are meant to bring solidarity” among the partner farmers organizations (FOs) by sharing knowledge and inspiration derived from the initiatives of one another.¹²²

121 Kenneth Mheil Mangaya-ay, “Midsayap IP Youth Continue Traditional Farming Practices for COVID-19 Survival,” *Choose Philippines*, April 16, 2020, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/life/04/26/20/midsayap-ip-youth-continue-traditional-farming-practices-for-covid-19-survival>.

122 Excerpted from “Southeast Asia FO Initiatives amidst COVID-19 Pandemic,” Reports from the Asia-Pacific Farmers Forum and the Asian Farmers Association for Sustainable Rural Development (AFA), May 7, 2020, <http://www.asiapacificfarmersforum.net/southeast-asia-fo-initiatives-amidst-covid-19-pandemic/>.

CAMBODIA-Farmer and Nature Net

Upon confirmation of a COVID19 infection in Cambodia, schools in Siem Reap and Phnom Penh closed, followed by a ban on the entry of foreigners from select countries. Travel restrictions were also imposed within Cambodia to reduce the transmission of the virus. To aid Cambodian farmers, ASEAN Farmers' Organizations Support Program (AFOSP) partner farmers' organizations mobilized their resources to conduct the following activities: helping agricultural cooperatives to strengthen their capabilities to process, store, and package foods and products and distribute them to the market; allocating emergency fund to support cooperatives that can store and distribute food items at stable prices to alleviate the suffering of members; and supporting farmer producer groups in their efforts to boost production.

Indonesia-Aliansi Petani Indonesia (API)

On March 15, 2020, President Joko Widodo opted to enforce physical distancing over lockdowns to help contain the virus. Public spaces were closed and localized lockdowns were imposed. This increased the level of precarity among informal workers, including farmers and fisherfolks who usually need to leave their homes to earn their daily income.

While the pandemic brought about challenges, it also brought some opportunities for some. Farmers and farmer-led cooperatives explored delivery service to bring their products to their consumers since many people were still isolated and were shopping online to get their needs, including agricultural produce. Meanwhile, the women members of the Aliansi Petani Indonesia (API) delivered, door-to-door their organic rice to their consumers.

As public resources were poured by governments into COVID-19 response, one important point of contestation in Indonesia is the government's decision to re-allocate 1.79 billion USD for relief efforts. For the funds allocated to respond to the needs of farmers and rural people, advocacy campaigns were launched. Farmer members of API made sure during the reallocation process of the village fund that the labor-intensive projects directly responded to the farmer's "interests and needs, such as irrigation development/ rehabilitation projects" and farm-to-market roads. These projects were also a valuable source of local employment and income for farmers as part of the guidelines in using the village funds.

MYANMAR-Agriculture and Farmer Federation of Myanmar (AFFM)

Travel restrictions were imposed by the government, particularly suspending the arrival of Chinese nationals, alongside conducting health checks along the border with China. To aid its farmer members, AFFM facilitated direct selling of their products to trade union members in the industrial zone, as well as to other farmer unions. Through this direct linking, AFFM was able to sell the products at an affordable price. Equally important, AFFM also offered free delivery service, specifically in areas that were under semi-lockdown. The marketing of the products was done online, particularly through social media platforms such as Facebook.

PHILIPPINES-Pambansang Katipunan ng mga Samahan sa Kanayunan (PKSK) Pambansang Kilusan ng mga Samahang Magsasaka (PAKISAMA)

National farmers' organizations (NFOs) conducted various initiatives to contribute towards food security.¹²³ They provided valuable information regarding preventing the spread of COVID-19 infection and some guidelines on how to boost food production and the logistics around it. An important thrust of the initiatives was to connect producers with institutional and commercial buyers who were looking for supplies to be distributed as relief goods.

The National Implementing Agency (NIA) worked in tandem with other CSOs and farmers network to campaign for:

1. Provision of assistance to food producers as frontliners of the pandemic (e.g., farmers, fisherfolk, farmworkers, including those workers doing processing and logistics);
2. Access to social protection such as health services programs to farmers who are vulnerable to COVID-19 infections;
3. Institutional support from the local governments to procure the produce of farmers for the fresh food pack relief; and
4. Easy mobility of fresh produce from farms to urban center.

123 Mazzoli, Enrico, Paraskevi Peglidou, Fabrizio Bresciani, Ilaria Firmian and Ye Tang. 2021. Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic. Implications and Way Forward. Asia and the Pacific. Rome. International Fund for Agricultural Development. https://www.ifad.org/documents/38714170/41971891/covid_impact_apr.pdf

PAKISAMA also extended support to the neediest among its members, namely accessing USD 100 and some seeds. PAKISAMA learned three crucial points during the pandemic:

1. Major problems of the farmers persist because programs remain small-scale and important policies lag in implementation. These programs include asset reform, the promotion of Integrated and Diversified Organic Farming System (IDOFS), and the development of cooperatives.
2. Strong food consumers' cooperatives play an important role in the distribution of products which can be sold at a high price, especially in urban areas.
3. Social media is a useful tool for farmers to reach their consumers.

THAILAND-Assembly of the Poor (AOP)

The government declared a state of emergency to give itself extra legitimacy. The biggest number of infected people was in Bangkok and other major urban areas. The number of infected cases in rural areas was comparatively less. At that point, the most severe problems were economic in nature, and they spread throughout the country. Since most of their Farmers' Organizations (FO) members focused on local markets, they were not highly vulnerable. Those impacted were members who supplied food to restaurants, depended on tourism, or were selling outside their communities (travelers or tourists).

The impacts were mostly due to the restriction of mobility and the curfew. As for the former, the sales in the local markets with income from travelers, tourists, and restaurants dropped. The curfew became a concern for some farmers who had to work during night time or at dawn, when they had to fish, catch bullfrogs, or tap rubber latex. Sometimes, they are granted a permit, but at others, they are not.

On the other hand, farming families needed to feed and care for their returning family members who were forced to migrate back to their provinces due to the lockdown. In response to the economic challenge faced during the lockdown, the Thai government provided cash relief of approximately USD 500 per person. However, citizens needed to register online to get this assistance. This strategy was difficult for many farmers who have limited internet access.

Several Thai government agencies took the opportunity during the pandemic to push for policies that harmed farmers. These included proposals to remove peasants from the forests, and to ignore the pressure from peasants' organizations to ban toxic agrochemicals. Meanwhile, to address COVID-19 on their own, AOP provided free fabric-based face masks to its members. It encouraged tourist-oriented markets to sell to locals. Moreover, it promoted direct selling to urban consumers. Although there were people who migrated back to provinces due to the lockdown of Bangkok and other big cities, no COVID-19 cases were reported among AOP members (as of the time of writing).

VIETNAM-Viet Nam Farmers' Union (VNFU)

On account of an improved situation, the government opened the economy by allowing businesses to resume, but at only 50 percent capacity. Mass gatherings were still prohibited. The government provided food support to vulnerable groups, and financial assistance to businesses. VNFU donated money to the national budget, while members donated blood to patients. They also distributed food packages (consisting of sugar, rice milk, noodles) and medical supplies (face masks, hand sanitizers) to farmers. Additionally, they cooperated with enterprises to connect farmers with supermarkets. The challenge VNFU members faced include:

1. Not all farmers received support from the government because the financial aid was only for the poor sector (some farmers are not classified as such). The farmers have to show evidence that their income is affected to receive financial support. Another downside is that the location of the farmers affects whether they would be able to access the financial aid.
2. Transportation of agricultural products is difficult due to physical distancing, since the markets are located in urban areas while the goods come from rural areas.
3. There is a decline in the demand for agricultural products locally and agricultural goods for export. China is one of the biggest importers of these agro products. However, the demands decreased due to the pandemic and closure of borders. There are also delays since the staffing in the import/export sector is reduced. To be specific, imports in Europe are reduced by 50%, leading to a reduction in price to 40%. Production materials, such as seedlings that are imported from China, are also stilted due to the ongoing restrictions.

Significantly, Vietnam (at the time of writing) had no mortality recorded because of good governance.¹²⁴ All sectors were involved in mitigating the impact of the pandemic. Also important, the government exhibited strong commitment to action. Measures and initiatives to prevent the virus were supported rather than suppressed. People who tested positive with COVID-19 were identified and placed in immediate lockdown/quarantine. Compulsory quarantine of people coming from other countries was enforced. There was no complete lockdown, only physical distancing. People still wore masks in public. Production areas were encouraged to continue. A considerable amount of donations was made for food aid. The donations were directed to rural areas where there were more people in need. To propel the economy, the government encouraged enterprises to resume production and export. Vietnam continued to export, including rice, but only in limited quantities.

OTHER REGIONAL REPORTS

The AgriCord Farmers' Alliance is a global alliance of agri-agencies mandated by farmers' organizations. Since 2007, AgriCord has implemented the Farmers Fighting Poverty Programme, a delivery mechanism to provide support to farmers' organizations. Over 200 farmers' organizations per year are supported in over 50 developing countries.¹²⁵ As Asia dealt with COVID-19, disruptions of food supply chains were observed. To document the impact of COVID-19, the AgriCord alliance gathered information from farmer groups across Asia to assess the impact of the pandemic. As rice is the staple food in Southeast Asia, COVID-19 threatened its availability. AgriCord reported that rice-exporting countries, such as Vietnam, Cambodia, and Myanmar, restricted rice exports to ensure availability to their local populations. The same report also recognized that this move would have a negative impact on availability in rice-importing countries, such as the Philippines, China, and countries in Africa.

Because of COVID-19, food shortages arise. This led to panic buying, thereby increasing food prices in the short run. Moreover, the restriction of movements placed by different governments, as well as those on public

¹²⁴ This data was gathered as of May 2020.

¹²⁵ AgriCord, "An Impact Scan Based on Reports by Farmers' Organisations from Asia," 2020, <https://www.agricord.org/impact-scan-based-reports-farmers-organisations-asia>.

transportation, contributed to the dwindling food supplies. This is due to the smaller number of laborers who were allowed to go to work.

In Vietnam, AgriCord reported that food shortages occurred due to increasing debts and decreasing incomes. Other farmer groups in Vietnam similarly reported that because of the lockdowns, farmers were not able to harvest grains and vegetables, thereby tightening supply and increasing the price. Farmer cooperatives in Vietnam were also reeling from the effects of the suspension of public transportation.

The Indonesian Ngudi Makmur Cooperative reported that lockdowns made wholesale purchase of produced goods more difficult. Markets were closed, thus affecting organizations, such as the Komunitas Swabina Pedesaan Salassae (KSPS), which could no longer sell their produce. Moreover, the lack of transportation jeopardized supply chains, even if food production was ongoing.

In the Philippines, organizations such as the ISLACO Cooperative, reported the suspension of their dried fish production. Moreover, panic-buying incidents in the country depleted the stocks of some organizations, such as GlowCorp. Meanwhile, farmers were unable to sell their produce because of the ECQ. In general, the disruption of supply chains reduced the incomes of farmers. Aside from low income, farmers encountered more problems due to the high cost of production, transportation costs, and increasing interest on loans. Financial resources of farmer organizations were also depleted since they depended on farmers' contributions to run their operations. Farmer organizations in the Philippines reported that because of the non-collection of payment from the farmers, they were not able to pay their staff, or service their outstanding loans.

The Coalition for Human Rights in Development-Asia Region reported the continuing struggles of frontline communities in resisting the building of internationally-financed development projects that both threaten the cultural way of life of local communities and the integrity of the natural environment.¹²⁶

126 Carmina Flores-Obanil, "Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Frontline Communities Resisting Internationally Financed Development Projects," Heinrich Böll Stiftung Southeast Asia, May 6, 2020, <https://th.boell.org/en/2020/05/06/impacts-covid-19-pandemic-frontline-communities-resisting-international-ly-inanced>.

As in most communities, hunger and loss of incomes were the most pressing problems for frontline communities, especially for informal workers such as sidewalk vendors, drivers, construction workers, among others.

For frontline communities within contested development projects, the threat of COVID-19 has posed additional risks to pre-existing health conditions due to environmental pollution brought about by energy and extractive projects. For example, the indigenous Dumagat-Remontados in Quezon province who has been resisting the building of China Exim Bank-funded Kaliwa Dam Project within their ancestral domain, were prevented from gathering food, medicine, and firewood from their ancestral territory.

Likewise, communities who have been compromised by the toxic ash and smoke from the coal plants are further rendered vulnerable by the COVID-19 virus. Residents suffering from breathing problems have been sent home by hospitals after only being administered first aid (since hospital facilities were fully occupied). Reports from three different communities revealed an increase in illegal mining activities, particularly by Chinese mining companies.

The space for mobilization has shrunk further because communities and allied organizations are limited to using emails, phone calls, texts, video and call conferencing to communicate with their partners and with government agencies. The risks of hacking and surveillance are also heightened leading to further attenuation of fundamental freedoms such as freedom of assembly, information, and speech.

Despite these challenges, the civil society organizations (CSOs) and local community organizations persisted in their advocacy for human rights and tried to adapt to the “new normal.” In the Philippines, several CSOs even extended financial aid and relief goods to marginalized communities and initiated a fund drive to respond to the immediate needs of the grassroots communities.

Women’s Legal and Human Rights Bureau (WLB)

In a May 14, 2020 report, the WLB and its partner communities concluded that the Philippine government’s “general, non-specific, non-inclusive approach to addressing COVID-19 will not work” because it does not respond to the specific contexts and distinct experiences of poor

families, women, and girls.¹²⁷ They argued that there has been a systemic problem with gender neutrality and blindness in Philippine policies and responses, and the COVID-19 crisis only exacerbated the existing discrimination, violence, inaccessibility, and inefficiency of the criminal justice system. They believe that CSO and feminist groups must be steadfast in exposing the disproportionate effects of the health crisis on women and girls. WLB reached out to the following marginalized groups of women in the rural community: “women with disability, lesbian, bisexual, and transgender (LBT) women, women migrant workers, indigenous women, peasant women, women fisherfolks,” and young girls to tease out the issues confronting them. The report covers the period of March 25 up to April 20, 2020, during which the WLB was able to send direct assistance to its community-partners after almost two weeks of lockdown.

The report reveals the following issues of women, particularly marginalized groups.

(1) Women’s excessive “mental load” which affects their mental health and wellness; (2) Women’s tendency to prioritize food expenses over their own personal hygiene expenses; (3) Rampant economic insecurity and multiple burden on women in the time of COVID-19; (4) Lack of information from the government on the local COVID-19 situation and response efforts of the local government units (LGUs); (5) Limited access to government facilities and services due to the increasing number of COVID-19 patients; (6) Possible military harassment and threats of COVID-19 infection faced by women leaders acting as frontliners at the Barangay Level to help LGUs respond to COVID-19; and (7) low reported cases of violence against women.

More particularly, findings of WLB and their partners are the following:

1. “Enforcement of the enhanced community quarantine protocol is anti-poor, anti-rural, and anti-women.” The government’s pandemic response is not only militaristic. The lockdowns and the meager amelioration support also disenfranchised the poor whose income relies on daily paid economic activity outside their homes (e.g. fishing, food gathering, selling food items on public spaces, etc.). This also increased the multiple burdens of women who have to manage the household and help put food on the table with little or no money at all.

¹²⁷ Women’s Legal and Human Rights Bureau, “Gender Transformative, Pro-poor, and Inclusive COVID-19 Response is Necessary,” May 14, 2020, <https://wlbonline.org/covid19-update2/>

2. “Survival of the fittest is the game: Pushing women to make both ends meet.” With the shrinking and even wiping out of the financial resources of families under the pandemic, women were compelled to borrow money or get loans from lending institutions which further added to their mental worries. Rural women were forced to keep managing their homes without any money. In Samar, some families planted vegetables and crops on plots they borrowed, while some engaged in “cash for work” activities just to put food on the table.
3. “Relief efforts remain gender-neutral and scarce.” Gender-sensitive relief efforts have to include in their relief packages the items that respond to needs of women and children such as sanitary napkins, infant formula for children, nutritious food for lactating mothers, and contraceptives.
4. “Continuing invisibility of marginalized sectors during COVID-19.” The gender-blind government response stems from the fact that data do not disaggregate the different needs and characteristics of women in relation to their age, special needs, ability, gender orientation, health conditions, sector, among others. The government overlooks these specific contexts and nuances because it works on the level of families and households in its social amelioration program (SAP).
5. “Lack of reliable information on how to get support from the Philippine government in times of COVID is the biggest challenge faced by migrant workers.” There was no efficient referral system for distressed migrant workers, as suggested by dysfunctional hotline numbers or unanswered phone calls to the Philippine Embassy. WLB managed to extend relief packages to several Filipino women migrant workers in Dubai by enlisting the help of their fellow NGOs and networks.
6. “Cases of Violence Against Women (VAWG), harassment, and discrimination are less prioritized during the crisis.” Under community quarantines, access to justice became even more problematic owing to the unavailability of transportation, unclear guidelines for reporting violence, closure of courts, among others. Because of the failure of the system, abuses to women by their intimate partners and husbands continued.

4. REPORTS FROM THE GRASSROOTS AND COMMUNITIES

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

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

Meanwhile, organized communities were better able to mitigate the effects of the health crisis, while some livelihood projects continued, including agricultural production in farming areas and women's social enterprises. The highest level of self-reliance and food security could be found in collectively-owned and collectively-managed lands—where sustainable development and agro-ecological methods are practiced, incomes are equitably shared, and basic needs are addressed. In several cases, however, the lockdown and stringent quarantine measures continuously hampered the ability of direct producers from accessing raw materials and markets, leaving agricultural produce unsold and spoiled. In such cases, access to food and other basic necessities, and health protection were hard to come by.

Equally important, local associations took the initiative of enforcing safety and health guidelines among their members and neighbors. Those involved in enterprise activities creatively shifted to the production of personal protection goods, such as face masks and hand sanitizers for income generation. In the spirit of solidarity, these were sometimes distributed for free to those in need. Civil society organizations and other support groups were also helpful in assisting communities, particularly in responding and attending to the immediate needs of their residents and

members. They linked producers with direct buyers in urban areas and brought to the proper authorities the plight of those who were most in need of help. Additionally, national and regional organizations were busy documenting grassroots efforts in order to provide valuable lessons within and beyond national borders.

While the government had amelioration responses, such as food aid and cash allotments, these were inadequately, unevenly, and unequally distributed. Patronage politics sometimes determine who received support. Many poor communities were less able to access aid, as they fell outside the radar of official monitoring and data collection (the absence or lack of government-issued identification cards). On the other hand, even those who did receive aid were confronted with other unmet needs, such as maintenance drugs for seniors.

All over Southeast Asia, migrant workers and those involved in the informal economy received the least support. As the pandemic continued, government funds slowly ran out, resulting in increased hunger incidence among the poor and economically disadvantaged. Other mitigating measures by national governments included tax breaks and suspension of interest payments on loans, but it is not certain whether these were well-implemented and will benefit those who need them most. In some areas, emergency short-time employment was initiated by the government, but was limited and scarce.

Donations from several private sectors came in, partially making up for government inadequacies. For instance, a September 2020 survey by the Social Weather Stations (SWS) revealed that the number of Filipino families who experienced involuntary hunger during the height of the pandemic reached a record-high 7.6 million (30.7 percent), which almost doubled the number in April 2020.¹²⁸ With information and communication almost completely reliant on the internet and social media, those with inadequate or no access to these technologies were further disadvantaged. This infringed on the right to timely and accurate information that would properly guide the peoples' responses to the pandemic. Online information, however, had to be filtered carefully as health-related fake news also proliferated.

128 "SWS survey reveals new record-high number of Filipino families experiencing hunger." 2020. *CNN Philippines*, September 27, 2020, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/9/27/SWS-involuntary-hunger-new-record-high-September-COVID.html>

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

The sudden and sweeping imposition of quarantine and lockdown measures stranded individuals and families. Migrant workers, for one, were unable to return to their homes. Within countries, with all public transportation suspended, some had to walk hundreds of kilometers for days to get home to their families. Stateless peoples and undocumented workers, along the Thai-Burma border, suffered more than others.

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

The lockdown saw a rise in domestic violence against women and young girls—on top of their triple burden covering domestic, income-generating, and community labor. Women groups criticized Southeast Asian governments’ lack of attention towards the needs of women and young girls; thus, they called for more specific and contextual approaches. They decried the violence, discrimination, and harassment of women during the pandemic. In Cambodia, women engaged in sex and entertainment work. Meanwhile, women in the garment manufacturing industry were affected; many of them were migrants stranded in their former places of work. Also marginalized were the LGBT communities and individuals whose gender choices are unrecognized whether in the formal or informal economy.

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

For poor and disadvantaged families, in both urban and rural areas, and those in the informal economy, access to education was sometimes gained through alternative learning systems (ALS) via daycare, skills training centers, or special courses. Under lockdown and extreme quarantine measures, this opportunity was put on hold for an indefinite period. Their teachers were also disadvantaged since they did not receive their wages. Online classes, however, have limited effectiveness since access to the required technologies and internet was non-existent, intermittent, or highly unreliable.

Also concerning was the absence of any reports from the grassroots of widespread COVID-19 testing among their members, neighbors, and their communities. This deficit was particularly disturbing, given national reports of testing being stepped up for greater numbers of residents. The experience of other countries showed that testing is one important measure to stem the spread of the disease.

5. POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

As a matter of paradigm shift, Southeast Asian governments need to establish collective and truly cooperative efforts in addressing social and economic problems. ASEAN has to end its decades-long doctrine of leaving it up to each country to undertake measures to address problems that are common to their respective peoples or have impacts that transcend national borders.

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

With few exceptions, the fragility of Southeast Asian health systems in particular, and social protection in general, has exposed societies in the region to the worst effects of COVID-19. The lack of social protection and inadequacy of public social services, such as health, housing, education, public transportation, to name a few, are mainly due to a flawed development model that prioritizes economic growth over securing social well-being of the people. In the post-pandemic era, this model needs to be overturned and corrected.

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

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

Labor rights must be upheld including the right to organize, to engage in collective bargaining, and to strike for better working conditions and

higher wages. Labor contractualization, in all its forms, must end; while more attention be paid for informal workers. Importantly, international covenants on workers' rights must be strictly implemented at all times.

The United Nations General Assembly has declared 2019–2028 as the UN Decade of Family Farming. In Southeast Asian rural areas, small farming household-based production must be supported and granted subsidies, particularly to increase food production and attain self-sufficiency. This will ensure food security for the rest of the population. Laws and policies that promote the land rights of small producers should be upheld. In this connection, the ancestral rights of Southeast Asia's indigenous peoples must be legally protected. Equally important, their traditional food production systems must be developed and supported.

Lastly, governments must institute legal mechanisms that will acknowledge and respect the right of civil society organizations, social movements, and peoples' organizations to exist as separate and autonomous pillars of society. The alternatives that these organizations offer must be accorded to the proper venues for public discussions and debate that will involve all the stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

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

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



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