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

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**Eduardo C. Tadem, Ananeza P. Aban, Karl Arvin F. Hapal, Venarica B. Papa,
Nathaniel P. Candelaria, Honey B. Tabiola, and Jose Monfred C. Sy¹**

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

KEYWORDS: COVID-19, pandemic, grassroots, local communities, organization, sectoral groups

¹ Eduardo C. Tadem, Ph.D. is Convenor of the Program on Alternative Development (AltDev), UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS AltDev). Karl Arvin F. Hapal is Co-convenor of the UP CIDS AltDev and Assistant Professor of Community Development at the UP College of Social Work and Community Development (UP CSWCD). Venarica B. Papa is Project Leader at the UP CIDS AltDev and Assistant Professor of Community Development at the UP CSWCD. Ananeza P. Aban, Nathaniel P. Candelaria, Honey B. Tabiola, and Jose Monfred C. Sy are Research Staff of the UP CIDS AltDev.

INTRODUCTION

The unprecedented health crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic has caused the world economy to ground to a virtual halt, prompting projections of an impending economic depression with economic growth across countries already registering negative numbers. The Southeast Asian region is no exception to this pattern with government declarations of lockdowns and stringent quarantine measures. While national reports have been extensively reported, there has been less attention to what has been happening on the ground—among local communities, marginalized sectors and underprivileged populations. This report is a preliminary attempt at addressing that concern.

As one of the programs under the Development Cluster of the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS), the Program on Alternative Development (AltDev) seeks to look at paradigms, policies, practices, and projects that are largely marginalized and excluded from the mainstream. Moreover, the Program aims to bring these alternatives into the mainstream and level the playing field so that they may be regarded on equal footing with dominant discourses and thus offer alternatives to the existing system.

This report is a preliminary attempt to document the independent initiatives undertaken by AltDev partner organizations and civil society networks during the COVID-19 crisis. Since 2018, AltDev has been engaged in partnerships with these organizations for the purpose of undertaking various modes of participatory research and documentation of their alternative practices on the ground as responses to their marginalized socio-economic, political, and cultural situation. In order to cover a wider field of experiences, reports from other civil society organizations and their partner grassroots organizations networks and their responses to the health crisis were also included.

The purpose of this report is to extend support and solidarity to the research partners of AltDev across the Southeast Asian region who have played key roles in realizing the evolution of a movement of alternative practitioners whose practices and timely innovations are viable solutions in this time of global pandemic. Beyond data gathering and research writing, AltDev has always been committed to undertaking solidarity work and support with these communities, this being part of a bigger effort to achieve a liberating and alternative research process. This report is also a way of finding out how communities through their alternative and sustainable practices have stood out and manifested their resilience in times of pandemic and other modalities of the current global crisis.

Through this mapping, AltDev was also able to obtain a preliminary identification of the strengths, vulnerabilities, opportunities, and threats confronting these communities. This report will be updated regularly given that other partners cannot yet elaborate on their situation since they are either quarantined in their homes or are preoccupied with their respective solidarity work. Also included are reports from other national and regional organizations with whom AltDev has also been engaging over the past three years.

THE PHILIPPINES

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

Since the declaration of the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), the Quezon City government has already conducted its third wave of distribution of food packs to their Homeowners Association (HOA). Some of their allied organizations such as Sanlakas were also able to provide immediate food packs during the earlier days of the ECQ. The ASAMBA HOA has also twice provided 2 kilos of rice to their members. Some HOA members volunteered as front liners (*bantay*) in their vicinity to make sure people are staying home (*walang tambay sa labas*) and physical distancing is practiced. Since their HOA is the strict implementor of the policy, the neighborhood is compliant.

Many among ASAMBA members have availed of the Social Amelioration Program (SAP), the government emergency cash subsidy distributed by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). The pay-out was done in ASAMBA's locale, assisted by the HOA front liners. Donations continue to pour in. Their immediate needs are medicines, especially maintenance drugs for older persons. If there will be donations such as medicines, they will gladly accept them.

PANALSALAN DAGUMBAAN TRIBAL ASSOCIATION (PADATA) AND BACLIG FARMWORKERS ASSOCIATION (BACFA)

Members of PADATA and BACFA are from the indigenous Talaandig and Higaonon tribes of Bukidnon, Mindanao. Not all of them received food rations from the local government of Maramag, Bukidnon. Those who were ensured of the food packs are only beneficiaries of the government's conditional cash transfer program (4Ps). However, for those who are home quarantined in their ancestral domain, food is not yet a problem and they are not dependent on the food rations from government. They rely on their farm products such as *kamote*, *binggala*, and vegetables for food security of their families in this time of pandemic.

At the onset of the SAP pay-out nationwide, many members got frustrated with this because they thought everyone can receive it, after hearing Duterte's speeches and considering that they are IPs and some of them were also affected by the 'no work no pay' scheme, being daily wage earners of banana plantations in the province. Later in May, members of both these IP organizations were reported to have received the SAP, except for a few.

At the break of the ECQ, a PADATA woman-leader was unlucky to have been stranded in Manolo Fortich, the hometown of her husband. This situation complicated things because she was not able to get the *ayuda* or relief from government, if any. Technically, she belongs to Maramag municipality and not Manolo Fortich. She hopes for her SAP to arrive soon.

If there will be donations coming, both PADATA and BACFA still welcome them. Since early May, mobility restrictions have been quite relaxed after the General Community Quarantine was declared in Bukidnon.

At the start of the lockdown, some of the indigenous peoples (IP) leaders panicked after hearing that Senator Miguel Zubiri was tested positive of COVID-19 because they have been in close contact with the senator in a meeting a few days before his test results were announced. Zubiri hails from Bukidnon. Fortunately, nobody among them was infected.

AYTA-MAG-INDI COMMUNITY OF PORAC, PAMPANGA

Discrimination against the Ayta-Mag-indi tribe in Porac, Pampanga was reported. The Kapampangans and other lowlanders alleged that the Ayta peoples are actually the carriers of the contagion because they eat *paniki* (bats). Hence, people avoid interaction with them. Disproportionate distribution of government food rations was observed. Instead of giving one cavan (50 kilos) of rice to every Ayta household, only a few kilos were distributed in Barangay Planas in Porac.

Government has been remiss in providing accurate and relevant information about the situation. Despite that, after hearing the news of the pandemic and the ECQ declaration, community leaders immediately installed checkpoints to screen the entry of non-residents to their community. Residents are discouraged to leave, unless during an emergency. There are community health workers both Ayta and *unat* (non-Ayta) who are tasked as first responders should a medical emergency occur, COVID-19-related or not. IP leaders have produced face masks since there are none provided to the community.

Understanding that this virus can cause respiratory illnesses, they have intensified their traditional healing practices as a preventive health measure. Drinking ginger tea has become more frequent. Many Ayta families have decided to retreat to the mountain (*umatras sa bundok*) believing that it is a safer place from where they can also source their food. For those who chose to stay in the barangay, they proceeded with their farming activities. Admittedly, their harvest can hardly suffice. Hence, all forms of assistance are welcome, albeit short term.

Donations poured in including funds raised by UP College of Social Work and Community Development (UP CSWCD) and UP CIDS AltDev. The community managed the procurement and distribution of relief goods to ensure every Ayta household is provided. Portion of the funds was also spent for a feeding program for children.

The DSWD gave out only 25 SAP forms for the entire IP community. The tribal chieftain tried to negotiate with the barangay captain, but to no avail. Because not every family benefitted from the SAP, they pooled the contributions from those who received their 4Ps subsidy and thereafter divided the money accordingly to those who have none. The initiative was their

expression of solidarity and capacity to look after their own, a practice among indigenous peoples like the Ayta that continues to flourish these days.

BAKWIT SCHOOL

Displaced from their ancestral lands in Southern and Northern Mindanao and relocated to Metro Manila, the young students, teachers and support staff of the Bakwit School continue to stay at the premises of the UP Diliman College of Fine Arts. But building administration rules restrict them from going outside. Donations and other matters that require meeting other parties can only be done at the entrance of the building and only with the proper disinfection processes. Students are having educational discussions on different topics in place of classes which have already closed. Other activities include film showings, artmaking, and others. These are done only among members of the School. Social distancing, however, is not a concern because they have all been living together for the longest time with a regulated type of mobility. Otherwise, the only potential carriers of the virus are external agents who have already been restricted from entering the premises.

Networks and allied organization continue to conduct donation drives. Aside from food, immediate needs include hygiene kits, alcohol, and medicine including maintenance drugs and vitamins. Cash donations are welcome but must be rechanneled to the Bakwit School in Haran, a church property of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines in Davao City, because the area is being prevented from receiving donations. Other organizations have conducted online film screenings and artmaking to garner cash donations for the School.

SAVE SAN ROQUE ALLIANCE

The Sitio San Roque community in Quezon City together with supporters and advocates have been active in documenting the struggles of residents against inept government response. Member organizations under the Alliance have held donation drives to fill in gaps in social welfare provisioning.

On April 1, 2020, community residents, out of hunger and frustration over government handling of the pandemic, organized a public demonstration to demand for relief assistance. But unfortunately, they were violently dispersed by the police and 21 of them were detained. With the help of human rights lawyers and celebrities, they were able to secure bail and were released. While struggling to cope with the lockdown, mothers in the area are operating a *Kusinang Bayan*, a feeding program to help ensure food security in the neighborhood given the limited food rations provided by the government. Their food ingredients are sourced from the collectively-gathered relief goods from various donors.

Supporters and advocates actively use social media to do online protests against injustices inflicted on the community. These campaigns include #KwentongSanRoque which asks former visitors to share their stories that capture the human side of these urban poor

residents in order to encourage public understanding and solidarity, amidst the increasing violent handling to the poor.

HOMENET PHILIPPINES²

After the government declared the ECQ, over 100,000 workers in the formal sector had to stop working. Meanwhile, contractual workers and those in the informal economy lost their incomes as they were likewise prevented from leaving their homes to earn a living.

A new law, the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act (RA 11469) was enacted with provisions to support low income households through the SAP, an emergency subsidy of up to Php 8,000/month. As part of this law, the Labor Secretary initiated the *Tulong Panghanapbuhay sa Ating Disadvantaged/ Displaced Workers* (TUPAD), an assistance package that provides emergency employment for workers for a minimum period of 10 days. Meanwhile, the SAP and food packs are sluggish and may not be sufficient for big families.

As a pro-active response to these challenges, HomeNet Philippines members produced masks made of washable fabric in order to augment their loss of income. It launched a solicitation drive to help home-based workers in Rizal. It has also joined other civil society organizations to enable the University of the Philippines (UP) COVID-19 Pandemic Response Team to come up with Policy Note No. 4, a proposal on social policies that must address the immediate needs of the most vulnerable sectors.

BANTAY KALUSUGAN PAMPAMAYANAN (BKP), MAIGTING NA SAMAHAN NG PANLIPUNANG NEGOSYANTE NG TOWERVILLE (IGTING), AND GAYA-GAYA SEWERS

In San Jose del Monte, Bulacan, one month and two weeks since the ECQ declaration in Luzon, the situation remains dire in Towerville, a resettlement site in Barangay Minuyan, Gaya-gaya and Graceville. Without any source of livelihood, many families are experiencing hunger. While some families have received cash assistance through the government's 4Ps, many have not received any monetary assistance from the SAP.

Unable to work, some rely on food packs distributed by the provincial, city and barangay government. However, the food packs have been delivered rather slowly and, its contents lacking. In Brgy. Minuyan, one resident claimed that the first batch of food packs only came two weeks after the ECQ was declared. A pack included three (3) kilos of rice, nine (9) canned sardines and two (2) instant noodles which are hardly enough to sustain a family of five for a week. The next food ration came in 12 and 23 April with similar contents. Due to the slow and insufficient assistance from the government, local organizations such as the BKP began to mobilize resources, if only to mitigate the worsening situation in Towerville. As

² "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.

of 30 April 2020, BKP was able to generate about PhP180,000.00 worth of cash and goods. UPCIDS AltDev was also able to raise funds as contribution.

ASOSASYON SANG MGA MAMUMUGON SA NOLAN (NAKALANG PADILLA FARM WORKERS ASSOCIATION) AND FREEDOM FROM DEBT COALITION (FDC)–NEGROS

Bacolod City in Negros island remains under Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) while its fringes have been under General Community Quarantine (GCQ). Only a few of the members received SAP funds from the government while those who got it were dismayed by its insufficiency. For almost two months, members relied on their own produce such as vegetables, rice, and root crops for their daily food consumption.

When reports of a possible lockdown started circulating, the organization immediately approved a resolution on advanced distribution of dividends among members. It has also decided to create an emergency fund from their “organic premium” which was distributed among members. An organic premium is a specific amount added to the buying price of their product (e.g., sugar) which is remitted back to the organization. Further, the organization also 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.

The ECQ period coincided with their harvesting season of sugar cane (starting March). As the lockdown-imposed constraints on mobility, it was difficult to find truck haulers to transport sugar cane to the sugar mills which led to unnecessary delays and decrease of the quality of their produce. The organization also had difficulty claiming the payment for their sugar cane harvest given the lockdown.

The organization is currently focusing on land preparation for the coming planting season. Members remain anxious as the next harvest will be four months away, in September this year.

SUSTAINABILITY AND PARTICIPATION THROUGH EDUCATION AND LIFELONG LEARNING (SPELL)

The core leaders of SPELL recently held an online updating and sharing of information. For those unfamiliar with advanced digital communications equipment such as smartphones, it was their first time to use this medium to effectively communicate with their peers even under home quarantined.

Most members of SPELL in Quezon City are from the informal sector who suffered work stoppages when the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) was enforced. The distribution of cash allotments under the government’s Social Amelioration Program (SAP) and food ration was not justly distributed (*pinulitika*). Because of this, some community members were extremely disappointed with the Quezon City mayor. What complicated the situation

is the intervention of some homeowners' associations, who arbitrarily sifts the list of those who should avail the SAP before it reaches the barangay.

SPELL members who teach in small private schools are in a no-work, no-pay situation. Since they are not identified as belonging to the poorest of the poor, they are not qualified for SAP. They only received food packs distributed by the barangay. There were 10 teachers interviewed so far.

Community day care centers which are community-operated had to close after the ECQ declaration. This means no incomes for the teachers and staff whose salaries or allowances are dependent on the minimal contribution from the families of pupils. In Quezon City, SPELL has monitored around 25 centers that closed thus affecting the education of around 1,000 pre-school children of mostly urban poor communities. There is no assurance of re-opening the classes in the next few months, even using online platforms as contrasted with affluent privately-owned learning centers, they lack the operational capacity and resources such as internet access, gadgets, and post-paid or pre-paid loads.

In Talavera, Nueva Ecija, a municipality-wide lockdown caused widespread disruption and dislocation among SPELL members who are mostly seasonal farmers and workers undertaking menial construction jobs in their locality. SPELL has also uncovered cases of barangay health workers irregularly sifting through the list of SAP beneficiaries before passing this 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 trainings on dairy farming, in partnership with the Department of Education and the Philippine Carabao Center. The ALS schools also have to close down with uncertainties of re-opening soon especially for the Accreditation and Equivalency Exam of the students after taking their 10-month course. The pandemic already complicated the issues they earlier had about ALS vis-à-vis the K to 12 curricula. An increase of school drop-outs among the poor is anticipated, who will eventually resort to ALS. But the government's capacity to accommodate these drop-outs is questionable.

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

Bohol members were able to secure donations from overseas Filipino friends which they shared with the other SPELL chapters such as in Quezon City. For monitoring and reporting purposes to their donors, they took photos of their relief drives. Beyond geographic distance, they perceive this as the real spirit of giving and solidarity.

ASIAN SOLIDARITY ECONOMY COUNCIL (ASEC)–PHILIPPINES

ASEC is trying to reach out to the Department of Agriculture to improve the Kadiwa marketing program the agency has created during this period of lockdown. Their group wanted to mainstream the concept of consumer supported agriculture, a basic form of Social Solidarity Economy (SSE), through these Kadiwa centers. The purpose is to effectively cut short the value chain between food producers and consumers. They will also be conducting an online course on SSE to discuss its continuing relevance. ASEC Philippines Coordinator Dr. Ben Quiñones promised to elaborate on their other plans when an online meeting with AltDev shall be scheduled.

THAILAND

SOUTHERN PEASANT FEDERATION OF THAILAND (SPFT), FOCUS ON THE GLOBAL SOUTH (FGS)–THAILAND, AND NUSANTARA FOUNDATION–PATTANI

Since March 26, the national government placed Thailand under a state of emergency, and on April 3, imposed a countrywide curfew of 10 pm to 4 am. Other restrictive measures are being observed to curb the spread of coronavirus and flatten the curve of COVID-19 cases, including a provincial lockdown, the closure of land borders, limitation of civilian mobility, and a wide-range closure of businesses. These policies have disproportionately impacted the lives and livelihoods of Thai peoples, especially the poor.

Facing the challenges posed by the government’s declarations, SPFT community members find it difficult to make a living because of the provincial lockdown and restrictions on movement. They could not access the relief measures provided by the Thai government since these can only be accessed through an online platform, and peasant communities have limited access to the internet. Moreover, SPFT communities could not avail of personal protective equipment (PPE), e.g. masks and alcohol that the local and provincial governments distributed because they do not possess household registration records. Nonetheless, SPFT communities are quite self-reliant against unprecedented crises because of grassroots-level practices, particularly alternative land management. Despite the restriction of movement, they can consume food that they grow on collective farmland.

SPFT plans to promote and implement food sovereignty ideas among the communities. To realize this vision, SPFT community members are preparing and expanding collective land for food crops, e.g. rice and vegetables. The communities are also looking into establishing a rice bank and raising livestock animals to ensure that they remain resilient against the COVID-19 crisis and build a social safety net after the pandemic subsides.

Meanwhile, an allied group, the Nusantara Foundation, a CSO composed predominantly of Muslims in Pattani, southern Thailand, has a problem working in the community due to

COVID-19. They cannot cross provinces due to the emergency declaration by their provincial Pattani government. And there are strict check points, thus making the situation even more difficult.

PEOPLE'S EMPOWERMENT FOUNDATION (PEF)

There are many groups in Thailand providing support to communities by donating food and other essentials. PEF is donating and distributing food packs but only in nearby areas. Members of P-Move or the People's Movement for Just Society (Jumnong Nupan's group in Bangkok and Kridsakorn Silarak's group in Ubol) are doing fine and might also be involved in humanitarian work in their respective community.

PEF is looking for funds to finance a research project on ASEAN and amplifying voices of those who are left behind. Thereafter, the research recommendations will be presented to ASEAN governments. If they finally access funds, AltDev is asked to join this research.

HOMENET THAILAND

On 23rd of March, the Thai government implemented its special measures for the informal workers which included cash of ฿5,000 (Thai baht equivalent to 50% of minimum wage) for three months; reduction in the interest rate of state pawnshops; skills training with per diem; and 2.5 years loan for ฿10,000 (with interest of 0.1%/month) and 3.5 years loan for ฿50,000 (with interest of 0.35%/month).

In terms of accessing the website for registration and submission of application for availing of the programs, HomeNet Thailand works closely with their members, especially those who do not have access to the technology and reside in remote areas. Universal Health Care is supposed to cover free testing and medical treatment of COVID-19 patients while informal workers who are covered by the Social Security Scheme will get daily cash for lack of work income.

In its effort to lessen the impact of COVID-19 on informal workers and low-income earners, Homenet Thailand continues to press for special measures in relation to financing and taxation, employment, and health and social security.

TIMOR LESTE

K'DADALAK SULIMUTUK INSTITUTU (KSI) AND FUNDASAUN HTL (HAFOUN TIMOR LORO'SAE)

KSI leaders said they are safe and are working from home after their government declared a state of emergency. Because of the mobility restrictions, contact has not yet been established with Uniaun Agrikultores Munisipiu Ermera (UNAER) members lately.

Civil society organizations under Timor Leste's national NGO alliance FONGTIL (Forum NGO Timor Leste) are doing their share of supporting the government by providing field support for COVID-19 prevention such as handwashing facilities in public spaces, monitoring the socio-economic impact of the lockdown period, and public dissemination of information about virus prevention. Twice a week, FONGTIL conducts public information campaigns on the impact of the pandemic on the socio-economic rights and other human rights of citizens. As managing leaders for COVID-19, the two organizations submit their recommendations for alternative solutions to the government. As of this writing, Timor Leste has zero COVID-19 casualty.

ARCOIRIS TL

It was confirmed that there are 19 COVID cases in Timor Leste (as of April 2020). All residents are advised to stay home. On another matter, ARCOIRIS, as an LGBTQ+ advocacy group, happily announced that their NGO registration certificate has just been released, somehow a good piece of news during this time of pandemic. For safety, their members are also working from their homes.

LAOS

HOMENET LAOS

The Lao government ordered a lockdown of the country. Informal workers have been badly hit because they could no longer access raw materials for production and sell their products. Government implemented relief measures such as a 50 percent discount on electricity rates and suspension of tax payments for low-income groups. Free medical treatment and check-up are also provided to address the COVID-19 health crisis. Nevertheless, these measures do not sufficiently address the need for food, especially for poor home-based workers who may soon face involuntary hunger. In response to this urgent situation, HomeNet Laos applied for a grant with Oxfam, an international NGO, for the provision of food and masks.

GREEN COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT ASSOCIATION (GCDA)

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

On the other hand, a GCDA partner, the Lao Farmer Network reports of problems other farmers are experiencing in the time of COVID-19.³ These include throwing away tons of produce such as 8 tons of carrots (Hoaphan province), zero sales of their produce where normally they could sell 20 tons per day (Champasak province), suspension of organic vegetable production due to poor sales (Thongmung and Hoayoun), and lack of government support for domestic farmers.

INDONESIA

HOMENET INDONESIA⁴

Confirmed cases of COVID-19 have now spread out to the 34 provinces of the country. The government has imposed a semi-lockdown which prescribes physical distancing and mandates policies such as relaxing the terms for loans for one year especially for informal workers, relaxing tax 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 PKH Card) by Rp200,000 per month, for six months. Unfortunately, street vendors, waste pickers, homeworkers in the putting out system, and construction workers do not benefit from these policies.

Additional government interventions include basic food assistance in some regions; restructuring and acceleration of 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. Some loopholes in these cards have been pointed out as they exclude some homeworkers, and only subsidize training programs, not the basic necessities that people need during this crisis situation.

The lockdown has 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 non-basic commodities. The lack of social and health protection exacerbated the situation further. In order to keep up with the crisis and not depend on assistance from government and the private sector, homeworkers have shifted online to sell homemade food. Many have also turned to producing masks and other PPEs for medical personnel.

³ 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/>.

⁴ "HNSEA Reports on COVID-19 Impact on Homebased Workers," 1–8.

KONFEDERASI PERGERAKAN RAKYAT INDONESIA (KPRI)

One of KPRI's member peasant federations, the Serikat Petani Pasundan (SPP) has harvested their farm products in Pasundan and distributing these for free to KPRI members and friends in Bandung and Jakarta. The KPRI coffee shop has been closed since the quarantine but KPRI office has been transformed into a 'central solidarity place' for the relief operation and donation collection that will be shared to the people. KPRI also currently produces hand sanitizers that are freely shared to the community. He added that this moment is just timely in order to realize real solidarity economy.

SORGHUM FARMERS OF PERHIMPUNAN PETANI SORGUM UNTUK KEDAULATAN PANGAN NTT

Flores Island in Nusa Tenggara Timur remains COVID-free as of this writing. Farmers are engrossed with their usual farming activities and have started harvesting sorghum, even when the national government ordered all citizens to work from home. Farmers are reacting to this policy given that farming requires them at all times to be outside their homes. But as ordered, they are compliant of social distancing, frequent hand washing, and wearing of masks. Meanwhile, they would like to know the feasibility of sorghum growing in the Ayta Mag-indi community in Porac, Pampanga, Philippines.

KOALISI SENI INDONESIA (KSI)

The situation in Indonesia is worrisome and uncertain as positive COVID-19 cases are still on the rise. Artists-members of KSI are currently staying home since the government declared a lockdown. They are, however, safe with no COVID-19 cases reported so far among the artists. The major downside is access to income. All their activities have to be delayed (or postponed), so this means no income for these artists.

VIETNAM

VIETNAM PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION (VPDF)

VPDF reported that as of mid-April and that for the previous 48 hours, there have been are no new COVID-19 cases in Vietnam. With this recent welcome development in Vietnam of zero COVID-19 casualty, the organization commits to write about the experience of the country, with emphasis on the importance of people's solidarity action in response to the public health emergency actions of the Vietnam government. For VPDF, the government owes much of this success to its people.

As Vietnam is the host country of the ASEAN Civil Society Conference/ASEAN Peoples' Forum (ACSC/APF) 2020, the conference might push through in September or October this year. Local organizers said they will immediately send the announcement to the Regional

Steering Committee (RSC). There will be an online Regional Consultation Meeting anytime soon.

HOMENET VIETNAM⁵

The Vietnam government's policies and measures only cover the formal workers. The implementation of social 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) have stopped. Street vendors lost their opportunity to earn while the waste collectors, aside from having the highest risk of infection, continue to suffer economic insecurity.

HomeNet Vietnam has been monitoring 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 has produced a policy brief addressed to concerned key ministers. HomeNet Vietnam works closely with international NGO Oxfam, to secure emergency support for vulnerable persons. It plans to conduct research on the impact of COVID-19 on migrant workers and other groups.

MALAYSIA

CIVICA RESEARCH AND INTERNS OF THE RURAL INTERNSHIP TRAINING PROGRAMME (RITP)

Malaysia went into COVID-19 lockdown mode on 17 March 2020 after the country was given a mere 48 hours' notice. Called the Movement Control Order (MCO), all businesses and factories were shut (food outlets and pharmacies exempted) and all movement of people disallowed. Only medical and other essential personnel were allowed outside their homes. The general population was however allowed out under strict rules but only to buy food and/or seek medical services/supplies.

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 various other living necessities. CIVICA Research thus alerted two of their former RITP interns working in KL who had lived among these IPs in their villages to respond immediately. Informed of the plight of the 14 IPs, these former interns quickly organized an immediate food relief operation and coordinated a longer-term plan of support.

⁵ Ibid.

With funds from CIVICA and 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 these 14 IPs for two weeks until early April. They have also talked to a local church group that was located geographically 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 fund-raise 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 RM10,000 (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 PPEs 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 centres in Limbang, Lawas, Bintulu, and Belaga Divisions. The successful collaboration resulted in bringing over 1,000 pieces of N95 mask and 100 PPE gowns.

CAMBODIA

FOCUS ON THE GLOBAL SOUTH (FGS)–CAMBODIA⁶

COVID-19 has not only shaken Cambodia's health system, it has also exposed the underlying flaws in the country's current economic model, which are resulting in livelihood crises for many people. The economic impacts of the pandemic are severe on the working-classes and small businesses, especially women in both formal and informal economic sectors, rural communities, sex and entertainment work, and the garment manufacturing sector.

The Cambodian Government has issued a number of orders, statements and press-releases to prevent the disease from spreading. The provisions of the emergency law have raised numerous concerns among civil society and human rights experts about their legal implications. Further, the government has taken many actions quickly but without providing protection and damage prevention for those who bear the brunt of the economic impacts.

The sudden closure of karaoke clubs, night-clubs and beer gardens has hit the entertainment industry hard, where most of the workers are women. Women workers suddenly lost their jobs and incomes and were placed in desperate situations because of heavy debt repayment burdens. Some women workers are facing evictions because they cannot pay the rents for their rooms and are also facing food shortages. The sudden closure of the entertainment sector did not provide any damages or compensation packages to the

⁶ 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/>.

workers, or assurance to them of reinstatement of employment once the sector opens up again.

The impacts of the pandemic on the garment sector are different and more complex. This sector was already expected to be hit because of the European Union's (EU) Everything But Arms (EBA) decision on restricting import-tax exempted garments to EU markets. More than 80 percent of the garment workforce of 800,000 are women and will be negatively affected by both, the EBA decision and the severe impacts of the pandemic in the global north. For some garment workers, factory closures will lead to the loss of jobs and incomes. The workers are experiencing difficulties in paying their room rents and repaying their debts to Micro-Finance Institutions (MFIs), commercial banks and the money lenders. For others who still have full employment, the uncertainties facing the garment sector because of the EBA decision and potential impacts of the pandemic have triggered anxiety and panic about their future job security and livelihoods.

Many garment workers are also facing trouble because of the travel ban imposed by the government during the Khmer New Year, as they were targeted as potential transmitters of COVID-19. They were ordered to report to the government authorities about where they went during the ban period. Owners of the places where the workers rent rooms were instructed to not allow workers back to their rooms unless they show that they are COVID-19 negative, or they have been through 14 days in quarantine. Workers' names and ID cards have been recorded and they are not allowed to go to work if they took leave during the ban period. There are double-standards and differential treatment of people who travelled across provinces during the Khmer New Year ban period with regard to quarantines and other restrictions. These orders specifically targeted garment sector workers. At the same time, no measures have been put in place to protect these workers from catching the virus.

HOMENET CAMBODIA⁷

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 closing of borders, most of the home-based workers continue to produce their products from home and sell locally either in wholesale or in retail through local trade fairs or through social media (e.g., Facebook). They worry, however, about their plummeting sales. In April, members of the Artisans' Association of Cambodia (AAC) who are usually the buyers of their products have closed their businesses.

The relief programs of the Cambodian government that include some food and PPE are only given to poor with Health Equity Fund cards. The government has appealed to banks and micro-finance institutions to rearrange repayment terms for employees only in four sectors: tourism, garments, transportation, and construction. Given this, HomeNet Cambodia continues to work closely with other informal economy groups to advocate for extending government's short term and long-term support to informal workers.

⁷ "HNSEA Reports on COVID-19 Impact on Homebased Workers," 1–8.

MYANMAR

KAREN DEVELOPMENT NETWORK (KDN) AND THANDAUNGGYI WOMEN'S GROUP

News reports say that actual cases in Myanmar could be vastly underreported due to limited testing capacity. Given Myanmar's economic status, it would be unlikely for the state to conduct widespread testing, especially on migrant workers from Thailand and China who have returned to the state.⁸

Both the military (Tatmandaw) and civilian government are involved in the COVID-19 response. Members of the parliament associated with the Tatmandaw proposed a measure to convene the security council to address the situation. But this was rejected by the Speaker of the parliament.⁹ At the same time, the civilian government led by State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi heads two new committees and rely on local regional governments and civil society to enforce COVID-19 measures.¹⁰

KDN staff are now working from home, like all other NGOs in Myanmar. It will be after 19th May when they shall start the phase of reopening their office. All KDN activities on the ground, especially in Kayin State has to cease because this state is the gateway for migrant workers from Thailand. The first group of migrants arrived before the Myanmar New Year. KDN had to intervene by establishing a mechanism to handle their arrival such as setting a quarantine facility and transporting them directly to their towns once they are declared no signs of symptoms.

All the coffee and fruit harvests of the women farmers belonging to the Thandaunggyi Women's Group in Kayin State have been put to waste because of the absence of transportation and buyers. The head of the group is currently working as a member of the COVID-19 response committee in their town. Due to the influx of returning migrants passing through Kayin State, community volunteers have set up quarantine facilities in nearly all towns and they are working round the clock here as a measure to contain the virus.

⁸ Kyaw San Wai, "Myanmar and COVID-19," *The Diplomat*, May 1, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/05/myanmar-and-covid-19/>.

⁹ Moe Moe, "Myanmar Speaker Rejects Call to Summon Military-Majority Security Council to Address COVID-19," *The Irrawaddy*, 25 March 2020, <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-speaker-rejects-call-summon-military-majority-security-council-address-covid-19.html>. See also San Wai, "Myanmar and COVID-19."

¹⁰ San Wai, "Myanmar and COVID-19."

THAI-BURMA BORDER

MAE TAO CLINIC (MTC)

Stateless peoples and migrant workers in the border rely mostly on Mae Tao Clinic for access to affordable health care. Clinic operations are doing good so far although as peoples living in the border, and now as frontline health care workers, they have to closely monitor the situation of both Thailand and Burma countries. While Thailand COVID-19 cases have dropped, Burma is apprehensive about the virus spread after a massive return of its migrant workers before Thailand locked its borders.

In this time of pandemic, immediate access to health care among migrants in Thailand becomes a worsening problem as either health officials have difficulty reaching migrants or migrants are reluctant to approach health care providers for so many factors such as language barrier, outright rejection, high fees, or fear of being reported to the police. Migrants, especially undocumented migrants are usually the last to get government assistance so they are the last to access important PPE when distributed in the community. Migrants who have returned to Burma worry of unemployment or visa security after this pandemic will be over.¹¹

MTC founder and director, Dr. Cynthia Maung said the response to COVID-19 requires a strategic plan that considers the welfare of the migrant and refugee population in Mae Sot. Meanwhile, as a precaution, MTC has upgraded hand washing facilities and boosted hygiene promotion. Staff number on duty have been reduced while non-emergency procedures have been closed. MTC has tapped community volunteers to disseminate COVID-19-related information on the ground. Dr. Maung also observe difficulty among returning migrants of compliance for social distancing and self-isolation during the required quarantine period.¹²

MTC epidemiologist Dr. Vit Suwanvanichkij said that the situation in the border changes very quickly which require them to mobilize and adjust quickly as well despite having faced a financial challenge when international funding for MTC has been cut. He said COVID-19 will expose the most fragile as it has already imposed new stresses that were not anticipated.¹³

¹¹ Quadrini, Maggi, "Anti-virus measures hurting migrants," *Bangkok Post*, April 6, 2020, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/1893995/anti-virus-measures-hurting-migrants>.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ 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>.

REGIONAL REPORTS

ASEAN SOGIE CAUCUS (ASC)¹⁴

ASC conducted a rapid assessment of the impact of the global pandemic on 15 LGBT organizations across the region. During this time of 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, are expected to be seriously affected by this pandemic. Many of them now contend with trying to compensate for the lost income of other members of their households. A common concern is the problem of access to food. They, too, have difficulty accessing facemasks, alcohol, and other hygiene supplies due to lack of money and supplies.

Some LGBT persons do not have access or have limited access to the internet to enable them to have sustained on-line interactions with friends or community. A sense of helplessness is felt because of inability to help others or unable to provide enough help. Their mental health is also precarious.

All the ASC organizations say that the crisis forced them to rethink the conduct of their activities. Some groups cancelled their planned activities outright. Others decided to suspend the activities and have them rescheduled to a later date. Those who have decided to reschedule have considered redesigning the activity such as by taking it online.

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

HOMENET SOUTH-EAST ASIA¹⁵

Homenet South-East Asia stressed that "home-based workers constitute a significant percentage of the workforce worldwide," majority of whom are women, contributing to the well-being of families and economies. Despite their vital contributions, they remain largely invisible and unrecognized economic players which makes their right to secure, stable, and decent livelihood still illusive. This renders them highly vulnerable to health and economic impacts of crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Most live in poverty and rely on precarious work just to survive. Given the lockdown, "the inability to continue working literally means starvation for their families."

¹⁴ ASEAN SOGIE Caucus, "Implications of the COVID-19 Pandemic on LGBTIQ Organization in ASEAN: Rapid needs assessment" (Unpublished document, 2020).

¹⁵ "Home-based Workforce Calls for Protection to Survive the COVID-19 Crisis," *HomeNet South-East Asia*, April 2020, 2–3.

As a call for social protection, home-based workers demand the following:

1. From the government: provisions for *health and safety* which include constant water supply and sanitation services; free testing and good quality of medical treatment (especially those who have no health insurance); freedom from violence from police and security forces; and support for victims of domestic violence; income and food security; availability of cash grants; provision of free food; relief from payment of taxes, rentals, and social security contributions; regulation of financial services such as freezing loans, micro credit payments, and other debt payments; and use of home-based workers' skills to produce emergency PPE. In terms of *information*, government should provide regular, accurate and accessible information on health and safety concerns and access to free/affordable data for communication.
2. From local employers, contractors, and big brands: income replacement; honoring of existing contracts (which especially includes payment for goods already produced); provision of minimum wages and social protection measures including hygiene and safety products.
3. From financial service providers: freezing of loans, micro credit payments and other debt repayments and the provision of short-term low interest loans to augment loss of income. For the long term, government should recognize home-based workers through laws and policies which protect them and provide opportunities for improved livelihoods.

ASIAN SOLIDARITY ECONOMY COUNCIL–RIPESS-ASIA

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 countries of Asia. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the network has turned to social media and online platforms for discussing RIPESS-Asia's analysis and responses to the crisis. Webinars, Zoom discussions and YouTube videos have been organized as follows:

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

OTHER REPORTS

The following reports have been gleaned from other grassroots-based organizations at the national and regional levels who have been issuing updates on the situations in their constituencies, notably farmers' and indigenous groups.

MIDSAYAP, COTABATO, PHILIPPINES¹⁶

In Barangay Milaya in the Municipality of Midsayap, Province of Cotabato, the new generation of youth leaders are continuing traditional farming practices for the survival of the Erumanen Menuvu called Suragad. The seeds to be planted called *peruvini-an* are placed in a *pandi* or white cloth that will serve as a mark called *Kelayag Ivevasuk* so that all the seeds will be blessed.

The farmers will go to the *peruvini-an* to do the *Penawagtawag*, a ritual where Apo Kelayag Ivevasuk or God will be asked to bless the planted seeds for a bountiful harvest of ladies' fingers, peanut, bitter gourd, string beans, taro, lemon grass, sweet potato and banana among others. As part of the ritual, they will also offer a chicken to Apo called *pagsumbali*. The longstanding tradition will help the IP community survive especially in times of crisis. The tribe has imparted to the youth the importance of respecting and following elders and working out for the rebirth of their culture. The IP youth leaders identified the area where farmers with the youth can conduct Suragad.

Some of the plants already bear fruits that serve as sources of the community's food amidst this pandemic problem. With this, the SK Federation of the Municipality of Midsayap commits to keep the tradition alive by including it in the federation's priority projects. "I believe that the development of the town will begin in the revitalization of the culture. As one of the youth leaders in our town, I am committed to continuing the practices of our forefathers and most especially helping the people)," said Mark Ferven Avance, SKMF President.

Modern society is becoming an amalgamation of cultures, but as we move forward, we can choose to celebrate our past and have them become a part of our culture future!

FARMERS' SITUATION IN OTHER 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 on how their organizations try to respond to the challenges they face. The sharing sessions are meant to bring solidarity among our partner FOs and to learn and be inspired by the initiatives of others. In this

¹⁶ Kenneth Mheil Mangaya-ay, "Midsayap IP Youth Continue Traditional Farming Practices for COVID-19 Survival," Choose Philippines, 16 April 2020, <https://www.choosephilippines.com/awesome-filipinos/pinoy-culture/6552/midsayap-ip-youth-continue-traditional-farming-pra?>

article, we write about the experiences of our partners in Cambodia, Laos, Myanmar, Philippines, and Vietnam.¹⁷

CAMBODIA

Farmer and Nature Net

Since 8 March 2020, all schools in Siem Reap have been closed upon confirmation of a COVID-19 positive case. Schools in Phnom Penh are closed. There is ban on entry of foreigners from Italy, Germany, Spain and the US for 30 days. Starting 31 March 2020, Cambodia imposed travel restrictions to reduce COVID-19 transmission. To help our members during this time, we conducted the following activities:

- Food processing and storage at the community level (agri cooperative level)
- Allocate some reserve or emergency fund to support cooperatives that are able to stock and distribute food relief to community members with stable/guarantee price to minimize the burden on the members
- Support farmer producer group to maximize their production to achieve food stability
- Support agri cooperatives on processing facilities, packaging and linking the products to the market
- Support for food relief

INDONESIA

Aliansi Petani Indonesia (API)

There is a lockdown on red zone areas, but not total lockdown. The government is implementing physical and social distancing. President Joko Widodo dismissed the idea of lockdown in Jakarta and opted for physical distancing coupled with civil emergency measures. However, schools, workplaces, places of worship, and other public centers are closed for two weeks. Localized lockdowns are also being implemented to prevent further spread of the virus.

LAOS

Lao Farmer Network (LFN)

The country was under a lockdown on 1-19 April 2020. Meanwhile, the government authorities suspended or postponed all “unnecessary” social events such as weddings and Lao New Year celebrations. The government advised Lao people to avoid large gatherings. We are helping our members with storing and processing their produce. Farmers are not able to bring their produce to the market because there is no transportation available due to the lockdown. In addition, many shops in the market are closed.

¹⁷ 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). 7 May 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 UN FAO International Decade of Family Farming, UP Campus, 13-14 November 2019.

MYANMAR

Agriculture and Farmer Federation of Myanmar (AFFM)

The government implements restricted travel. There is an increased health checks along the border with China and the Visa on Arrival for Chinese nationals is also suspended. President U Win Mying has not been spotted since 8 March 2020.

AFFM is facilitating direct selling of its farmer members produce to trade union members in the industrial zone as well as to other farmers' unions. AFFM brings the produce of its farmers to these areas and sell them at a low price so the trade union members and other farmers can afford them. Aside from the affordable price, AFFM also offers free delivery service, specifically in areas that are under semi-lockdown. The marketing of products is also done online on Facebook. This is an initiative with AFFM's parent organization CTUM.

PHILIPPINES

Pambansang Katipunan ng mga Samahan sa Kanayunan (PKSK)

Pambansang Kilusan ng mga Samahang Magsasaka (PAKISAMA)

Initially, national FOs focused on providing information about preventing the coronavirus and information on government guidelines on food production and logistics. The NFOs are now concentrating on linking producers with institutional and commercial buyers in the cities who are running out of supplies for relief food packs.

NIA is also working with other CSOs and farmers network to advocate for: (1) support for food producers (farmers, fishers, farmworkers, including those in processing and logistics) being frontliners of the food supply chain; (2) enhanced health service to our farmers who are vulnerable to COVID due to their advanced age (average age of farmers in PH is 58); (3) for local governments to source directly from farmers for the fresh food pack relief that they will distribute to people who lost their daily wage jobs due to the lockdown; and (4) easy passage through lockdown security checkpoints of fresh food produce from farms to urban center. NIA is also developing communication materials to be published in social media platforms on those advocacies. NIA and other NFOs are also linking with groups who buy fresh produce for distribution to LGUs or to fresh markets.

PAKISAMA continues to participate in the networks to influence policy concerning the pandemic. They are also increasing their capacity in social media and other technological platforms. USD 100 is given to farmers as support and they are helping farmers access it. Seeds are also distributed to farmer members. Cooperatives to help the farmers are also being organized.

PAKISAMA has three learnings during this time of pandemic:

1. Programs are affirmed such as asset reform is important to make them pandemic resilient. Monocrop farmers may have land but no food. IDOFS program is important

for food and nutrition security. Markets are hard to access but it is easier with cooperatives. The problems faced are because the programs are still not scaled up and the advocacies are still not implemented and it contributed to the suffering of the people.

2. Movement of strong food consumers' cooperatives. During the time of the pandemic, it is important to have cooperatives working in the urban area wherein the products of the farmers can be directed to the city and bought to a higher price. These cooperatives will have a role in the distribution of food in households.
3. Social media is useful in reaching the farmers, and most of them have not utilized it before.

THAILAND

Assembly of the Poor (AOP)

The government declared a state of emergency to give extra authorities to the government. The governor already signed a shutdown. In Thailand, the biggest number of infected people are in Bangkok, and other big cities and urban areas. The number of infected cases in rural areas are comparatively less. But the most severe problems are economic impacts that are spreading throughout the country.

As most of our member FOs focus on local markets, our farmers are not highly vulnerable. Only some members that supply food to restaurants, depend on tourism or sell to people outside their communities (e.g., travelers or tourists) are impacted. Although there are people who migrate back to provinces due to the lock down policies of Bangkok and big cities, so far there are no members infected with the COVID-19.

The impacts are mostly due to the restriction of mobility and the curfew which was recently announced. As for the restriction of mobility, the sales in our markets with income from travelers, tourists and restaurants are dropping. The markets are focusing on local people that are affected.

Regarding the curfew, the fisherfolks and Para rubber growing farmers need to travel during the curfew time. But we do not expect much problems because the affected members can apply for permission from the Village Head or Sub-District Head. Besides, the government focuses more on cities and urban areas, with less restriction in rural areas.

As for our FOs' initiatives to address the COVID-19: We give free cloth masks to our members. We encourage our traveler/tourist-oriented markets to sell to local people. We promote the direct sale to urban consumers. We want to produce some alcohol-based sanitizer from our local rice wine brewery but we are prohibited by the law. We are planning to increase production on quickly-growing food to mitigate the food hoarding and scarcity.

VIETNAM

Viet Nam Farmers' Union (VNFU)

Because of the improved situation, the government has now opened the economy by allowing businesses to resume but only with 50 percent capacity. Mass gatherings are still prohibited. The government provides food support to vulnerable groups and financial support to businesses.

VNFU has donated money to the national budget and members donated blood to patients in need. They have also distributed food packages (consisting of sugar, rice milk, noodles) and medical supplies (face masks, hand sanitizers) to farmers. They are also cooperating with enterprises wherein the farmers are connected to supermarkets. The challenge VNFU members are facing right now are:

1. Not all of the farmers received support from the government because the financial aid is only for the poor sector and there are farmers that are not classified as such. The farmers have to show evidence that their income is affected in order to receive financial support. Another downside of this is that the location of the farmers affects whether they would be able to access it or not.
2. Transportation of agriculture products is difficult due to social distancing because the markets are in urban areas while the goods are coming 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 and the demands decreased due to the pandemic and closure of borders. There are also delays since the staffing on the import/export sector is reduced. 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 constrictions.

Vietnam has no mortality recorded because of good governance. All sectors were involved in preventing the spread of the virus and now the government has a good commitment to the actions. Measures of preventing the virus were done rather than fighting it. People that tested positive with COVID-19 were identified and placed in lockdown/quarantine earlier to stop the spread. There is also an implementation of a compulsory quarantine of people from other countries. There is no complete lockdown, only social distancing which is implemented clearly. People wear masks in public and production areas are encouraged to continue production.

There are also lots of donations made to provide food support. The donations are directed to rural areas where there are more people who are in need of support. In terms of the economy, the government encourages enterprises to still continue production and exporting despite the problems. Even if the price is reduced, the government still

encourages the resumption of production. Vietnam is exporting again, including rice, but only limited.

OTHER REGIONAL REPORTS

The Agricord Farmers' Alliance "is a global alliance of agri-agencies mandated by farmers' organisations. Since 2007, AgriCord implements the Farmers Fighting Poverty Programme. Over 200 farmers' organisations per year are supported in more than 50 developing countries. Farmers Fighting Poverty is a delivery mechanism established in 2007 by which support is provided to farmers' organisations."¹⁸

As Asia continues to deal with COVID-19, disruptions of food supply chains are observed. These disruptions will have an implication for the food security of the region. To document the impact of COVID-19 in Asia, the AgriCord alliance gathered information from farmer groups across Asia to assess the impact of COVID-19.¹⁹

As rice is the staple food in Southeast Asia, COVID-19 threatens its availability. As reported by AgriCord, rice exporting countries such as Vietnam, Cambodia and Myanmar are restricting rice exports to ensure availability to their local populations. The same report also recognized that this move would have a negative impact on rice availability on rice importing countries such as the Philippines, China, and countries in Africa.

Because of COVID-19, food shortages are also seen. This led to panic buying of food items, thereby increasing food prices in the short run. Moreover, the restriction of movements placed by different governments, as well as the restrictions on public transportation, contribute to the dwindling food supplies due to the smaller number of laborers allowed to go to work.

In Vietnam, AgriCord reported that food shortages occur due to increasing debts and decreasing incomes. Other farmer groups in Vietnam has likewise reported that due to the imposition of lockdowns, farmers are not able to harvest grains and vegetables, thereby increasing the price due to tight supply. Farmer cooperatives in Vietnam are also reeling from the effects of the suspension of public transportation.

The Indonesian Ngudi Makmur Cooperative reported that lockdowns made wholesale purchase of produced good much more difficult. Markets were also closed which affected organizations such as the Komunitas Swabina Pedesaan Salassae (KSPS) who could no longer sell their produce. Moreover, the lack of transportation might jeopardize supply chains, even if food production is ongoing.

In the Philippines, organizations such as the ISLACO Cooperative have reported that their production of dried fish was suspended as well. Moreover, panic-buying incidents in the country have caused organizations such as GlowCorp to have stocks depleted. And in terms

¹⁸ "Vision | Agricord," Agricord, <https://www.agricord.org/en/alliance/vision>.

¹⁹ "An impact scan based on reports by farmers' organisations from Asia," Agricord, 2020, <https://www.agricord.org/en/impact-scan-based-reports-farmers-organisations-asia?>

of food vending, farmers are unable to sell their produce due to the imposition by the government of the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ).

Laos has reported the impacts of restrictions due to COVID-19. The Farmers for Sustainable Agricultural Production (FASAP) in Laos reported a 40 percent decrease in production. The restrictions also made it difficult for farmers to avail of agriculture extension services in the country.

In general, the disruption of supply chains caused by COVID-19 has reduced the incomes of farmers. Despite the low income, more problems to farmers are seen due to high cost of production, transportation costs, and increasing interests on loans. Farmer organizations are also affected as their financial resources are depleted, as they depend on farmers' contributions to run their operations. Farmer's organizations in the Philippines have reported that due to the non-collection of payment from farmers, they are not able to pay their staff, as well as service their outstanding loans.

The Coalition for Human Rights in Development–Asia Region reported on frontline communities resisting internationally-financed development projects in the time of COVID-19.²⁰ In Manila, Philippines the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) imposed by the Duterte administration meant near total lockdown. All forms of public transportation were suspended, schools and malls were closed, and all businesses and stores considered non-essential were shuttered. In some countries though, these measures were simply not enough to curb the spread of the virus, prompting governments to impose further control by adopting different and sometimes harsher versions of quarantines.

Hunger and loss of livelihoods are the most immediate concerns for frontline communities. Across countries, the closure of businesses and non-essential industries due to lockdown and quarantine measures meant that people were forced to temporarily stop working. Daily wage earners in the informal sector including vendors, hawkers, transport drivers, and construction workers were most affected. Several communities have been further affected because of the projects they have been resisting.

For example, the indigenous Dumagat-Remontados in Quezon province, within whose ancestral domain the controversial China Exim Bank funded Kaliwa Dam Project will be built, were being prevented from gathering food, medicine and firewood from their ancestral forest areas. In this light, the spread of COVID-19 is creating additional health risks for those with pre-existing health conditions due to environmental pollution from energy and extractives projects.

Communities affected by coal-power plants have to cope with their pre-existing health concerns due to toxic ash and smoke from the coal plants in their areas. With COVID-19,

²⁰ Excerpted from Flores-Obanil, Carmina. 2020. "Impacts of COVID-19 Pandemic on Frontline Communities Resisting Internationally Financed Development Projects." <https://th.boell.org/en/2020/05/06/impacts-covid-19-pandemic-frontline-communities-resisting-internationally-financed>

people in the area are doubly vulnerable because their immune system have already been weakened due to the plant's continuous operation. Residents suffering from breathing problems have been sent home by hospitals after only being administered first aid because the public facilities were full. At least three different communities report seeing an increase in illegal mining activities, especially by Chinese mining companies.

Interventions that communities and allied organizations can undertake have also been limited. Many are using emails, phone calls, texts, video and call conferencing to communicate with partners, and their advocacy targets like governments. There are also increased risks of hacking, and surveillance, which increases risks for organizations and defenders who are working in sensitive and high-risk situations. The lockdown has led to the curtailment of fundamental freedoms including, freedom of assembly, freedom of information, and even freedom of speech.

Fortunately, there is still hope. CSOs and local community organizations have taken on the challenge of supporting the communities they have been working in or with. In the Philippines, several CSOs provided financial aid and relief packages for marginalized communities and groups. NGO Forum on ADB also initiated a fund drive to help their members respond to the needs of the communities they are working with.

Additionally, despite the odds, several communities are continuing to fight for their rights, and even having successes. This is the new normal and it is a challenge for all of us. A challenge to seek ways to ensure that the rights of communities are still protected, and that their most immediate needs are addressed.

Women's Legal and Human Rights Bureau. In a May 14, 2020 report, the WLB and its partner communities conclude 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.²¹ 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. As such, 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 girl children to surface and understand their situation. The update covers the period of 25 March up to 20 April 2020. During this time, WLB was able to send direct assistance to the four communities after almost two weeks of lockdown.

²¹ "Gender transformative, pro-poor, and inclusive COVID-19 response in necessary," Women's Legal and Human Rights Bureau, May 14, 2020, <https://wlbonline.org/covid19-update2/>.

In general, the issues confronting women, particularly marginalized groups, remain the same: (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 of 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 unit (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, the findings are the following:

1. ***Enforcement of the enhanced community quarantine protocol is anti-poor, anti-rural, and anti-women.*** With the imposition of the ECQ, poor families are pushed further into extreme poverty, which is then exacerbated by the limited support from the national government. Before COVID, women were already having difficulty budgeting the meager take-home pay of their husbands. Now, the situation worsened because there is nothing to budget but the need has become bigger as family members are all staying at home.
2. ***Survival of the fittest is the game: Pushing women to make both ends meet.*** Being forced to borrow money or ask for loans from various lending institutions to survive the crisis adds to women's existing mental load. Rural women are left with no choice but to continue to manage their own homes without cash. In Samar, some families borrow land (rent-free) to plant vegetables and crops, while others (both men and women) participate in "cash for work" activities.
3. ***Relief efforts remain gender-neutral and scarce.*** Relief packages contained canned goods but not the basic needs of women/mothers such as infant formula for children (giving formula milk is prohibited under the Milk Code), nutritious food for pregnant or lactating mothers, sanitary napkins, contraceptives, etc. A woman leader from Samar acted on the problem of inefficiency in distributing relief goods in their barangay by giving the barangay an updated list of households and openly airing out their grievances as women community leaders.
4. ***Continuing invisibility of marginalized sectors during COVID-19.*** Even before COVID-19, data has not been disaggregated by either sex or sectoral concerns. Disadvantaged sectors like the PWDs, senior citizens, solo parents, LGBT persons, stranded women migrant workers (WMW), and marginalized women in general are rendered more invisible. Their unique individual contexts are overlooked because the government only sees families and households in its social amelioration program (SAP).

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 in general. WLB

was able to facilitate delivery of relief packages to some Filipino women migrant workers in Dubai by calling fellow NGOs and networks in the Philippines.

5. ***Cases of Violence Against Women (VAWG), harassment, and discrimination are less prioritized during the crisis.*** Cases of violence against women and girls are further under-reported due to the crisis. Women are at a loss as to which agency will they report incidents, especially now when not all government offices are open. Unfortunately, during ECQ women rarely tried to access justice due to compounded problems. In cases like this, *women are silenced because the structures are seemingly not working and the system is failing them, too.*

THE GENERAL PICTURE IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

As of May 28, 2020, the twelve Southeast Asian countries have totaled 83,309 confirmed cases of COVID-19 infection with 2,580 deaths, 36,495 recovered and a mortality rate of 1.66 percent (See Table 1). Ironically it is the more economically developed countries that have suffered the most and their pandemic numbers can only be expected to rise in the coming weeks and months. Societies at the lower half of the regional economic ladder have fewer health-related problems even as their economies could also be negatively impacted.

The region's most developed economy, Singapore, has tallied the greatest number of COVID-19 cases even as its advanced health care system has resulted in few mortalities and high rates of recovery. This seeming paradox is explained by the revelation that most confirmed cases were among the city-state's migrant workers in the construction business who have long lived in deplorable and cramped housing conditions.²² Indonesia and the Philippines come second and third in confirmed cases with 23,851 and 15,049 respectively. Both countries also have the highest mortality rates at 6.18 percent and 6.01 percent respectively. The two other countries with rates of infection in the thousands are Malaysia and Thailand (number 4 and number 5) but their mortality rates are below 2 percent. From there on, the situation improves drastically for the seven remaining Southeast Asian countries with less than 400 cases for each one and zero deaths tallied for Vietnam, Cambodia, Timor Leste, Laos, and Papua New Guinea.

²² Dominique Mosbergen, "COVID-19 surge exposes ugly truth about Singapore's treatment of migrant workers," *Huffpost*, April 24, 2020, <https://www.huffpost.com/entry/singapore-coronavirus-migrant-worker>.

Country	Confirmed cases	Deaths	Recovered	Mortality rate %	Tests	Tests per million
Singapore	32,876	23	17,276	0.07	334,691	57,251
Indonesia	23,851	1,473	6,057	6.18	278,411	1,019
Philippines	15,049	904	3,506	6.01	315,363	2,882
Malaysia	7,619	115	6,083	1.51	519,944	16,084
Thailand	3,065	57	2,945	1.86	375,453	5,380
Vietnam	327	0	278	0.00	275,000	2,828
Burma/Myanmar	206	6	43	2.91	21,593	397
Brunei	141	2	137	1.42	18,648	42,665
Cambodia	124	0	122	0.00	18,392	1,102
Timor Leste	24	0	24	0.00	1,290	980
Laos	19	0	16	0.00	5,938	817
Papua New Guinea	8	0	8	0.00	2,402	269
Southeast Asia	83,309	2,580	36,495	1.66	2,167,125	131,674
World	5.794M	357.5K	2.5M	6.25		

Source: <https://www.covid19projections.com/> (data from Johns Hopkins University) and <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/#countries>

Concerns have been raised about the state of human rights in Southeast Asia during COVID-19 times.²³ Troubling patterns include (1) “reduced preparedness” due “to poor leadership and governance” thus putting lives of citizens at greater-than-necessary risk,” (2) weaponizing COVID-19 and using the pandemic as “an opportunity to crack down on dissenters and restrict fundamental freedoms” and deepen authoritarian rule, and (3) using the crisis “as an excuse to amass power.”

The response from the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been muted and devoid of any concrete, unified, and coordinated response. Other than an online conference of Foreign Ministers in early April 2020 which approved the establishment of a still-to-be-realized COVID-19 Response Fund there has been no high-level concerted effort that belies the regional grouping’s projected image of a unified and people-caring ASEAN.²⁴ Later it was revealed that the response fund would have to be accessed through loans from external donors like China, Japan, and South Korea.

In a Blackbox survey of citizens’ sentiments in 23 countries covering 12,592 respondents as to how their leaders in government, business, community, and media have responded to the COVID-19 crisis, only seven were rated favorably. Six Southeast Asian countries were covered by the survey—Vietnam, Malaysia, Philippines, Indonesia, Singapore, and Thailand

²³ 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>.

²⁴ 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/>.

(See Table 2).²⁵ Of the six, Vietnam and Malaysia were favorably assessed with cumulative scores of 77 percent and 58 percent respectively. The four others scored unfavorable cumulative ratings of below 50 percent thus: Philippines, 49 percent; Indonesia, 48 percent; Singapore, 48 percent; and Thailand, 36 percent.

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

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

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

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 2020²⁶

²⁵ Blackbox, “The World in Crisis: A Global Public Opinion Survey Across 23 Countries (Summary Report),” May 2020, <https://blackbox.com.sg/everyone/2020/05/06/most-countries-covid-19-responses-rated-poorly-by-own-citizens-in-first-of-its-kind-global-survey>. Thanks to Filomeno Sta Ana III for pointing out this survey in his May 24, 2020 column in *Business World*.

²⁶ According to the Singapore-based Blackbox Research, it “carried out an online nationally representative survey of n = 12,592 across 23 countries, aged between 18 to 80. Quotas were applied for gender, age and socio-economic criteria, including education and household type, to ensure representative coverage. The statistical margin of error for the study is 3-6 per cent. The survey was conducted between 3 April to 19 April.” Ibid.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

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

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

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

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

All over Southeast Asia, those involved in the informal sector economy have received the least support, if at all. And as the pandemic continues, government funds are soon expected to run out—raising the possibility of widespread famine and hunger among the poor and economically disadvantaged. Donations from some private sectors have been coming in, partially making up for government inadequacies. For instance, a May 2020 survey by the

Social Weather Stations (SWS) reveals that the number of Filipino families who experienced involuntary hunger in the three months of the COVID-19 crisis reached 4.2 million (16.7 percent) which was double the number in December 2019.²⁷ Other mitigating measures by national governments include tax breaks and suspension of interest payments on loans, but it is too early to tell whether these are well implemented and benefit those who need them the most. In some areas, emergency short-time employment was initiated by government but was limited and scarce.

With information and communication almost completely reliant on the Internet and social media, those with inadequate or no access to these technologies have been further disadvantaged. This infringes on the right to timely and accurate information that would properly guide the peoples' responses to the pandemic. Online information, however, has to be filtered carefully as health-related "fake news" have also proliferated.

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

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

Among indigenous peoples (IPs), while their food needs are met by their own home-grown farm products as well as through hunting and gathering, they sometimes suffer discrimination from lowlanders who accuse them of being disease carriers because of their unique diet, e.g., wild animals such as bats. In ancestral lands that are closely monitored by security forces, some IP communities have been prevented from gathering food, medicine, and firewood. Other IPs have also been stranded in lowland areas due to the lockdown. Those who have been relocated away from their ancestral lands due to peace and order concerns or as migrant workers face even more difficult situations. A positive development, however, is the continuation or revival of ancient and traditional farming practices that are

²⁷ "SWS: Number of hungry families doubled to 4.2M," *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, May 23, 2020, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1279666/sws-number-of-hungry-families-doubled-to-4-2m>.

environmentally friendly and coupled with community-bonding and unifying cultural practices.

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

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

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

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

It is apparent from both the initial 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 engage in hit and miss, poorly thought, and highly inadequate efforts to contain the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and "flatten the curve." On the other hand, it would also appear from the above report that, although preliminary, and despite pressing challenges and difficult hurdles, the communities and sectors that have seemingly weathered the worst and have coped with the less than ideal situation and have been more resilient are those who are organized and/or have instilled within themselves the core values of solidarity, community, self-help, and cooperation. #