

# **COVID-19: Impact on Inequalities in Asia**

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**Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP)** supports people in their struggles for justice and brings individuals and organisations together to challenge the institutions and processes that perpetuate poverty and inequalities. GCAP defends and promotes human rights, gender justice, social justice, climate justice and the security needed for the dignity and peace of all.

GCAP is a network of over 11,000 civil society organisations (CSOs) organized in 58 National Coalitions and in constituency groups of women, youth and people discriminated by work and descent, among others. GCAP works closely with other civil society organisations in engaging the United Nations and governments in pursuit of the

Agenda 2030 and the SDGs. It provides a global platform to give voices to people who are living in poverty and inequality through its Faces of Inequality Campaign.

*Authors' Notes:*

*This study was initially drafted by Malay and Baiksah for presentation in the Kathmandu Democracy Forum held virtually on November 4-6, 2020 with support from the Asia Democracy Network. It was subsequently updated and presented by Malay for the Tokyo Democracy Forum held on February 16, 2021 with support from Japan NGO Center for International Cooperation (JANIC). The authors wish to thank the organisers of both forums for the opportunity to document the Impacts of Inequality in Asia. We hope that the advocacy and campaign on fighting inequalities will gain more attention and prompt policy makers to adopt the systemic reforms needed to change the lives of those who are left behind in the path towards sustainable development.*

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## **1. Executive Summary**

Even though 80 per cent of the extreme poor in Asia Pacific were lifted of poverty by 2015, rising inequality remains a great cause of concern. With a high number of informal labourers, 60 percent of the Asian population are not covered by any social protection and 40 percent have no access to healthcare. The COVID 19 pandemic has worsened the situation in the region, increasing the damage on lives and livelihoods. Governments are struggling to provide emergency health care for COVID 19 testing, tracing and treatments.

During the lockdowns in the early months of 2020, the informal sector and the most marginalised groups have suffered the most. These populations are mostly located in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas, vulnerable sectors such as children and orphans, LGBTQI, persons discriminated based on work and descent, sex workers, homeless persons, migrant workers, small and marginal farmers, daily wage workers in the urban areas – the list goes on.

Various agencies like the International Monetary Fund have projected the slump in growth or even negative growth for the countries in the region. In South Asia job losses and decreased opportunities for livelihood will likely push 132 million people to extreme poverty.

Income insecurity is closely associated with food security and hunger. Several cases of hunger have already been reported in South Asia, gravely affecting people's overall health and vulnerability. In South Asia, gaps in the public health infrastructure pose serious challenges to the governments to handle COVID 19 testing, contact tracing and treatment.

All over Asia, the pandemic lockdowns have also resulted in the rise in gender-based violence and the burden of increased unpaid work for women.

While the pandemic has brazenly exposed the various faces of inequality, new challenges have emerged in relation to peace and human rights.

With regard to the attainment of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), South Asia initially made some progress but the pandemic, has since reversed the trend. In the Southeast Asia is likewise expected to slip off its SDG targets with the outbreak of cases.

On the front of income inequality during the pandemic, on one hand when about 500 million more people could be pushed into poverty globally as a result of the pandemic and the economic downturn, there are trends of biggest companies profiteering at the

same time. The major tech firms expected to make 46 billion USD more profit in 2020 than before the pandemic. Most of the profit is paid to their shareholders – while taxes are avoided. The picture in Asia Pacific can be imagined in comparison.

The causes of inequality among the rich and poor countries are also rooted in the extortionist debt system in the World. For example, over US\$300 billion is being spent annually by the Global South for public external debt payments to bilateral and multilateral lenders such as the World Bank and IMF, private banks, speculators, and investors in government bonds and securities.

As immediate measures, most affected countries in Asia Pacific provided subsidies for testing and treatment of the disease. They announced packages for revival of economy including the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) through providing tax-exemptions and subsidies. Despite several measures undertaken by the governments, the fact remained that hunger, discrimination and exclusion were widely reported in some countries, mainly in South Asia. Across the region the governments have invoked emergency clauses during the pandemic to curtail freedom of association and limit other human rights. Due to restrictions on media, facts could not come out clearly. But there is a prevailing sense that many governments under-reported the COVID cases across the regions. Several countries provided cash support, but there were issues of exclusion and sufficiency.

On to 2021, the quick development and massive manufacturing of vaccines give hope for countries to recover. Whilst the vaccines are universally acknowledged to be a global good and should be universally distributed, inequality in access and distribution has become a major issue. Rich countries have cornered the deals, while the poor countries that could barely afford to contain any outbreak of the virus, have been left with minimal allocations. The economic system that controls patents and intellectual properties is once again contested as the WTO rules on TRIPS enforce restrictions on these essential medical products. Vaccinating the people would have given them the badly-needed shield against the spread of COVID, and restart economic activities with a considerable amount of confidence, accompanying safety protocols.

At the global level a coalition of over 400 CSOs working on human rights and sustainable development issued a 12-point demand charter asking for just recovery that tackles the interlinked challenges of providing universal healthcare, reducing inequalities and guaranteeing human rights; alongside the critical need to re-think our economies in response to the parallel crises of climate change and biodiversity.

At national level, during the lockdown CSOs distributed food packets to vulnerable people, issued statements and found new sources to support the people working in informal sectors and monitored the government relief services.

It is necessary for the governments to make financial and policy commitments with a human rights based approach with clear social and environmental conditions. Its time to take progressive measures to bridge income inequality among the poor and rich by tax justice, fully operational social protection systems etc. and take long term policy measures towards sustainability and environmental protection keeping the objectives of Agenda 2030 and Paris Climate deal in mind.

## **2. Abbreviations and Acronyms**

ASEAN	Association of South East Asian Nations
Action4SD	Action for Sustainable Development
CNICs	Computerized National Identity Cards
COVAX	COVID 19 Vaccines Global Access
CSOs	Civil Society Organisations
DWD	Discrimination Based on Work and Descent
ESCAP	Economic and Social Commission for Asia and Pacific
FNJ	Federation of Nepalese Journalists
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GCAP	Global Call to Action Against Poverty
HLPF	High Level Political Forum
IMF	International Monetary Fund
JANIC	Japan NGO Center for International Cooperation
LGBTQI	Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer & Intersex
MSMEs	Micro, small and medium enterprises
NBA	Nepal Bar Association
NCPCR	National Commission for Protection of Child Rights, India
NHRC	National or State Human Rights Commissions
PPE	Personal Protective Equipment
SAARC	South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SHRCs	State Human Rights Commissions
SMEs	Small and Medium Enterprises
SWOT	Strength, Weakness, Opportunity and Threat
TRIPS	Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights
VNR	Voluntary National Review
WHO	World Health Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization

### **3. Introduction**

In spite of poverty reduction efforts since the late 1990's, inequalities continue to rise all over the world. The gap between the incomes of the rich and poor have increased in many Asian countries. The SDGs are far from being met, let alone SDG 10 on reducing inequality does not even have a standard income inequality indicator, in spite of a good number of measures of income and technology diffusion.

Democracy and inequality reinforce each other. Inequalities hinder political participation in decision-making and gaining access to basic services. The very fact that inequality in all its forms is rising means that wealth and access to resources are not democratised.

COVID revealed the pre-existing inequalities and exacerbated these inequalities for the poor and the marginalised. Women and girls are heavily impacted as cases of violence against them have risen in many countries, as a result of lockdowns imposed as safety measures to prevent transmission. Achieving gender equality (SDG 5) is a central consideration to policy-making under and post-COVID.

Those who are left behind before COVID are all the more left behind under COVID, and recovery is a very important task that cannot be left to government alone. Social cohesion is needed in order to surmount the widespread impacts of the pandemic.

#### Defining Inequality<sup>1</sup>:

Inequality can be defined as the difference in social status, wealth or opportunity between people or groups. In broad categories, there are three different types of inequality:

- Inequality of outcomes due to income and wealth disparities: The most widely known measure of income and equality is the Gini Coefficient, named after Italian statistician Corrado Gini, which aggregates income gaps in one measure from 0-1. Simply put, if all of the income in one group of people goes to one person, the coefficient is 1, and if all people in the same group have the same income, the coefficient is 0.

Data from 1990-1994 and 2010-2014 in the ESCAP study show that the changes in gross or market income (without taxes and cash transfers) show a mixed picture, where several countries like China, Indonesia, Bangladesh and India have increased inequality while other countries like Maldives, Kyrgyzstan, Azerbaijan and Georgia sharply declined. <sup>2</sup>

Net income inequality figures for five countries in the OECD database – China, India, Republic of Korea, Russian Federation and Turkey show that the average Gini coefficient was 41.7 compared with 46.2 for gross income, showing the important role of fiscal policies for income redistribution.<sup>2</sup>

SDG 10 aims at “Reduce inequality within and among countries” and target 10.1 states, “By 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40% of the population at a rate higher than the national average.”

If we look at the trends in consumption inequality between the early 1990s and early 2000s, we will find that the average consumption of the bottom 40% over the average consumption for the whole population in Asia’s most populous countries – China, Indonesia, and India – declined from 50.3% to 48%. In China and India, inequality increased in urban areas, while in Indonesia, inequality rose more sharply in rural areas.<sup>3</sup>

- Inequality of opportunity – unequal access to fundamental rights and services: Target 10.3 of SDG 10 states, “Ensure equal opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practises and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and action.”

While many of the rights are enshrined in various declarations, conventions and treaties of the UN, not everyone has equal access to clean water and sanitation, nutritious food, quality health care, or decent work. These opportunities are accessible to people who have the resources, education, training, and capabilities that poor and marginalised people do not have. Lower level and low quality education deprive people of the potential to earn higher income and improve their lives.

- Inequality of impact – asymmetric impacts of external shocks such as disasters and environmental damage: Users of inefficient fuels are poor communities who cannot afford the cost of electricity and are exposed daily to air pollution. Links between the impact of pollution and poor ambient air quality on health are well established. This can lead to lower earning potential and even premature deaths. Most poor communities whether in urban or rural areas, face higher vulnerability to natural disasters such as typhoons, floods, heat waves, and other hazards.

## **4. Data and Trends about COVID-19**

### **Basic facts and figures about Inequality in Asia and the World<sup>4</sup>**

- The gap between the super-rich and the rest of society remains unimaginably high.
- In 2019, the world's billionaires, only 2,153 people, have more wealth than 4.6 billion people.
- 22 richest men have more wealth than all the women in Africa
- The world's richest 1% have more than twice as much wealth as 6.9 billion people.
- The monetary value of women's unpaid care work globally for women aged 15 and over is at least \$10.8 trillion annually – three times the size of the world's tech industry.
- Taxing an additional 0.5% of the wealth of the richest 1% over the next 10 years is equal to investments needed to create 117 million jobs in education, health and elderly care and other sectors, and to close care deficits.
- If you saved \$10,000 a day since the building of the pyramids in Egypt you would have one-fifth the average fortune of the 5 richest billionaires.
- If everyone were to sit on their wealth piled up in \$100 bills, most of humanity would be sitting on the floor. A middle-class person in a rich country would be sitting at the height of a chair. The world's two richest men would be sitting in outer space.
- It is estimated that 500 million more people could be pushed into poverty as a result of the COVID – 19 pandemic and the economic downturn that it has exceedingly exacerbated.
- Governments in many countries are unable to support their people due to debt payments. Over US\$300 billion is being spent annually by the Global South for Public External Debt payments to bilateral and multilateral lenders such as the World Bank and IMF, private banks, speculators, and investors in government bonds and securities. The debt problem is compounded by illicit financial flows, also in the billions of dollars.

## 5. Chronology from 31 December 2019 to 16 February 2021

<b>Date</b>	<b>Global Event</b>
2019 Dec. 31	China – 27 cases suspicious of COVID-19 in Wuhan, China discovered and reported
2020	
Jan. 9	China – First death in Wuhan, China
Jan. 11	China – The first group of 41 confirmed cases in Wuhan, China
Jan. 14	Thailand – First confirmed case in Thailand outside China (Chinese woman from Wuhan, China, 61)
Jan. 16	Japan – First confirmed case in Japan (Chinese man from Wuhan, China, 30s)
Jan. 20	South Korea – First confirmed case in South Korea (Chinese woman from Wuhan, 35)
Jan. 21	USA – First confirmed case in North America (USA)
Jan. 23	China, Wuhan total lockdown
Jan. 24	France – First confirmed case in Europe (France)
Jan. 30	WHO declares “Public Health Emergency of International Concern (PHEIC)”
Jan. 31	Italy – first confirmed cases (Chinese couple, 60s)
Jan. 31	Italy declares state of emergency
Feb. 1	Philippines – First confirmed death in the Philippines outside China (Chinese man from Wuhan, 44)
Feb. 15	France – first death in Europe (Chinese man, 80)
Feb. 21	Italy – first death (Italian man, 78)
March 9	Italy national lockdown imposed
March 11	WHO Declares Pandemic
March 13	USA declares state of emergency
March 14	Spain declares state of emergency
March 18	Portugal declares state of emergency
Mar 22	France declares state of health emergency
Mar 26	G20 Virtual Extraordinary Summit on COVID-19
April 3	Global – 1 million confirmed cases
April 3	Global – 50,000 <sup>th</sup> confirmed deaths
April 6	China – Wuhan declared the end of lockdown
April 7	Japan declares the State of Emergency
April 11	Global – 100,000 <sup>th</sup> confirmed death
April 14	ASEAN+3 Summit on COVID-19 – virtual
April 15	South Korea – National Elections
May 5	China-India skirmishes at the border
May 18-19	WHO World Health Assembly online
May 20	Global – 5 million confirmed cases
May 20	UN 6 <sup>th</sup> Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (Virtual)
June 28	Global – 10 million confirmed cases
July 7-16	UN HLPF on Sustainable Development (virtual)



July 14	Phase I/II clinical trials of Moderna vaccines
Aug. 5	Sri Lanka – Parliamentary elections
Aug. 11	Global – 20 million confirmed cases
Aug. 12	Phase I/II clinical trials for Pfizer vaccine
Aug. 27	Japan, PM Shinzo Abe resigns
Sept. 15	UN General Assembly (75 <sup>th</sup> session) open (virtual)
Sept. 18	Global – 30 million confirmed cases
Sept. 28	India 6 million confirmed cases
Sept. 29	Global – One million deaths
Sept. 30	India 0.1 million deaths
Nov. 3	USA – Presidential Election
Nov. 4-6	Kathmandu Democracy Forum (KMDF)
January- March 2021	Initial Rollouts of the COVID Vaccines
Feb. 16	Tokyo Democracy Forum

## **6. Impact of COVID-19 on people in particular vulnerable groups with reference to SDGs and human rights**

Despite the adoption of the Agenda 2030 five years before, the wealth inequality has risen across the globe. Asia region is no exception. The situation of democracy and state of human rights is no better.

Even though 80 per cent of extreme poor in Asia Pacific were lifted of poverty by 2015 in Asia and Pacific, rising inequality remains a great cause of concern. High level of informalisation of labour is a worrying trend. 60% are not covered by any social protection and 40 per cent have no access to healthcare. The COVID 19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation in the region<sup>5</sup>.

The pandemic has brought in an unprecedented challenge to the society and the governments.

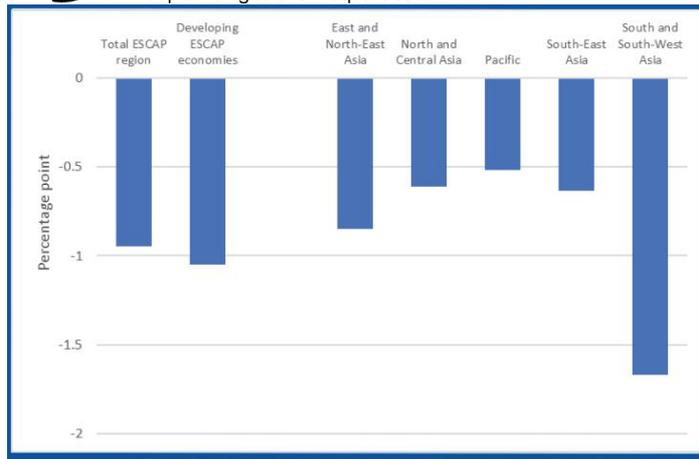
Initial response of the governments were to contain the spread of virus through lockdowns, quarantines, travel restrictions, which immediately halted almost all economic activities. Due to the restrictions, people's employment and livelihoods were affected, resulting to huge income losses and increased poverty amongst the poor. The twin tasks of tackling the disease and supporting the livelihood of people posed a major challenge to the governments. Many countries with poorly-funded and inadequate health systems and infrastructure have not been able to cope with the pandemic.

The stark reality is that people are facing difficulties in several ways. There has been disproportionate impact of the pandemic on vulnerable groups like the workers in the informal sector. The crisis is pushing them back to poverty and unemployment<sup>6</sup>. Their livelihood is gone. Several governments have undertaken measures to support the poor people. But in cases they have not been proved to be enough.

Inequality has shown its ugliest face. Access to justice is denied, as most of the justice delivery institutions are not functioning properly. Achievement of the SDGs is now a far cry. In many states there have been weakening of the institutions in face of the unseen challenges. Migrants' rights are violated. They have been left in a lurch.

There has been impact on the GDP growth.

i. A figure is provided below<sup>6</sup> by ESCAP estimates. (The GDP growth differences are based on GDP growth forecasts on 27 November 2019 and 10 March 2020.)



ii. The growth projections of IMF<sup>7</sup> given on October 3, 2020 is seen below:

## Latest World Economic Outlook Growth Projections

(real GDP, annual percent change)	PROJECTIONS		
	2019	2020	2021
<b>World Output</b>	2.8	-4.4	5.2
<b>Advanced Economies</b>	1.7	-5.8	3.9
United States	2.2	-4.3	3.1
Euro Area	1.3	-8.3	5.2
Germany	0.6	-6.0	4.2
France	1.5	-9.8	6.0
Italy	0.3	-10.6	5.2
Spain	2.0	-12.8	7.2
Japan	0.7	-5.3	2.3
United Kingdom	1.5	-9.8	5.9
Canada	1.7	-7.1	5.2
Other Advanced Economies	1.7	-3.8	3.6
<b>Emerging Markets and Developing Economies</b>	3.7	-3.3	6.0
<b>Emerging and Developing Asia</b>	5.5	-1.7	8.0
China	6.1	1.9	8.2
India	4.2	-10.3	8.8
ASEAN-5	4.9	-3.4	6.2
<b>Emerging and Developing Europe</b>	2.1	-4.6	3.9
Russia	1.3	-4.1	2.8
<b>Latin America and the Caribbean</b>	0.0	-8.1	3.6
Brazil	1.1	-5.8	2.8
Mexico	-0.3	-9.0	3.5
<b>Middle East and Central Asia</b>	1.4	-4.1	3.0
Saudi Arabia	0.3	-5.4	3.1
<b>Sub-Saharan Africa</b>	3.2	-3.0	3.1
Nigeria	2.2	-4.3	1.7
South Africa	0.2	-8.0	3.0
<b>Low-Income Developing Countries</b>	5.3	-1.2	4.9

Source: IMF, World Economic Outlook, October 2020

For India, data and forecasts are presented on a fiscal year basis, with FY 2020/21 starting in April 2020. India's growth is -8.6 percent in 2020 and 6.8 percent in 2021 based on the calendar year.

## **Impact on most vulnerable community across the region – the faces of inequality:**

The Leave No One behind slogan is far more important now than ever before in the face of the impact of the pandemic. This is the time, which exemplifies the “Survival of the fittest”. When the government systems are fast crumbling in providing basic health care, key social protection to feed its people and when the informal sector is nailed, it is the most marginalised groups, which has suffered the most. The groups like the women, persons with disabilities, old people, single mother, pregnant woman, indigenous communities, people living in geographically inaccessible areas, orphan, LGBTQI, Children, persons belonging to DWD (discrimination based on work and descent) communities, sex worker, beggar, homeless, small and marginal farmers, daily wage worker in the urban areas and so on.

The regional specific impacts are discussed below:

### **Impact in South Asia region:**

South Asia has approximately one fourth of the World’s population but one third of World’s poor. The job loss and loss of livelihood opportunities due to the pandemic is likely to push 132 million people into extreme poverty and accentuate inequalities

It is going to reverse the gains made for last several years in the regions on poverty reduction. Gaps in the public health infrastructure posed serious challenges to the governments to attend the pandemic in terms of testing and treatment.

The shutdowns due to the pandemic brought the economic activities to a standstill which is likely to push the growth estimate to -2.7%<sup>7</sup>. While this will have severe impact on the income of people in general, the pinch on the people on the margins will be disproportionate. There has been a collapse of the micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs) that form the backbone in the region pushing the lower strata of society to further impoverishment. There has been labour shortage, supply chain disruption etc. This would push such category of people into a the vicious cycle of poverty as the economic activities continue to be sluggish even after lockdowns and shutdowns have been relaxed, thus widening the gap between the poor and rich in the countries.

The internal migrant workers work in informal sector, which have also faced the job loss and bleak future. Restrictions on the international trade have affected the export-oriented sectors like leather; footwear, shrimp, etc. and the tourism sector have taken a severe beating<sup>8</sup>. International migrant workers have also lost their jobs and faced unemployment after coming back to their countries. Nepal, a predominantly a remittance-based economy with 30% of GDP supported by its overseas workers, have been severely affected. The local governments in Nepal are running resource-crunched

and thus are facing a tough time in providing service to the people. Reduction in remittance has also severely affected Bangladesh, Pakistan and Sri Lanka in South Asia, and the Philippines, and Indonesia in Southeast Asia. Though a comparative study is yet to come, it can be imagined that the countries whose economy are remittance dependent, are more affected than others. This increases the inequality among the countries.

In terms of social inequalities, women, persons with disabilities and the old people have been major sufferers<sup>8</sup>. The latter category of people who need constant attention and service faced issues of isolation and negligence. Demand for the unpaid work increased bearing more burdens on women and the time has witnessed rise in gender-based violence.

The income insecurity is closely associated with food security and hunger. Several cases of hunger are reported from the region, especially that of the children<sup>9</sup>. This will also exacerbate the health condition of the poor people in the region.

On SDGs, the region had started making some progress, but with the pandemic, that has been reversed.

### **Impact in the South East Asia region:**

The impact of the virus has impacted less to the South East region in comparison to the other regions. This could be due to the fact that the region had already coped with the SARS crisis in 2003 and the experience helped this time<sup>10</sup>. However, it has inflicted misery on people, more so on the disadvantaged groups. New challenges have emerged in relation to peace and human rights<sup>11</sup>.

The region was off-track in achieving the SDGs before the pandemic. The region has witnessed high growth, which has unfortunately been associated with high levels of inequality, low on social protection and peace, security accompanied by ecological damage. However on the health front, (SDG 3), most of these countries have developed capacity to public health emergencies<sup>12</sup>. However, the WHO's universal health coverage index suggests that much more progress is needed in more than half of the countries in the region which have weak health system.

During the COVID pandemic, all countries were not at par on testing capacities. In Philippines, for example, mass testing was not possible till June-July 2020. Procuring the Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs) was also challenging in the region owing to the restrictions in movements<sup>13</sup>. It nevertheless, was quick in developing technological tools, often developed locally to address the pandemic, e.g. in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

61 million people in this region are undernourished. The pandemic may have increased this number. While food supply have been good, the access to the diverse and nutritious food for the poor people is less due to reduced income. As during the lockdowns, food in the high priced super markets were available but not the low priced vendors, which were closed<sup>14</sup>.

There are over 18 million migrants workers outside their country of origin in SE Asia. Migrants in general, the low-skilled on in particular, undocumented and temporary migrants have been most vulnerable due to the cramped living condition limiting physical distancing norms and income loss. Many are excluded from getting treatment. Non-residents have been unfairly blamed for spreading the virus. They have faced violence and discriminatory practices<sup>15</sup>.

The pandemic threatens to affect the livelihoods of South- East Asia's 218 million informal workers, who represent anywhere between 51 and 90 per cent of the national non-agricultural workforces in countries of the sub-region<sup>16</sup>.

The fewer women than men in the region are receiving information on preparedness to cope up with the pandemic. Healthcare access for the pregnant women and women with infants have been affected. In terms of income, the sectors, which have more women concentration like tourism, hospitality sector etc have been the hardest hit leading to their job loss. Due to the loss of income of the lower strata of people may have led to the rise in the income inequality in the society. And as universal phenomenon, the unpaid care work done by women has been multiplied during the lockdown like care to the children and elderly. Across Asia and Pacific gender based violence has increased during the pandemic<sup>17</sup>.

### **Some cases from different countries:**

#### **a. Health system in Afghanistan affected by conflicts:**

The government system to tackle the COVID pandemic is not well equipped. The healthcare professional and facilities have been facing the wrath of Taliban, the armed groups (SDG 16). And that is a key barrier to provision of the basic healthcare.<sup>18</sup> And the pandemic has not deterred these groups to continue targeting the health workers and facilities<sup>19</sup>.

The out of pocket expenses in Afghanistan in the health sector is as high as 73.3 per cent. This is where the poor gets to suffer the most. During the pandemic the NGOs came to the fore to lead the treatment in Afghanistan.

The imposition of restrictions owing to the pandemic since March has forced the people into unemployment. As many as 15 million Afghans are vulnerable to livelihood losses due to the economic lockdown. These people earn their livelihood from small shops, street vending, daily labours and some personal services.<sup>20</sup> Poverty may increase from 54.5 to 72 per cent due to the impact of the pandemic. This has worsened the conditions of hunger and desperation to the poor and marginalised in the country.

**b. Digital illiteracy leads to exclusion of the most needy in Pakistan:**

Most vulnerable communities like transgender; people living with disabilities, older people and religious minorities and women headed families are suffered much more than others in Pakistan during the lockdown. A survey done by Pakistan Development Alliance found it. The religious minorities are also severely deprived of food and other relief items as charity organizations are instructed by the donors to give charity to Muslims<sup>21</sup>. Most of the marginalized groups are deprived to take the advantage of the “Ehsaas Cash Grants” of the government due to digital illiteracy. Most of them do not have Computerized National Identity Cards (CNICs), which is the medium to get the benefits. Even though some have these identity cards, they can hardly respond to mobile messages sent by the registration authorities due to illiteracy, according to the survey findings.

**c. Migrant workers on the road in India – serious human rights violations:**

In May 2020, a migrant woman gave birth to a child on the roadside while walking from Maharashtra province to her home in neighbouring Madhya Pradesh province. The lady and her family walked 150 kilometers after the delivery of the baby<sup>22</sup>. In May itself a train rammed over and killed 16 migrant workers in Aurangabad of Maharashtra province when they were exhausted and resting on the railway track while walking back to their homes<sup>23</sup>. These are some cases of serious human tragedy that the country witnessed.

The migrant issue showed serious human rights violations in the country. After the first lockdown imposed on March 25, 2020 there was huge exodus of the interstate migrant workers from cities like Delhi, Mumbai, and Pune etc. to their homes, who started walking as all transport services were shut down. Many such incidences as discussed above have happened with these interstate migrant workers in India. Despite governments' claim that food and ration were delivered to them in the cities of their work during the lockdown, the fact remains that many went hungry (SDG 2). As the lockdown continued, with no income, no food and no future, the migrant workers preferred walking back to their homes travelling a distance that is sometimes more than 1000 kilometers. Several migrant workers also went by cycles, by an auto rickshaw or by a truck. Many were exhausted and died en route. Many faced with accidents and the number went on counting each day. Media reports suggest that as many as 238 such

migrant workers died en route to their homes<sup>24</sup>. The exact figure is not known. The government in an answer to the question in the Parliament said it has no information on the same<sup>25</sup>.

The irony is the doors for justice (SDG 16) were completely shut for these people. Neither the Supreme Court, nor the statutory rights commissions like the National or State Women's Commissions, National or State Human Rights Commissions (NHRC or SHRCs), National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) rose up to the occasion to save these people from dying and suffering. Nevertheless, some High Courts were forthright to take up cases and seek answers from the government. Eventually in fact the above institutions became active.

The livelihood of 40 million migrant workers in India have been affected by the lockdown, said World Bank in April<sup>26</sup>. As the situation stands now, many people are jobless and have no foreseeable sources of income.

#### d. Concerns raised in Japan and Singapore:

Feedback from partners in Japan noted that some groups of people (e.g. gays, sex workers, or customer of the sex industry) are afraid about sharing their personal information which they fear may be made public and cause further stigma and discrimination, since are blamed for spreading the virus. For example, in the run up elections to the Tokyo metropolitan government in July 2020, the current Governor blamed the sex industry for the spread of COVID. In Singapore, the living condition is poor among more than 300,000 migrant workers, which is attributed to a second wave of infections.

#### **Income Inequality during the pandemic:**

On one hand when about 500 million more people could be pushed into poverty as a result of the pandemic and the economic downturn, there are trends of biggest companies profiteering at the same time. The GAFAM firms (Tech companies like Alphabet, Facebook and Amazon) and Microsoft are expected to make 46 billion USD more profit in 2020 than before the pandemic. Most of the profit is paid to their shareholders – while taxes are avoided<sup>27</sup>.

According to the Billionaires Insights Report 2020<sup>28</sup> published by UBS and PwC in October 2020, Asia and Pacific has highest number of super rich. Almost 40 percent of the richest people live in this region as of July 2020. 831 billionaires' wealth totals US\$3.23 trillion in the region. The irony is Asia Pacific region has exceeded the Americas (762 or 35%) and the Europeans, Middle Eastern and African billionaires (596 or 27%).

There are now 2,189 billionaires globally with a combined wealth of US\$10.2 trillion. Asia-Pacific retains its global position as “the engine of wealth growth”. China has the highest 415 billionaires, followed by India (114), Hong King (65) Taiwan (40) and Australia (39). The US is home to 636 billionaires.

From 2019 to the peak of the downturn in April 2020, Asian billionaire wealth were not affected too much – dropping by 2.1% only in comparison to 10.1% in Europe, Middle East and Africa and 7.4% in the Americas. This could be partly related to the region’s dominance in the key industries of technology and health care, which have surged in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic<sup>29</sup>.

According to report, in India, the billionaires’ net worth between April and July 2020 has increased by 35% to \$423 billion. And this mostly the lockdown period in India during the Pandemic! This has happened when 40 million internal migrants have been impacted by the lockdown<sup>30</sup>. To be fair to the super rich, at least nine billionaires donated \$541 million for COVID-19 related causes in the form of financial donations, manufactured goods and equipment, or other commitments<sup>31</sup>.

Oxfam in January 2021 showed the following graphics:<sup>32</sup>

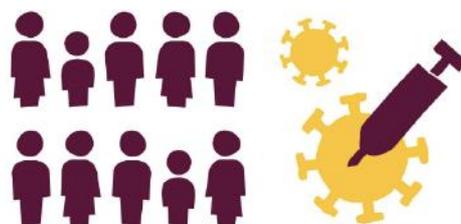
## THE INEQUALITY VIRUS

It took just **NINE MONTHS** for the fortunes of the top 1,000 billionaires to return to their pre-pandemic highs, while for the world’s poorest, recovery could take **MORE THAN A DECADE**.



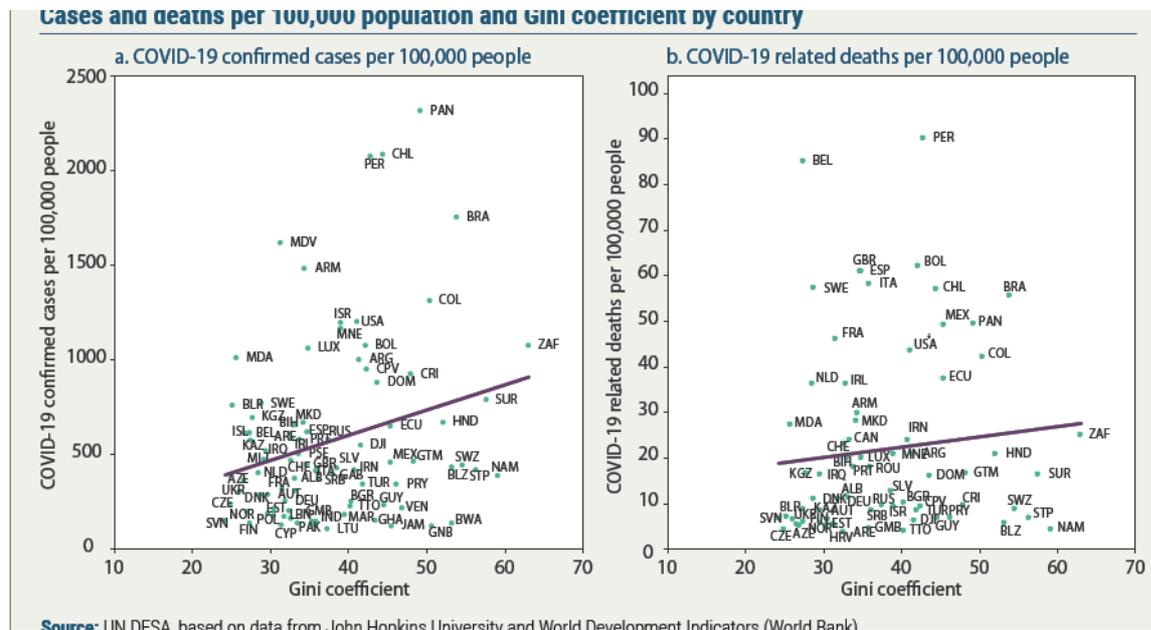
% change in top 1,000 billionaires' wealth (2020)

**THE INCREASE** in the wealth of the 10 richest billionaires since the crisis began **IS MORE THAN ENOUGH** to prevent anyone on Earth from falling into poverty because of the virus and to pay for a COVID-19 vaccine for all.



A preliminary study on the correlation between the Gini Coefficient (and Palma Ratio) of countries and the number of COVID cases by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) “....suggests that inequalities accelerate the transmission of the virus and thus contribute to a higher number of cases, which indirectly increases mortality. The statistical insignificance of poverty suggests that inequality possibly impacts COVID-19 cases mainly through differences in labour-market conditions, such as contact intensity of jobs and teleworking possibilities. In sum, preliminary research confirms that high levels of inequality mattered in the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic,

and that fighting inequality will remain critical for reducing vulnerability to health shocks and enhancing resilience of societies.”<sup>33</sup>



### Debt situation puts poor countries on back pedal:

The causes of inequality among the rich and poor countries are also rooted in the extortive debt system in the World. For example, over US\$300 billion is being spent annually by the Global South for Public External Debt payments to bilateral and multilateral lenders such as the World Bank and IMF, private banks, speculators, and investors in government bonds and securities<sup>34</sup>. The debt problem is compounded by illicit financial flows, also in the billions of dollars. Many African, Latin American and some Middle Eastern countries commonly pay more than 10% interest on their borrowings while richer nations can pay 1% or less<sup>35</sup>. And during the pandemic, the governments in many countries are unable to support their people due to debt payments.

The IMF has announced debt relief for 25 countries<sup>36</sup>. Civil society is now demanding debt cancellation to ensure that low and middle-income countries have resources to cope with the pandemic<sup>37</sup>.

Data show that the IMF has allocated total debt relief for 29 countries, totalling Special Drawing Rights of 351.53 million equivalent to USD 488.7 million. A glance at some Asian countries that received this relief is shown below:

<i>Country</i>	<i>Type of Emergency Financing</i>	<i>Amount Approved in SDR</i>	<i>Amount Approved in US\$<sup>2</sup></i>	<i>Date of Approval</i>
<a href="#">Bangladesh</a>	<a href="#">Rapid Credit Facility (RCF)</a>	SDR 177.77 million	US\$ 244 million <sup>3</sup>	May 29, 2020
	<a href="#">Rapid Financing Instrument (RFI)</a>	SDR 355.53 million	US\$ 488 million <sup>3</sup>	
<a href="#">Maldives</a>	<a href="#">Rapid Credit Facility (RCF)</a>	SDR 21.2 million	US\$ 28.9 million <sup>3</sup>	April 22, 2020
<a href="#">Mongolia</a>	<a href="#">Rapid Financing Instrument (RFI)</a>	SDR 72.3 million	US\$ 99 million <sup>3</sup>	June 3, 2020
<a href="#">Myanmar</a>	<a href="#">Rapid Financing Instrument (RFI)</a>	SDR 172.3 million	US\$ 237.7 million <sup>3</sup>	June 26, 2020
		SDR 86.1 million	US\$ 118.8 million <sup>3</sup>	June 26, 2020
	<a href="#">Rapid Credit Facility (RCF)</a>	SDR 172.3 million	US\$ 237.7 million <sup>3</sup>	January 12, 2021
	<a href="#">Rapid Credit Facility (RCF)</a>	SDR 86.1 million	US\$ 118.8 million <sup>3</sup>	January 12, 2021
<a href="#">Nepal</a>	<a href="#">Rapid Credit Facility (RCF)</a>	SDR 156.9 million	US\$ 214 million	May 6, 2020

As part of the COVID19-related rapid arrangements, borrowing countries have committed to undertake governance measures to promote accountable and transparent use of these resources.

### **Vaccine Inequality**

As many poor countries receive various forms of financial relief to help them recover from the economic slump, the hope for long-term recovery is pinned on the deployment

of vaccines. The relatively fast development of vaccines by scientists and big pharmaceuticals give a glimmer hope for all humanity that recovery is on its way, but issues of vaccine access have further arisen, once more laying bare the deep systemic inequalities between rich and poor countries.

In a video message on 28 January 2021, the head of the World Health Organization, Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus said,

*“We now face the real danger that even as vaccines bring hope to some, they become another brick in the wall of inequality. It’s right that all governments want to prioritize vaccinating their own health workers and older people first. But it’s not right that younger, healthier adults in rich countries are vaccinated before health workers and older people in poorer countries. Thirty-nine million doses of vaccine have now been administered in at least 49 higher income countries. Just 25 doses have been given in one lowest income country. Not 25 million, not 25 thousand, just 25. I need to be blunt. The world is on the brink of a catastrophic moral failure. And the price of this failure will be paid with lives and livelihoods in the world’s poorest countries.”*

The WHO and Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, among other philanthropists and wealthier nations, have put in place the Act-Accelerator Partnership which intends to make medical equipment and supplies like vaccines available to all, but funds have remained low and not enough to secure the needed amount of materials.

New York Times reports on Christmas Day 2020:

‘One element of the Act-Accelerator partnership, known as Covax, is meant to allow poor countries to buy vaccines at affordable prices, but it collides with the reality that production is both limited and controlled by profit-minded companies that are answerable to shareholders. “Most people in the world live in countries where they rely on Covax for access to vaccines,” said Mark Eccleston-Turner, an expert on international law and infectious diseases at Keele University in England. “That is an extraordinary market failure. Access to vaccines is not based on need. It’s based on the ability to pay, and Covax doesn’t fix that problem.”

On December 18, 2020, Covax leaders announced a deal with pharmaceutical companies aimed at providing low- and middle-income countries with nearly two billion doses of vaccines<sup>38</sup>. The arrangement, which centers on vaccine candidates that have not yet gained approval, would provide enough doses to vaccinate one-fifth of the populations in 190 participating countries by the end of next year.

India is home to pharmaceutical manufacturers that are producing vaccines for multinational companies including AstraZeneca, but its population is unlikely to be fully vaccinated before 2024, according to TS Lombard, an investment research firm in London. Its economy is likely to remain vulnerable.

Even if masses of people in poor countries do not gain access to vaccines, their economies are likely to receive some spillover benefits from wealthier nations’ return to normal. In a world shaped by inequality, growth can coincide with inequity.’<sup>39</sup>

In October 2020, India and South Africa called for the waiver of intellectual property rights at the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in which medical products and technologies including contact tracing applications, protective equipment, and vaccines fall under the TRIPS Agreement. This is an important step to allow the generic manufacturers of vaccines to acquire the technologies to produce the vaccines at the least cost to the government and distribute free to the people.

While the call for universal access to the vaccines are being made, rich countries have cornered the bulk of the supplies. Bloomberg reports in its vaccine tracker that Canada has ordered more than three times more vaccine than the size of its population, while countries Afghanistan, which faces a polio pandemic at the same time, has yet to secure its supplies from China and Russia.

As of January 21, 2021, ASEAN Briefing updates show us the following information on vaccine rollouts:

Country	Source	Rollout
Brunei	COVAX	Q1 2021
Indonesia	Sinovac	started 9million doses to frontliners
China	own vaccine	since 2020
Kazakhstan	"Quazcovid"	Q2 2021
Maldives	COVAX	Q2 2021
Mongolia	AstraZeneca, COVAX	Q2 2021
Nepal	COVAX, India	Q2 2021
Bangladesh	GAVI	Q1 2021
Singapore	Developing own "Lunar" vaccine	Q1 2021
VietNam	Medigen (Taiwan), +own vaccine	Q1 2021
Macau	COVAX	Q1 2021
South Korea	AstraZeneca, Pfizer, J&J	Q1 2021
Japan	US, UK	free Q1 2021
Philippines	Astra Zeneca donated by Business	2.6 million
Malaysia	Pfizer	12.8 million doses for free 2021 Q1
Thailand	AstraZeneca	Jun-21
Pakistan	free vaccine	Apr-21
Cambodia	China, Russia, Australia	
Laos	Trial Sputnik V, China	
Myanmar	GAVI, COVAX, Australia	
Afghanistan	China, Russia	
Timor Leste	GAVI	
Hong Kong		
India		
North Korea	China	
Sri Lanka	GAVI	
Taiwan	Developing own vaccine, COVAX	

## **7. Impact of COVID-19 on democracy and civic space**

Across the globe governments have invoked emergency clauses during the pandemic to curtail freedom of association and limit other human rights. While it is recognised under the International Human Rights Law to invoke restrictions during the pandemic like this, it's necessary that the restrictions meet international standards. While several protects which were taking place before the pandemic, several opted novel ways to continue their struggle for human rights and civic rights like online and solo protests. There are also case where people have come in masses violating the restrictive laws. In reality, several countries have overstepped their jurisdiction and curtailed the media freedom, freedom of expression and civic space to the extent, which fail the test of international standards<sup>40</sup>. The situation in Asia is also not very different from general global situation.

In South East Asia, for example, questions have been raised whether the emergency clauses invoked by the countries in the region meet the requirements of “necessity, proportionality, non-discrimination and adherence to international legal norms”. Vaguely worded provisions have potential to violate various freedoms and human rights. In some cases there are no guarantee that the emergency clause will go as soon as normalcy returns<sup>41</sup>.

The CIVICUS report published in October 2020, “Civic Freedom Under Threat during COVID-19 Pandemic”<sup>42</sup> brings forth various forms of violations of freedom – media and civic space, and the human rights. Some cases are discussed below.

Top broadcaster ABS-CBN was taken off air in May 2020 after its licence was not renewed by the Philippine Congress. Prominent Journalist Maria Ressa was convicted for Cyber Libel. In Cambodia, the state of emergency law passed in April empowered the executive to ban meetings and to close public and private spaces, including banning news and social media that it deems may generate unrest and public alarm. In Myanmar the Rohingyas, the Muslim community that faces serious human rights abuses, were extorted and harassed under the pretext of COVID response. Police and army have been reported to punish a woman for not wearing a mask, by doing sit-ups for 30 minutes. In India, the plight of uncounted migrant workers who walked down hundreds of kilometers during the lockdown prompted the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet calling for humane treatment to them. In India, several journalists have been arrested for being critical of the government in handling the pandemic<sup>43</sup>.

There is however some positive news regarding the elections during the pandemic. The Parliamentary election was held on August 5 in Sri Lanka during the Pandemic. It witnessed high voter turnout of 70% despite the fear of the Coronavirus. Though there

are some complaints of illegal activities, the election was broadly peaceful<sup>44</sup>. It showed the spirit of people and their trust in the democratic processes.

Similarly the national election was held in South Korea in April 2020 where 66.2 percent voter turnout, highest since the Parliamentary election in 1992. Such high voter participation is encouraging development for the democracy. The President Moon Jae in won the election, which is seen as an endorsement for his praiseworthy work in managing the COVID pandemic<sup>45</sup>.

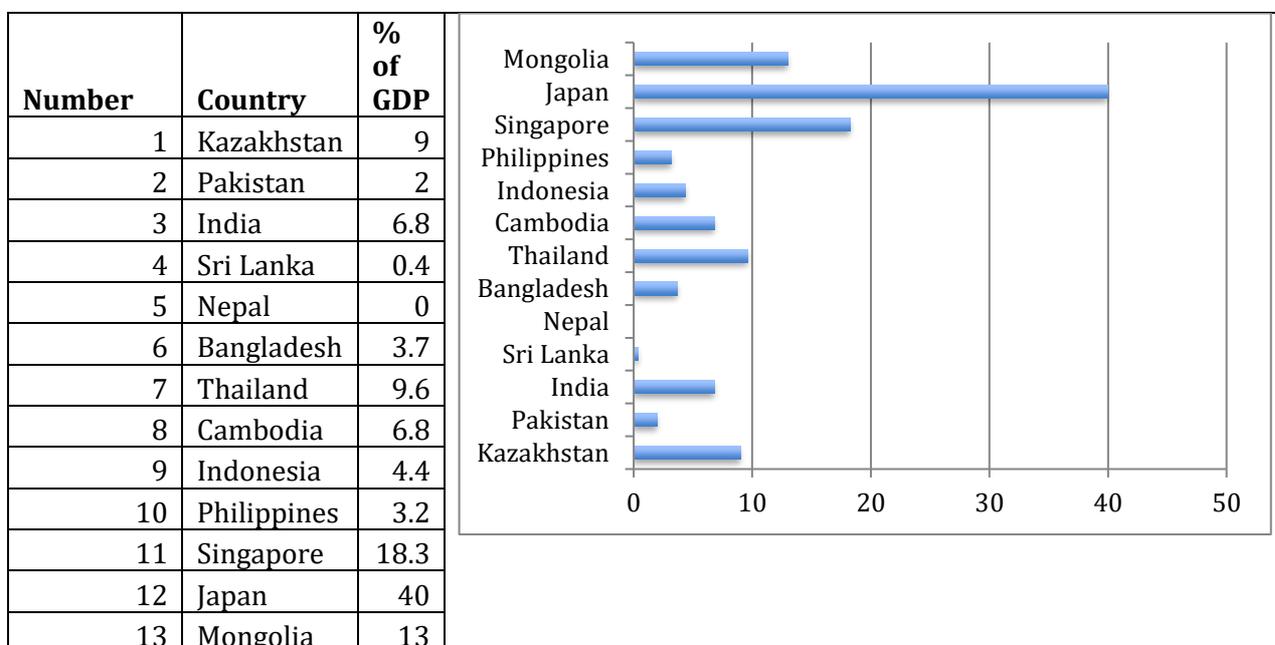
## 8. Government's responses to the COVID-19

Governments in Asia adopted immediate responses such as budget allocations and subsidies for testing, treatment, increased hospital capacity, and procurement of medical supplies. In some countries, the national and local governments provided incentive for securing public cooperation for quarantine endeavours<sup>46</sup>.

On the aspects of jobs and livelihood and majorly two types of efforts have been taken in the region. One is to support the small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to revive or continue their business by providing tax-exemptions and subsidies so that the employments do not dry down. On the other, the governments have offered employment insurances and cash transfers to maintain the consumption needs.<sup>47</sup>

China has supported the SMEs by waiving or delaying their social security contributions and delaying tax payments. Similarly in Japan, the government extended support to the SMEs by wage support and consulting services. Hong Kong, China and Singapore have subsidised some sectors like retail, food, transport and tourism, which involves the livelihood of low-income families<sup>48</sup>. Other countries like Cambodia, the Republic of Korea and Thailand have introduced such stimulus packages.

### Financial package<sup>49</sup> as percentage of GDP by various countries (As on 28/08/2020)



Source: <https://www.unescap.org/covid19/policy-responses>

### Response by South East Asian nations:

Countries like Singapore and Vietnam have undertaken early measures of recognising problem, communicating with the citizens, and taking mitigation effort. The governments of Singapore, Cambodia, Malaysia and Thailand have provided free testing and treatment for citizens and foreigners alike. Most of these countries have used technology to effectively do contact tracing.<sup>50</sup>

The Singapore government has given 3000 Singapore dollars as ‘Workfare’ assistance to low-income workers<sup>51</sup>. Food banks were set up by CSOs and private citizens to make food accessible to all.

**Response by the South Asian governments:**

**SDG progress in South Asia in 2019<sup>52</sup>:**



In an immediate response to the outbreak of Coronavirus, south Asian countries took several restrictive measures in forms of fully or partial lockdown such as asking to stay indoors except going out to purchasing essentials, closing international and interstate borders, closing religious places, travel ban, office shutdowns. . These aimed at checking the community transmission. Nepal and Afghanistan are among the countries with the highest stringency measures with a score of 93 and 84 respectively, followed by Bangladesh (82), Pakistan (80), India (79) and Sri Lanka (77)<sup>53</sup>.

Quick short-term fiscal support has been announced by the South Asian governments for allocating resources to the health sector, social assistance including cash and kind such as food and food vouchers. For the general public, the governments have deferred t payments on essential services and loans. For stability of the financial system in the times of economic recession due to the pandemic, the overall interest rate and reserve requirements have been reduced to under the monetary policies to ease liquidity situation<sup>54</sup>.

**Regional Cooperation:**

Regional cooperation can strengthen the collective position to fight the pandemic. The regional bodies have adopted some important measures to mitigate the impacts of COVID through greater cooperation.

SAARC (South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation) countries have created a COVID-19 emergency fund to mitigate the risks associated with the pandemic<sup>55</sup>. This was decided during the meeting of the SAARC heads of State on March 15. India announced a donation of \$10 million and the pool had \$21 million by April 10 with the contribution from other member countries: Maldives, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Afghanistan and Sri Lanka.

The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) organized multiple meetings and conferences in the areas of health, economic and security areas in wake of the spread of Coronavirus. It called the countries for using technology to mitigate the economic impact of the pandemic. Through proactive measures for border controls and tracing the member countries have enhanced their regional preparedness and adopted suitable mitigation strategies to cope with the pandemic. Countries like Vietnam, Cambodia, and Lao PDR performed quite well in checking the spread of the virus. It, as a region, has relatively done better in coordinating a joint response to the pandemic and connecting with partners and international organizations in comparison to other regions like European Union or countries like America, Brazil, and Russia etc.<sup>56</sup>

## **9. Assessment of various governments' response to the COVID-19**

Despite several measures undertaken by the governments, the fact remained that hunger, discrimination and exclusion were widely reported in some countries, mainly in South Asia. Due to restrictions on media, facts could not come out clearly. But there is a prevailing sense that many governments under-reported the COVID cases across the regions. Several countries provided cash support, but there were issues of exclusion and sufficiency.

In the Philippines the emergency fund has been set aside for the purchase of medical supplies such as PPEs (Personal Protection Equipment) for health care workers, setting up emergency response and intensive care infrastructure in public hospitals, etc. The government however is not transparent in the use of the funds. There exists on paper, a national action plan (NAP), but the leadership to execute the plan has been severely inadequate. The Inter-Agency Task Force in charge of the pandemic is led by and composed mainly of ex-military personnel and is not strongly guided by medical professionals and scientists. In the implementation of the lockdowns and mobility restrictions, they have been proven to adopt extreme measures to punish people violating the new norms.

In India despite widespread demands from economists and opposition parties for immediate cash transfer amounting to \$70 -\$100 to the needy, especially the displaced migrant workers, the government did not budge. That would have prevented the migrant workers to walk back their homes in large numbers for hundreds of kilometers. The two financial packages announced - \$22.6 billion<sup>57</sup> on March 27 and another of \$265 billion<sup>58</sup> in May 2020 hardly gave sufficient cash in hand for the migrants.

Dalits (community discriminated based on caste) in India, Nepal and other South Asian countries continued to face discrimination during service delivery by government machineries to them during and after the lockdown.

The farmers faced huge problem in selling their produce due to restrictions in movement. The governments could hardly address to protecting the farmers produce and income. In Nepal, the farmers had to throw away unsold spoilt milk, tomatoes and other produce in spite of increasing incidence of hunger.

Conflict has affected the delivery of services in the region. Several Southeast Asian countries are affected by long-running conflicts. In Myanmar the conflict between military and ethnic armed groups continued, though later owing to the call from the UN Secretary general, ceasefire were announced by the Armed Forces.<sup>59</sup> Approximately 130,000 internally displaced persons from different communities are confined in relief

camps. More than 800,000 people, mostly people from the Rohingya community who were forced to flee in 2017 are refugees in Bangladesh. These people are facing difficulties in getting the humanitarian aid<sup>60</sup>.

Illicit trafficking and organized crime in the South East Asia appear not to have been much affected by lockdowns and movement restrictions. There has been no decrease observed in drug production and trafficking<sup>61</sup>.

In South Asia, border confrontation continues between China and India on one hand and cross border firing between India and Pakistan on the other. This has undermined the focus of the governments to deal with the pandemic.

Persons staying in overcrowded prisons and detention centers have issues of social distancing and treatment. Some governments have taken steps to reduce overcrowding through early release schemes and other alternatives to detention<sup>62</sup>.

Many countries in South East Asia and elsewhere have used digital technology to track the spread of COVID. While this is good use of technology in the times of crisis, the issue of data breach and data privacy needs to be addressed to protect individuals from harm.

## **10. Civil society's responses to the COVID-19**

In response to the global crisis triggered by the COVID-19 pandemic, Asian civil society organizations have initiated various measures to respond to the crisis.

At the global level, a coalition of over 400 organisations working on human rights and sustainable development across the globe came together including community volunteers, local civil society groups, and major NGOs, released on April 24, 2020 a 12-point demand charter<sup>63</sup> for the world leaders<sup>64</sup>. GCAP and the global platform Action for Sustainable development (Action4SD) played key-coordinating role in the mobilisation. As governments consider key steps towards recovery, the CSOs called for a joint plan to fight the crisis and build a just recovery that tackles the interlinked challenges of providing universal health care, reducing economic inequalities through social protection and guaranteeing human rights. More importantly, CSOs called for the critical need to re-think our economies in response to the parallel crises of climate change and biodiversity.

**Global Solidarity Action:** The global CSOs called for a mass social media mobilisation in form of global solidarity action on 22 May under the hashtag **#StrongerTogether**. The objective of such an action is to give a strong message to the public and politicians that the COVID-19 crisis can only be solved globally with global solidarity. Various social actions were done by people and spotted on their social media.

At the **Asia level**, CSOs jointly called for solidarity actions and established closer coordination for timely information, and relevant advocacy directed towards governments and regional bodies. .

**At the national and local levels** the NGOs were variedly involved in helping the marginalised groups and seeking accountability from the government. During the lockdown when food was scarce and access was limited, relief programmes consisting of distribution of food packs and mobile kitchens were set up by the CSOs. Many workers, especially in the informal sector, lost their jobs and had to find new sources of livelihood to support themselves and their families, CSOs mobilised resources in order to tide them over and teach new skills such as sewing face masks and protective personnel equipment (PPEs); establishing micro social enterprises by linking with rural food producers, aggregating their produce and supplies and selling them in communities and online; engaging the government in advocacy work for transparency and accountability by closely monitoring the implementation of emergency and strategic measures such as cash transfers, government procurement, data management, and direct advisories. Professional groups such as medical and health workers associations, service workers in the food, transport, sanitation and security sectors, who

are in the frontlines of the COVID battle, are given attention and support by CSOs through volunteer mobilisations to cover their shifts and by providing them with safe, transient housing close to their places of work. Cultural workers such as musicians and artists shifted their platform to social media in order to reach more people and help cope with the psychological difficulties of isolation.

Many GCAP national coalitions in Afghanistan (Sanayee Development Organisation), Pakistan (Pakistan Development Alliance), India (Wada Na Todo Abhiyan), Nepal (NGO Federation of Nepal), Philippines (Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement), Cambodia (Coordination Committee of Cambodia) and Japan (Japan SDGs Forum) issued statements stating their demands calling the governments for action. The NGOs have identified the needs of vulnerable populations and highlighted them regularly on social media and held the governments and institutions accountable.

As GCAP works on inequality, it has been calling for an equitable development in the post-COVID era. The Dalit groups in India developed app to track the Dalit migrant workers during the lockdown and help them. Sanayee Development Organisation in Afghanistan and many other NGOs are directly involved in tracing testing and treating the covid patients. In Pakistan, Pakistan Development Alliance has been helping most vulnerable communities like transgender; people living with disabilities, older people and religious minorities and women headed families in filling up the information digitally to take the benefits of “Ehsaas Cash Grants” of the government. In India several NGOs helped the vulnerable people get food by directly giving ration or linking to the government supply. They also helped thousands of migrant workers who were on the streets on their way to home or were stuck in cities to get food and government support to reach home. In Nepal, NGO federation of Nepal coordinated and brought in the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC), Nepal Bar Association (NBA), Federation of Nepalese Journalists (FNJ) to form the Human Rights Monitoring Network to monitor the human rights situation of during the COVID-19 pandemic.

CSOs in general also intensified the use of digital platforms in lieu of face-to-face conferences and meetings in order to carry out trainings, webinars, and other capacity-building activities. In many ways, the digital platforms provided the connection that people needed to maintain their mental health. The other side of the coin is that the same digital divide that separated the rich from the poor has never been more exclusionary.

## **11. Assessment of civil society responses to the COVID**

The global community has responded hugely to the call for Global Call for Action on 22 May under the hashtag **#StrongerTogether**. The results were impressive: 6,000 posts, which reached 43 million people & 126 million impressions in more than 100 countries. Read more about the Global Day of Solidarity and see the materials below.

Understandably, due to the lockdown imposed to contain the spread of COVID, CSOs had to stop operations and shift to work from home and remote conferencing arrangements. Depending on the mandate of the CSOs, responses to COVID 19 are varied.

Humanitarian NGOs that do relief were able to mobilise staff and volunteers in small measures in cooperation with local governments who are the first responders in the state structure. Those involved in advocacy shifted to online meetings and were able to expand their reach via social media. The difficulties lie in the negotiations involved in lobbying for policies, communicating well and understanding the nuances of policy positions without the benefit of face-to-face exchanges and debates.

Many NGOs were hampered by the lack of agility to shift to emergency mode. In many cases, COVID put CSO operations on a sudden halt and exposed the need to operationalise contingency plans in the quickest time possible. CSOs providing direct services to remote communities still find it difficult to travel under strict quarantine protocols.

International advocacy and campaign CSOs have long been used to virtual conferencing and have found it easier to adjust to the work-from-home mode. International travels have stopped, perhaps a good chance to provide the earth with a good respite from carbon emissions.

The role of CSOs in these times of crisis is truly commendable. Despite the shrinking space of the civic space in the region, the CSOs rose to the occasion and met the challenges.

The UN systems have done a splendid job doing comprehensive studies on the impact of pandemic on people from the margins, economic impact governments' initiatives and dealt with recommendations for recovery. They have held webinars on the subject.

## **12. Proposals and recommendations to the government**

### **Short-term response by the governments:**

- Safeguard healthcare workers and social care workers on the frontline by ensuring they have access to safe and decent working conditions and are resourced properly.
- Ask the private and public health institutions render regular health services with proper precaution to address the sufferings of the old and people having various forms of diseases who need regular medicines and follow-ups. Delivering emergency health services for such people also.
- Immediate healthcare and social protection measures keeping the most vulnerable groups at the center and take special care to make the delivery inclusive.
- Involve civil society organizations in policy and operational responses to COVID-19. A formal mechanism of engagement between the government and CSOs must be developed at various levels to ensure effective delivery of services.
- Uphold financial and policy commitments to a human rights based approach, in particular the rights of older people, persons with disabilities and women, girls and gender diverse people during the pandemic.
- Implement clear social and environmental conditions on any emergency financial stimulus to companies, such as treating workers fairly and cutting carbon emissions.
- Timely mobilize fund to set up continue control of coronavirus and for relief to the people most affected. In mobilizing the fund, transparency and accountability are equally important.
- Take adequate measure to fight against fake news.
- Safeguard freedom of expression and support innovative approaches to digital freedom of assembly to ensure all voices are heard.
- Helplines should be initiated to report sexual and gender based violence.
- Keep the human rights institutions for access of justice for people during the lockdowns and beyond.

### **Medium and long-term 'recovery' phase:**

- Drive a seismic shift towards universal healthcare, welfare payments and social protection that include essential services such as vaccine programs, sexual and reproductive health products and services for all.
- Assess the job and livelihood loss and announce financial package to protect and revive people's livelihood and make them inclusive.



- Time to take progressive measures to bridge income inequality among the poor and rich by tax justice, fully operational social protection systems etc.
- Put in place incentives for a feminist, green industrial revolution to enable rapid scaling up of sustainable jobs.
- Long term policy measures must be intertwined with the concepts of sustainability and environmental protection keeping the objectives of Agenda 2030 and Paris Climate deal in mind.
- Government stimulus packages and rationalization of fossil fuel subsidies should aim to accelerate decarbonization and greening of the economy, including sustainable mobility.
- Stimulus packages should not support businesses behaviors that lead to further environmental degradation.
- Regional cooperation remains vital to manage and recover from the crisis in a sustainable way.
- Regional cooperation on preserving wildlife can prevent and mitigate future pandemics by such actions as collectively banning illegal trade of wildlife, and working together on stopping habitat loss.

### 13. SWOT analysis

<p><b>Strength:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• South East Asia has the earlier SARS experience that helped manage the pandemic better</li> <li>• Elements of regional cooperation at SAARC and ASEAN level</li> <li>• Advanced technology in SE Asia and their use during Pandemic</li> <li>• Civil society is active in the region on service delivery and raising issues</li> <li>• Commendable work of the health workers and the government servants during the pandemic</li> </ul>	<p><b>Weakness:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Widespread poverty and hunger in South Asia</li> <li>• Shrinking CSO space</li> <li>• Bad human rights conditions almost in most part of the region</li> <li>• Emergency clause invoked - Gag on media prevents truth to come out</li> <li>• Informalisation of labour and weak protection of the international and internal migrants</li> <li>• Low level of social protection in South Asia</li> <li>• Authoritarian regimes in the region</li> </ul>
<p><b>Opportunity:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Opportunity to build forward better in a sustainable way and a more egalitarian society</li> <li>• Opportunity to frame the policies in a way toward environment protection</li> <li>• Pandemic has taught that we have learnt that we can lead a less luxurious life</li> <li>• There is fiscal space which for most countries in SE Asia that helps governments to spend more for the pandemic</li> <li>• Debt service cancellation for some period by IMF and G 20 countries</li> <li>• The rich have donated to manage the pandemic</li> <li>• Need for better regional cooperation</li> </ul>	<p><b>Threat:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inequality has risen during the time – likely to rise</li> <li>• The poor people may crumble if the pandemic related restrictions continued too far as informal work is the most sufferer</li> <li>• Possibility of the Corporate world influence the post-Covid policies in their favour</li> <li>• Uncertainty in development of vaccine</li> <li>• Poor may be left behind during vaccination – issue of access</li> <li>• Continuing financial stress due to low or negative GDP growth may force government to take austerity measures</li> <li>• Conflicts are still continuing so also and boarder tensions among some countries</li> </ul>

**14. Recommendations to international organizations (UN, ASEAN, SAARC etc.)<sup>65</sup>**

- Regional Cooperation among ASEAN and SAARC countries are the need of the time.
- Connect immediate response and recovery funding directly with local groups which includes a 'gender marker' for women, marginalized people, community organisations and social enterprises to ensure we leave no one behind.
- Promote the global ceasefire and support governments to re-direct military spending to social protection.
- Cancel national debts to ensure sufficient finance is available to governments to ensure a just recovery.
- Encourage member nations to adopt fairer taxation policies on those who hold the most resources in our society, alongside measures to tackle illicit financial flows to pay for these protections.
- Call for a ban on the live wild animal trade and a halt to deforestation.

## **15. Proposal for actions among CSOs at the national level**

- State institutions ought to be ordered to facilitate CSOs in imparting relief and support services as well as highlighting gaps and challenges for taking appropriate measures both by public and private sectors.
- The CSOs should appeal for food security to the migrants and poor and all such vulnerable people at this moment and for universal healthcare, proper protection shield for health workers (PPEs) and enough testing facilities.
- Hold consultations on how to build forward better – address income and other forms of inequalities and achieve SDGs and protect the environment.
- A lot of misinformation is being spread. CSOs should make people aware about the same and try to maintain harmony among communities.
- Keep monitoring the service delivery of the government and bring out the lapses and suggest the governments.
- Monitor the situation of the vulnerable people and bring them to the notice of the governments and donors.
- We should document some good practices and difficult experience.

## **16. Proposal for actions among CSOs at the international level -regional and global**

- The multilateral and bilateral development partners, national and international non-government organizations, private sector and other stakeholders are urged to come up with support and relief packages and mobilize through appropriate mechanism.
- Do **#FoodForAll** and **#VaccineForAll** campaigns and Debt Cancel campaigns
- Conduct survey to capturing the country situation on inequalities and bring forth to the limelight.
- Develop medium and long term recovery plan and recommend the governments and the UN systems.
- Constantly hammer on the issues of human rights during the pandemic as most countries have invoked emergency clauses.
- Keep reminding that we should reboot our ways of development etc. – not building back better but building forward in a sustainable way.
- The VNR and HLPF processes should be intensely engaged with to influence the governments agenda for an accountable mechanisms.
- Discuss on the ways to achieve SDGs and suggest in wake of disruptions owing to the pandemic.

## 17. Major websites about COVID-19, Inequality, SDGs, Human Rights and others

### a. ESCAP studies on impact of COVID-19

- The impact and policy responses of COVID 19 in Asia and Pacific  
[https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/COVID%20Report\\_ESCAP.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/COVID%20Report_ESCAP.pdf)
- COVID 19 and South Asia: study by UNESCAP  
[https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/South%20Asia%20Covid-19%20Paper\\_5.pdf](https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/South%20Asia%20Covid-19%20Paper_5.pdf)
- Impact of COVID-19 on South East Asia: Study by ESCAP  
<https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/d8files/2020-07/SG-Policy-brief-COVID-19-and-South-East-Asia-30-July-2020.pdf>

### b. Links to Inequality studies:

- Inequality in Asia and the Pacific in the era of 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development  
<https://www.unescap.org/publications/inequality-asia-and-pacific-era-2030-agenda-sustainable-development>
- Rising inequality in Asia and policy implications (Think Asia, ADB Institute)  
<http://hdl.handle.net/11540/1225>

### c. Impact of the COVID-19 on democracy and civic space

- Civic freedom and COVID 19 pandemic- by CIVICUS  
<https://monitor.civicus.org/COVID19Oct2020/>
- In cooperation with relevant thematic international reports  
<https://sdg.humanrights.dk/>  
<https://www.humanrights.dk/sdg-human-rights-data-explorer>  
<https://sdg.humanrights.dk/>
- UN Special Procedures on human rights defenders, freedom of expression and opinion, Freedom of peaceful assembly and association, arbitrary detention, disappearance, independence of judges and lawyers, etc.  
<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/CivicSpace/Pages/ProtectingCivicSpace.aspx>  
<https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/CivicSpace/CivicSpaceandCovid.pdf>  
<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Pages/Webinar-In-the-shadow-of-COVID-19.aspx>
- Assessment of civic space according to the Human rights indicators on SDG 16+ (refer to the list of national indicators for SDGs – 16 and 17 and other targets)  
<https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal16>  
<https://www.sdg16hub.org/hlpf2019/report>  
<https://www.sdg16hub.org/landing-page/sdg-16-indicators>  
<https://medium.com/sdgs-resources/sdg-16-indicators-61780bd4ff82>  
<https://indicators.report/goals/goal-16/>  
<https://www.sdg16hub.org/landing-page/sdg-16-pathfinders>
- Ulaanbaatar Declaration on SDG 16+ (Feb. 2019)  
<https://adnasia.org/2019/03/24/2019-ulaanbaatar-declaration-on-peaceful-just-and-inclusive-societies-in-asia-and-beyond-sdg-16/>

**d. Impact on key Human Rights and SDGs**

- UN OHCHR  
<https://www.ohchr.org/en/issues/pages/listofissues.aspx>
- UN OHCHR Portal about COVID-19 and Human Rights  
<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/NewsEvents/Pages/COVID-19.aspx>
- 23 Human Rights Issues Affected by COVID-19 (13 May 2020)  
[https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Events/COVID-19\\_Guidance.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Events/COVID-19_Guidance.pdf)

**e. Useful Websites on SDG 16+ and HRBA**

- UN SDGs  
<https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>
- UN SDG Knowledge – SDG 16  
<https://sdgs.un.org/goals/goal16>
- SDG 16 Hub  
<https://www.sdg16hub.org/>
- Complementary Global Indicators on Goal 16  
<http://www.sdg16.org/data/>
- UNDP on SDG 16  
<https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/sustainable-development-goals/goal-16-peace-justice-and-strong-institutions.html>
- SDG 16+ Report (2019) by UNDP  
<https://www.sdg16hub.org/hlpf2019/report>
- SDG 16+ Progress Report 2019 by Institute for Economics and Peace (IEP)  
<http://visionofhumanity.org/app/uploads/2019/03/SDG16Progress-Report-2019-web.pdf>
- The Human Rights Guide to the SDGs  
<https://sdg.humanrights.dk/>
- UN Sustainable Development Group – HRBA  
<https://unsdg.un.org/2030-agenda/universal-values/human-rights-based-approach>
- Human Rights Indicators  
<https://www.humanrights.dk/publications/human-rights-indicators>
- OHCHR Human Rights Indicators  
<https://www.ohchr.org/EN/Issues/Indicators/Pages/HRIndicatorsIndex.aspx>
- SDG – Human Rights Data Explorer -a tool to find human rights data related to the SDGs by the country  
<https://www.humanrights.dk/sdg-human-rights-data-explorer>
- The Human Rights Guide to the SDGs (online) -a tool to link the goal and target to international human rights standards/instruments  
<https://sdg.humanrights.dk/>

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<https://www.unescap.org/news/pandemic-response-south-east-asia-must-address-rising-inequalities-says-new-un-report>
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