

The Impact of COVID-19 in Asia Pacific

સ્નેહ સૌંદર્ય

સ્નેહ સૌંદર્ય છે સર્વને સ્પર્શતું,
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સૃષ્ટિનો શ્વાસ એ, જીવન ઉલ્લાસ એ,
સેંકડો સ્વર્ગથી સ્નેહ વાધે!

— અરદેશર ફરામજી ખબરદાર (૧૮૮૮ - ૧૯૫૩)

The Beauty of Affection

*Affection is beauty that touches everyone,
Affection fills our world with joy;
Affection is freedom for all living beings,
And affection is dialogue that conquers all distance;
Affection is truth that resounds in creation,
And affection is strength supreme in the soul;
Affection is the master that sustains this world,
And affection resides in deep devotion!*

*As a glance at the sun can seize its beams,
And enter the body and set it alight;
So the rays of affection fall on the heart,
And set every human heart aglow;
Affection is the link to world enlightenment,
Binding us closer in full brotherhood;
The breath of creation, and the joy of life,
Affection pervades many heavens itself.*

— Ardeshar Feramji Khabardar (1888-1953)

The pandemic response in South Asia has been driven by fear and social distancing till now; may it now be driven by our affection and concern for the most vulnerable. If every disaster is an opportunity then let this pandemic be an opportunity to bring us closer to each other.



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When Disasters Collide

By *Mihir R. Bhatt*, All India Disaster Mitigation Institute

As the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded across South Asia, the region was simultaneously hit by other disasters as well. In particular, Cyclone Amphan and Cyclone Nisarg along with the widespread flooding in the Indian states of Assam and Bihar are some of the examples of how the COVID-19 pandemic collided with other disasters. This collision of disasters has made response and recovery more difficult and enhanced the risk for the affected population. An online discussion, titled *'When Disasters Collide; Managing Disasters in the Context of COVID-19 in South Asia'* was hosted by *Duryog Nivaran* and Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) on 30th June, 2020. The theme of the discussion was centered on the strategies of South Asian nations to deal with different disasters simultaneously.

The discussion also highlighted what has worked, pitfalls to be avoided, and the recommended action for future. A brief overview of all these areas of the discussion is given below.

A. What has worked in practice

- Adapting the existing Disaster Management structures to comply with the health and safety related protocols operationalised for COVID-19 and implementing it at the local level – as was seen during cyclone Amphan.
- Galvanizing support from various stakeholders and actors such as private companies, faith and

religious groups, NGOs etc. played a key role in making response more effective.

- Forming local volunteer-led teams to engage with higher density, low income areas in order to create awareness on precautions like hand washing and wearing masks, distributing resources to low income areas, as well as setting up makeshift clinics for monitoring fever and conducting health checks.
- Better identification of vulnerable groups through improved monitoring.

B. Pitfalls to be avoided

- Unclear communication and lack of transparency can lead to the rampant spread of misinformation.
- Irregular data collection and improper data management. In crisis situations, data is vital, and inefficient data systems can impede response.
- Lack of planning and preparedness at a state level can give rise to avoidable loss and damage.
- Duplicating structures without leveraging existing structures can lead to duplication of efforts and redundancy.

C. Recommended Actions

- Investing in disaster management at a macro-level, particularly in high risk areas such as healthcare and resilient shelters.
- Pushing for digitization of data as well as improving access to this data by stakeholders operating at

the local level. This will improve the quality of the response at the local level.

- Recognising the necessity for South Asian countries to create/revise preparedness and response plans for monsoons and other disasters considering the constraints and risks posed by COVID-19.
- Encouraging cooperation inter-regionally and between state and non-state actors on disaster management and planning while utilizing existing systems and more collaborative approaches.
- Recognising Gender related issues that arise during times of disasters and crisis and formulating support systems to address issues such as Gender Based Violence, vulnerability of women-led businesses and sole female breadwinners, increasing resources and facilitating access for pregnant women, elderly and vulnerable groups etc.
- Along with focus on healthcare support, livelihood support should also be extended to those facing unemployment such as the daily wagers in the informal sector.

The discussion proved fruitful in highlighting the new measures and innovative solutions in disaster management systems needed to manage risk, deliver assistance and relief and effectively respond to the challenges of simultaneous disasters in South Asia. ■

ABOUT THE ISSUE

This issue of *Southasiadisasters.net* is titled *'The Impact of COVID-19 in Asia Pacific'* and takes a detailed look at how the pandemic has affected the various countries of the region. The social, economic, demographic and cultural diversity of the region has shaped the pandemic response of these countries, with varying degrees of success. For instance, South Korea and Vietnam emerged as exemplary models for pandemic containment while other nations in region struggled to keep the pandemic in check. This issue of *Southasiadisasters.net* deals with all such themes related with pandemic response, their impacts and long-term ramifications.

The important themes discussed in this issue range from the impact of concurrent disasters to nationwide pandemic response of federal governments; and from the impact of the pandemic on Asia's small and medium enterprises (SMEs) to the increasing role of women in the workforce.

Growth and Jobs – A Major Casualty of COVID-19

By James P. Villafuerte, Senior Economist, Asian Development Bank, Philippines

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to weigh heavily on the health and economic systems around the world. Presently, there are almost 13 million confirmed cases in over 187 countries, and about 570,000 lives have been lost [1]. Border controls continue to be strictly implemented in many economies; with mobility restrictions acting as supply shocks, impairing global production capacity, and creating one of the most serious crises in history.

Using a multiregional, comparative-static, CGE model of world trade and investment, an ADB study estimated the COVID-19 economic impact [2]. The estimates revolved around two scenarios: a short-containment scenario, where it takes economies about 3 months to bring the outbreak under control and normalize their economic activities; and a long-containment scenario which takes about 6 months. The study also assumes that for the two scenarios: a) travel bans are in effect for 3-6 months; b) global consumption falls

by between 3.5% to 13% and global investments by 4.4% to 15%; c) iceberg costs for trade increases by between 1% to 2%; and d) direct income and revenue support mitigate some of the COVID-19 impacts.

Based on the ADB study, the COVID-19 economic impact will cut global output by \$5.8 trillion in the short-containment scenario and by \$8.8 trillion in the long-containment, equivalent to 6.4% to 9.7% of global GDP (Table 1). About 30% of this global impact will be accounted for by Asia where output will fall by \$1.7 trillion to \$2.5 trillion in the two scenarios, or 6.2% to 9.3% of regional GDP.

Globally, employment value equivalent to 158 million to 242 million jobs will also be lost in the two scenarios (6.0% to 9.2% of total employment). For Asia, the drop in employment will reach 109 million to 167 million jobs—or 69% of total employment losses globally. This estimated impact is more than 7

times the drop in employment during the 2008–2009 global financial crisis—which reduced employment by about 22 million people measured as fulltime job equivalent [3].

Moreover, the pandemic will also likely reverse some of the hard-won development gains that Asia has achieved since the global financial crisis. For example, relative to a scenario without COVID-19, the long containment scenario will see a 56 million increase in the number of poor people living in the extreme poverty threshold of \$1.9/day, and 140 million increase under the \$3.2/day poverty rate [4].

For these reasons, government support to income and revenues of households, businesses, and government units are critical. Incorporating this type of policy responses, the ADB study noted that the COVID-19 impact could soften by as much as 30%–40%, reducing the global economic losses to \$4.1 trillion–\$5.4 trillion (4.5%–5.9% of global GDP).¹

Table 1: Economic Impact of COVID-19

Indicator	Short-containment Scenario	Long-containment Scenario
Impact on GDP, excluding policy responses (\$ million)		
World	-5,796,893	-8,789,852
Asia	-1,667,824	-2,529,112
Impact on Employment (million jobs)		
World	-158.1	-242.1
Asia	-109.1	-166.7
Impact on Poverty (increase in poor people, million)*		
\$1.9/day, Asia		56
\$3.2/day, Asia		140
Impact on GDP, with policy responses (\$ million)		
World	-4,095,760	-5,387,673
Asia	-1,328,566	-1,854,273

* The poverty impact results cover only 34 developing member countries.

Source: Asian Development Bank estimates

1 For the 68 ADB members and the EU, these measures amount to \$4.7 trillion (6.6% of their cumulative GDP). On average, direct support to income and revenue accounts for 42.8% of the stabilization packages of ADB DMCs and 33.8% for advanced economies.

In closing, containing the pandemic through sufficient testing, tracing and isolation, effective social distancing, and securing protective and medical equipment are critical. Governments should also support struggling families and businesses to avoid long-term consequences for growth and development. More so, it is also important to manage supply chain disruptions, rely on e-commerce and technology solutions to deliver goods and services, and prepare for the eventual opening of the economy

in a gradual manner when things get better. And they will get better. ■

References:

1. World Health Organization. WHO Coronavirus Disease (COVID-19) Dashboard. <https://covid19.who.int/> (accessed 12 July 2020).
2. Asian Development Bank. 2020. ADB Briefs: An Updated Assessment of the Economic Impact of COVID-19. May.
3. According to the ILO, COVID-19 related full or partial lockdowns are affecting roughly 2.7 billion people,

or 80% of the global workforce. More so, ILO's new global estimates indicate that working hours will decline by 6.7% in Q2 of 2020—equivalent to 195 million people in full-time job equivalent.

4. Bulan, J., R. Hasan, A. Martinez, and I. Sebastian. 2020. "COVID-19 and Poverty: Some Scenarios." Unpublished note prepared for Economic Research and Regional Cooperation Department, Asian Development Bank.

ROAD TO ECONOMIC RECOVERY IN GLOBAL SOUTH

Impact of COVID-19 on Asia's SMEs: Choices and Opportunities for the Global South

By Denis Nkala, Regional Coordinator and Representative, UNOSSC Asia and the Pacific Office, Thailand

In reviewing the literature on Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), there is a consensus that the definition of an SME varies from country to country and even from industry to industry within a country. There is also a strong agreement across the board that SMEs constitute a very high percentage of private sector businesses, 90% of all enterprises in most countries can be classified as SMEs (Katua, 2014), and generate most of the employment and economic growth (over 70% of employment in China, Japan, Thailand and Vietnam). In a study entitled, "Experience of SMEs in South and South-east Asia (2003), the South Asia Development Facility observed that SMEs create jobs and growth because they are more labour-intensive than the big companies and that they are usually the downstream suppliers to the larger industries that helps the economy to grow. In the same paper by the South Asia Development Facility, the authors studied the fast growth economies in Asia and observed that most of them were driven by innovation and



Photo credit- Anastasiia Chepinska.

competition ushered by the new enterprises.

The vulnerabilities of the SMEs include inadequate access to finance, a constraining business enabling environment as well as a lack of high-quality business development services. In many developing countries, these requisites were unmet before COVID-19. The impact of COVID-19 on the SME sector worsened the situation. In a paper entitled, "Impact of COVID-19 on

Digital Transformation and Sustainability of Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs): A Conceptual Framework" (Khairul, 2020) makes a very direct diagnosis that social distancing to limit the spread of COVID-19 limited people's activities outside the home. That resulted in falling revenues to businesses. In fact, as the pandemic has spread around the world, its impact has resulted in forced shut-downs of some businesses for health reasons as well as restricted travel.

A report by the International Trade Centre, the "2020 SME Competitiveness Outlook", released on 22 June 2020 showed that "two-thirds of micro and small firms said that the crisis had strongly affected business operations". A lesser forty-percent of the large companies had a similar response. An even more ominous finding was that a fifth of the SMEs said that they were at risk of permanently closing down within three months. The report also indicated that 70% of the companies in the service, accommodation and food services business had had their operations "strongly" affected by the pandemic as of June 2020.

The pandemic has therefore been a significant shock to the economy but more significantly to the SME sector. One country that has studied the impact of the pandemic is Bangladesh. In a study entitled "Post COVID-19 Jobs and Skills in

Bangladesh", the researchers found out that among the 11 sectors most affected were the SMEs and in particular, tourism and hospitality. The study also focused on any new opportunities that may result from the impact of the pandemic. They identified new growth areas including, pharmaceuticals, ICT and Commerce, health-care services, agro-food and creative media.

The analysis clearly shows that the pandemic has decimated many of the SMEs. There is a near consensus in the literature that SMEs must go digital to survive. Several observations arise from this stance. This solution may already be too late for most SMEs as many may have closed down permanently. New start-ups may indeed use technology to grow into the gaps left by failing enterprises, now and in the future. The question is whether the governments can afford to let this

happen because if so many businesses in SMEs fail resulting in stagnation for many years, increased unemployment and growing poverty can probably derail any chances of meeting the Sustainable Development Goals. It seems imperative that SMEs in the developing world must be saved. Governments must provide subsidies to the SME sector. The international community must realise the negative impact on future growth and that it is in the world economy's interest to keep SMEs afloat. The larger businesses would best serve the economies by implementing measures to help SMEs through keeping the supply chains open. In conclusion, the economic route for recovery from COVID-19 runs through keeping the SMEs afloat and urgent action must be taken now. ■

ROLE OF YOUTH

Youth and Climate Change Adaptation: Accelerating Adaptation Action

By Dr. Kavya Michael, Associate Fellow, and Saurabh Bhardwaj, Fellow & Area Convener, Center for Climate Modelling, TERI, New Delhi, India

The increasing intensity and incidence of extreme events, disasters as well as slow onset climatic changes is already leading to reversal of developmental gains and plunging more and more people into chronic poverty. With the Paris Agreement setting forth a global goal on climate change adaptation and the setting up of the Global Commission on Adaptation there has been significant momentum world-wide to accelerate adaptation action. However, in mainstream policy and literature climate change adaptation is typically understood as a responsive adjustment to the already occurring as well as predicted impacts of future climate change. The youth of today are the

largest generation to inhabit the planet and hence significantly susceptible to the increasing effects of climatic changes. On the other hand, they have come together globally to establish their transformative potential and transcended climate change communication from high level scientific meetings to dinner table conversations. They have also played a key role in bringing forth the muted voices in the climate change crisis, the voices of the marginalized and vulnerable communities, their lived realities and experiences with climate induced hazards and disaster events to the international climate change policy and practice forums. Their relatively

higher resilience, quicker and creative contributions on ideas and actions before or during any disasters makes them a significant part of any disaster preparedness and recovery process. Understanding this, globally, governments have constituted strategy documents to help train, prepare and mainstream youth actions towards any emergency situations.

While scientists across the globe have tinkered with technocratic solutions to climate change adaptation the youth of today has vehemently conveyed the message that Business as Usual Scenarios are clearly not acceptable anymore. This messaging

also comes from the realization that this generation will significantly bear the brunt of climate change in the near future. However, what is currently observed in the climate policy and practice space is that the youth movement remains largely isolated from the mainstream negotiations and discussions about climate change (AF 2020). This has been attributed to the lack of ability of the youth to provide concrete inputs to the climate change debate. While this could indeed be a question of the need for change in perceptions and behaviors it also points out to the accelerated need for investing in capacity building for the youth. This is especially true of the developing countries across the world which harbors a large percentage of today's youth.

The recently launched background paper of the Global Commission on

adaptation "Adapt our future" which focuses on youth and climate change adaptation emphasizes that the youth of today envision climate change adaptation as an opportunity for transformation. The youth could potentially play a key role in advancing transformative action. Most often there is a significant gap between the adaptation science and its implementation in the policy space. This is where the youth can play a key role by translating scientific information with its socio-economic implications in a language comprehensible to the policy makers. They are perhaps best placed in understanding and communicating the integrated nature of the socio-ecological system and turning policy attention away from proximate issues to addressing the root causes. On the other hand, it is also critical to see effective climate change adaptation through the lens of

participation where the youth are recognized as significant stakeholders in addressing the climate change adaptation challenge. ■

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1. Amponsem, J., Doshi, D., Toledo, A. I. S., Schudel, L., & Delali-Kemeh, S. (2019). Adapt for our Future: Youth and Climate Change Adaptation. A background paper commissioned by the Global Commission on Adaptation. Rotterdam and Washington, DC, 2019-09
2. AF 2020. Youth and Climate Adaptation: Accelerating Action for a Resilient Future, Proceedings from the second webinar series of Adaptation Futures 2020 (AF 2020), Available online at <http://adaptationfutures2020.in/webinar-series-2.php>

STRENGTHENING RISK GOVERNANCE FOR RESILIENCE

CityNet Role in COVID-19 Response: Building on Korea's Response and an Increase Role for Local Governments

By *Geunhyeong Yim*, Chief Executive Officer, CityNet, Korea

As more and more cities are slowly "reopening" their economies after extended lockdowns while a second wave of infections still looms large, it is useful to take a look at how COVID-19 was dealt with until now and how to best approach the new normal moving forward.

CityNet, as an association of cities and urban stakeholders in Asia-Pacific, has been working since its inception in 1987 on building more sustainable and resilient cities, with a dedicated cluster of its members working on Disaster. Recognizing sustainable urban planning and management as the basis for building

resilience, CityNet trains city managers in disaster risk reduction and management approaches, facilitates urban risk profiling activities and disseminates best practices in disaster preparedness. Despite this long experience, the pandemic proved especially challenging to CityNet's members. From the onset, CityNet launched a series of webinars and consultation with its members, promoting City-to-City Cooperation, and providing them with a platform to share their successes and challenges in tackling COVID-19.

In this regard, the Korean and the

Seoul Metropolitan Government experience, CityNet's President City, proves especially enlightening to forge a path ahead. As the Republic of Korea is globally acknowledged for its COVID-19 response, various analyses are being made on the country's response, also known as "K-quarantine," and its most distinctive feature, the management of infectious diseases without the enforcement of a lockdown, enabling its inhabitants to carry on with their lives with minimum disruptions. It is premature to predict how the situation will unfold, but I believe that partial success was achieved mostly thanks to the active role

played by local governments in Korea. Throughout K-quarantine, the local governments performed as significant a role as the central government in the development and implementation of this response. In spite of this, the role of local government has been repeatedly minimized and less publicized in media outlets.

Above everything else, I would like to point out that the Korean local governments have been playing, not only unusually big but also in some cases, leading roles in responding to the current COVID-19 situation. At the initial stage of the outbreak, the central government had taken prudent steps in consideration of the negative impacts quarantine would have on its national economy and its relations with China, while the opposition parties and media demanded a prompt and vigorous response. It was at this time of hesitation that the Seoul Metropolitan Government dared to come to the forefront of the argument, immediately implementing strong quarantine measures. In retrospect, I believe it was this prompt intervention that led the Korean government to take the strong quarantine measures from that time onwards. Since the beginning of its outbreak on January 20th, the Seoul Metropolitan Government leadership has taken the position of a thorough and transparent response.

A key instance where the central government embraced the preemptive action taken by local government is with the social distancing policy called "A Brief Pause," which was first taken by Seoul in early March, was subsequently turned into a nationwide policy called "Social



Distancing" by the central government. The social distancing policy, which was proactively executed by Korea, spread to other countries afterwards. With no vaccination being available at the moment, social distancing is regarded as one of the two most efficient preventive measures, along with wearing face masks.

Behind the significant role local governments in Korea have played during this pandemic, and despite the decentralized governing system being only about 30 years old, is the realization that local autonomy has taken roots in the country's political system so successfully that people know they can rely on it. The most important element in coping with an epidemiological disaster is the citizen. Without cooperation and support of the citizen, no governmental policy can be performed successfully. Had it not been for the solidarity of Korean people, the country would not have been able to contain the spread so effectively.

If we refer to the Korean experience in the recent COVID-19 cases, local governments showed a leadership role, sometimes even replacing the central government in matters that

could not possibly be handled by the latter alone. This can be replicated on the international cooperation scene to cope with COVID-19. In close cooperation with the central government, local governments may play a role in producing synergies or going as far as to pioneer their own ground where the central government may not reach.

Such a cooperative framework has been, to a certain degree, established when it comes to issues regarding non-political international affairs such as climate change, global disasters, and air pollution. However, it is yet insufficient and should be further developed to take root in the convention of international relations. It is in this aspect that CityNet, as a network of cities and local government, can play and increasingly important role, strengthening local government functions, and acting as an alliance and vector of the willingness in the face of quarrelling states and weakening multilateralism. I hope this worldwide disaster turns into an opportunity to develop and strengthen cooperative frameworks between central, local governments and various municipal actors. ■

Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Investments in Asia

By *Mia Mikic*, Director, Trade, Investment and Innovation Division, United Nations ESCAP, Thailand

Even before the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, global trade and foreign direct investment (FDI) were already in decline due to continuous trade tensions, rising economic nationalism and protectionism, stalled global value chain growth, falling rates return on FDI, and overall economic policy and geopolitical uncertainty. In 2020, FDI to developing economies in Asia are projected to drop by up to 45%, according to UNCTAD, bringing FDI below \$1 trillion for the first time since 2005. FDI is expected to decrease by a further 5%-10% in 2021.

If the second wave of COVID-19 pandemic becomes a reality, these projected declines might turn out as overly optimistic. With no vaccine in sight, restrictions on people's mobility remain the most reliable measures to fight the pandemic's spread but come at the high economic and social costs. In China, greenfield FDI projects have declined by over 80% in the last few months. Still, capital expenditure by existing investors has remained stable. While FDI in India was expected to decrease, FDI inflows into India rose 13% on year in FY20 to close to a record \$50 billion compared to \$44 billion in 2018-19.

In South-East Asia, the pandemic and the disruptions of supply chains have raised some doubt about the subregion being a beneficiary from the US-China trade war. Major automotive manufacturers in Thailand, such as Mazda, Mitsubishi, and Nissan (all Japan), temporarily stopped production. Ford (United States) has temporarily suspended

production in Thailand and Viet Nam, while Toyota (Japan) has done the same at plants in Indonesia and Thailand.

The Great Lockdown's biggest loser is the tourism and travel sector, including the hospitality industry. Some other services such as construction, traditional retail, education, entertainment, recreation /sporting, and even some medical services have been in free fall while the restrictions on people's mobility were imposed. Even after some relaxation of those policies, the uptake of business has been very slow, due to unprecedented demand shock. On the other hand, all digitally enabled services (and, of course, e-commerce platforms) were able to grow their business, including employment, and remain the most attractive investment sector, promising minimal risk.

In the future, the trend of shortening supply chains, which started before the pandemic, will be intensified in search of higher resilience of both supply chains and economies.² Contrary to what might appear as a strong focus on self-sufficiency, FDI, trade and value chains will remain key drivers of sustainable development. They will play a key role in boosting countries' economic resilience by providing a critical source of external capital for financing debt, creating employment, and providing access to knowledge, technology, and ideas.

The crisis and the fact that many businesses of different sizes and sectors will face financial difficulties may trigger a new wave of M&As, which has become a more potent

driver of FDI in the last decade. It is expected that this will lead to a higher concentration of firms and possible monopolies; therefore, countries must put in place vigilant anti-trust bodies.

While foreign investors claim that low taxes, low wages, and low input costs or access to natural resources are not their top criteria, they emphasize the need to have supportive political environments, stable macroeconomic conditions, and conducive regulatory regimes.³ Governments can do a lot to facilitate FDI and rebuild investors' confidence. Investment promotion agencies (IPAs) can boost their countries' investment competitiveness by better aligning their FDI attraction and retention efforts with market signals and changing investor preferences. Digitalization of IPA services (for example, online assistance to investors) will be increasingly important, so right regulatory and legal framework, including e-commerce, digital marketing, development of AI must be secured on time, that is, even while pandemic is not over.⁴ Most importantly, for the long-run stability, Governments' role will be in leveraging FDI for robust economic recovery from COVID-19 pandemic towards building forward better and putting a premium on projects enabling decarbonization and transition to sustainable production and consumption within and across national borders.⁵ This can be done only by avoiding protectionist and nationalistic policies and fostering global and regional cooperation. ■

2 See more details in Anukoonwattaka, W. and Mikic, M. (2020) "Beyond the COVID-19 pandemic: Coping with the 'new normal' in supply chains" available at <https://www.unescap.org/resources/beyond-covid-19-pandemic-coping-new-normal-supply-chains>

3 See more details in World Bank (2020) Global Investment Competitiveness Report 2019/2020: Rebuilding Investor Confidence

in times of Uncertainty available at <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/33808?deliveryName=DM73734>

4 More on IPA and other possible promotion and facilitation policies see ESCAP (2017) Handbook on Policies, Promotion and Facilitation of Foreign Direct Investment for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific available at

<https://www.unescap.org/resources/handbook-policies-promotion-and-facilitation-foreign-direct-investment-sustainable-0>

5 See more details in ESCAP (2020) Socio-Economic Response to COVID-19: ESCAP Framework available at <https://www.unescap.org/resources/socio-economic-response-covid-19-escap-framework>

Why and How Myanmar Slowed Down COVID-19 Impact on Communities: Key Action

By Ngwe Thein, Executive Director, Capacity Building Initiative, Myanmar

Since early January 2020, the Government of Myanmar has been proactively preparing to check the spread of COVID-19 pandemic in the country. Moreover, the infection situation is being closely monitored as Myanmar due to the country's proximity with China and a large volume of trade from it. The preparation included renovation of ICUs at the hospitals, conduction of awareness campaigns, issue of orders to prohibit local and foreign travellers and most importantly identification of suspected patients and provision of medical treatments, and upgrading of medical laboratories. Another important preparation was establishment of quarantine centers throughout the country in collaboration with the civil society organizations. State Counsellor Daw Aung San Suu Kyi mentioned during her daily video conferencing with stakeholders, that, success was achieved in preventive measures because early plans were adopted and it could be said that Myanmar was one of the countries which adopted rules and regulations at an early stage. Besides, she mentioned that, Myanmar Government holds the principles of "People are the key" and "Leave no one behind" and we experienced the



Awareness raising of COVID-19 by handheld speakers and pamphlets hand washing basins.

participation of the people in whole country by following the guidelines of the Ministry of Health and Sports. At least people followed by staying at home even during the time of Myanmar New Year from 10-16 April 2020 at which the whole nation usually take part throughout new year days in the form of large groups and crowds and celebrates by throwing water on each other. WHO representative for Myanmar Dr. Stephan Paul Jost responded to a media that, Myanmar started surveillance of the disease early since first week of January 2020, with a

focus on the border passes and applied multi-ministerial coordination approach by forming National-Level Central Committee for Prevention, Control and Treatment of Coronavirus Disease COVID-19, among other committees.

In Myanmar there was almost no infection inside the country but it was carried by the people who came back from Foreign Countries. The first case was found from 2 people on March 23 who came back from England and the United States. Again, most of the infection cases in



CSO members going around with vehicles for awareness raising of COVID -19 in the sub-urban areas.



CSO members raised temporary shelters for testing camps.

Myanmar did not show much symptom and thus it was very dangerous and Myanmar Government put most efforts on vigilance on the suspected persons and put them as persons under investigation (PUI). The Government has been urging the people to protect themselves with vigilance and it is more effective than receiving treatment.

The number of infections slowly increased as testing capacity of Myanmar was limited in the early stage. Later the testing facilities were enhanced and close to 2000 tests could be performed daily. Anyhow, as the authorities are able to identify the sources of infection, strict inspection and quarantine regulations were set for travelers from abroad and that has made the Government successful in tracking down and controlling the disease.

Another important factor is the thorough, smooth coordination cooperation among Government Ministries and the support and contribution of the people individually as well as organizations, in kind or in cash. The most valuable and effective measure is the cooperation of individual citizens who are abiding by the rules and regulations even though it was really very hard for them.

The Civil Society Organizations also played a big role in this by providing their service as volunteers, raising awareness of the disease among the people through distribution of reading materials, using loud speakers and hand held speakers, posters and hand washing centers. Besides, showing the methods of making liquid soap, hand sanitizers by using available materials and making woven cloth masks. These demonstrations were taken in videos and distributed as widely as possible. At the same time, they developed guidelines for Community Based Facility Quarantine and Community Based Surveillance Guidelines and distributed them to at-risk



CSO members raising posters for COVID-19 at the center points together with military personnel.

communities through respective CSOs. Many different CSOs participated in the fighting against COVID-19, in different ways in the different parts of the country.

The most praise worthy work done by the Government is formation of the National Volunteer Steering Unit, which supports the volunteers morally and provides necessary welfare. There are thousands of volunteers working in the Quarantine Centers in turn, together with the Health Service Providers, Government Officials, Local Leaders and of course the people under investigation and thus managing and supporting the volunteers for their long term service is very important. The courage and sacrifice of the Health Workers at the

Hospitals and the Quarantine Centers also plays a key role in the effective prevention and control of the disease. They also receive love and respect from the public and they deserve praise. ■

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Women and Work: The Impact of COVID-19 in Indonesia

By *Debby Paramitasari, Abdul Kadir, Fatma Lestari*; Disaster Risk Reduction Centre, Universitas Indonesia (DRRC UI)

Since late 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic has been unfolding across the world. There are severe impacts experienced by each country in many aspects. Specific regulations and protocols of Covid-19 had been created and enacted in each country along with the appointment of Covid-19 task forces to manage and control the spread of the outbreak within the country. However, the inclusion of women in the task force is still quite limited. Gender perspectives are not specified in the regulation. In the USA, President Donald J. Trump appointed 12 men in his Covid-19 task force in the early phase of the outbreak in late January¹, before appointing two women in the early March². Similarly, the appointed task force in Indonesia based on Presidential

Decree No. 7/ 2020 and No 9/2020 about Covid-19 Task Forces, have limited women inclusion which is not aligned with Head of National Disaster Management Agency Regulation No. 13/2014 about Mainstreaming Gender in Disaster Management. The Ministry of Woman Empowerment and Child Protection as representative of women and children was not included as a task force member³. The most influential task force members who appear daily in media to announce the update of Covid-19 are both men. A female doctor was later appointed as additional spokesperson on the third month to announce the daily update of Covid-19 along with the previous spokesman.

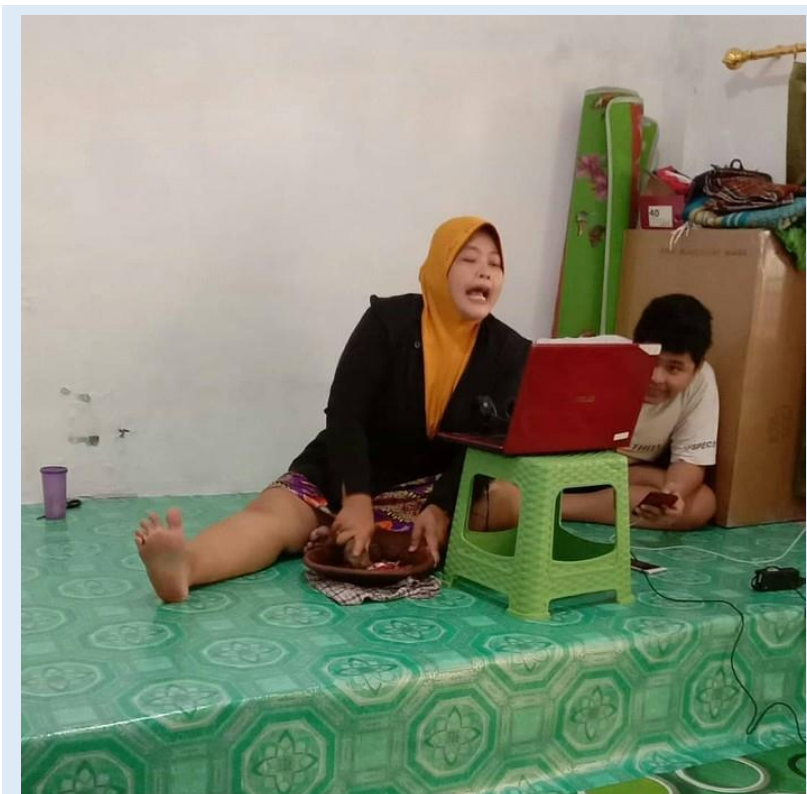
The response to outbreaks such as Ebola, Zika, and now Covid-19 are claimed to ignore the structural issues or known as 'tyranny of the urgent'⁴. Meaning gender perspective or existing inequality are not considered in the response. This condition made women even more vulnerable. In the Indonesian context, Covid-19 task force focus their responses and regulations to solve urgent biomedical and economic problems. Limited consideration on gender resulted in even greater inequalities on the ground.

The Inequity health workforce

During a health crisis such as a pandemic outbreak, a large number of health workers are needed on the front line of response to curb the rapid spread of the pandemic. In fact, women comprise more than two thirds of the global health workers⁷. Similarly, more than 75% of the health workforce in Indonesia are also women⁸. However, woman health workers earn 28% less than the man in the same field⁷. Moreover, female health workers are likely to be more exposed to the infection, to have worked longer, experienced unpaid work with insufficient leave, and be the first groups to be laid off due to outbreak⁹. Further, women also experienced "sandwiched" between personal responsibility such as childcare and professional responsibility to care for the patients during outbreak⁶.

Mothers do it all

In the implementation of large social distancing (PSBB) due to Covid-19 pandemic in some areas in Indonesia, many companies also have implemented working from home (WFH) regulation for their employees. WFH might be beneficial for some, but it is considered as



A mother has a virtual meeting while cooking some food during Work from Home (WFH) regulation. (Picture source: food.detik.com twitter @avekiddas)

“working from hell” for women especially mothers. During WFH, the paid work (known as first shift) and the unpaid work (known as second shift)¹⁰ would be carried out simultaneously.

The disproportionate amount of domestic work or unpaid work carried by women and men¹¹ also increase the burden. The paid work includes intense online meetings and finishing other tasks from the workplace, while unpaid work ranges from domestic chores such as cooking and cleaning and helping children with their homework. In Indonesia, women participation in domestic chores is four times higher than that men¹² which may differ based on location (city or rural) and social status⁵. Women who live in the rural area and/or have lower social status usually do it all the domestic work, while women who live in the city and/or have higher social status have options to pay for helpers or a nanny.

Female worker: the hardest hit

The Covid-19 pandemic severely impacted industries which lead to massive unemployment. The majority of female workers who work in service sectors such as retail, hospitality and tourism, and health and care sectors experienced massive layoffs¹³. Around 1,2 million workers in Indonesia were laid off as of April 2020¹⁴. Moreover, female migrant workers were obligated to leave their jobs and be deported to their home countries without sufficient support¹⁵.

The increasing number of cases of violence against women

The health crisis such as Covid-19 triggered gender-based violation (GBV) due to stress because of Covid-19 uncertainty and movement restriction^{5,9}. The form of GBV could be physical, verbal, and psychological⁵. There are more than seven thousand cases of violence against woman reported during January to early August 2020 in Indonesia. In nearly 90% of these

cases, the perpetrator is a man who is an intimate partner and parent¹⁶.

Conclusion

The Covid-19 pandemic has impacted an entire population, and each person or region experienced it differently, including Indonesia. The inclusion of gender in the response agenda is the key in having a sensitivity regarding the existing inequality and available risk and detrimental effects of the current disaster or pandemic situation. fulfilment needs and justice. ■

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Inspiring Hope and Resilience amidst Dire Straits

CDP's Perspective and Experience in Responding to COVID-19

By Loreine Dela Cruz, Executive Director, Centre for Disaster Preparedness Foundation, Inc. (CDP), Philippines

The whole world was shocked and shaken by the COVID-19 pandemic. The coronavirus disease as described by health experts is an infectious disease caused by the severe respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV2), a new strain first detected in Wuhan, China in 2019. It has impacted around 215 countries in different regions of the globe. The 2 August 2020 figures showed 17,660,523 of confirmed cases and the death toll is running to 680,894 in affected countries of the world. In the Philippines in particular, it is second to Indonesia with highest number of cases in Southeast Asia reaching already at 103,185 with 35,569 active cases.

With the seemingly unfettered spread of the pandemic, the best prevention for slowing down the transmission is for an informed citizenry that understands the causes and how the virus spreads. As such, CDP's experience of community-based disaster risk reduction and response for many years has a significant role in engaging whole of communities and society via families. The families as primary carers can become frontliners in communities in building their resilience in varied contexts whether in urban or rural settings.

As a response to the current pandemic, CDP advocates and promotes the harnessing and maximizing of the role of families in

communities as carers and frontliners in the fight against COVID-19. They can do their part in preventive measures by adhering to the protocols of washing hands frequently, using face masks, and observing physical distancing. They can help in information dissemination and contribute to contact tracing based on their social circles and sphere of influence in their communities. And as they take care of their very own families, they are contributing not to increase the number of cases which are currently on the rise. Addressing their economic needs is making the Bayanihan to Heal as One responsive and actualizing the all-of-society and all-of-humanity approach in this pandemic. The Bayanihan to Heal as One is the law that was passed in the country in response to COVID-19 pandemic. A truly remarkable source of inspiration are the women taking on the bridging role and leadership starting with providing additional income support for their family and helping in health issues of the community. When the situation calls for it, it becomes natural for women to step up and exercise leadership for their family and community.

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support Services (MH-PSS) for Frontliners and Affected People

Aside from preventive approach already mentioned, another significant response of CDP in the

context of COVID is in mental health-psychosocial support services. Identified as one of the most urgent need and concern not only by health workers and frontliners but by the affected population as well, CDP has designed an online approach to conduct MH-PSS among medical professionals, health workers and frontliners to cope and manage in COVID response. The medical and health professionals including other frontliners such as firefighters, crisis hotline operators, pharmacists, local disaster risk reduction and management officers experience stress, pressure and uncertainty amidst the situation brought about by COVID. CDP's MH-PSS became a welcome intervention by the people affected and suffering from distress.

CDP does the MH-PSS in a non-threatening, lighter approach and process for about two hours either face to face but observing physical distancing or via online. In the course of the intervention, the participants get to identify what they want to do to be helpful to the affected people and communities, cull resilient statements and frame shared/articulated statements into resilient attributes that provides hope and resilience for the participants. An example of a statement from the participants would be like 'this will turn around for the best'. The resilient attribute that may be culled from such statement is optimism wherein the



Happy Faces after the MH-PSS session.



MH-PSS Session.

participant is able to reappraise the situation and its impact considering the fact that initially it may appear to be negative. From the 25 psychosocial support services interventions that were already conducted, the feedback was that the intervention was very helpful for them to proceed with their job assignment in a more positive and hopeful perspective. They were able to harness the strength from one another and the courage to proceed despite fear and uncertainties.

Harnessing the gifts of Humanity

The pandemic despite its sheer gloomy impact to many individuals, on the other hand, it provided some new discoveries in leadership and governance of states all over the world, also for family and community relationships in various localities. The spiritual nurturance and self-awareness of people became paramount in varied, unique settings. From the collection of feedback, there are good things that were brought about by the pandemic. One of the positive points that had happened is family togetherness and time for bonding that bring about closer and deeper appreciation of one another -- discovering their wonderful traits



Output of MH-PSS.

and peculiarities and doing things together like work chores at home or other new and exciting ventures that they would enjoy doing together. These were not happening previously during normal situations due to busy schedules of all family members. At the community level, it is supporting one another to live and survive in the face of difficulties, economically, emotionally and psychologically with all the stress from job loss, health concerns, etc.

Adapting to the new normal is the way forward making the lives of people flexible and responsive to the call of the times. It is always instructive to anchor on new things and discoveries that drive resilience forward. There are many fronts in the battle against COVID, the medical solution, enhanced governance, compassion, unity, and service. CDP, together with its fellow women and men will bounce back, better. ■

AIR QUALITY AND COVID-19

Air Pollution in China and COVID-19: What Are Possible Links?

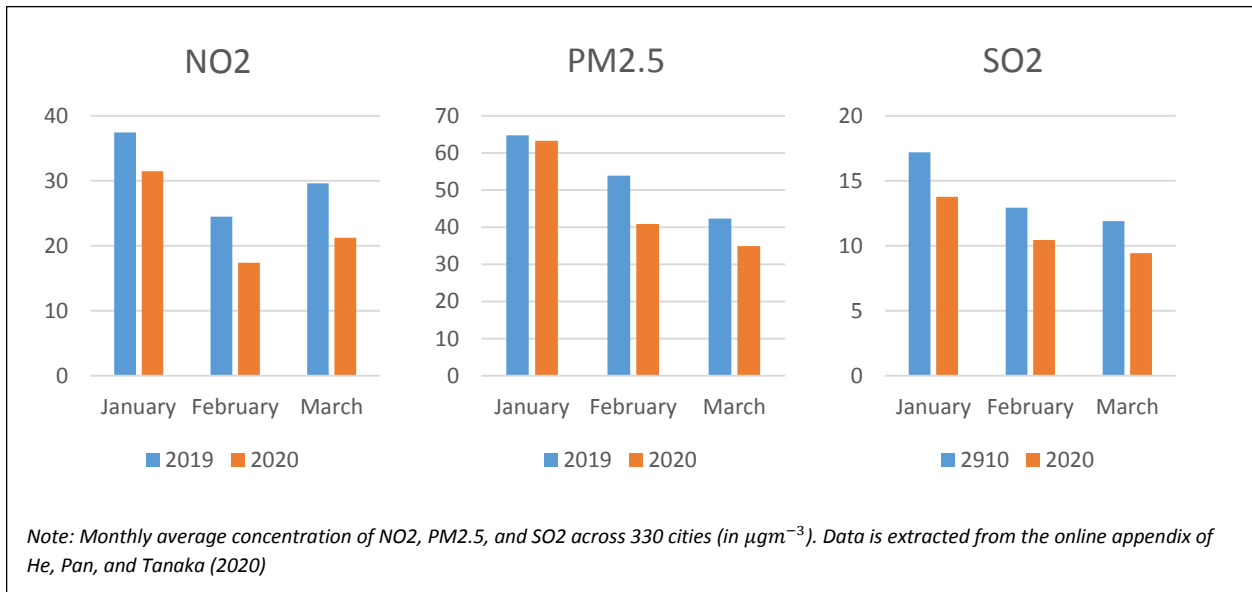
By Eiji Yamada, Ph.D. Research Fellow, JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development, Japan

China was the first country where the current COVID-19 crisis emerged. Since the first case of an unknown disease reported in Wuhan in December 2019, the people and the government of China have paid tremendous cost to contain the spread of the virus, by restricting the economic activities and people's mobility in populated large cities. Among the episodes of economic damages due to such draconian

measures, a silver lining was the clean and blue sky in major cities, which is unprecedented since the past few decades. China has long suffered from severe air pollution, costing the health and lives of the people. A WHO estimate suggests that air pollution contributed to more than 1.1 million premature deaths in China in 2016.⁶ This huge environmental burden is reportedly reduced to some extent, due to the

lockdowns and other governmental measures to restrict human interactions. As shown in the figure below, for major pollutants such as NO₂, PM_{2.5}, and SO₂, the level of concentration was lower throughout January to March in this year compared to the same months in 2019. He, Pan, and Tanaka (2020) argue that there was a causal link between the COVID-19 related restricting measures and the reduce

⁶ https://www.who.int/gho/phe/outdoor_air_pollution/burden/en/.



air pollution in the first three months of the year 2020. The imposition of a formal lockdown contributed to reduce PM_{2.5} concentration by 14.07 $\mu\text{g m}^{-3}$, suggesting a sizable environmental benefit.

While the COVID-19 crisis delivered a short-run benefit in terms of urban air quality, its mid/long-run consequences is difficult to predict. How will China's air pollution evolve in the post-COVID period? Recent headlines tell that air pollution in China resurges as the government is easing strict measures to limit people's mobility. Even though it is still early to evaluate whether the pandemic will raise or reduce the long-run level of air pollution, existing researches suggest a handful of potential links that are crucial.

First link comes through the response of local environmental policies to the urgent need to revive economy. In China, the authority to enforce environmental policy is decentralised to local governments. Due to the built-in system for performance evaluation of local leaders that comprehensively assess various achievements including local economic output and environmental quality, leaders have a tendency to adjust strengths of environmental enforcement to secure local economic

activity (Zheng et al. 2014). Due to the negative economic shocks caused by the COVID-19 crisis, local governments may have been incentivized to loosen environmental enforcement for spurring the economy. Especially, the disruption of global trade and travel might cause a longer effect on the global supply chain in the direction to reduce the demand for Chinese goods. If the Chinese central government and local governments respond to this situation by easing environmental regulations order to reduce the production cost, China's air quality may be worsened in the long-run compared to if the COVID-19 crisis did not happen.

However, we should note that people's preference may have also changed by the pandemic. White collar workers experienced the luxury of remote-work from home – they have become to hate the burden of commuting in crowded traffic than ever before. What is more, people experienced consecutive days of blue skies. They already knew well that respiratory diseases can be severer under polluted air. There are a lot of studies in pre-COVID times that find that people in China actually care about the air quality as revealed from consumption and migration decisions (Chen, Oliva, and Zhang 2017; Freeman et al. 2017;

Ito and Zhang 2016). If the current pandemic has increased people's demand for clean air, this will be a power to promote environment-friendly production system and urban structure. ■

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	Page
1. When Disasters Collide <i>Mihir R. Bhatt, AIDMI, India</i>	2
2. Growth and Jobs – A Major Casualty of COVID-19 <i>James P. Villafuerte, Senior Economist, Asian Development Bank, Philippines</i>	3
3. Impact of COVID-19 on Asia’s SMEs: Choices and Opportunities for the Global South <i>Denis Nkala, Regional Coordinator and Representative, UNOSSC Asia and the Pacific Office, Thailand</i>	4
4. Youth and Climate Change Adaptation: Accelerating Adaptation Action <i>Dr. Kavya Michael, Associate Fellow, and Saurabh Bhardwaj, Fellow & Area Convener, Center for Climate Modelling, TERI, New Delhi, India</i>	5
5. CityNet Role in COVID-19 Response: Building on Korea’s Response and an Increase Role for Local Governments <i>Geunhyeong Yim, Chief Executive Officer, CityNet, Korea</i>	6
6. Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Investments in Asia <i>Mia Mikic, Director, Trade, Investment and Innovation Division, United Nations ESCAP, Thailand</i>	8
7. Why and How Myanmar Slowed Down COVID-19 Impact on Communities: Key Action <i>Ngwe Thein, Executive Director, Capacity Building Initiative, Myanmar</i>	9
8. Women and Work: The Impact of COVID-19 in Indonesia <i>Debby Paramitasari, Abdul Kadir, Fatma Lestari; Disaster Risk Reduction Centre, Universitas Indonesia (DRRC UI)</i>	11
9. Inspiring Hope and Resilience amidst Dire Straits <i>Loreine Dela Cruz, Executive Director, Centre for Disaster Preparedness Foundation, Inc. (CDP), Philippines</i>	13
10. Air Pollution in China and COVID-19: What Are Possible Links? <i>Eiji Yamada, Ph.D. Research Fellow, JICA Ogata Sadako Research Institute for Peace and Development, Japan</i>	14

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