

Disrupted: How COVID-19 is affecting societies across Asia

Testimonies of an unfolding crisis

March - August 2020

FRIEDRICH
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STIFTUNG



FOREWORD

The COVID-19 pandemic is a generation-defining event with far-reaching implications. It is not only the most severe public health emergency in recent history but also an economic and social crisis of unparalleled proportions that is touching every aspect of human life.

To understand the repercussions of this crisis and chart a way forward, Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) in Asia launched the blog series “Disrupted: How COVID-19 is affecting societies in Asia” in late March 2020.

For six months, FES experts, partners and guest contributors shared their insights on local issues and broader regional developments. They documented the ways in which the crisis has unfolded in 16 countries in Asia and shed light on what it means for workers and supply chains, gender justice, climate action, peace, security, regional cooperation and geopolitics. From the first lockdown experiences and initial government responses to the greater impact of closed borders, economic recession and debates over the new normal, these articles showcase how different parts of societies are being impacted.

The coronavirus pandemic highlights existing inequalities and amplifies them. For those who make it through the crisis, the ability to get back on track will be affected by class, gender and race. And the ability of Asian societies and states to recover will depend on a variety of factors, including their public health management, national development paths, integration into the world economy and level of international cooperation.

Beyond the immediate health crisis, COVID-19 has forced a debate among decision-makers, civil society, trade unionists and academia over how to “build back better”. Will the clearly visible shortcomings of our current economic and social systems lead to post-pandemic paradigm shifts? Are we witnessing the end of globalization as we know it? Is this a chance to advance workers’ rights and safety? Will care work finally be appreciated more? Do we have a window of opportunity to mitigate climate change? What is the future of the rules-based international order and multilateralism?

These early thoughts on the impact of the pandemic do not give comprehensive answers yet, but they provide a glimpse of what needs to be discussed more, who needs to be involved and who should not be left behind.

Given the fast pace of events, the testimonies in this publication are naturally snapshots reflecting the state of affairs at the time they were written—a compendium of “diary” entries. We hope this spotlight on the debates and developments in Asia are food for thought and inspire more exchanges and learning.



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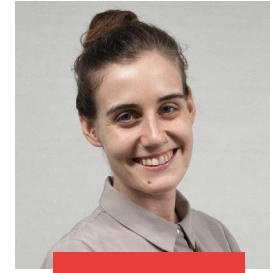
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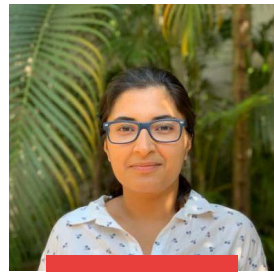
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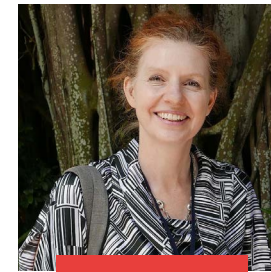
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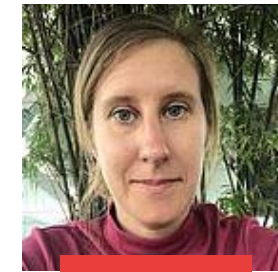
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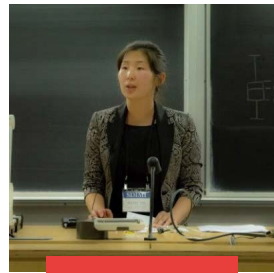
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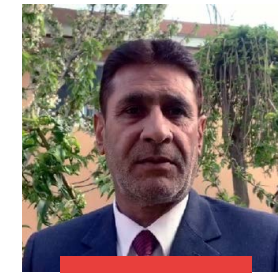
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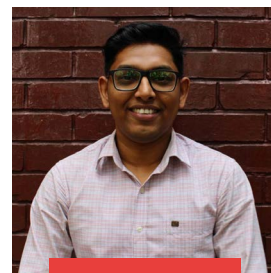
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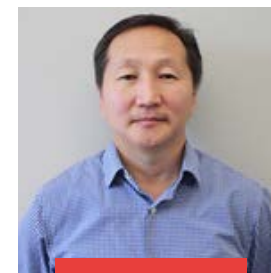
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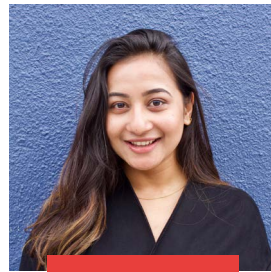
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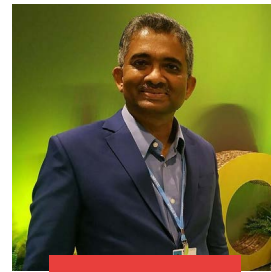
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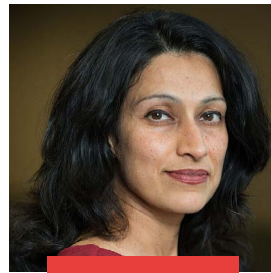
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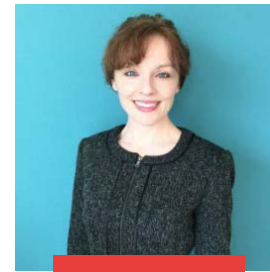
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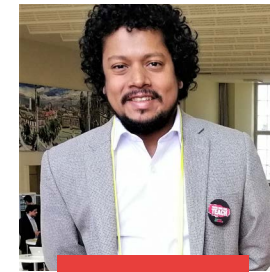
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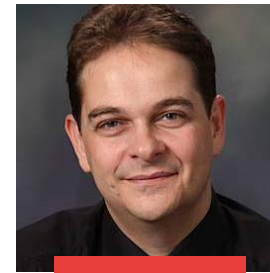
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The many faces of COVID-19 in Asia

24 March 2020

All realms of public life in Asia will be affected by the most severe pandemic in our lifetimes thus far.

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The range of impacts on the economic, social and political systems can seem overwhelming. They are. The many faces of COVID-19 in Asia will stress already strained systems, put disadvantaged groups under even more pressure and will define social justice and international collaboration for years to come. What are the implications of this global pandemic for the truly diverse countries and populations across Asia?

The “strategic new normal” in Asia

With the escalating US-China tensions, as well as regional power rivalries, Asia will likely be caught in a long contest for political dominance and military power, collective security, connectivity, trade routes, resources, artificial intelligence and technological supremacy in the age of digital capitalism. These developments are certainly not new, but they are exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis. The rules and terms of what many refer to as the Asian Century are about to be renegotiated in the coming years. With countries across the region increasingly caught between the two superpowers, how do governments and civil society navigate in this tense environment and preserve their own autonomy? What does the emerging “strategic new normal” look like in Asia?

Multilateralism and regional cooperation

The international rules-based order and cooperative approaches to tackling global challenges are experiencing a severe crisis. Multilateral bodies have been weakened, protectionism is on the rise, major countries are withdrawing from treaties and political, economic and military coercion have become a common practice again. We are witnessing the return of geopolitics to Asia. An increasingly fragmented picture is emerging characterized by a plurality of alliances and counter-alliances, old and new institutions and a general trend towards decentralized mini- and plurilateral coalitions shaped and re-shaped on an issue-by-issue basis. The Asia- and Indo-Pacific regions will likely become central to shaping the future of the multilateral order.

As of late March, almost all countries in Asia have shut their borders, cut flight connections, revoked visas and now hibernate in various levels of self-isolation. At the same time, national responses are not sufficient to tackle the global crisis. The fast-spreading virus demonstrates the interdependence of

the United States, China and other major economies. The need for more and better coordination and multilateral action might be spurred. Distance can create closeness. Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi, for instance, quickly convened the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) leaders in a video call to discuss how to address the crisis together. Senior officials representing the 10 members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are also about to convene shortly. It remains to be seen, though, how the region will adapt to the disruptions in supply chains and the potentially more decoupling, deglobalization and diversification. Do we see a revival of regional cooperation or do we, on the opposite, witness the return of each-nation-on-its-own policies?

Supply chains and workers

The global lack of demand for consumer goods and the coronavirus threat-induced shutdowns of factories along vulnerable value chains will shake the global trade system. The plummeting oil price and reduced CO2 emissions are among the first indicators of the severe decline in production and the corresponding ripple effects expected for the global economy. Interrupted supply chains will leave many thousands of workers in Bangladesh's garment sector unemployed. [One million garment workers have already lost their job](#) in a country with almost no social security net.

Peace and security

In Afghanistan, the COVID-19 outbreak is adding an additional layer of complexity to an already fragile peace process and domestic political turmoil. It is also making the insurgent Taliban realize they need health care workers. In the past, the Taliban regularly targeted international aid workers, but they now assure all international health organizations and the World Health Organization of their [readiness to cooperate](#) and coordinate with them in combating the spread of the virus. Insurgencies around the world may soon wonder about the point of continued fighting if their physical survival is threatened by the global pandemic. Thus, the repercussions of the COVID-19 crisis can also be felt in the realm of peace and security, with UN Secretary-General António Guterres calling for a global ceasefire to focus on [“the true fight of our lives”](#).

Climate change

The rising collaboration in combating climate change may suffer severe setbacks. Although the immediate

effects of the pandemic are reducing the emission of greenhouse gases—[China's CO2 emissions dropped by a quarter](#) after Chinese New Year, we also see widening fault lines between nation states in crises. The recovery efforts after the expected global recession tend to put international long-term collaboration at formidable risk. On the other hand, the unprecedented challenges that lie ahead and the momentum they create might also open up opportunities for meaningful action.

Gender justice

As health and care workers, women are on the front lines of the fight against COVID-19. Will the currently visible value of care work survive into the post-pandemic world? Women in Asia are expected to be hit the hardest by the crisis because they do the most precarious low-paid jobs. House helpers and nannies have lost their jobs, and many of those services are no longer needed. Additionally, women continue to carry the main burden of unpaid care work, which has increased due to school closures. Women are more vulnerable regarding financial and social protection. Many also lack opportunities and access to equipment and skills that would enable them to thrive despite the crisis.

Asia is different

Advisories about social distancing and work from home in the Global North fall flat in view of the realities of most people in Asia, particularly in the Global South. Billions of people work informally, live in densely populated settlements, use crowded public transport or do not have the kind of job that enables remote work. Informal and platform workers have lost their income and are left without social protection, putting them and their societies at risk. The digital divide could exacerbate the vulnerabilities of those who are already left behind.

The “now normal”

We talk a lot these days about the unfolding new normal. And yet, the pandemic has just commenced and is here to stay. What trends that we are now discussing are permanent, and which are just temporary? Are we witnessing structural disruptions severe enough to trigger lasting systemic changes? The truth is, we don't know. In the here and now, we can at best understand the “current normal” or “now normal”. What the new normal will look like one day in a post-COVID-19 world, is yet to be deliberated and should be shaped by all of us.

Nepal: Tourism sector workers lose livelihoods

31 March 2020

In Nepal, the last tourists are leaving. Their guides stay behind. How are workers in the tourism sector coping with the COVID-19 crisis?

Travel and tourism are central pillars of the Nepali economy. The government had launched a promotional campaign to develop the sector further: Visit Nepal 2020. In early March, the campaign was cancelled. Nepal's tourism sector had generated nearly **241 billion rupees** in revenue in 2018 (about \$2 billion), which contributed 7.9 per cent of GDP. At that time, the sector supported more than 1 million jobs directly and indirectly, and the numbers were expected to grow in 2020. Now, many hotels, resorts, airlines and travel and trekking companies have been forced to shut down.

Workers in the tourism sector are left with nothing

Suman Prasad Parajuli, President of the Union of Trekking, Travel, Rafting, Airlines, Culture, Archaeologies, Courier and Cargo Workers (UNITRAV), is sounding the alarm bell: "There are all together around 100,000 people working in the trekking sector who are expected to lose their jobs. Around 70,000 trekking porters, 22,000 licensed trekking guides and 4,000 mountain trekking guides as well as many cooks and cleaners are going to be unemployed. So are 5,000 tour guides, 3,500 local guides [and] 10,000 transport [and] rafting guides and outsourced airline jobs."

After international travel came to a grinding halt in the past few weeks, there are still thousands of tourists in the country. Some governments have started to bring their stranded citizens home. Some of them are still stuck in famous tourist destinations, like the lakeside city of Pokhara, located close to the Annapurna range, one of the most popular regions for trekking.

You earn, you eat

As the last tourists leave, their guides and porters stay behind. "Nepal is one of the most famous and safe destinations for mountain and mountaineering activities, such as trekking and hiking. There are also many other cultural sights to see, but the European and Asian travellers mostly come for trekking. There are more than 1,000 trekking guides and porters who are jobless now in Pokhara due to the lockdown," says Bijay KC, President of UNITRAV Pokhara.

Most of them have little protection and often very limited savings. "They work on daily wages—you earn, you eat," says Dipesh Prasad Thapaliya, tour guide and Secretary at the Organization Department of UNITRAV.

Workers need support to sustain their livelihoods

With the country under lockdown, people are only allowed to go out for grocery shopping. The country's middle class—mostly living in their family-owned houses—can probably cope with these challenges for a while. Most of them had been stocking up and preparing for a shutdown in the past weeks. Many Nepalis still remember the earthquakes of 2015 and the following hardships

all too well. But for daily wage labourers, the times are already harsh. How long can they hold out with little to no savings and without meaningful government support? What are the consequences?

UNITRAV's Dipesh Prasad Thapaliya fears the worst. "There are thousands of workers across the country who run their life through daily wages. It is hard for them to survive, especially in the city areas where they are now stranded because of the lockdown. They are not even able to return to their villages. This economic crisis might bring physical as well as mental problems for them, which might be even more dangerous than the coronavirus."

The overall impact on the Nepali economy is hard to predict, but some immediate effects of the crisis are already felt. Vegetable prices doubled in the past week, while the prices of other essential food items went up by 10–20 per cent. Propane gas is hard to come by. Nepal is heavily reliant on imported goods, most of them coming from India. Nepal's huge trade deficit has been largely financed with workers' remittances from abroad, which amount to about 30 per cent of GDP.

The tourism sector might not recover anytime soon. Meanwhile, people's livelihoods need to be sustained. But for the workers in the Nepali tourism industry, there is no quick fix in sight.

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Photo: Flickr / Gavin Yeates

Afghanistan Peace in the time of COVID-19

03 March 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has elevated the urgency for peace in Afghanistan to unprecedented levels. For the fledgling peace process, it is either an existential threat or a golden opportunity.



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When Gabriel García Márquez published *Love in the Time of Cholera* in 1985, Afghanistan had entered the sixth year of what has become more than 40 years of war, leaving millions of people dead, injured or displaced. In 2019 alone, more than 10,000 civilians were killed or injured in the conflict. In his novel, Márquez's metaphor of cholera, which strikes unexpectedly and leads to death within a few hours, reminds us of life's brevity and of love's urgency. The unfolding COVID-19 crisis in Afghanistan is yet another reminder of the devastating effect of wars on human security. For the fledgling peace process, however, COVID-19 is either an existential threat or a golden opportunity, depending on whether Afghan elites and the Taliban can work together.

Even a small outbreak could cause a major health crisis

Officially, Afghanistan had registered just 273 cases as of 2 April, mostly due to its extremely low testing capacity—by 16 March, only 250 tests had been conducted. The numbers of unreported cases are likely to be much higher, given that since January more than 115,000 Afghans have returned from Iran, one of the epicentres of the pandemic. The Health Ministry warned that up to 75 per cent of the population could become infected, with more than 100,000 people potentially dying.

Even a small outbreak could cause a major health crisis, especially if the fighting, which injures thousands of people every year, continues. According to the Fragile State Index, the Afghan State's ability to provide essential services, such as health care and sanitation, to the general population was among the weakest in the world in 2019. The ability of the Afghan government to effectively deal with the coronavirus pandemic is further degraded by the ongoing constitutional crisis stemming from the disputed results of the 2019 presidential elections, and this may worsen outcomes.

Lockdown and social distancing: neither fully enforceable nor feasible

To address the crisis, the central government is building new COVID-19 hospitals and clinics in provincial and district centres. With many more cases anticipated and essential equipment in short supply, such as masks and ventilators, these measures are insufficient, and major international assistance is needed. A lockdown of Kabul and other cities since 28 March aims to slow the spread of the virus, yet the government has neither the human resources to enforce such rulings on the streets nor the financial ones to compensate businesses and workers for the resulting losses. Many people are unable to fully observe social

distancing either due to crowded multigenerational families in one home or dependence on daily wages.

Closed borders and reduced aid

The situation is further aggravated by regional developments. While the Afghan authorities asked Iran to close the border to prevent the spread of the virus, cross-border movements continue. India and Pakistan, sought-after alternative sources for health care to the relatively ineffective Afghan health care system, have suspended international travel, which also affects vital international trade. Finally, restrictions extend to the northern borders with Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, increasing fears of shortages in essential supplies. For the landlocked country, where food insecurity is an endemic challenge for millions of people, wheat imports from Central Asia are crucial.

In addition to the domestic and regional challenges, Afghanistan's outcomes lie predominantly beyond its span of control. More than 75 per cent of the Afghan budget is financed by advanced economies, many of which face major economic fallout from the COVID-19 crisis. The US economy alone could decline by \$2.5 trillion. Donor countries, including the US, will likely face increased pressure for international disengagement. Total amounts of assistance are likely to shrink, and donors may prioritize short-term humanitarian aid over medium- and long-term development goals. These impacts will only add to the quagmire created by the US aid reductions in response to the yet-unresolved election crisis.

The only way out: Cooperative action for the greater good

In these critical times, cooperative action by Afghan elites and the Taliban is urgently needed to prevent a humanitarian catastrophe. All parties have started to call on the public to observe protective measures and to impose strict rules and health checks at hospitals in areas under their control. There have been two further steps in the right direction: last week's formation of a negotiation team, which was widely accepted at least among the Kabul factions, and the start of deliberations over the release of Taliban fighters in government custody. If an immediate ceasefire, as demanded by the UN, materializes and prisoner releases are accelerated, the COVID-19 human security catastrophe will be mitigated. At a minimum, this would sustain greater levels of good will among donor countries and assure continuing aid. At a maximum, Western countries will actively participate in the political process, steering Afghanistan towards positive outcomes. The COVID-19 pandemic has elevated the urgency for peace in Afghanistan to unprecedented levels. We hope it is converted into the required decisive action.

Bangladesh: Garment sector collapse could devastate millions of workers

06 April 2020

Bangladesh's textile sector is highly dependent on demand from Europe and the United States. The economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will hit factory workers, especially women.



Photo: Shutterstock, SK Hasan Ali

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Seven years after the devastating Rana Plaza garment factory collapse shook Bangladesh, the economy and workers are shaken again. On Wednesday, 25 March, Bangladesh announced an unprecedented 50 billion taka (around \$588 million) stimulus package to support the country's ready-made garment industry and other export-oriented sectors to cope with the economic fallout of COVID-19. With global consumption plummeting, the demand for mass consumer products is falling. And while the stimulus package is [intended to stabilize workers' wages](#), the economic disruption has already outgrown the rescue package. "Earmarking the amount to pay to the workers was a nice thing, but at best, one month's minimum salary for some 4 million garment workers can be paid with this amount," [says Mustafizur Rahman](#), a fellow at the Center for Policy Dialogue in Dhaka.

Bangladesh's garment sector in crisis

More than 1 million Bangladeshi garment workers have already lost their source of income. [Garment manufacturers had lost \\$1.5 billion](#) in orders before the stimulus was even announced. Most workers in Bangladesh's garment sector are typically unable to save any portion of their earnings. With their sole source of income barred, the consequences will be dire. The *FES Core Labour Standards Plus* project [analysed](#) the role of Bangladesh's garment sector in the past and proposed policies that would have allowed workers social protection and decent wages. Safety nets are critical to mitigate the

worst consequences for workers in the coming recession.

Unions safeguard labour rights

Trade unions and worker organizations are uniquely positioned to effectively reach workers with timely guidance and help to negotiate mutually beneficial agreements with employers regarding safety. The IndustriALL Bangladesh Council, for instance, has recommended the following urgent measures:

- Until the situation is under control, employers should give workers paid leave.
- Health care and treatment should be ensured.
- The government should provide cash support to workers.
- Under the leadership of the Ministry of Labour, a tripartite monitoring task force, including government, employers and unions, should be established.

Now more than ever, the government

of Bangladesh, factory owners and brands should work together with independent workers' rights organizations and trade unions to get through the crisis and ensure workers some protection.

Women are vulnerable amid this recession

Depending on estimates, between [61 per cent](#) and [80 per cent](#) of the workforce in the garment sector in Bangladesh are women. The sector has been the most important source of formal—even though often precarious—employment, particularly for semi- and low-skilled women. At the same time, the lack of protection for women with long working hours and poor working conditions has impacted women's health (see [Feminist Perspectives on the Future of Work in Bangladesh](#)).

Without any form of social protection, a wave of factory closures leaves women with only few options. They could become domestic helpers with

less pay and increased vulnerabilities or be unemployed in a country with virtually no social security net. For women whose workplace was an escape from abusive households, the situation can only worsen as domestic abuse rises.

The region is particularly exposed to the global recession

Bangladesh exemplifies the struggles many export-orientated countries in the region are already experiencing or will experience soon. The short-term consequences will be severe. Asia's economies will have to deal with broken supply chains and their restructuring. As multinational corporations put reshoring, diversification and renegotiations on their agenda, the workers in the region face an uncertain future. Trade unions and workers' organizations must use this disruption to demand better working conditions along rebuilt supply chains.

Philippines: COVID-19 as a public health crisis

07 April 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates the long-standing symptoms of a weak and inequitable public health system in the Philippines. A densely populated capital, widespread socioeconomic disparities and inept infrastructure have made the country an epidemiological disaster waiting to happen.

Like any other country whose health system has been put to the test, the Philippines, with its relatively ill-equipped health system, is expected to be overwhelmed with the surge of COVID-19 cases. A shortage of hospital beds in regular as well intensive care, mechanical ventilators and masks are among the most pressing issues in an archipelago country of 100 million people.

Days after the announcement of a lockdown, it became evident that action plans and centralized power alone would not be enough to ensure social protection for all Filipinos. For civil society groups, it was a call to take a more active role in addressing the pandemic.

Without intending to romanticize the concept of resilience, Filipinos have always been known to pull through environmental hazards and humanitarian crises that regularly plague the country. This pandemic is no exception. To help mitigate the impact, decentralized arrangements between corporations and workers have been made. Some are providing continuous payment and are moving to flexible work schemes, while others are directly offering cash assistance to employees. Less optimal short-term fixes, which provide immediate relief but are not certain to benefit workers in the long run, range from releasing workers' thirteenth-month pay to utilization of leave credits during the period of quarantine.

Innovation and resourcefulness

In the face of the rapidly unfolding COVID-19 crisis, improvising, local initiatives and creative innovations are the call of the hour. They are key to address the lack of personal protective equipment (PPE), testing kits and critical infrastructure. Scientists from the National Institute for Health developed a local antigen-based screening test kit that lowered the cost and reduced turnaround time for results. Students from the University of the Philippines released models for sanitary tents, which were adopted by local government units. Due to the supply shortage of PPE, workers in the garment industry developed a design for masks, together with infectious disease specialists, and temporarily converted their workspace into a makeshift mask factory. Local communities in villages started assembling face shields made from everyday materials.

Social rearrangements as windows of solidarity

It is truly inspiring to see how many innovations in terms of social solidarity are emerging, which are equally important as technological innovations. Schools, hotels and event places have opened

up their spaces to cater to patients with mild symptoms of COVID-19. Cafes and dormitories have opened to accommodate front-liners and people who are homeless. Various individuals have started fundraising programmes for the relief of marginalized groups, developed databases to match donors and those who need assistance and volunteered in government relief efforts. Professionals in different fields are also offering free online consultations via social media platforms.

Stigma and discrimination against underpaid, overworked front-liners

While most people respond to the pandemic with a strong sense of solidarity, public anxiety over the spread of the virus has led to the emergence of discriminating acts against front-liners. Because they are highly susceptible to the virus, some front-liners have been evicted from their boarding house, have been prevented from buying food and, at times, subject to violence. [A nurse in the southern Philippines was splashed with a corrosive disinfectant](#) by five men. In Quezon City, [an ambulance driver was shot](#) in his hand after being accused of transporting COVID-19-positive patients.

Despite the risk to their personal or family's health and poor compensation, health care workers bravely continue going to work.

Any public health crisis is essentially about social justice

Comprehensive health care, even in normal times, is prohibitively expensive and out of reach for many people in the Philippines. Filipinos shoulder more than half of their total health expenses out of pocket. An estimated [1 million people are driven into poverty](#) every year because of health-related expenses. [And 6 out of 10 people](#) in the Philippines die without seeing a doctor.

Social justice is at the bottom of any public health crisis. Civil society in the Philippines has taken on much of the burden, performing tasks that urgently need to be addressed by the government, such as fundraising for more PPE and tests, securing front-liners' welfare and ensuring food supply and distribution. The big gap in this crisis is yet to be filled with the State's response. Hands-on civil society initiatives grounded in solidarity and justice continue to be an important source of hope at this decisive point in time.

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The pandemic of COVID-19 has brought public life and entire economies in Asia to a halt and, with that, global greenhouse gas emissions have come down. China, for instance, witnessed a [temporary drop](#) of its energy consumption and emissions by 25 per cent. As the spread of the virus forced governments to impose drastic measures to contain the virus, we have seen pollution levels drop and air quality improve all over the world. For most people in the climate scene, however, it is clear that the coronavirus crisis is not quite the boon it might seem for the ongoing climate emergency.

First, it would be cynical to celebrate environmental gains at the cost of a global pandemic that is taking thousands of people's lives and hits the most vulnerable groups of society and their livelihoods especially hard (see earlier articles on the Nepali tourism sector or the Bangladeshi garment industry).

Second, looking at the experience from the financial crisis in 2008, the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions will probably not be long term but rather be cancelled out by rebound emissions. Although global emissions dropped during the financial crisis by around 2 per cent, they rose by 5 per cent after the crisis.

"There is nothing to celebrate in a likely decline in emissions driven by economic crisis because, in the absence of the right policies and structural measures, this decline will not be sustainable," [says Fatih Birol](#), Executive Director of the International Energy Agency. After the financial crisis, the opportunity was missed to put the economy on a more sustainable, climate-friendly track. To avoid that mistake happening again, many researchers and climate activists have suggested how [economic stimulus packages should be tied to the promotion of green growth](#) and investment in low-carbon technologies.

In Malaysia, for example, Nithi Nesadurai, Regional Coordinator of the Climate Action Network Southeast Asia, reported that civil society organizations sent a letter to the Minister of Finance after the announcement of two economic stimulus packages by the government and in anticipation of a third one. In it, they demanded that the packages shift the economy towards a more efficient use of energy, sustainable consumption of natural resources, enhanced social and economic resilience against future shocks and equitable access to wealth and resources.

Third, a global recession could slow down a social-ecological transformation. Yes, a massive reduction of global emissions is needed if we

are to avoid a 3- or 4-degree warming of the world, and the past few weeks have shown that such reductions are possible. But [a decarbonized economy means decoupling wealth from emissions and not economic decline](#), where peoples' very existence is threatened. For such transformations, healthy economies are needed. This also requires that governments, which have an active role in steering these transformation processes, make sure that this transition is just and that no one is left behind. A further deepening of the crisis could stall resilient infrastructure projects and the necessary investments for an energy transition.

The global supply chains for the hardware of renewable energy have also been affected. Whereas the factories in China, where 70 per cent of the global supply of solar panels is manufactured, are able to restart their production, it is now India that is under lockdown, causing likely delays in the delivery of wind turbines and solar PVs. With the uncertainty of how long this crisis will last, the completion of renewable energy projects not only in Asia but worldwide could be impacted.

And finally, this health crisis could be a setback for international climate diplomacy. This year, 2020, was supposed to mark the beginning of a decade of focus on the climate, in which countries would step up their ambitions and curb emissions in time to meet the goal of capping the global temperature rise at 1.5 degrees. With the recent announcement that the 26th United Nations Climate Change Conference will be postponed, concerns are growing that the momentum will be lost and the crisis will be used as an excuse to delay climate action. As an example, the European car industry has already called on the [European Union to delay its climate targets](#), and the [Chinese government is reportedly thinking about postponing a new emissions-particle restriction](#) for six months. It should not come as any surprise if those who were against ambitious climate action before this crisis now try to use it for their own interests.

With many things uncertain these days, what we know for sure is that the climate crisis will still be here after the pandemic ends. Therefore, we need to carefully consider these things as a whole and not play one essential crisis against another.

No quick wins: The COVID-19 crisis and climate change

08 April 2020

The measures to contain the COVID-19 pandemic have led to a decline in CO2 emissions. But without structural changes in place, this will not benefit the climate in the long run.

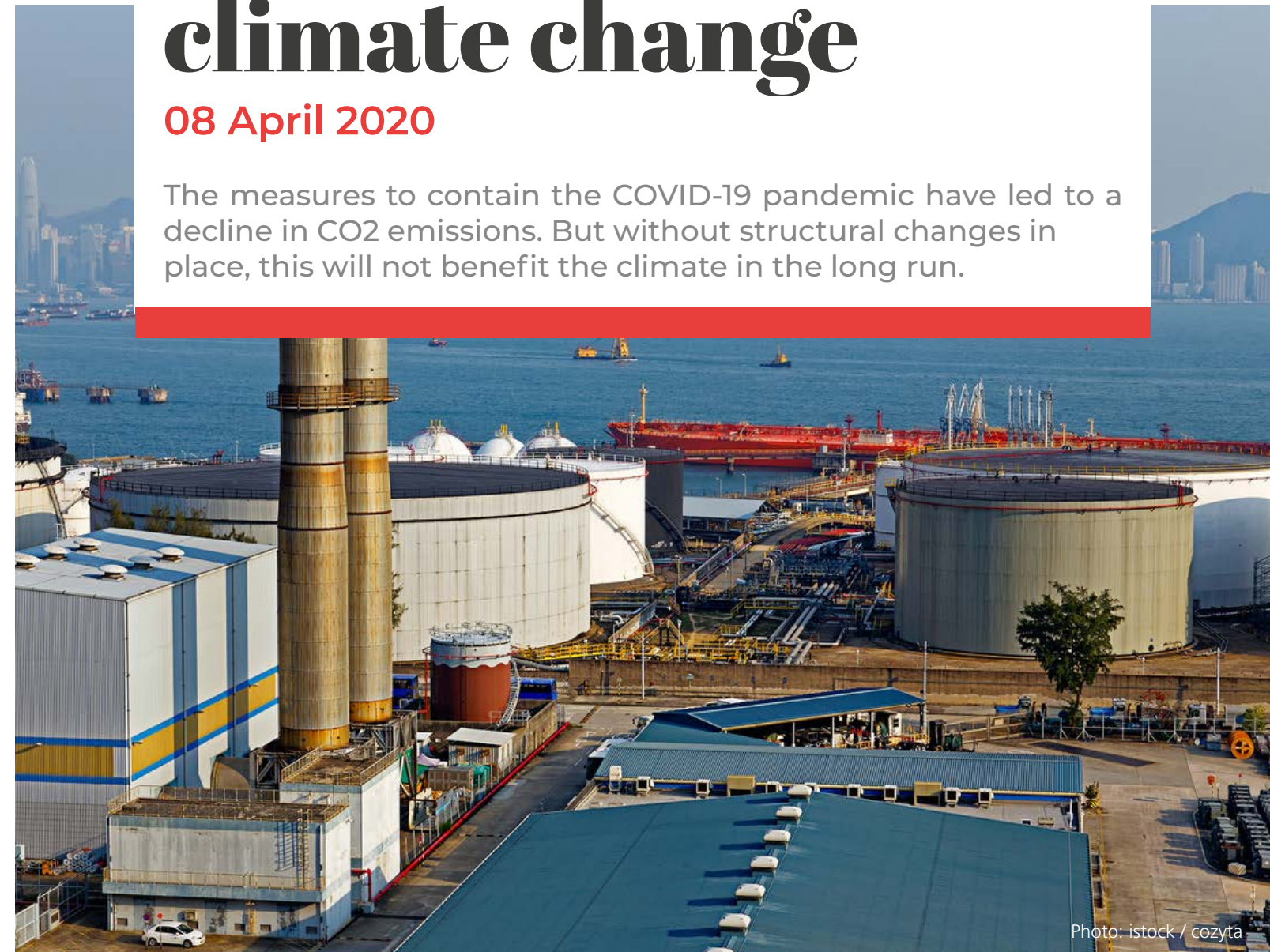


Photo: istock / cozyta

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South Korea: Elections in times of COVID-19

14 April 2020

South Korea's strategy in the fight against the coronavirus is viewed as a model throughout the world. Now the country is conducting parliamentary elections, which are dominated by the pandemic.

South Korea is viewed worldwide as an example of how to combat the coronavirus pandemic effectively. The number of daily new infections has fallen steadily in recent weeks, to less than 50 cases for several days. It appears that the country has the pandemic largely under control for now.

The ingredients of the country's success: early, determined action by the government; fast and comprehensive testing; meticulous reconstruction and contact tracing for each infection cluster; and the application of modern IT (in the form of coronavirus applications for smartphones). A strong orientation towards the common good and the active cooperation of the population in implementing preventive measures also contributed to curtailing the spread of the virus. In public places, most people wear protective masks, and disinfectants are available everywhere—in shops, offices, buses and even in lifts. Despite this, the government had to impose measures that considerably restricts the daily life of Koreans. Large events are prohibited, and schools and universities are still closed. So far, though, it has been possible to avoid more drastic compulsory measures: No general restrictions on going outside have, as of yet, been imposed. Government offices, businesses, restaurants and cafes remain open.

Voting with protective masks and plastic gloves

The country is now heading to the polls. Parliamentary elections will take place on 15 April. Under the early voting procedures, voters were able to cast their votes at more than 3,500 polling

stations on 10–11 April. More than 11 million people availed themselves of that opportunity, which suggests a high level of voter turnout ultimately. The process of casting votes, which went relatively smoothly during the early voting, is strictly regulated because of the COVID-19 crisis. Voters must observe social distancing rules in the polling stations, wear protective masks, disinfect their hands and wear plastic gloves to cast their vote. In addition, body temperatures are taken in front of the polling stations. If a high temperature is detected, a voter is guided to a special voting booth, which is then disinfected after the vote is cast.

The process of casting votes is more difficult for people currently in self-quarantine and special precautions have been taken for these voters. They are permitted to interrupt the quarantine and can cast their votes within a specified time slot, in special voting booths that are disinfected on a continuous basis. However, there is no possibility of participating in the elections for most Korean citizens who are living abroad because, in many countries, restrictions on going outside apply, and embassies and consulates are closed.

New forms of election campaigning

Election campaigns in the middle of a pandemic need creative ways to reach voters. Here, there have been virtually no limits to the creativity displayed for this. For example, candidates have showed up on trucks, riding electric scooters or even horses. Electoral events—if they occur at all—involve only small groups or are restricted to the distribution of information leaflets. A popular

trend among candidates is to show themselves disinfecting public facilities and playgrounds, obviously with protective masks, which more often than not makes it difficult for voters to remember their faces. The bulk of election campaigning is taking place online, on Facebook, Instagram and KaKaoTalk. Almost all candidates have their own YouTube channel.

Programmatically, the focus of the election campaign is the government's crisis management. In view of the successes in curtailing the virus, the government hopes that the economic consequences of the pandemic will not be as severe as in Europe or the United States. The current forecasts for economic growth this year range between minus 2.3 per cent and 0.1 per cent. The government has launched several support packages amounting to more than €80 billion to cushion the economic and social consequences. In this regard, the Emergency Economic Council set up by President Moon has become an important crisis management committee, in which both employers and unions are represented, along with the government.

Prospects for the parliamentary elections

In view of the, so far, largely successful management of the crisis, the prospects for the Democratic Party of President Moon have improved considerably. A few weeks ago, the situation looked very different. At that time, South Korea was second among the countries most strongly affected by COVID-19, after China. The number of infections had soared within a short time after a mass infection occurred in Daegu, a city of more

than a million people. The conservative opposition had pressured the government with massive criticism and accused it of serious failures, including that it had not imposed a general ban on travellers from China. This criticism has since been largely muted. With 10,500 infections today, South Korea ranks nineteenth worldwide in terms of cases and is being praised internationally for its successful crisis-response strategy.

The government's effective crisis management is also reflected in current opinion polls. The approval rating for President Moon, who has now completed half of his five-year term in office, has risen to 55 per cent, the highest approval rating since November 2018. The Democratic Party is also in the ascendant and hopes to benefit from the government's successful crisis management. In most polls, it is clearly ahead of the conservative opposition. However, it is difficult to predict how strongly the current sentiments and perceptions will influence the outcome of the elections and the future allocation of seats in parliament, with most of the parliamentary seats assigned according to a majority voting system. Whether the Democratic Party will succeed in increasing the number of its direct mandates remains to be seen. But one thing is already certain, this parliamentary election will go down in history. It will be the first in which the focus of election campaigning is not on traditional electoral campaign themes, such as corruption or relations with North Korea, but on the government's management of a crisis and the combating of a pandemic.



UNI Asia-Pacific 5th Regional Conference,
Nov 2019, Kathmandu
© UNI Apro

UNI Asia-Pacific unions lead the pack in responding to the coronavirus crisis

16 April 2020

Trade unions have a critically important role in mitigating the economic and social effects of the coronavirus crisis. UNI Asia-Pacific Regional Secretary Rajendra Kumar Acharya spotlights the vital activities of workers' rights organizations

Asia was the first region affected by the spread of the coronavirus. The UNI Asia-Pacific Regional Organization (Apro) monitored the situation carefully as governments rolled out public health measures to curb the spread of the virus. Early on it became clear: The most immediate and visible effect of the pandemic is the impact on ordinary people's lives and livelihoods.

Workers on the front line of the pandemic

Health and care workers, cleaners, private security, postal and delivery workers, grocery and supermarket clerks—in this time of crisis—are recognized as essential, working on the front line and providing the bare necessities for all of us. People in the media as well as call centres are doing extremely challenging jobs in this global emergency. Many of them are working extended hours, often without proper protection and suffering under the threat of unemployment and infection.

UNI Apro affiliates' quick response

In Asia, UNI Apro is proud that affiliate unions have led the pack and were quick to formulate responses, some even before COVID-19 was officially named on 11 February. In Macau, the New Macau Staff Rights Gaming Union mobilized to demand that all casino employees wear masks and that the government close and disinfect all casinos. In the early stage of the outbreak in Korea, the Grand Korea Leisure Union had already urged the management to prepare for the impact of COVID-19 and to guarantee workers' safety.

Our unions, from Australia to Nepal, from Pakistan to the Philippines, all alerted their members to defend their rights and urge their employers to provide access to special paid leave, particularly for employees required to self-isolate or who cannot work due to the impact of the pandemic.

We are also proud that many of our affiliates have lent their voice in solidarity to amplify the plight of precarious workers—those who are often described as self-employed, such as casual, labour-hire and migrant workers.

UNI's COVID-19 global survey
In our COVID-19 global survey that ended on 23 March, we asked all members around the world about their situation. Unions have a vital role in the preventive efforts to fight the virus, and more than 90 per cent of our unions have been proactively reaching out to their members with crucial COVID-19 information. At the same time, 60 per cent of union members who continue to work are overwhelmingly impacted by the shortage of protective equipment, such as masks, gloves and sanitizing wipes. It is a situation that is simply not acceptable.

As a result of our joint efforts, we can point to the first successes in Asia: Compelled by the Korean Workers United's advocacy, the Korean government announced additional measures to support exhausted health workers. More than 2,000 health care professionals working on COVID-19 treatment will be compensated for overtime work, get enhanced rest allocation and receive additional protective gear. We are also pleased that our affiliate in Nepal, the Union of Private Hospitals and Healthcare Workers, successfully lobbied the government to provide insurance for all health care workers in the country. But these are only the first steps in the protection of workers.

Changing the structure below the crisis

Even during this global emergency, we remain conscious of the digital transformation that was poised to disrupt the future world of work even before the pandemic. And pointedly, the theme of UNI Apro's 5th Regional Conference in November 2019 was securing a just transition for workers in the digital disruption age—seeking to enhance our unions' capacity for dialogue with employers and governments. In the current ever-evolving context of this pandemic, we call upon governments, employers and corporations to refocus this dialogue and put the emphasis on people rather than profits. Now, it is high time for us to push for a new social charter to save not only the workers and people but also our planet—throughout this unprecedented crisis and thereafter. It is a mission that can only be successful when all tripartite partners join forces.

UNI is a global union federation representing more than 20 million workers from more than 150 countries who work in the cleaning, security, commerce, finance, gaming, graphical and packaging, hair and beauty, information, communication, technology, services, media, entertainment and arts, post and logistics, private care and social insurance, sport and tourism industries: www.uniglobalunion.org

Rajendra Kumar Acharya is the Regional Secretary of UNI Apro. His union leadership began in 1989 when he became a local union delegate in his native Nepal. In the years since, he has held several local, national as well as international positions. Today, he leads one of the largest Asian trade union federations.

17 April 2020

The corona crisis is sending shockwaves through political, economic and social systems. The challenges for the Asia-Pacific region are enormous, and they call for systemic changes.

No one knows how long the pandemic will last, how many people will fall ill, how many lives the coronavirus will claim. But the economic and political consequences of the outbreak are already emerging. Measures to contain the pandemic are disrupting public life around the world.

Starting with China, production has come to a standstill in one country after another. Global supply chains are broken. You don't need a lot of imagination to see a wave of bankruptcies approaching in many industries, where every last cent counts.

Even before the full impact of the pandemic will be felt in countries across the Global South and the Asia-Pacific region, the economic effects are already devastating. Local lockdown policies have left millions of workers in Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Pakistan and Thailand with no choice but to return to their village or country of origin and, by doing so, increasing the risk of spreading the virus into even the remotest and poorest corners.

At the same time, the collapse of consumer demand has caused global brands to cancel their orders, hitting major textile producers like Bangladesh and India. Local movement restrictions and the suspension of port and logistics networks in China are shoving ripple effects through the global supply chains. Cut off from their supplies, manufacturers in Malaysia or South Korea and Malaysia have had to halt production and lay off workers. Border trade, for instance between China and Myanmar, is taking a hit. The collapse of tourism is hitting hard on Indonesia, the Philippines and Thailand. The sudden slump in Chinese demand has shaken the commodity markets and is hurting palm oil exporters like Indonesia and Malaysia. Commodity exporters like Mongolia, which are highly dependent on the Chinese market, already feel the pain resulting from the oil price war between Russia and Saudi Arabia.

The economic response

Some countries in the Asia-Pacific region, such as Japan, South Korea and Singapore, quickly launched unprecedented packages of measures to cushion the impending economic crisis. The emerging economies of India, Indonesia, Malaysia and Thailand have set up stimulus packages, too. Not all countries, let alone the least developed countries, will be in a fiscal position to install the kind of safety umbrella needed to protect their small and medium-sized businesses, freelancers and workers. Whether these and other potential immediate measures are sufficient to stop the economic downturn depends on how deeply the crisis eats through the system.

After past epidemics, a brief, sharp slump in the economy was usually followed by a quick return to growth. Whether this will also be the case with the corona crisis depends on many factors, not least how long the pandemic lasts.



A crisis like no other: Asia and the wider global picture

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Governments now must deliver. This is because the crisis is by no means limited to the economic sphere. The ability of states to protect the life and limb of their own citizens is also being put to the test—and the stakes are nothing less than the fundamental legitimacy of the Leviathan. Decades of austerity policies and of healthcare system cutbacks to the absolute minimum have hollowed out state structures. Many people worry whether their nation will still be able to cope with the major crises. And what does solidarity with others mean when the only thing we can do is to isolate ourselves?

Each nation on its own?

An international pandemic cries out for a coordinated global response. So far, however, many nations have pursued a solo effort. Even within Europe, there is a lack of solidarity. As in the euro crisis and the refugee crisis, Italy in particular feels that its partners have let it down. China cleverly took advantage of the lack of European solidarity and sent a plane loaded with medical supplies to Italy, its Belt and Road partner country. In the meantime, the German government has recognized the geopolitical dimension of the dual crises—coronavirus and refugees—and is concerned about the attempts by external powers to divide Europe. In the Asia-Pacific region, regional organizations are increasingly stepping up to help one another. ASEAN foreign ministers approved the establishment of a regional fund to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. A similar emergency fund scheme was adopted by members of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation.

The crisis is also fuelling the US-China hegemony conflict. For some time now, there has been a bipartisan consensus in Washington to decouple the American economy from the Chinese economy so as not to strengthen the competitor's global supremacy by supplying China with its money and technology. Globally positioned companies now need to reassemble their supply chains overnight. Will all of these corporations return to China when the immediate crisis is over? Corporate executives will then have to think twice on whether to willingly ignore the geopolitical marching orders from Washington. This may offer a major opportunity for emerging economies like India or Vietnam.

And how will Europe's companies reposition themselves after the crisis, after the costs of being overly dependent on Chinese supply chains have become all too clear? In the debate over whether the Chinese company Huawei should be excluded from the expansion of the European 5G infrastructure, Europeans have had a taste of how great American pressure can be.

The corona crisis could accelerate a development that has been going on for some time: deglobalization. As a result, the global division of labour could disintegrate into competing economic blocs. Economies may gather around a regional hegemon to get rid of unwanted competitors through incompatible norms and standards, technology platforms and communication systems or exclusive connectivity infrastructure and market access barriers.

Where will this leave the poorest countries that are struggling to climb up the global value chains? Has their moment for catch-up industrialization passed? How can countries like Bangladesh, Myanmar and Pakistan provide livelihoods to millions of workers if global brands decide to produce closer to their home markets? And how can middle-

income countries like Malaysia and Thailand climb up the global value chain if this chain is cut for geopolitical reasons? Deprived of strategic options, they may end up being much more vulnerable to pressure from their regional patron.

The window to the future is wide open

The corona crisis amounts to an enormous field test. Millions of people are experimenting with new ways to organize their everyday lives. Business travellers are switching from flights to video conferences. University teachers are scheduling webinars. Employees are working from home. Some will return to their old patterns after the crisis. But many people now know from personal experience that the new way of operating not only works but is also more environment- and family-friendly. We must use this moment of disruption, the immediate experience of deceleration, to generate long-term behavioural changes in the fight against climate change.

People are experiencing a wave of solidarity in their neighbourhoods, at work and within their circle of friends. We can build on this experience of solidarity to make society as a whole more cohesive again. If we manage to overcome the crisis together, we are creating a symbol at the dawn of a new era: A community that stays together can meet any challenge.

However, reacting to the crisis also poses dangers. Borders are closed around the globe, visas are cancelled, and entry bans are imposed on foreigners. The record number of orders for industrial robots indicates that the production chains will be made more resilient to breakdowns through a decisive step towards greater automation. Digital automation may shatter the hopes of emerging economies ready to take advantage of the opening spots in the global supply chains. Already today, the factory floors of global manufacturers in India and Vietnam are populated by robots. Growing foreign direct investment seeking to diversify supply chains will drive growth, but it may be jobless growth.

Developing economies must not be left alone to cope with the devastating effects of the crisis and its social aftermath. It is in the very interest of European countries to assist them in their recovery. Last but not least, our planet cannot afford any more austerity. The investments in the social-ecological transformation necessary to mitigate global warming need to be made now and must not be out-crowded by the cost of the corona crisis. We are, indeed, all in this together.

Hyperglobalization is making us vulnerable

The global crisis has raised awareness of how vulnerable hyperglobalization has made us. In a globally networked world, pandemics can and do spread across borders at high speed. Global supply chains can all too easily be cut. The financial markets are vulnerable. And now, right-wing populists want to close the borders and isolate themselves from the world—but that is the wrong answer to the global challenges of epidemics, wars, migration, trade and climate change. Rather, our goal should be to address the root causes of these crises. To do this, the global economy must be placed on a more resilient foundation.

The global financial system, which is held together by not more than duct tape, urgently needs reordering. For more than a decade, central banks have not been able to counter



deflationary trends through monetary policies. In the crisis, governments with expansionary fiscal policies are jumping aside. Politically, this means a return to the founding logic of parliamentarianism, the principle of “no taxation without representation”.

In other words, the financial systems must be put back under democratic control. Conflicts are arising from excessive interdependence. These conflicts must be cushioned by international norms and multilateral cooperation. Unlike the 2008 financial crisis, however, this time there is no coordinated response from the 20 largest economies. The geopolitical rivalry of the great powers, on one hand, and the right-wing populist call for isolation, on the other hand, stand in the way of greater international cooperation. The existing elements of multilateral governance need to be strengthened with concrete contributions. This can begin by providing more solid funding to the World Health Organization and continuing with a G20 meeting to coordinate economic crisis management. - Here, the Germany-led Alliance for Multilateralism can prove its value.

The desire for a fundamental reorganization of our economic activity and collective life has never been greater. Like a spotlight, the corona crisis is illuminating the geopolitical, economic, ideological and cultural fault lines of our time. Might this crack in the edifice even signal an epochal break? Does the age of turbo-globalization end with the decoupling of the major economic blocs? Are the oil price wars heralding the end of fossil-based industrial economies? Is the global financial system changing

into a new regime? Is the system guarantor's baton going from the United States to China, or are we experiencing the breakthrough of the multipolar world?

What is certain is that the coronavirus could lead to a number of trends that have long been hidden. All of these developments are mutually influencing each other at breathtaking speed. This complexity suggests that this crisis will go deeper than the 2008 recession. The pandemic could be the burning fuse on the powder keg of a global system crisis.

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Who cares? Feminist responses to the pandemic

20 April 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic has a strong gender dimension. It is increasing women's vulnerabilities and risks in their roles as workers and caregivers. Feminists in India have developed demands to address these issues now and beyond the crisis.



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Across Asia, women are being hit hard by the economic downturn caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Lockdowns and partial shutdowns have dire implications across all strata of society. But informal workers are particularly hard hit, and the majority are women, many of them the head of household. The loss of wages deprives these families of money they need for rent and daily necessities, exposing them to hunger, malnutrition and infection.

The pandemic has also exposed the essential role of women's unpaid care work for both economies and societies. In Asia, [women already spend 4.1 times more of their time on unpaid care work](#) than men. Men across the region spend on average one hour per day on unpaid care work, but just half an hour in India and Pakistan. Under lockdown conditions, in addition to childcare and household chores, women are now confronted with additional responsibilities, such as home schooling, more intense care of the sick and community care. Women who are juggling care responsibilities with the

need to earn money are more likely to be self-employed, to work in the informal economy and to have no paid sick leave or other social protection.

Feminist recommendations — What will be left in the post-crisis economy?

The impact of the pandemic on global markets is destroying the livelihoods of women in vulnerable sectors around the world. For those who make it through, their ability to get back on track will be affected by gender biases, class and race.

Feminists have long been demanding greater recognition of the contribution of women's work to national income, economic growth, national efficiency and productivity. The urgency of this has been emerging with more force as the crisis unfolds. Research on previous pandemics, such as Ebola, have found a significant negative impact on women's long-term health and economic vulnerability even after the crisis.

Civil society activists worldwide have been quick to raise their concerns,

share resources online, call for solidarity and [demand gender-responsive state policies](#) to address the extraordinary challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. UN Women in Asia and the Pacific took stock of the [first 100 days of the COVID-19 outbreak](#) in the Asia-Pacific region and now seeks to ensure that the world post-COVID is built on principles of human rights and gender equality.

The policy recommendations and demands are about the inclusion of women and marginalized groups in all aspects of life, including groups particularly vulnerable in many Asian countries, such as women migrant and informal workers. For example, special attention should be paid to the gender impact of digitalization and access to information and communication technology in light of the shift to online education and remote work, which is problematic in many parts of the region, where the digital gender gap is wide. UN Women also recommends more sharing of emerging and good practices from the region to address the challenges.

Feminists to the rescue

One example of women's and feminist groups to engage in the crisis comes from India, where more than 300 groups have come together to demand specific interventions from state and non-state actors:

1. Food security for informal sector daily wage workers, migrant populations and women-headed households.
2. Timely access to comprehensive sexual and reproductive health services, such as emergency contraception and safe abortion and the supply of menstrual hygiene products. Staff to be trained to recognize signs of domestic violence.
3. Barrier-free access to education ensured through the creation of educational radio programming appropriate for school-age children, and expansion of free Internet access.
4. Encouraging the equitable sharing of domestic tasks in explicit terms and through allowances for time off and

compensation for all workers.

5. Access to emergency shelters, information and public health information in multiple languages.
6. Access to safe water and sanitation.
7. Provision of personal protective equipment against infection for front-line health workers.
8. Inclusion of women in COVID-19-related decision-making regarding the front-line workers: doctors, nurses, sanitary staff and volunteers of NGOs who are risking their lives.
9. Addressing domestic violence during COVID-19 lockdown by providing active helplines and immediate intervention.

These measures and recommendations by feminists are not only stepping stones towards more gender-equal and just societies, they are crucial for building future resilience of all parts of society for the emergencies and disasters to come.

Vibhuti Patel

is a professor at the Advanced Centre for Women's Studies, School of Development Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai. A team from the university, including Vibhuti, was among the 300 groups in India who organized themselves online to formulate the recommendations.

Lea Gölnitz

worked as a Programme Manager with FES ORCA until July 2020 where she headed the regional feminism as well as women and the future of work projects.

Stories of hunger: India's lockdown is hitting the poorest

22 April 2020

Amid the world's largest lockdown, migrant workers face an impossible choice: Risk contracting the virus or go hungry. Indian journalist Sanjay Kapoor reports from New Delhi.



Migrant workers and families line up outside the Anand Vihar bus terminal to leave for their villages, New Delhi, India
© BHUVAN BAGGA/AFP via Getty Images

Sanjay Kapoor

is Editor of the New Delhi-based *Hardnews Magazine*, the South Asian partner of *Le Monde Diplomatique*. He has authored a book on corruption and is a regular commentator on Indian and foreign TV channels.

Stories of hunger deaths of migrants stranded between their villages and big cities have begun to slowly find space in the Indian media. Many of these reports are promptly denied, but in each of these cases, the dead never return.

In the north Indian town of Bhadohi, for instance, a woman daily wage worker threw her five children into the Ganges River because, she reportedly claimed, she was no longer able to provide food for them. Police later claimed starvation was not the reason but that she was of an unsound mind and acrimonious. In another case, a hungry migrant in Delhi sold his phone for 2,500 Indian rupees, which he handed over to his wife, and then hung himself. The police said he was also mentally unstable.

By conservative estimates, ever since India went into a shutdown to flatten the coronavirus curve, 189 deaths have taken place due to hunger, exhaustion while walking back home and suicide. These numbers will swell further.

According to government estimates, 1.25 million migrants are stranded between big cities and their villages and are living in government shelters. By another estimate, 33 per cent of the total migrant population has had no access to food since 24 March, the day Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi announced a comprehensive lockdown that has meant shutting down factories, work sites, small and large businesses and transport. In a matter of a few hours, millions of daily-wage workers lost their job and found it difficult to stay in their rented house.

A genuine mass exodus

Without money and fearing starvation, they each wanted to take the first bus or train to their village, where they hoped to find food and emotional security. Thousands headed to the bus terminal in Delhi. They were stopped by force by police officers who were ordered to keep people away from the roads. Many of these migrants began to walk hundreds of kilometres back home. Some cycled or took a lift to reach their village—a genuine mass exodus during the coronavirus lockdown. While on his way home, a hungry and tired migrant collapsed in north India's state of Uttar Pradesh State. He was 400 kilometres from his village.

According to IndiaSpend, there are 120 million rural migrants in most of the big and small cities of the country. Professor Santosh Mehrotra, a labour economist with Delhi's Jawahar Lal Nehru University says: "There exists little basis for the migrants to be invisible to the decision makers. This data was in the public domain when the lockdown was declared."

There have been demonstrations and riots in Mumbai and the textile city of Surat in Gujarat, where roughly 700,000 daily-wage workers, unable to go home, are reportedly in miserable shape. Civil society activists are increasingly coming forward with reports of starvation deaths.

"We are workers who work to feed ourselves—we are not beggars."

A survey conducted on April 9 of 11,000 migrant workers in different parts of the country by Stranded Workers Action Network (SWAN) revealed: "50 per cent of workers had rations left for less than a day. [And] 72 per cent of the people said that their rations will finish in two days, [while] 96 per cent had not received rations from the government, and 70 per cent had not received any cooked food. Around 98 per cent had not received any cash relief from the government."

Long queues for food are visible in Delhi and other cities of the country. Some people are embarrassed that they have to go through this ignominy and beg for food. A news report in an online publication quoted a worker nursing a hurt pride: "We are workers who work to feed ourselves—we are not beggars."

There have been well-meaning suggestions from Nobel laureates Amartya Sen and Abhijeet Banerjee as well as former Central Bank Governor Raghuram Rajan. In an article in an Indian daily newspaper, they advised that the government should open up its considerable food reserves of 77 million tonnes—three times more than its buffer stock. "At a time of national emergency, it makes perfect sense to dispose of some of the existing stock," they argued. They also recommended issuing temporary ration cards to anyone who wants to stand in the queue and pick up their monthly allocation. What has aggravated the crisis is the understanding that there are about 100 million poor Indians who have been excluded from the public distribution system due to outdated census data. Many others are left out from the public distribution system because their fingerprints could not be read by a biometric machine.

An impossible choice

After the lockdown, the Indian government announced free rations and cash transfers to migrants. Sen, Banerjee and Rajan found the amount "small and narrowly targeted" and believe that an amount decent enough should be given to help them stay at home during lockdown. The World Bank, too, has expressed concern that reverse migration could otherwise take the pandemic to the villages of India. Indian public health experts weigh the risks differently and claim that—in a country that may see its 400 million people working in the informal economy fall into even deeper poverty due to the lockdown—more will die of hunger than the virus. It's an impossible choice no one wants to be confronted with.

Under pressure: Health care workers fighting at the front lines in Nepal

22 April 2020

Female doctors and nurses carry a double burden during the COVID-19 crisis. Unions in Nepal are demanding urgent action to safeguard workers' physical, psychological and economic well-being.

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Samira Paudel is a Project Coordinator at FES Nepal.

There are 34,000 doctors and 100,000 nurses registered in Nepal. Many more are working as support staff, such as cleaners, in the health care sector. FES Nepal reached out to trade union partners working with health care workers for a glimpse of their situation.

The double burden is taking its toll

According to Pratima Bhatta, organizer and Treasurer with the Union of Private Hospitals and Healthcare Workers in Nepal (UNIPHIN), more than 75 per cent of care, paid and unpaid, is done by women. Women are on the front lines of the fight against COVID-19 and at the same time shoulder most of the unpaid care work.

Schools and day care facilities have been closed since 19 March. This especially affects female health care workers, who bear most of the responsibility for childcare and household work in their family. In times of lockdown, when everyone not working in an essential service must

stay home, many women are juggling care responsibilities with paid work in their home office. Workers in the health care sector do not have this option. Yet, they fear being infected and putting their family and friends in danger through possible exposure to COVID-19.

Health care workers, cleaners and others working in hospitals face multiple health risks as well as discrimination and social stigma. This is illustrated by a [recent case of a nurse who was evicted by her landlord](#). A female hospital cleaner from Banke District in Province No. 5 in the far-western part of Nepal found herself in a genuine dilemma: "I am doing my regular duty with safety measures. I am very thankful that the hospital has provided a mask, a separate dress and gloves to me. The only problem I am facing now is complaints from my neighbours. They say, 'Every day you go to the hospital and come back home.' I try to stop them from worrying by saying that I have applied all safety measures and that I also wash my clothes every day and have a bath after

returning to my room. I am very careful about everyone's safety."

Who cares about the health of health care workers?

As in many other countries, there is [lack of protective personal equipment](#), especially outside Kathmandu Valley. Despite the difficult working conditions, health care professionals are working tirelessly to protect the country from the threat, according to Prithivi Raman Thapaliya, President of UNIPHIN.

The union has circulated information on precautions to prevent infection among its members, especially targeting non-medical staff. It demands that hospital owners and authorities:

1. Provide personal protective equipment (PPE) to all staff on duty.
2. Deploy only a minimum number of nurses and female paramedics for duty because the mostly female nurses have dual duties; with the imposition of the lockdown, they are under much stress because they are also taking care of children and other family members.
3. Provide a one-time allowance amounting to two monthly

salaries to the staff.

4. Provide adequate insurance for staff.

The management of the hospitals have agreed to the union's demands. The government also has provided insurance, with a coverage of 2.5 million rupees (about \$20,500) for each health worker. But because there is a shortage of PPE in the country, the first demand seems to be impossible to put into practice.

The highly privatized health sector is already crumbling

In a diverse country with one of the world's most challenging topographies, the government has mobilized around 50,000 female health volunteers to reach out to residents at the community and village levels. The health volunteer system began in the 1980s and is crucial for basic health services, even in remote places. The volunteers will support the application of safety measures and social distancing and will be remunerated with \$15 per day for helping in the fight against the coronavirus.

Meanwhile in the urban parts of the country, even without a high number of COVID-19 patients, the highly privatized health sector is already

showing signs of failing in delivering needed treatment. While being the best equipped, private hospitals try to avoid possible COVID-19 patients. A number of [people with fever or respiratory symptoms are turned down at hospitals](#). Against this backdrop, the government also issued a package of incentives for doctors and health workers from the private sector to help treat the COVID-19 cases. But there is scepticism, whether or not private hospitals can be convinced to join, especially due to the lack of PPE not being addressed.

When the heat of the fight against the virus has cooled, there will be a need to look at the lessons learned from this crisis that exposes the breaking points of our health care systems, and not only in Nepal.



Public Health Unit of Budhanilkantha Municipality, Nepal
© Upama Dahal Pokhrel



Food distribution campaign © HomeNet

Thailand: Helping the most vulnerable workers

23 April 2020

For millions of Thai workers, the lost income due to the COVID-19 response is fast becoming a more pressing daily concern than social distancing. Initiatives by the government and civil society are working to mitigate this impact.

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In Thailand, more than 10 million people work in the informal economy outside agriculture. Tourism normally accounts for a significant proportion of the economy. Workers in these sectors were hit hardest by the response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Following a partial lockdown in Bangkok, the government has approved some relief measures for informal workers. The most important is a [5,000-baht handout](#) (\$150), which workers must register for through a telephone app or online. Those in formal employment must continue to receive a portion of their salary if their place of work closes, according to the Labour Protection Act.

But these state-run initiatives must be complemented by civil society. Some organizations are already helping out, such as [HomeNet Foundation](#), a non-government organization that supports home-based workers across Thailand. More involvement from other sectors is needed, including academia and trade unions.

Informal workers

The majority of Thailand's street vendors and motorcycle taxi drivers has been unable to work since the pandemic prompted a soft lockdown of large parts of the country, explains Poonsap S. Tulaphan, Director of the HomeNet Foundation. "Some can work, but their income is decreasing to only \$3–\$6 per day, which is not enough to buy food and sanitizers to protect their health."

"When it comes to home-based workers, their condition is slightly better," she adds. "They can produce face masks for sale. Domestic workers can keep their jobs if they are live-in and can stay in their employer's home. But some living on their own have lost their job because their employer wanted to practise social distancing and keep non-family members out of the home."

HomeNet has taken steps to help informal workers who have lost their income source. They submitted policy recommendations to the Ministry of Labour and produced a video to help informal workers understand how to apply for the government handout. Together with a team of researchers from Chulalongkorn University's Social Research Institute, HomeNet is now developing policy recommendations based on data they are collecting on the current situation of workers to assess if they are eligible for government assistance.

Formal workers

Formal workers, particularly those in the tourism sector, have also been extremely hard hit. Of the roughly 1.6 million people who work in hotels nationwide, nearly [980,000 live on the minimum wage](#) of approximately \$10 per day. At the time of writing, 95 per cent of the country's hotels had no income at all and could not pay wages. But only if the hotels are closed by order of the authorities can employees receive 62 per cent of their salary from

the Social Security Fund for three months. While employers are demanding an official order to close all hotels, the government has only ordered their closure in a few provinces.

"All the workers on the tourist island of Phuket have been affected," says Vijit Dasantad, President of the Phuket Federation of Hotel and Service Labour. "There are only three unions of hotel workers in this province, he explains. In contrast to the rest of the approximately 35,000 hotel workers in Phuket, his federation's 500 members were able to negotiate partial or full payment during the shutdown.

Economist Kiriya Kulkolkarn of Bangkok's Thammasat University has welcomed the state interventions but questioned whether they are sustainable. "The government should support hotel businesses," he says. "But as this crisis seems to be a long one, most industries will be affected. My concern is that the government won't have enough money for all in the future. We need to think about other initiatives."

The way forward

At this stage of the COVID-19 pandemic, income insecurity is the most pressing problem for many workers. While the 5,000-baht handout is very helpful for informal workers, similar relief should be provided to formal workers forced to take leave with low or no pay.

Looking ahead, the challenge for labour in the longer term is likely to be job loss. There are pre-existing government skills development schemes, but so far none have been designed or altered to respond to the specific needs caused by the pandemic and its consequences. This must be followed up, with an eye on the lessons learned from past crises and in other countries.

Non-state actors have a range of invaluable roles in facing this complex challenge. The media have been helping to give voice to the problems and needs of workers, especially informal workers. The network of HomeNet and other NGOs has demonstrated the potential to support informal workers and is planning more initiatives to apply their experience and knowledge intensively. For their part, trade unions in the formal sector have so far not been very active but could be potential actors because they are legitimate representatives of workers. They should collaborate with other civil society groups, notably academics, who could provide them with systemic information to help them organize, advocate and negotiate.

Who gets to stay at home?

Social distancing in Asia's megacities

24 April 2020

In Asia's densely populated cities, social distancing possibilities are limited. The pandemic reveals the need for more sustainable responses and people-centred urban planning.



High density living in Hong Kong
© istock / visualspace

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Asia has seen rapid urbanization, with an annual urban growth rate of [3.4 per cent](#), compared with the 1 per cent in Europe and the United States. Of the 33 global megacities with a population of at least 10 million, [19 are in Asia](#) (10 in China and India). Additionally, there are hundreds of metropolitan areas with more than 1 million people merging into megacities—vast urban settlements with multiple centres.

This development has led to a rise in population density, with [six of the world's most crowded cities now in Asia](#). The challenges this poses for policymakers and urban planners are highlighted by the pandemic. People in the lower economic and social strata have especially been sidelined, living in cramped quarters or slums. And while COVID-19 might not discriminate, the containment measures often do. A lack of social welfare, job security and space leave the marginalized more vulnerable. Lacking governmental support is substituted by self-organization, private initiatives, religious groups and NGOs.

In times of crisis, adequate government action is needed to protect the civil rights of all members of society. Blanket solutions commonly fail to cater to the distinct needs of the most vulnerable people. Annie Wilkinson, an anthropologist and health systems researcher, [highlights](#) the lack of comprehensive data collection on informal settlements, asking: "How do epidemiological models predict spread in populations they have no data for?" As many of Asia's major cities struggle with similar issues, an evaluation of ongoing responses and community efforts could support the development of more sustainable mechanisms in the future.

Hong Kong

Hong Kong is one of the most densely populated and expensive cities in the world. Many immigrants and impoverished older persons work in low-income jobs and, despite social distancing, the city relies on many people in "essential" jobs like construction, cleaning or delivery services. To them, home office is not an option.

For the [20 per cent who live on income below the poverty line](#), being told to #stayhome can feel like detention. In confined spaces, illegal rooftop dwellings or subdivided units with shared kitchens and bathrooms, physical distancing is impossible. Hong Kong's housing prices have led some people to rent partitioned beds or subsections in badly ventilated 40-sqm flat-shares. [These conditions drive others to stay outside](#). The city's homeless population has direct implications for its efforts to contain the epidemic. As Tony, a 53-year-old homeless man told the *South China Morning Post*: "Are we really going to start sleeping on the streets when the parks get too crowded? I'd rather catch the virus and get some proper rest in a hospital."

In the past decade, the number of rough sleepers has more than doubled. Because only a few shelters are available, 24-hour McDonald's restaurants have become de facto homes for the so-called McRefugees. After a public outcry, [the hamburger chain reversed a COVID-19-related stop](#) of evening dine-in services and let homeless people back in. So far, the Hong Kong government has made an effort to keep businesses running and allow people to go out for their daily necessities and some fresh air. But even though the government approved multiple-billion Hong Kong dollar relief packages, the financial and social support for the poor residents have [received little attention](#).

Asian megacities with populations living in slums

In other parts of Asia, the quickly growing informal slum settlements pose an even bigger challenge to contain the spread of COVID-19. From **Manila** and **Dhaka** to **Delhi** and **Karachi**, low-wage migrants dwell in living quarters that often even lack necessary hygiene facilities, let alone space for social distancing.

The nationwide lockdown on Indian citizens [triggered an exodus of millions](#) of poor people from the metropolitan areas. Crowded living conditions in slums increase the risks of contracting the virus. Due to the lack of sanitation, many people living in the slums resort to public bathrooms or open spaces. Water is often only provided through shared taps, used by hundreds of people, many of whom must walk a long distance for the access. In some slums, the water supply is normally provided by workers who have [now returned to their rural home](#). Once more, the scramble for a comprehensive response to a pandemic has led to the exclusion of the vulnerable populations and left them on their own.

In **Manila**, a [megacity under lockdown](#), people who are poor have been facing sudden unemployment and no financial support or additional health benefits. While some of them left the city before the lockdown and returned to their family elsewhere, others opted to stay in the capital because they rely on their daily income. Some [3 million](#) people commute daily from the outskirts into Manila. During the lockdown, informal workers without proof of employment have been particularly hard hit because they are banned from entering the city. Susana Baldoza, a volunteer and resident of the San Roque community, told the *The New York Times*: "We haven't received help from the government, no help from the outside, except the donations that they give us. And people can't work." Those who dare to confront this situation and break social distancing rules may even risk being [shot by the security forces](#).

Government responses all across the Asia-Pacific region highlight the reliance of urban areas on cheap rural labour migration and societies' deficiencies in social welfare protection. The demonstrated lack of people-centred city planning should become a starting point for future improvements.



Indonesia: A late shift in re-balancing economic and health priorities

Photo: Mudik, or Pulang Kampung, is an Indonesian term for the activity where migrants return to their hometown during major holidays especially Lebaran (Eid al-Fitr).
© istock / Georgina Captures

28 April 2020

The most populous country in Southeast Asia was initially slow to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. Now the government has stepped up travel restrictions and eased limits on public spending to fight the crisis. Observers hope such measures will come on time.

A slow wake-up call

In the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, Indonesian authorities seemed less responsive than in other countries in acting decisively to curb the spread. As late as February, President Joko Widodo (Jokowi) was still saying that he would offer discounted travel to Indonesia in a bid to attract more tourists. In March, after only a handful of cases were officially identified, the government was publicly debating the causes of Indonesia's apparent immunity rather than actively seeking to track the spread of the disease.

The health minister said diligent prayer had warded off contagion and encouraged Indonesians to eat well. The home affairs minister urged citizens to eat more bean sprouts and broccoli, while the president vaunted the merits of traditional herbal drinks. Another minister argued that the virus cannot survive in the country's tropical climate. The lack of widespread testing as a possible cause for the low number of reported cases was not debated.

On 14 March, the World Health Organization urged Indonesia to take more serious measures to fight the spread of the coronavirus, including a national state of emergency. This marked the beginning of a turnaround for the national and local governments.

That day, the Jakarta administration was the first to announce it would close schools across the capital. The next day, the president recommended social distancing and urged all people in Indonesia to work, study and pray at home. On 31 March, Jokowi declared a national health emergency, effectively removing some autonomy from regional administrations and forcing them to comply with central government policies. On 3 April, the borders were—with a few exceptions—closed to foreigners. And in mid-April, Jokowi called for greater transparency in how the nation handles the outbreak, apparently reversing his approach in March and admitting to holding back some information to avoid a public panic.

Fighting blindfolded

Testing has been a challenge. Health services have struggled with limited time and material. Only 36,000 people had been tested by mid-April. On 13 April, President Jokowi instructed the health minister to test 10,000 people per day. With a population of 270 million, this still leaves authorities almost blind to the real number of cases, especially with many people not seeking hospital care. Testing kits have been a limiting factor, but the national task force has been able to secure 50,000 from South Korea, with another 495,000 having started to arrive around the time of writing.

Leaving aside the matter of infection rates, the number of deaths from COVID-19 has been among the highest in Asia. This, and a spike in overall deaths in March, compared with the same period in previous years, as reported by Reuters and others, has led several observers to estimate that the real prevalence is much higher than the official figures.

Making any forecast is hard, given the challenges with data and the uncertainties around transmission. According to one estimate by task force advisor Professor Wiku Adisasmito, as well as Indonesia's national intelligence agency, infections might peak at some point in May or early June before declining, leaving a total number of cases at around 95,000. Another model by the University of Indonesia's Faculty of Public Health has warned that there could be more than 140,000 deaths and 1.5 million cases across the country by May, unless authorities take tougher actions.

Vulnerable health care infrastructure

Indonesia introduced universal health care coverage in 2014, responding to campaigns by trade unions and civil society. By February 2020, it covered 82.7 per cent of the population. But hospital resources are insufficient to face the potential spike in the number of patients. The country still only has around 1.2 hospital beds per 1,000 people, compared with 12 or 14 beds per 1,000 people in Japan and South Korea. Hospitals across the archipelago have slightly more than 8,000 ventilators. And there are only 132 referral hospitals for COVID-19 patients in the whole country, which Ombudsman Alamsyah Saragih has warned will not be enough. "We need more than economic programmes to counter the impact of the epidemic. We can't neglect health and social security," he told the *Jakarta Globe* earlier this month.

Balancing economic and health risks

The difficult state of the economy, budget and exchange rate has sharpened the government's dilemma. Since the outbreak, the International

Monetary Fund has revised its projection for the growth in Indonesia's GDP this year, down to 0.5 per cent from the original projection of 5.3 per cent. President Jokowi has said the economy could even contract, down to a growth figure of minus 6 per cent. Indonesia's current account, already in deficit, has been further hit hard, while the exchange rate dropped as investors sold off nearly 148.8 trillion rupiah (\$9.04 billion) in Indonesian assets and global commodity pricing slid downward.

Despite the worrying economic indicators, the government has rebalanced its initial approach by responding to the health imperative as well as the social collateral damage and lifted the cap on the budget deficit, previously at 3 per cent of GDP for 2020–2022, to give policymakers more spending flexibility. The government has used this ammunition to budget around 405 trillion rupiah to deal with the COVID-19 crisis.

The extra spending represents 2.3 per cent of GDP and is set to expand the fiscal deficit for 2020 to nearly 5.1 per cent of GDP. The new money is to be allocated across four sectors as follows: health—75 trillion rupiah, social protection—110 trillion rupiah, tax incentives—70.1 trillion rupiah and economic recovery—150 trillion rupiah.

The *mudik* dilemma

Mudik, or exodus, is an annual tradition whereby up to 20 million people travel to visit their families for the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, mostly going from cities out into the provinces. This year, around 1.3 million people were projected to travel from Greater Jakarta alone, where it is estimated that two-thirds of the country's COVID-19 cases are. Such a migration has the potential to intensify the spread of the virus in all parts of the archipelago, including many areas with far worse health care systems than Jakarta.

For President Jokowi this presented a dilemma. He refrained for weeks from banning *mudik*, most likely in a bid to avoid another setback for the economy or due to allegations by political opponents that he would be favouring or attacking certain groups. Or he feared social unrest triggered by people who lost their livelihoods in the city and wanted to return to the countryside. But on 21 April, the Indonesian president finally pulled the ripcord and officially banned *mudik* travel, suspending all inter-city public transport. Now the most important question, which has to be answered within the next two months, is which instruments could substitute the large-scale social restrictions after lifting them.



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COVID-19 and refugees in Asia: A crisis waiting to happen

29 April 2020

Governments, funders and humanitarian agencies must act now to save lives and mitigate the potentially catastrophic impacts of COVID-19 on refugee and host communities throughout the Asia-Pacific region.

Around 3.5 million refugees reside across the Asia-Pacific region, having fled conflict and persecution in their home countries. The largest refugee populations in Asia are Afghan refugees residing in neighbouring Iran and Pakistan and the Rohingya refugees from Myanmar in Bangladesh. Refugees are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19: They often have limited access to medical care and hygiene supplies, reside in high-density settings where social distancing is not an option and struggle with pre-existing health conditions that put them at higher risk of mortality and morbidity.

A potential hotspot: Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar

Nowhere better encapsulates this vulnerability like the Rohingya refugee camps in Cox's Bazar District, Bangladesh—one of the largest camps in the world, with nearly 900,000 refugees. The first case of COVID-19 was reported in the town of Cox's Bazar on 24 March. As of today, no case has been found in the camps. But authorities are sounding the alarm that

an outbreak could be catastrophic. A [study](#) by researchers from Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health led to their prediction of around 500,000 cases within the first 12 months in the Rohingya camps, with hospitalization capacity being eclipsed within two to five months.

The setting is ripe for transmission. Around [40,000 people](#) reside per square kilometre, more than 40 times the average density of Bangladesh. [More than half](#) of households do not have enough water to meet their basic needs, such as handwashing. Around [175,000 cases](#) of acute respiratory infection have been recorded since the beginning of the year, highlighting the ease of communicable disease transmission in the camps. More than 31,500 Rohingya are [older than 60](#) and are particularly at risk of COVID-19-related mortality. [Traditional burial practices](#), which involve close social contact, can also facilitate the spread of the virus. [Food storage is impossible](#) in the small huts, forcing people to leave their home on a daily basis to secure food. These challenges are compounded by [a dearth of ICU beds](#) and [zero ventilators](#) in the entire Cox's

Bazar District of 3 million people. A major concern is the lack of reliable information and limited communication channels. With [Internet and phone access widely unavailable in the camps](#), awareness-raising and information-sharing about the virus and prevention practices are difficult. This has fuelled fear, anxiety and misinformation, such as a [pernicious rumour](#) that symptomatic persons presenting at a health care facility will be killed. Health-seeking behaviours among the Rohingya as well as trust in service providers were already low before the pandemic and appear to be eroding further.

The good news is that government actors and humanitarian agencies are preparing to respond. For example, UNHCR and partners are working to add [1,900 beds](#) to serve both refugees and the host communities, aid agencies are setting up [disinfection points](#), and awareness-raising efforts are expanding through the mobilization of community volunteers, radio programmes and [tuk-tuks](#) topped with megaphones.

Action needed across the entire Asia-Pacific region

Much more needs to be done to minimize transmission and protect vulnerable refugee communities as well as the host communities—not just in Cox's Bazar but in refugee settings throughout the Asia-Pacific region (and globally). The Afghan refugee population, for instance, constitutes the [largest protracted situation in the world](#), with 2 million refugees having lived in Pakistan and Iran for more than three decades. In addition, Asia, together with Africa, has the largest numbers of urban refugee populations, be it in Kuala Lumpur, Kabul or Kathmandu.

Some critical actions that donors, aid agencies and national governments should undertake include:

- Sufficiently funding COVID-19 appeals and broader humanitarian

response plans (the 2020 Joint Response Plan for the Rohingya Humanitarian Crisis is currently only funded at [17 per cent](#)).

- Widespread testing that includes both refugee and host populations.
- Large-scale procurement and distribution of personal protective equipment.
- Inclusion of refugees, internally displaced persons and stateless persons in national COVID-19 response plans.
- [Partnering](#) with refugee communities to develop effective awareness-raising and trust-building efforts between authorities, health providers and refugees.

Inclusive responses are key

It is critical that response efforts are inclusive and address the unique needs of vulnerable groups, particularly women and girls, LGBTIQ+ persons,

disabled persons and older persons. These groups are especially at risk, given, among other reasons, their traditionally limited access to information and services, which can shrink even further during crises. For women and girls, their lives are at risk not only from COVID-19 but violence in the home: the UN is warning of a [“shadow pandemic”](#) as reports of domestic violence have skyrocketed globally. Aid agencies should learn from the [gendered impacts](#) of the [Ebola outbreaks](#), and donors must earmark funding and prioritize support for protection, particularly local women's and LGBTIQ+ groups that are at the forefront of providing violence-related services.

Time is of the essence. Governments, funders and humanitarian agencies must act now to save lives and mitigate the potentially catastrophic impacts of COVID-19 on refugee and host communities throughout the Asia-Pacific region.



A woman sits at the entrance to her shelter in Kutupalong refugee camp in Bangladesh. © istock / Joel Carillet

Dr Sarah Chynoweth

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Photo by Mariam Alimi for FES Afghanistan

Labour Day under lockdown

29 April 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic sours 1 May celebrations in Afghanistan. But the crisis also shows that a vibrant workers' movement is needed.

Dr Magdalena Kirchner is the Director of the FES Afghanistan Office.

Maroof Qaderi is the President of National Union of Afghanistan Workers and Employees (NUAWE).

No demonstrations, no rallies, and for many—no work! This year's 1 May will be an unusual one due to the COVID-19 pandemic triggering the closure of shops, offices, businesses and factories everywhere and (temporarily) restricting our democratic right to assemble freely. And yet, the pandemic has created a major crisis for millions of Afghan workers on a multitude of levels, where the ideas of the workers' movement can give us guidance, too.

How can you stay safe at the workplace when you cannot work from home? How can you provide for your family when you or relatives get sick or you are laid off? How can you take care of yourself when you have to care for a never-ending stream of patients? How can you survive in the informal sector?

To discuss these and other questions, FES Country Director Magdalena Kirchner talked with Maroof Qaderi, President of the National Union of Afghanistan Workers and Employees (NUAWE).

Mr Qaderi, International Workers' Day, or Labour Day, has been celebrated and honoured in almost all countries around the globe for more than 100 years. Why and for whom is this day also important in Afghanistan?

First, on behalf of the National Union of Afghanistan Workers and Employees, let me congratulate the workers and employees of Afghanistan and the world on International Workers' Day. It is a day when we remind ourselves and others that workers' rights are human rights, and even if conditions are severe, we should not compromise on our aspirations for a better future.

NUAWE has a history of about half a century and has been active in defending the rights of Afghan workers and employees in all government and non-government sectors, for and beyond our roughly 175,000 members. In Afghanistan, we face high levels of underemployment and unemployment, on the one hand, but also exploitation and hazardous conditions at the workplace on the other, and child labour is part of our reality. Therefore, it is a day to remind us that we have a long way to go to make workers' rights a part of people's reality.

As a union, we reflect the voices and demands of the workers everywhere and see it as our mission to raise awareness among people about the rights that they have and encourage them to stand up for themselves and to negotiate with the government and employers to achieve better conditions for everyone. And indeed, we had some achievements in the past. Examples are the revision of the Afghan labour law and the introduction of a minimum wage, at least in the public sector. This 1 May will be unusual for us because of the lockdown because we cannot celebrate Labour Day or demonstrate in the streets against violations of labour rights that we, unfortunately, observe every day.

In the international media, there is much attention to the possible peace negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban. Why do you think that workers' rights and decent work conditions should be on the agenda of the talks?

Many Afghans support the negotiations because they hope that peace will bring stability and economic growth and an end to endemic unemployment and poor working conditions. People are tired of a war that means poverty and suffering to millions of Afghans.

Four decades of war have destroyed almost all of Afghanistan's economic infrastructure, and many of our country's youths have lost their life, leaving behind thousands of widows and orphans. Hundreds of thousands of breadwinners have been injured and disabled and can no longer provide for

their families; others have experienced displacement or emigration because work opportunities vanished.

Finally, the war is often used as an excuse to not implement international conventions and laws that would benefit workers. So, while the conflict has such a significant influence on our path towards decent work, we want to push another narrative as well: decent work as one of the conditions for a sustainable peace because it is something all parties wish to have.

How should today's fighters provide for their families tomorrow? How can we prevent a post-war scenario where poverty forces [people], especially young people, back into the arms of radicals? How can we create incentives for Afghans in other countries to return to our homeland? Injustice is a driver of conflict, so social justice must be at the top of the peace agenda as well, and—to be honest—workers and their interests should also be represented at the table!

The COVID-19 pandemic is not only a health crisis. It has also created a dramatic situation for hundreds of thousands of Afghan workers. How are they affected by the crisis? What can unions in general and NUAWE do to help these people in the crisis?

Everyone knows that the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic, not only in Afghanistan but in the world, has led to health, work security and unemployment crises.

As in other countries, Afghan health workers, doctors, nurses and caregivers, who are crucial for testing and treating patients, are working until exhaustion in hospitals and medical facilities. Often, they lack the most basic equipment to protect themselves; several have already lost their life to the virus. Unions can help to raise awareness among those who cannot work from home, from traffic police to shop assistants, on how to protect themselves at the workplace, and [they can] advise employers what to do to keep their workers safe.

Our biggest concern these days is the fate of daily and domestic workers who lost their jobs due to the lockdown and are now facing an existential crisis. Even before the coronavirus, it was hard for them to provide for their families. Unfortunately, working day and night did not help them to leave poverty behind. Now, with food prices increasing and uncertainty about how long the lockdown will continue, many have no idea how to put food on the table.

While many Afghans try to help their neighbours and people in need through donations and charities, we call on the Afghan government and the international community to find immediate and mid-term solutions to prevent a humanitarian crisis.

Sheep diplomacy and a troubled economy: Mongolia amid COVID-19

30 April 2020

Balancing two mighty neighbours is part of the DNA of Mongolia's diplomacy and economic relations. The country's economy depends heavily on trade with China and Russia. With demand decreasing during the pandemic, the most vulnerable households are expected to be hit hardest.

For Mongolia, landlocked between China and Russia, it has always been important to have good relations with its neighbours. Economically, Mongolia is more dependent on China to the south, which shares a 4,700-kilometre border and takes almost 90 per cent of its exports, mostly coal and copper. Thus, the spread of COVID-19 in China poses particular challenges. Mongolia has had to maintain good relations with the Chinese government to keep its economy afloat, while preventing the pandemic from spreading within its territory.

At the same time, Mongolia enjoys traditionally close relations with Russia to the north, dating back to the communist era. Cross-border trade, energy cooperation and a largely favourable view of the country among Mongolians are the pillars for the bilateral relationship.

Sheep diplomacy

When COVID-19 cases expanded in Wuhan Province, the Mongolian government took drastic measures to contain the spread of the coronavirus that causes the disease. Well before

the first imported case of COVID-19 was confirmed, the government shut the border with China, cancelled international flights, closed all educational facilities and even cancelled the Tsagaan Sar (Lunar New Year) national holiday.

When President Khaltmaagiin Battulga announced a visit to China in late February, a number of people opposed it initially for fear of coronavirus infection. However, during his five-hour visit, President Battulga was warmly welcomed by his Chinese counterpart Xi Jinping as the first foreign head of state to visit China since the outbreak of COVID-19. The Chinese public expressed particular gratitude for his donation of 30,000 sheep as a neighbourly gift from a strategic partner.

President Battulga's so-called "sheep diplomacy" received overwhelming positive comments on Chinese social media. The topic "Mongolian President donated 30,000 sheep to China" received more than 100 million views on Sina Weibo. International affairs expert and former diplomat Dashdorj Bayarkhuu considers this visit a "diplomatic victory for a small state" and a "smart move to

promote Mongolia's positive image to the Chinese people". Luguusharav Byambakhand, an independent researcher focusing on international affairs, sees the visit as a "soft power policy success for Mongolia in winning over the hearts and minds of the Chinese". Dr Jamsran Bayasakh, prominent sinologist and former director of the Institute of International Affairs at the Mongolian Academy of Sciences, shares a similar view on the importance of this visit amid the current crisis, but he is somewhat critical of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs for not being sufficiently proactive and letting the president take up the reins instead.

Though the livestock will not actually make the trip until the autumn, when they are in best physical condition, the sheep diplomacy move has certainly helped to improve the Mongolian president's image in China. Back in 2017, he won the presidential election on the back of anti-China rhetoric. Moreover, the latest moves have greatly helped to solidify the strategic partnership between the two countries, to improve political and economic relations and to deepen mutual understanding between the Chinese and Mongolian people.

Economic challenges on all fronts

When the Mongolian State Emergency Commission decided as early as January to close schools as well as restrict public gatherings and visits to bars and restaurants, the impact was felt quickly. According to official figures, more than 70 per cent of companies operating in Mongolia are small and medium-sized enterprises in the service industry. Due to quarantine measures and a fall in foreign trade levels, 60,000 companies have reported a decrease in business revenue. They are facing challenges in servicing bank loans, tax obligations and staff salaries, resulting in staff lay-offs or leave without pay.

The export of commodities to China, Mongolia's main source of revenue, was also severely disrupted for some weeks but recently resumed with additional precautionary measures for ensuring the health of Mongolian truck drivers entering China. At the same time, commodity exporters like Mongolia continue to feel the pain resulting from the oil price war between Russia and Saudi Arabia and the collapse of the oil price.

The poverty level in Mongolia has decreased but remained at 28.4 per

cent as of the end of 2018, according to the National Statistics Office. An additional 15 per cent of the population is considered vulnerable to falling into poverty. Those parts of the population will suffer the hardest from an economic decline that is sure to materialize.

Rolling out the government's rescue package

Prime Minister Ukhnaagiin Khurelsukh announced in the beginning of April the government's package of measures to overcome the economic difficulties and support for businesses and households. This package of measures is estimated to cost 5.1 billion tugriks (1.9 \$million), subject to further debate in the parliament. These measures include the following:

- Employers and employees of private companies as well as voluntary contributors to the Social Insurance Fund will be exempt from contribution obligations for the upcoming six months.
- Companies with a taxable income less than last year of less than 1.5 billion tugriks (approximately \$270,000) will be exempt from

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Mongolian yurts on a field. © istock / bizoo_n

- corporate income tax for the upcoming six months.
- Employees of companies that lost revenue because of quarantine will receive wage support of 200,000 tugriks (approximately \$75) per month for the next three months for each employee retained on the payroll.
- Child money received for each child (20,000 tugriks per month per child aged 0–18 years) will be increased by 10,000 tugriks (approximately \$4) for the next three months.
- Low-income households who are unable to pay electricity bills will not be subjected to electricity restrictions.

United in resilience

It remains to be seen whether these measures will be sufficient to provide a safety net for Mongolia's fragile economy. What is certain, though, is that Mongolians have weathered many storms and hardships throughout their proud history. To this day, more than 300,000 herders continue to cherish the traditions of a nomadic lifestyle under some of the harshest climatic conditions on the planet. Resilience is probably the biggest asset of Mongolia's people.

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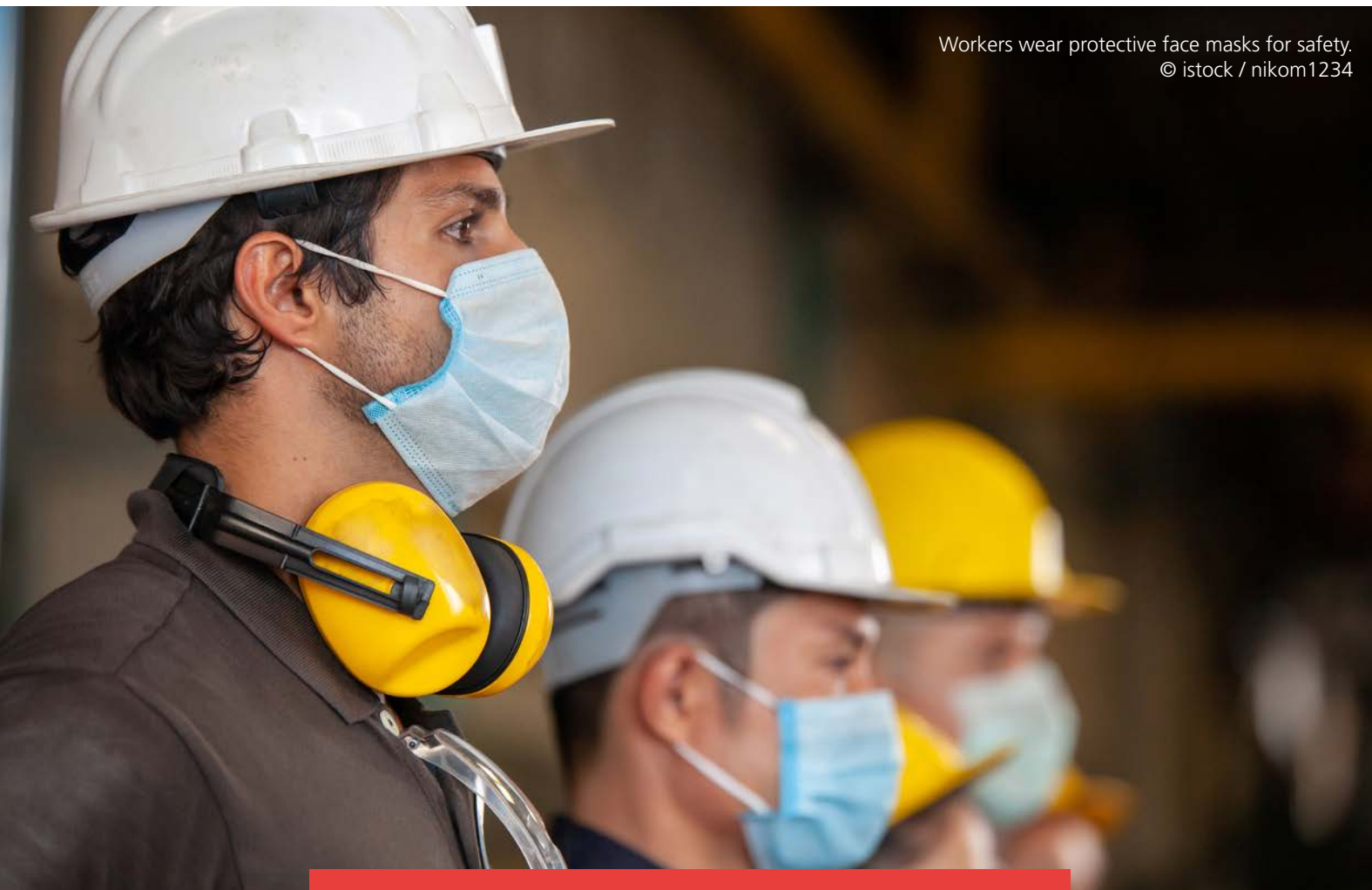
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A comic from India**



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Leapfrogging to a COVID-proof smart workplace

Lives at stake: rights and responsibilities for a safer workplace



Workers wear protective face masks for safety.
© istock / nikom1234

Dr Hidayat Greenfield

is the Asia-Pacific Regional Secretary of the International Union of Food, Agricultural, Hotel, Restaurant, Catering, Tobacco and Allied Workers' Associations (IUF). Visit www.iuf.org for more information about their work.

01 May 2020

Access to rights and collective representation through unions is vital to tackling the pandemic. Safe workplace measures must be jointly designed and owned by employers and employees, stresses the Regional Secretary of IUF, a union federation bringing together food, farm and hotel workers that is at the forefront of negotiating with governments and multinational corporations.

Throughout the Asia-Pacific region, employers in all sectors have implemented some form of COVID-19 measures in the workplace.

In some cases, comprehensive measures were introduced through negotiations with unions, respecting workers' collective bargaining rights. Other workers are still fighting for their voices to be heard. The right to negotiate change is a fundamental right and not to be suspended in an emergency.

Through mutual agreement on changes to reduce the risk of COVID-19, employers and unions ensure safer workplaces and communities. Unions have a vital role in explaining these COVID-19 safety measures to workers, thus ensuring effective implementation. Only when unions are empowered to provide feedback on problems and are included in their resolution, can an employer truly claim that "we are working together" to overcome this pandemic.

Lack of workers' involvement

The reality is that in most cases, COVID-19 policies have been implemented unilaterally by employers, with no negotiations, no feedback and no mutual understanding of what needs to be done or what needs to be fixed. COVID-19 measures have introduced temperature checks, physical distancing and changed work schedules. But many employers did nothing to involve workers in making it work. And if something is not working, no one will know until it is too late.

In some instances, safety measures were introduced to meet local government requirements to keep operating as an essential service. Because government requirements are often changing and even conflicting, workers are confused by

the new arrangements and are unfairly penalized. In other cases, it seems as though COVID-19 measures are mostly designed to promote the reputation of the company, boost the brand or avoid reputational damage. The public announcement of working together to overcome COVID-19 is apparently more important than what really happens in the workplace.

Rethinking workers' safety

There are also examples of major transnational companies making public donations while denying wages to workers suspected of being infected with COVID-19, under self-quarantine. At Coca-Cola Philippines, for example, workers suspected of having COVID-19 are self-isolating for 14 days but are not paid. They must use any annual leave they might have, then the "no work, no pay" rule automatically applies. At the same time, Coca-Cola Philippines gained media attention by announcing that it will donate 150 million pesos (nearly \$3 million) for the fight against COVID-19.

COVID-19 is not a health emergency that stops at the door to the workplace. COVID-19 is already an occupational disease, and this changes the responsibility of employers and forces us to rethink workers' safety. According to *ILO Standards and COVID-19*: "COVID-19 and post-traumatic stress disorder, if contracted through occupational exposure, could be considered as occupational diseases."

The ILO note on frequently asked questions also points out: "Workers have the right to remove themselves from a work situation that they have reasonable justification to believe presents an imminent and serious danger to their life or health. When a staff member exercises this right, he or

she shall be protected from any undue consequences." This reaffirms the right of workers to refuse to work if they believe that the workplace is unsafe.

Employers' responsibilities

One of the underlying challenges in understanding rights and responsibilities for a safe workplace in the COVID-19 pandemic is the tendency of employers to focus too much on worker behaviour as both the source of the problem and its solution. Unilateral employer responses to COVID-19 are largely based on holding workers responsible for their behaviour. It is all about individual responsibility for personal health and hygiene and following the rules. No doubt, physical distancing, wearing a mask and personal hygiene are important (wash your hands!). But employers are responsible for ensuring that workers' individual efforts are both feasible and effective. Workers must be provided with handwashing facilities, personal protective equipment, physical space and the time needed to do all of this. This all depends on each worker's access to the collective right to a safe workplace. Only through access to these rights are workers able to contribute to safety.

Access to rights and collective representation through unions is vital for tackling the pandemic. It is vital for ensuring collective action and cooperation. It is vital for tackling the post-COVID-19 crisis and recession. It is also vital for ensuring that we are doing this. By ignoring unions and refusing to negotiate the changes necessary to ensure a safe workplace in this catastrophic pandemic, employers are increasing risk and creating doubt, leaving millions of workers with the obvious question: If "we are working together" to overcome COVID-19...who exactly is "we"?

Migrant workers struggling under lockdown in Thailand

04 May 2020

Across Thailand, millions of migrant workers are struggling due to the lockdown, unable to go home and often without any work. The government has made exemptions to help their situation and established several support mechanisms. But access is often challenging for a range of reasons.

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The most widespread impact of the lockdown on migrant workers in Thailand is job loss, according to respondents in a study by the [Migrant Workers Rights Network](#) (MWRN). Many people still employed say their working hours and wages have been reduced. This leaves them unable to afford rent, food and daily household items. Many are not able to send remittances. They also expressed concern about visas and work permits that have expired during the pandemic.

The industry hardest hit by the COVID-19 lockdown has been garments and textiles, according to the MWRN report, *Thailand Situation Update in COVID-19 Emergency Response—April 2020*. This particularly hit more women than men because they are over-represented in this sector. The sectors of construction and real estate development, as well as metal and plastic manufacture, suffered the next-worst impacts. The fisheries and seafood-processing industry have not been significantly affected, the report noted.

Government assistance for migrant workers

Thailand is an important destination country for migrant workers in the

region. When a state of emergency was declared on 25 March to control the COVID-19 pandemic, there were around 2.8 million registered migrant workers in Thailand, according to the Ministry of Labour, with most of them from Myanmar, Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. In the following days, only about 60,000 people left the country, according to the Immigration Bureau.

On 21 April, a cabinet resolution gave migrant workers permission to stay in Thailand until the state of emergency is lifted or the borders are reopened. But even if their status is resolved, workers trapped in the kingdom face increasing economic hardship and health risks because those in the informal sector are not qualified for the government unemployment benefits under the social security system.

The Ministry of Labour has taken several measures to reduce the risks of coronavirus infection among migrant workers, including suspending the approval of new memoranda of understanding on employment with neighbouring countries; screening fisheries workers; distributing household items to migrant worker communities to reduce contact with locals; and relaxing regulations to allow migrant workers to extend their work and residency permits.

There are also several social security mechanisms available to any documented migrant worker in Thailand, and around 1.2 million migrants are registered with those systems. These registered workers are eligible for health care, compensation and unemployment benefits, according to the Social Security Office. The government has reduced or delayed some of the contributions to the social security funds that are required of employers and workers. In principle, all migrants can access medical treatment for COVID-19 regardless of their immigration status.

There are two health insurance systems for documented migrants and their dependants: the Social Security Fund under the management of the Social Security Office and the Foreign Workers Fund under the Ministry of Public Health. But many migrants have experienced obstacles. Access to the Social Security Office-managed services has been limited by delays in registration and poor understanding among employers. Migrants' use of the services under the Ministry of Public Health has been hampered by language barriers, residential status and their own lack of understanding of the benefits. Both of these health insurance systems potentially cover the medical expense of COVID-19 treatments.

Challenges for migrant workers persist

According to MWRN, many businesses in Thailand appear to be taking advantage of the pandemic and failing to ensure workers' labour rights as per the standards laid out in Thai law. With limited oversight, some businesses have allegedly forced employees to sign resignation letters to avoid compensation for ending contracts.

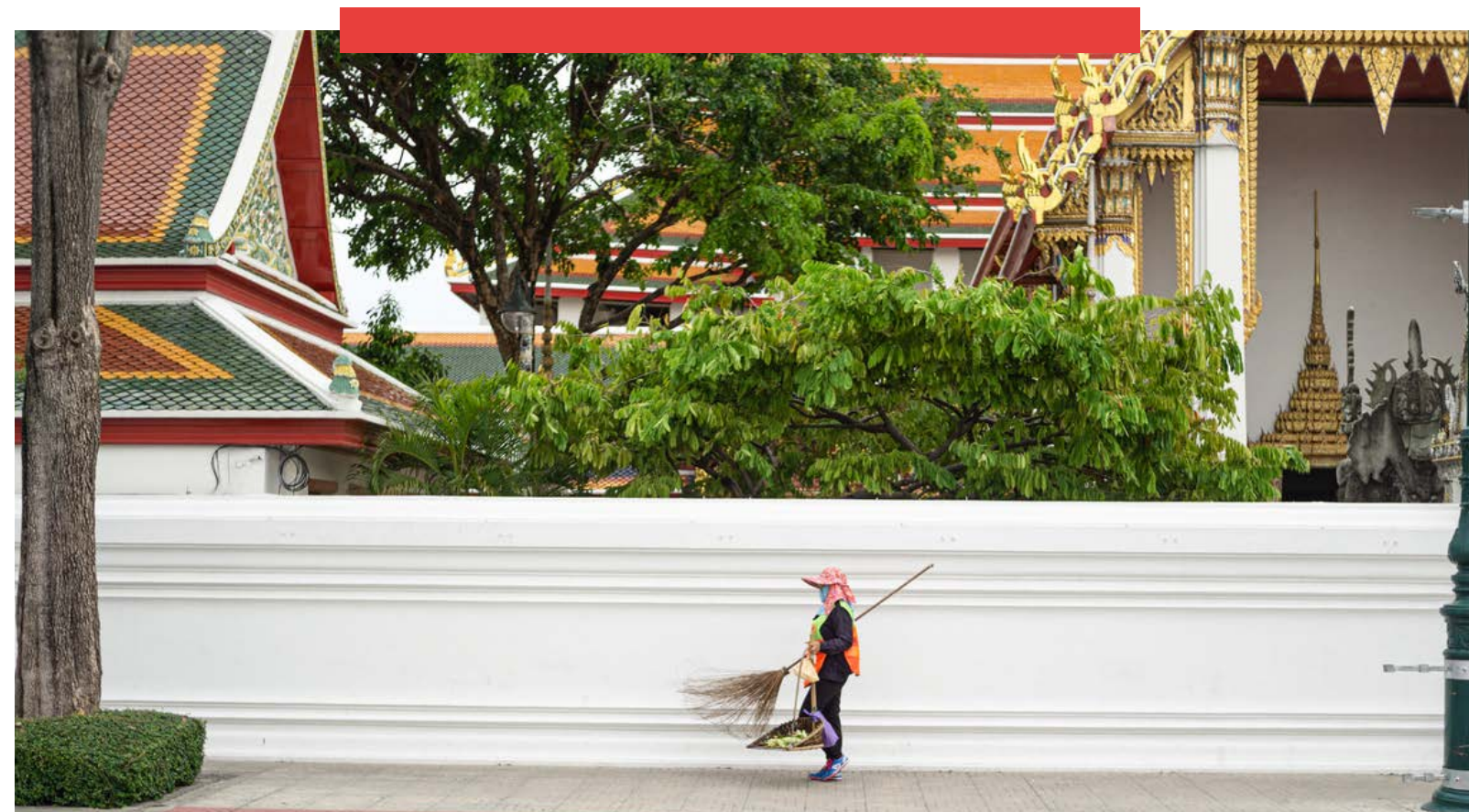
Because most official announcements are in Thai, migrant workers who do not understand the language well are unable to claim their labour rights along with their health care and employment benefits. There seems to be a lack of cooperation between government agencies, notably the Ministry of Interior, the Ministry of Public Health and the Ministry of Labour, claims the MWRN. Policies and frameworks are introduced in an ad hoc manner, and their implementation is inconsistent across agencies.

Migrant workers are also stigmatized by xenophobic elements among officials, law enforcement, health professionals and the media. This leads to discrimination and prevents prompt access to health care services. Even when the system works, there are bureaucratic delays. Labour complaints

can take up to 60 days to process. Many workers simply cannot afford to support themselves while waiting this long for the investigation and findings to be completed. And the system does not work at all for workers in the informal sector (such as agricultural, domestic, seasonal and sex work) who are excluded from the compensation and economic relief packages. They face an increased risk of exploitation, including human trafficking, because their options for meeting their basic needs are drastically reduced.

Migrants who are detained for any reason are not only unable to access any of the support mechanisms but also face dramatically increased risk of contagion from the cramped and unhygienic conditions, despite the recommendations on social distancing by health authorities. And if they do fall ill, they are very unlikely to receive adequate health care in detention.

The challenges migrant workers in Thailand are experiencing have many facets and need to be addressed comprehensively and systematically. Time is of the essence to avoid an economic and social crisis post-COVID-19 that is even bigger than the current crisis.



Street sweeper in Bangkok.
© istock / Sigit Setiyo Pramono

A group of self-employed village women working and manufacturing garments.
© istock / Aroybarman

Women's cooperatives respond to the crisis in India

05 May 2020

In this crisis, we see that many people suffer significant losses of income and employment as a result of social distancing measures. India's Self-Employed Women's Association Federation supports women-led cooperatives in a remarkable show of resilience and swift action.

The effects of this COVID-19 pandemic have been felt greatly in India. Those who are most affected are the most vulnerable workers in the informal economy, which constitutes **90 per cent of India's total workforce**.

Even in non-crisis times, these workers have **limited access to social protection**, given the fact that a large segment of them are self-employed, small and marginal farmers, street vendors or small producers. Women in the informal economy are the poorest and most vulnerable of workers. There is an overlap between informality, gender and poverty, with women more likely to be engaged in informal work arrangements, undertaking work that is poorly paid and often hazardous and that men will not do.

Female ownership for local solutions

When women are involved directly in extending social protection, they can quickly suggest what works and what does not for them and their families. One of the best ways, we have found, to convince policymakers and legislators to frame appropriate programmes, laws and policies is to show what works at the grass-roots level and what it will cost. Legislators are often surprised to learn that there are several low-cost or no-cost mechanisms and that the total burden on the exchequer is often much less than imagined, especially when the workers themselves implement the laws and policies through programmes and mechanisms, such as through their own cooperatives.

The **Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA)** has been working with informal women workers by organizing them into their own unions and cooperatives. Elaben Bhatt, for instance, began organizing women workers as early as 1972. Today, the union has 1.8 million members across 18 states in the country. Since 1992, the SEWA Cooperative Federation has promoted women-owned cooperatives, enabling nearly 300,000 women informal workers to access decent work.

In this time of unprecedented crisis, women cooperatives are helping to extend social protection measures when most needed by their members and their households. Key areas of action include:

Health care: Due to the nature of their work, many informal workers are not able to take required precautions, such as social distancing and handwashing, nor can they afford masks and sanitizers. Also, owing to their living conditions—crowded houses and community toilets, they are highly exposed to the risk of contracting the virus. Moreover, the foreseen livelihood loss can add to mental and psychological stress.

In response to an increasing price of hand sanitizers, our health cooperative—Lok Swasthya Mandali (LSM)—began producing low-cost hand sanitizers. These sanitizers are distributed to vulnerable households. Additionally, LSM's medicine shops are providing subsidized generic medicines. A cadre of health workers was trained to provide information on preventive health care, like handwashing, as well as specific aspects related to COVID-19 dos and don'ts, such as hygienic practices in relation to waste disposal as well as the basics of psychosocial care and dealing with stigma. These health workers are also working with local authorities to carry out rapid referrals in grass-roots communities.

Child care: Informal workers lack access to affordable child care facilities, which often is one of the factors that hinder women's participation in the labour market. Our child care cooperative—SEWA Sangini—has been running several centres across Ahmedabad city, caring for children of informal workers. Due to social distancing measures, child care centres have had to temporarily close. This has added to the care work being done by women within households, which in itself has seen a manifold increase due to the lockdown. To ease this burden, SEWA Sangini continued to cook and distribute hot meals for the children and their families. This has served a dual purpose: paid work for the caregivers and relief from unpaid care work.

Insurance: Informal workers are largely unprotected by the labour policies and schemes, which come with salaried employment for workers in the formal sector. SEWA's insurance cooperative—VimoSEWA—has been filling the gap by extending an integrated insurance programme that aims to provide social protection for members to cover their life-cycle needs and the various risks they face in their lives. In response to the COVID-19 situation,

VimoSEWA launched a comprehensive and integrated insurance package that provides financial help and compensates wage loss in case a member is infected with the virus.

Moving forward from COVID-19: Our recommendations

While the SEWA Federation's cooperatives have been quick to respond, they are still vulnerable to income losses. In a few weeks, the cooperatives will become unviable themselves, particularly those that do not fall under essential services, like domestic work or cleaning. There is a need for wider action, through widening welfare schemes and through public-private partnerships. We recommend:

- Universal health care, with an investment of at least 2.5 per cent of GDP;
- Universal full-day child care to catalyse women's labour force participation, which is likely to fall further post-COVID-19;
- Payroll compensation to cover fixed costs of cooperatives and other micro and small enterprises;
- A dedicated livelihood restoration fund (with social protection) that will allow cooperatives and other small businesses to rebuild; and
- Digital inclusion-access to mobile technologies as well as capacity-building to use them.

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People queue up to receive food at a distribution point in Lahore.
© shutterstock / A M Syed

Pakistan: What lockdown?

06 May 2020

In Pakistan, public health and religious piety must be carefully balanced. Lockdown and social distancing policies are difficult to enforce. For many people, economic and social hardships are much more immediate.

As of 6 May, Pakistan had [reported](#) 22,550 infections and 526 deaths, along with around 6,217 recoveries from COVID-19. For a population of more than 210 million, these figures seem tiny, especially in comparison with the hotspots in Europe and the United States. But this is no reason for joy or relief: Where extremely little testing is being done, most infections run undetected. For weeks, only some 400–500 daily tests were carried out. Daily tests have increased but still remain at fewer than 10,000, which, again, is hardly worth mentioning considering the size of the population.

Medical care unattainable for the poor

The country's [health care system remains weak](#). Quality and coverage are unsatisfactory. With only 1 per cent of the GDP spent on health, the dependence on expensive private health providers is high. There are a number of excellent hospitals and good doctors in some major cities, but for millions of Pakistanis, quality medical care is out of reach. Many people are so poor that they cannot visit a doctor. If a daily labourer or an agricultural

worker is suffering from fever or a cough, they likely will not seek treatment. For COVID-19 cases, this means that even if large-scale testing was to be rolled out, people who never go to see a doctor cannot be diagnosed. For Pakistan's nascent middle class, the picture is somewhat different. Awareness about the danger posed by the coronavirus has risen steadily, even more so after Prime Minister Imran Khan was also tested following contact with an infected person.

A lockdown difficult to enforce

In the early days of the crisis, Pakistani society and political decision makers displayed an astonishing lack of concern in dealing with the pandemic—all the way into mid-March. The bustling bazaars were as busy and hectic as ever. And even though some media outlets stressed the need for stronger social distancing rules, most people did not appear to bother. A few days later, after the World Health Organization officially declared COVID-19 a global pandemic, the country witnessed an abrupt change. While the prime minister seemed hesitant to declare a lockdown, fearing the devastating impact on the

country's already troubled economy, the influential Pakistani military insisted on tougher measures.

From there, things moved fast. As in many other countries, most shops were closed, with the exception of pharmacies and grocery stores. Large sections of the Islamabad capital quickly became a ghost town. In the few shops still open, customers were only allowed to enter with face masks. A few shops admitted customers only after they had been checked for fever and disinfected their hands.

A harsh reality for informal workers

Soon, a picture similar to many countries across the Global South emerged. While movement restrictions and social distancing are warranted to curb the spread of the coronavirus, they are enormously difficult to sustain. Not only are rules and regulations in Pakistan already difficult to enforce in normal times, the economic hardship that lockdowns produce is impossible to bear for the poorest. Even before the crisis, millions of daily labourers had difficulties to make ends meet, hardly generated income that would last for more than a couple of days and had no social safety net. To expect them to stay

in their often-crowded makeshift home for weeks is a sacrifice they are unable to make. For the millions of Pakistani workers in the informal sector and beggars on the streets, lockdown is not an option.

Patchwork lockdown

Being able or not to adhere to the lockdown measures clearly is a matter of class and social status. While people in the well-off districts of major cities, including the capital, have the means to observe the rules almost to their fullest extent, others do not have this privilege. In addition, and perhaps unavoidably so, many government measures even lead to more gatherings of people. For example, in many places, the government programme to pay 12,000 rupees (about two-thirds of the official minimum wage) to families in need means that people convene in larger crowds and long queues again.

Balancing public health and piety

Certainly, the biggest challenge lies in enforcing strict measures during Ramadan and thereby limiting the traditional ways Muslims are marking the holy month. This is a highly sensitive political matter. Many

governments, not just in Pakistan, shy away from [putting public health before piety](#). In the case of Pakistan, many COVID-19 infections have been apparently imported by Shiite pilgrims returning from the Islamic Republic of Iran, travelling back to their home regions in crowded buses and trains and without proper checks. A major Sunni religious gathering in March in the city of Raiwind, with tens of thousands of people in attendance, is now known to have been the source of many more infections across the country. All sides, not least religious officials and representatives of religious parties, continue to hesitate to cancel prayers in mosques and refrain from asking people to pray alone at home.

According to a study by the local community organization [PATTAN](#), a partner of FES Pakistan, about 80 per cent of mosques in Punjab Province do not adhere to the agreement between the Ulama and the government. This presents a genuine dilemma for the government: It seems culturally unimaginable and politically unfeasible that the authorities would use police officers to enforce social distancing standards and movement restrictions in religious institutions.

Is the worst still to come?

Some expert accounts and experience from other countries suggest that the worst is still to come for Pakistan. A major outbreak is all but impossible, if it is not already partly under way undetected. Authorities have to walk a tight rope between state policies and religious practices. Fatigue, exhaustion and the economic hardship caused by the lockdown are driving people back to the streets. For day labourers and many other informal workers, this is the only way forward anyway. But others, too, are returning to public life and seem increasingly less disciplined, for instance, in the way they are wearing (or not wearing) their face masks.

Political conflicts over how best to deal with the virus have begun—in particular between the central government, with the prime minister keen to loosening restrictions and restarting the economy, and the provincial government of Sindh, which is taking far more drastic measures to restrict movements. It is an uncertain future for Pakistan and a crisis that could exacerbate even further.

COVID-19 hurts the backbone of the Indian economy

07 May 2020

India, the world's second-most populous country, is under an unprecedented eight-week lockdown. While the lockdown is necessary to contain the spread, it is having a rippling effect on the economy and particularly on workers engaged in the large informal economy.



A woman collects free rations outside a government store in India.
© istock / Prabhat Kumar Verma

Just as with the rest of the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted life across India. The government has taken several socioeconomic measures to bring respite to the people. For many fortunate ones, the lockdown has turned homes into home offices overnight. But many others have been left high and dry. While technology is in full bloom, there are millions of gig workers now at the mercy of the state and charity. Pollution levels have gone down, the air is less suffocating in mega cities like Delhi or Mumbai, but there are now women struggling even more under the double burden of work and care, and [cases of domestic violence are on the rise](#).

The real capital

With around 90 per cent of workers in the informal sector, which is approximately 400 million workers, the informal economy contributes between 50 per cent and 60 per cent to India's GDP as per varying estimates. The Indian economy was already bracing for an economic slowdown coupled with rising unemployment prior to the pandemic. COVID-19 has further aggravated the situation. The Centre for Monitoring Indian Economy puts India's unemployment rate at 23 per cent, compared with 7.7 per cent in February 2020. This was post-nationwide lockdown, in the fortnight of March end and beginning of April 2020. According to the National Sample Survey results, nearly 136 million workers could be staring at unemployment in the future.

The worst hit are workers in small industries, the service sectors (hotels, restaurants and transportation), street vendors and daily-wage workers. They are already struggling for the bare minimum, whether in cities of work, transit camps or their native places. The desperate situation may be gauged by the hundreds of thousands of workers who headed to their hometowns and villages, covering hundreds of kilometres on foot.

The government is putting up a plan to start, phase-wise, operationalizing services and activities, like health care, agriculture, work under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act, movement of goods, industries and manufacturing units and construction activities. This may encourage migrating workers to return to the cities or their places of work, but the ambiguity over the movement of people and the means to do so may come as a hinderance. According to Barclays, the Indian economy may lose up to \$234.4 billion in the lockdown period.

Rise and fall of gig workers

Gig workers, once boasting of quick income and freedom of work, have been badly hit, too. The lockdown impacted app-based services like taxis, food delivery, courier services, grocery delivery and so on, affecting the livelihood of this young, low- to semi-skilled workforce. Although some of the services

are gradually starting up again, even though not in full strength, the workers have become unintended victims of social profiling. Unfortunately, the government bodies, service providers and residential complexes put the onus of contact-free delivery and maintaining social distance on the workers. Only a few companies provide protection gear, like masks and sanitizers, while others expect the workers to manage the same.

Under distress, at the margins

The pandemic has added to the vulnerability of workers at the margins, including home-based workers, transgender people living off the streets, domestic workers, sex workers—predominantly women and other genders. It may take a while before the numbers of marginalized workers impacted by the lockdown are known. But the severity of the impact can be inferred already from the fact that women constitute nearly a third of workers in the informal sector.

The current crisis has exposed the weak social security system prevalent in the country. It has further ignited the debate on extending a universal basic income and minimum social protection for all people. As well, the lack of credible workers' data is hampering the tracing of workers and thereby excludes them from the intended state-sponsored benefits.

Informal workers are equal partners in development. The country does not just need their economic contribution but also their skills and services. How well the country supports and addresses their needs in these times of crisis will determine how quickly it can recover from the losses. Now more than ever, the issues related to the informal economy need to be at centre stage. The goal should be to come out of this crisis stronger and collectively pursue the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, leaving no one behind.

This article reflects joint inputs by the team of FES India working on labour and industrial relations, gender and social justice and the economy of tomorrow:
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Technology for a social cause: TikTok and Asia's mobile-first nations

11 May 2020

TikTok, the most installed app amid the COVID-19 pandemic, makes influencers on social media “essential workers”. The platform presents an opportunity for concerted partnerships between governments, civic agencies and citizens to tackle the global crisis. Have we learned to manage the role of technology for a social cause?

Global and regional developments with regard to TikTok after 11 May 2020 are not reflected in this article.

When Finland classified social media influencers as “key workers” during the COVID-19 crisis, alongside nurses and bus drivers, it seemed like a cruel joke. It turns out that Finland is not alone.

From Bangladesh and Vietnam to Indonesia, governments are actively partnering with influencers to harness their networks to flatten the curve. The Chinese video-sharing social networking site TikTok has risen as a top application for these mobile-first nations, especially among their [billions of young users coming online for the first time](#) due to radically cheap mobile data plans. Their popularity has been amplified amid the COVID-19 crisis, hitting 2 billion downloads and becoming the [most installed app](#) in 2020.

Only a few years ago, some of these governments [debated banning this app](#) due to concerns of illicit content, data privacy and national security. Today, they have launched their own campaigns on TikTok in collaboration with companies, development agencies and influencers to guide their citizens through the COVID-19 crisis. For instance, Vietnam's National Institute of Occupational Safety and Health launched the #GhenCoVChallenge handwashing campaign that became viral as TikTok influencers rendered their own dance moves to the campaign video's catchy tune.

Even the World Health Organization has [embraced](#) TikTok to help educate and build global solidarity while they struggle to combat the “infodemic” of misinformation around COVID-19. They have partnered with companies like Dettol and Lifebuoy to promote hygiene tips and launched the Stay at Home campaigns with local influencers and the United Nations Development Programme for keeping people's spirit up in these regions. Their first two TikTok videos garnered [60 million views](#), paving the path for other agencies to follow suit.

Beyond the utility-driven agendas of using influencers for the public good, there is a parallel and diffused social movement that we must attend to. The human cost of the lockdown and the intimacy with glaring injustice rooted in systemic inequalities is also being mediated by such apps as TikTok. In India, the privileged among the Gen Z who were able to retreat to their homes and maintain social distancing was lambasted with a spate of gut-wrenching videos on mass media that humanized the headlines of [“India is walking home”](#) —the casualization of suffering of a child on a man's shoulder as he made his way to his village and of entire families huddled on the roadside with their meagre belongings gave a collective quiet scream on mass media.

“Poverty porn”, however, doesn't quite make it on TikTok. Resilience does, humanizing the epic struggles of

millions of migrant labourers through their everyday digital storytelling. The algorithmic mediation of these kinds of content juxtaposed with the typical TikTok videos of lip-synching, comedy skits and cooking and fashion vlog challenges may only have amplified and accelerated the discomfort with the disjuncture of inequality that has long been normalized.

The future of work will remain its past unless we fuel the public consciousness with empathy, outrage and optimism that comes from belonging to a growing conscientious collective. Clearly, systemic change is no easy task. While numerous GoFundMe campaigns and hashtag fundraisers have sprung up to aid the vast vulnerable segments of society, including in low-income countries, the formalizing of this informal generosity of the human spirit into legal protections and enforcements takes time. For instance, historical achievements through collective organizing for the right to a weekend or a 9-to-5 work week took more than a century to be fortified into law in Western democracies. After all, it remains a challenge to build empathy for those who are invisible.

But what if COVID-19 can be a global catalyst that can repurpose platforms like TikTok to build a healthy global intolerance for the ways in which current human labour are organized? Can we have a TikTok revolution of organizing digitally through the ludic pathways of creativity, humour, parody and play to help reimagine and re-engineer reality?

I know we have been down this path before. We had the “Facebook revolution” in which Facebook was viewed as a digital organizing tool of the collective discontent towards the Iranian presidential election in 2009. The “Twitter revolution” emerged in 2011, particularly across the Middle East, that led to the Arab Spring, mediatized by the Twitter application. [Critique](#) quickly followed of commodifying protest and feeding into the techno-utopian myth of technology's liberating power.

Is it perhaps different this time, with concerted partnerships between the governments, civic agencies and citizens coming together to tackle a global crisis? Have we learned to manage the role of technology in a social cause, capitalizing on its networked potential while mitigating our naivete of its inherently capitalistic logic and pushing for responsible regulation?

Could we seek for a slow-burning revolution that transforms into a resolution that permeates the nation's conscience? And what if this self-commodification of activism can result in the consolidation of a global confederation that reminds us of our universal vulnerability as well as our global courage?

Either way, going back to status quo is not an option.

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Philippines: COVID-19 crisis creates opportunity for basic income

Man with improvised personal protective equipment and face mask buys rice from a store during the lockdown in Antipolo City, Philippines.
© istock / junpinzon

12 May 2020

With millions of workers in lockdown, the Philippine government has initiated several cash assistance programmes to save both the lives and livelihoods of its citizen. It is an approach that might suggest that a universal basic income may not be as unrealistic as some have thought.

As fast as the contagion, local economic activities suddenly stopped for many industries and firms after the Philippine authorities put Metro Manila and the entire Luzon region under lockdown on 15 March. As dreadful as COVID-19, private sector jobs and incomes painfully vanished for a multitude of precarious workers and poor households. Hence, pressures mounted on the national government to save not only lives but also livelihoods.

On 24 March, the Philippine Congress passed an emergency measure to build an initial stimulus package from realigned and reallocated budgets. Under the Social Amelioration Program, the bulk of this initial budget, amounting to about \$4 billion for two months, is meant to subsidize the basic expenses of 18 million low-income households with cash handouts of \$100–160. Another \$82 million was initially targeted to provide some 710,000 affected workers with cash assistance worth around \$60–200. Rescuing small businesses, the finance department started receiving applications for a more than \$1 billion wage-subsidy scheme that will give between \$100–160 in cash to an estimated 3.4 million employees.

From temporary subsidy to permanent income guarantee?

This package of simultaneous cash grants is unprecedented. On several levels, it resembles an old but persistent idea that some progressives have been advancing, although only to little or no avail: universal basic income, meaning guaranteed unconditional and regular cash given to all members of a society to live a minimum decent life.

Consider coverage. One of the mentioned cash assistance programs, at least in theory, already covers 18 million households. In a country of **23 million households**, that is 78 per cent. If added with the number of households of beneficiaries of other government programmes, such as the wage subsidy scheme, and assuming no double counting, coverage expands to around **85–90 per cent**. Yes, these are households and not individuals being counted, but it is a concrete way of measuring the scope of a given form of guaranteed income towards expanding it into a truly universal one.

Then there is the aspect of conditionality. Universal basic income is fundamentally a no-strings-attached money transfer. The government emergency subsidies distributed do require burdensome documentary and procedural requirements, and yet it can be argued that they are nowhere akin to structural prerequisites of traditional conditional cash transfer programmes like the **Philippines conditional cash transfer initiative** (4Ps), which is stringently tied to health check-ups and school enrolment. Other “conditions” relative to identity or vulnerability characteristics of beneficiaries are an issue of targeting and not of conditionality per se.

Finally, cash. In an average family of five residing in Metro Manila, a subsidy amount of \$160 is hardly enough to meet daily necessities for a month. The same is true for a family in another region where the lower end of the cash aid amount is distributed. Still, the per capita amount aimed to be delivered to millions of families across the country under those various subsidy schemes is significantly higher than the one under 4Ps (maximum of \$35 per month for a family with one elementary pupil and one senior high school student) and even under the government’s **unconditional cash transfer mitigation programme** for poor households affected by a tax reform measure (\$6 per month).

To be clear, this is not to overstate the government’s Social Amelioration Program, let alone paint it as universal basic income. The design, implementation and efficacy of the

different cash assistance programmes under it have their share of issues in need of urgent answers as millions of Filipinos face the gruesome threat of hunger and poverty.

Executive agencies tasked to distribute the money have tried to find ways to clamber out of the usual inefficiencies and inadequacies in service delivery by quickly overhauling systems and remobilizing what is left of the government’s financial resources. But their own combined reports tell us it is still not enough. As of 1 May, more than a month into the extended lockdown, only 57 per cent of the targeted 18 million households in vulnerable sectors had received their financial subsidy.

However, the resemblance of the subsidy programmes and all their gaps and oversights are precisely what makes universal basic income a viable alternative, amid the pandemic and beyond. Not only will it simplify the process of giving money to where it is direly needed, thereby getting rid of targeting, application and distribution issues that allowed others to slip through the minimum safety nets. In the long term, it will also strengthen the foundations of the country’s social protection floor on which every Filipino can stand and walk with dignity, free from the constant fear of falling into another unbearable hardship.

Organized action can make the unthinkable more possible

It will be expensive, no doubt. But the very notion of universal basic income is not only or even primarily tied to the current availability of budgetary means, but linked to wider structural changes in society and the redistribution of wealth. Interestingly, the COVID-19 crisis has prompted a number of politicians and economists around the world to **call for universal basic income**. The immediate benefits for people in the Global South are obvious: Universal basic income helps fight technological unemployment, supports unpaid care workers, increases the middle class and, by extension, consumer spending and addresses extreme poverty.

And while we are in the early days of universal basic income research in countries across the Global South, with only a limited number of **pilot projects that can be studied** so far, our collective experience from a still-evolving pandemic in the Philippines shows us that a guaranteed basic income is possible. What is “expensive” in this context has been widely acceptable.

Politicians and policymakers may not have realized what in essence they are putting in people’s

pockets in order for them to stay home and literally stay alive, but they have been sending a crucial message—perhaps unwittingly—that giving money to individuals because they need it to survive and live through the crisis can be done. With the fiscal belt loosened and public spending reoriented increasingly towards people’s real needs, there is little reason to believe that the government cannot provide similar minimum cash handouts for all absent a crisis. But as history suggests, unprecedented economic measures during times of emergencies tend to be temporary without sustained advocacy and action.

When this crisis is over, progressive economists, labour leaders, civil society activists, academics, independent researchers and ordinary citizens hopefully will stand together in support of an idea whose time may have finally come. When the pandemic passes, may we not miss an opportunity to rebuild a healthier economy based on equality and social justice.

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Bangladesh: Navigating the globalized impact of the pandemic

13 May 2020

As an economically developing country heavily dependent on export-oriented sectors and remittances, Bangladesh needs to pursue a multipronged strategy to regain its economic momentum. The South Asian nation must deal with an unprecedented three-dimensional crisis.



Twenty Taka bill, Bangladesh
© shutterstock / Dmitry Chulov

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The COVID-19 crisis has added new dimensions and challenges to the increasingly globally integrated economy of Bangladesh. In recent years, its economy's growing connectedness with the global economy—through the export and import of goods and services, financial flows and foreign investment—has meant that the movement of the country's macroeconomic parameters hinges critically on its external sector performance. Thus, the external sector of the economy has positive and important implications in terms of growth of the country's GDP production, employment generation, foreign exchange reserves, import capacity and stability of the exchange rate. COVID-19 and the attendant transmission channels, both from global to national and vice versa, are already having significant adverse impacts on external sector performance indicators and therefore on the national economy at large.

Supply chain disruption hits Bangladesh hard

The tell-tale signs of pandemic-affected key partner economies of Bangladesh, such as Canada, China, Germany, Italy, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States, started to be felt even before the country went into lockdown on 25 March. Supply disruptions in China, accounting for about one fifth of Bangladesh's global imports and a large share of imports in the ready-made garments sector, were having adverse implications for both the export-oriented apparel industry and import-dependent domestic market activities. When subsequently economies in Europe and North America grounded to a halt, global brands and buyers catering to those markets first deferred and then started to cancel export orders for apparel. Textile products account for 83 per cent of Bangladesh's total exports, employing about 3.5 million workers of which about two-thirds are women.

The implications of the COVID-19 crisis for the flagship ready-made garment industry cannot be overemphasized. Since the lockdown started, the predominantly demand-induced disruptions are being compounded by supply-side disruption, with consequent implications for employment and earning opportunities affecting both entrepreneurs and workers. The story is

the same for other export items, such as leather and footwear, frozen food and the jute goods sectors. External sector-related activities are set to continue, facing further disruptions because of delays in accessing imported raw materials, extension of the lockdown (currently until 16 May) and due to health concerns at the enterprise level.

Facing a triple crisis

Indeed, Bangladesh now must deal with a three-dimensional crisis: health, economic and humanitarian. The government has taken several initiatives in support of entrepreneurs and workers associated with the export-oriented sectors.

These were primarily in the form of subsidized credit and refinancing facilities for working capital, by bringing workers under various safety net programmes and through targeted food supply and the subsidized sale of rice. Apparel entrepreneurs are urging global brands and buyers to stand by Bangladesh, not to cancel orders or defer payments. According to the Apparel Exporters' Association, \$4 billion worth of orders has been cancelled already. Indeed, export of apparel declined by 18.2 per cent in March from the corresponding figure of last year. In April, when the lockdown was in force, the export of apparel plummeted to \$360 million from the \$2.4 billion for the corresponding month of last year, a whopping drop of 84 per cent.

The likely scenario for the next few months is also bleak. Experts have warned against premature opening of the economy because Bangladesh is yet to see the flattening of the curve in terms of infections and deaths. Although entrepreneurs have been asked to open factories after ensuring compliance with safety standards, the health safety of workers remains a major concern in the backdrop of weak compliance capacities and lax enforcement.

The robust remittance flow of about \$17 billion in financial year 2019 has also experienced a dip. In March, it came down by 12 per cent from the previous year. In April, total remittances declined by one-third, and those from the Middle East, accounting for more than 60 per cent of the flows, by about two-thirds. The flow of workers going abroad (more than 600,000 in 2019)

has also come to a halt. With the oil price plummeting, both the number of workers and remittance earnings are expected to come down significantly in the coming months. There will be a large influx of returning migrant workers once travel resumes. All these dramatic numbers, translated into daily life, will mean nothing good for the country's balance of payments and expected developments at the macro and micro household as well as enterprise levels.

Strategies to be pursued

Bangladesh will need to pursue a multipronged strategy to ensure that the damage to its external sector-related activities is mitigated and that once the recovery phase starts, the country is able to regain its lost economic momentum. Such a strategy will need to address the health, economic and humanitarian aspects of COVID-19 through strategic expansionary fiscal, monetary and public expenditure policies, support of development partners and sector-specific, targeted measures.

The more than \$12 billion worth of various support packages (equivalent to about 3.5 per cent of GDP) announced by the government must be delivered in a way that it reaches the targeted people, enterprises and businesses. The government has also gone for a significant expansion of safety net and food distribution programmes. Cash transfer to about 5 million poor families is planned; experts, however, have estimated that the number of households in need is more than three times as high. Larger amounts of cash transfers to the most vulnerable people, as well as subsidized sale of rice for the workers, deferred payments of corporate taxes for entrepreneurs and larger investments in the health sector will be required. In view of the shrinking domestic fiscal space, there is a need—unavoidably so—to go for larger deficit financing and tap even more external resources.

Bangladesh's economic recovery will be an uphill battle of unknown proportions. It will take a genuine whole-of-society approach, with the government, labour, businesses, international aid agencies, civil society and other non-state actors joining hands and forging partnerships.



Neon sign at jazz club
© istock / caracterdesign

Creative industries in Mongolia

The challenge of COVID-19 for arts and culture

The effect that the lockdown is having on arts and culture is often overlooked in the discussions on the social and economic damages it is causing. This is also true for Mongolia. Even though it borders only two countries, Mongolia's cultural scene has attracted massive international exchange and relies on open borders to thrive. Musicians, especially jazz musicians, depend on physical proximity with each other on stage as well as with their audience. And as freelancers, they rely on live performances in public bars and jazz clubs for income.

Venues remain closed and concerts cancelled

Mongolia took on distancing measures very early and has been prohibiting public events since 27 February. In the case of the performing arts, this not only affects staff but also artists who make a living by performing in venues across the country. Although restaurants and bars are allowed to operate until 10pm, live music venues cannot benefit because 50–60 per cent of their income is generated after the cut-off time of this newly instated curfew. Live music is essentially a late-night affair.

Venues and arts organizations have been hit much harder by the lockdown than regular bars and restaurants. Those working with foreign musicians to support education usually book their acts up to one year in advance. Thus, travel arrangements and marketing expenses for cancelled engagements have contributed to the general loss. And even if concerts would be permitted again, culture will probably be considered a luxury by an economically weakened society.

A threat to the livelihoods of artists and their families

Government funding for culture and arts in Mongolia is relatively low and focuses on a few government-run institutions, such as the Philharmonic Orchestra and the Opera House. But even the musicians who are employed there need to generate additional income because their wage is not sufficient for making a living. The situation for freelancing musicians is even worse. Where other industries develop concepts for creating income through online channels, jazz musicians

do not have that opportunity because jazz music is a real-time interaction of various people on a very intense level, depending on extreme acoustic accuracy, among other things. Most musicians in Mongolia are rather young and thus responsible for a large part of their family's income. Due to the lockdown, the only funding they have access to now is family savings.

Music education forced to a halt

Most aspects of music education also depend on physical proximity. The use of face masks for brass, reeds and vocalists is impossible. Whereas classical and traditional music training in Mongolia is rather institutionalized through all levels, other genres, such as jazz, pop and rock, are typically taught privately. Government-funded institutions, such as the Mongolian State Conservatory, are working hard to provide lessons online. Yet, these efforts are only feasible for 40–50 per cent of the subjects taught. Consequently, most teachers' salaries and benefits have dropped drastically, without any compensation from the government.

Establishing a support system for the local music scene

Most societies reflect discrepancy when it comes to praising their artists versus enabling them to generate a living in an economical sense. That is why the arts have always been dependent on private support and sponsorship. The young jazz scene in Ulaanbaatar became a very important and well-acknowledged contributor to the city's cultural environment in a relatively short time. The local FAT Cat Jazz Club and the JazzLab NGO have much practice in generating funds from local and international supporters because it has been an essential form of financing their work. Through their initiatives, generous donations from various local and international music lovers have been attracted, thereby supporting musicians in need who regularly work for these institutions.

A post-COVID-19 future for jazz music in Mongolia

Throughout history, artists' lives have been full of economic and emotional challenges. Most artists experience social and psychological insecurity more than once and often face an uncertain future. Yet, the same emotions drive them to continue on their path. In

these trying times, when the whole world is talking about resilience, the young Mongolian jazz scene is a great example of how to deal with the manifold challenges. This lockdown will certainly have its effects on the development of the jazz scene, but it will also bring about new inspiration and outlets for its members creatively.

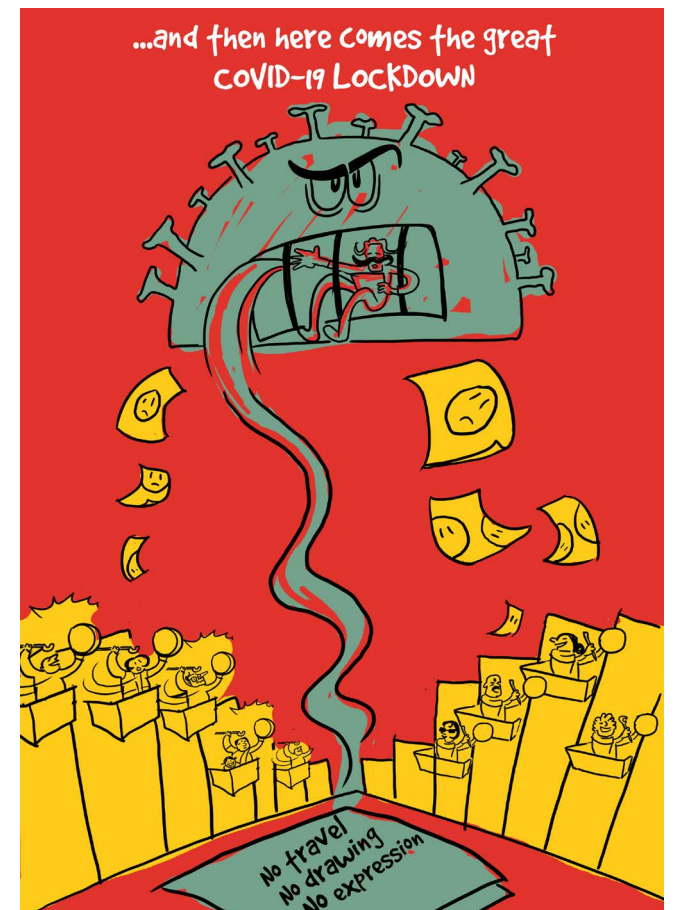
Professor Martin Zenker designed the Jazz Studies Programme at the Mongolian State Conservatory for Music and Dance in 2014 and is still it. He also works as an instructor for jazz double bass at the Munich Academy for Music and Performing Arts.

Mandukhai Tugstogtokh is the founder and CEO of the NGO JazzLab, which is dedicated to facilitating jazz concerts and education in Mongolia. As a music agent, she is responsible for the International Jazz Series.

When the virus hits... A comic from India

15 May 2020

Award-winning Indian cartoonist Sharad Sharma puts the spotlight on the economic and social plight of artists in this comic drawn for FES Asia. The founder of World Comics India documents how his work is being impacted by the COVID-19 crisis.





Sharad Sharma is an internationally acclaimed Indian cartoonist based in New Delhi. In the late 1990s, he founded the organisation World Comics India to introduce the idea of grassroots comics. He is a recipient of the Real Heroes Award by CNN IBN & Reliance Industries and was among the KarmaVeer Puraskaar laureates in the category "Social Communication and Campaign Strategist".

Corona vs Abenomics: Japan's reaction to the crisis

18 May 2020

Over many years, Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has sought to revitalize the Japanese economy, following a policy known as Abenomics. While Abenomics-related measures have only resulted in limited success, the COVID-19 crisis might prove to be the nail in the coffin for this economic approach.

Developments after 18 May 2020 and Shinzo Abe's resignation in September 2020 are not reflected in this article.

As an economic superpower, Japan has been navigating a narrow path between partial lockdown measures and attempts to save the economy during the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. To keep the economy running is a major priority for a nation that, following widespread destruction during World War II and then defeat, rebuilt its national identity around the narrative of a peaceful but economically strong world power. Paying attention to economic issues is particularly important for the current administration under Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, who has made revitalization of the economy a central pillar of his political platform, pushing a policy presumptuously named Abenomics.

Bleak economic outlook

The 18 May 2020 announcement that the country's economy had shrunk 0.9 per cent (3.4 per cent annualized) in the first quarter of 2020, before the declaration of the national emergency due to the coronavirus, came as a shock. A further decline is expected for the second quarter of 2020, which might exceed 5 per cent—some even predict an annualized

20 per cent. And the postponement of the Tokyo Olympics, originally scheduled for July and August, will further slow the economy beyond that. Calling off the Olympics entirely, a scenario becoming more and more likely as the global spread of COVID-19 continues, would be a major blow to the national psyche.

While the government is ascribing the economic downturn to the COVID-19 crisis, Japan had already logged negative economic growth for the fourth quarter of 2019 (7.3 per cent annualized), partly as the result of an increase in the consumption tax (8–10 per cent). This is one of the reasons that the Abe government has been so hesitant in implementing lockdown measures. Prime Minister Abe cannot afford to admit that Abenomics is a failure, partly because, as the name suggests, the policy is so closely tied to his political destiny. But it also—and probably more so—because he needs to keep the economy running smoothly to distract the Japanese people from his pet project, the revision of the constitution.

Japan's post-war constitution, promulgated in 1946 and in force since 1947, has never been revised. Prime Minister Abe has declared on

numerous occasions that he considers the revision of the constitution his “life’s work”. Opinion polls, however, consistently show a lack of interest by ordinary Japanese for constitutional revision—the polls have been dominated by economic questions, and the current crisis has only reinforced this tendency.

National emergency but no lockdown

As a result of Prime Minister Abe’s priorities, the government has refrained from business closures and binding social distancing measures, a course widely criticized as indecisive. Despite a national emergency being declared on 7 April, both the administration and local governments have only issued “recommendations”. Thus, people are still going to work in Tokyo, Osaka and elsewhere, although the trains are less crowded than usual and telework is slowly—very slowly—making inroads. People are also carrying on with shopping and eating out, and at weekends in the country’s well-known shopping districts, it is difficult to see the difference from the time before a national emergency was declared. Still, restaurants have seen a decline in customers due to fears of infection and requests by local government to reduce business hours and limit the number of guests they can serve. In Tokyo, for example, it is recommended that eateries close at 8pm and do not serve alcohol after 7pm. Bars and clubs, obviously considered less essential than restaurants and more challenging in terms of social distancing, were asked to shut down completely when the national emergency was declared in early April. Most but not all of these businesses have complied with the government’s requests.

Japan’s biggest-ever stimulus package: Unlikely to rescue those most in need

To demonstrate its commitment to saving the economy, the Abe government introduced measures to support businesses and employees in March and April. When the national emergency was declared, an economic programme was introduced that was touted as “Japan’s biggest-ever stimulus package” (Kyodo News)—it totalled an eye-watering 108 trillion yen (\$990 billion), equivalent to almost 20 per cent of the nation’s GDP.

Their package has since proved to be not much more than a PR exercise. Few companies or individuals had received any support at all by mid-May. According to national broadcaster NHK, as of 12 May, 270,000 companies had contacted government offices over the employment adjustment subsidies introduced in March, but only 5,000 of them had received any support. And according to the daily Asahi Shinbun, while 200,000 inquiries regarding subsidies for small companies

had been received by local administrative offices as of 4 May, only 2,500 applications were ever filed and only 250 companies actually received any money.

The core element of the stimulus package is a cash handout of 100,000 yen to every individual registered with a local government office (including foreign residents). Although this is a considerable sum, especially helpful for families with children, it is unlikely to rescue those who are most in need. Many people in irregular employment have lost their job or seen a reduction in working hours as a result of the restrictions placed on restaurants and bars, for example. This handout—even if people are able to apply for it and then actually receive it—will only help those most at risk for a month or two. The prospect of getting people—and especially the most vulnerable workers—back to work at this point is bleak, especially because exit strategies are not yet in place.

Keeping the economic and Olympic hopes alive

Whether the government’s instructions to keep businesses closed and work from home will be lifted at the end of May, when the national emergency is set to expire, remains to be seen. After a surge of infections in April (the low rates of testing in Japan do not allow accurate estimates of the number of infected people), new COVID-19 cases have been on the decline since early May. For the Abenomics government, as with Trump’s America, it will be difficult to withstand the temptation to prioritize the economy and declare the crisis over. This would also be one way of keeping alive the hope of holding the Olympic Games in Tokyo in summer 2021. As the cases of Singapore and Korea have already shown, however, it is likely that a rapid normalization of daily life in Japan’s megacities, with their crowded trains and malls, will have painful consequences and could very well lead to what many countries fear most at the moment: a second wave of the pandemic.

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Markers of identity: Asia's cultural heritage in times of COVID-19

19 May 2020

Workers in the tourism sector are now facing severe social challenges owing to the closing of UNESCO heritage sites and the absence of international tourists. At the same time, the unprecedented shutdown provides much needed relief to sites that previously experienced a downfall of mass tourism.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a drastic decline in global travel, hitting tourism-dependent economies the hardest. Heritage sites are often overlooked in this discussion, although they find themselves at the epicentre of a multifaceted challenge. Families whose livelihoods depend on a vibrant tourism sector are struggling, tour guides and heritage management staff are not being paid or have been made redundant, rendering heritage site management more difficult. Mass confinement makes practising cultural and religious rituals impossible for most people—adding yet another layer of hardship to a community's well-being in a time of crisis. For all these reasons, addressing the challenges around heritage sites is crucial.

Heritage sites in Asia: Closed until further notice

The role of heritage sites must not be underestimated. Of the 1,121 official UNESCO World Heritage Sites around the globe, 268 are in the Asia-Pacific region—representing roughly 24 per cent of all sites (with China alone leading the list with 55 sites). According to the UN's cultural watchdog, approximately 85 per cent of these sites

are now closed until further notice. The remaining sites are operating partially and are applying restrictions for the few domestic tourists. This ratio applies equally to thousands of other cultural sites in the region that do not have an official UNESCO status but are also tourist magnets. This illustrates the magnitude of the shutdown and its effects on the heritage sector.

Angkor Wat, Cambodia

While international tourism has halted altogether, regions are affected to various degrees by the decline of visitors. Take the famous ancient site of Angkor Wat, for instance—the site remains open, but the absence of visitors from abroad is striking. “Communities living in the vicinity of remote heritage sites in rural parts of the country are able to turn to farming, which has always been a leg to stand on in addition to community-based tourism,” says Moninita Un, a Cambodian archaeologist and director of Heritage Watch Cambodia. These families, he says, might more easily cope with the effects of the pandemic because they do not solely rely on tourism.

Unemployment is soaring

The impact of the crisis on urban heritage sites, however, weighs more heavily, according to Un. “Families who depend on the jobs in and around the Angkor Wat site are now facing severe difficulties, with a decrease of more than 250,000 expected foreign tourists per month—just at that one site. More than 75 per cent of the tourism sector's companies are currently not operating.” This sector undeniably faces many challenges, with hotels, bars and restaurants entirely shut down. Workers who are dependent on mass tourism do not have many alternatives to explore to compensate their loss of income. Unemployment is soaring. Tour guides have no clientele. The heritage management staff have either been let go or sent home temporarily without pay. Most heritage sites in the region are almost exclusively financed through the revenue generated by entry tickets and tours and not by government subsidies. Only a few governments in the region are financially able to employ their heritage site staff during the crisis. This may have severe consequences on the sites themselves.

Thubbataha Reefs, Philippines

Guides and security personnel are ensuring protection over cultural heritage sites and preventing temples or monuments from being looted or destroyed. Similarly, marine park rangers continue patrolling natural heritage sites. In an ongoing online video series published by UNESCO, site managers around the world report on their respective site's crisis response. Among the contributors to this series is

Angelique Songco, site-manager of the Thubbataha Reefs in the Philippines and 2019 KfW-Bernhard-Grzimek Award winner for her outstanding leadership in conserving this marine heritage site. She is featured thanking the rangers for their commitment in the protection of one of the biggest eco-systems in the world during this COVID-19 crisis. Their contribution is crucial to ensure the protection of wildlife in the coral triangle, and their job has become all the more difficult during this pandemic, with all sources of revenue cut off. Elsewhere, some countries report an increase in poaching and illegal wildlife trafficking.

A silver lining? Absence of mass tourism brings relief for flora and fauna

The global slowdown of tourism also has a silver lining: Cultural heritage sites are taking advantage of the emptiness to scale up their infrastructure projects and archaeological excavation, for which time and staff were preoccupied under normal circumstances. Natural heritage sites are witnessing a relief for flora and fauna as mass tourism halts. This not only gives the opportunity for sites and site-managers to breathe and focus on preservation, protection and restoration, it also allows for much-needed time to explore new ways of guiding tourists through the sites and parks. Non-open-air museums or exhibition spaces especially need to seize the opportunity of no tourists and identify one-way visitor steering so they can reopen as soon as governments allow while following health and distancing regulations for the foreseeable future.

Apart from the economic consequences impacting people and the managerial challenges for the sites, there is one dimension of the current crisis that must not be overlooked: the vast range of cancelled public holidays and festivities. Lockdowns and the suspension of domestic travel pose a major challenge to mobility. Even now, with measures being partially lifted, transport is still restricted, and health regulations continue to apply. This month it has affected families and, more specifically, practising Buddhists during their most important annual holiday, Vesak, in the beginning of May. Not able to celebrate with relatives and friends is one thing but not able to freely access the heritage sites during these processions and celebrations is another. Protecting bricks and stones is relevant for more people than just tourists: Heritage sites are the meeting point for communities to practise their religion and rituals and worship their ancestors. Intangible and tangible cultural heritage need to be thought as one, especially in times of crisis.

This pandemic shows yet again how culture is more than “nice to have”. It is relevant to us in many ways. Not only does the cultural sector employ millions of people, it also builds resilience and is what gives us respite when times get tough. Cultural identity is what brings communities together. The faster we ensure that culture is protected during this crisis and the faster people are able to again partake in it, the sooner we will overcome the challenges brought by COVID-19.



Panorama of the famous Cambodia landmark Angkor Wat © istock / f9photos

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A Grab delivery driver in Bangkok.
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Gig workers in the pandemic: A call to catalyse social protection

21 May 2020

Gig workers hold a unique position in the economic crisis triggered by COVID-19. Some parts of the gig economy—delivery of food, groceries and other goods by e-commerce companies—have been designated as “essential” services across economies but often lack the necessary support that workers need.

With the increasing spread of COVID-19, certain services have witnessed a growth in demand, in some cases leading to [massive hiring](#). Delivery workers, for example, have become front-line workers, placing themselves at a [high risk of infection](#) to avoid loss of income. This risk is compounded by companies’ failure to provide personal protective equipment or raise awareness of social distancing norms. Grab, for instance (though the situation varies across countries), has not [provided sufficient](#) protective gear in its markets, including in Indonesia and the Philippines.

In other services, such as transportation, workers face income loss even if they remain “logged in”. Drivers at Gojek in Indonesia [report](#) a 70 per cent decrease in earnings as a result of the drastic reductions in demand. In India, workers on food delivery apps have [reported](#) daily earnings as low as 150–300 rupees (\$24) during the nationwide lockdown.

Debates about the nature of gig work: A vacuum without social security?

These challenges bring ongoing debates about the nature of gig work as employment or self-employment into sharp focus. Most of the companies characterize these workers as

independent contractors and, before the onset of the current crisis, had not given employee entitlements, such as paid sick leave, medical insurance and pensions. This derives from the touted flexibility of gig work, which ostensibly allows workers to “switch off” whenever they please and seamlessly shift across platforms. But workers have been placed in this vacuum without social security while often having to work long hours on the same platform to meet unfair incentive structures.

To remain functional, some companies have made public announcements about the provision of protective gear, medical insurance and two weeks of sick leave in the event of a confirmed COVID-19 diagnosis. This then points

to the tension in their legal status as aggregators of independent contractors while also having to take at least minimal steps to protect workers. Such steps affirm the status of workers as the core of the aggregators’ business because they have been forced into them to ensure the viability of their business. In a laudable move, several companies have extended COVID-19 insurance and two weeks of paid sick leave to workers in lieu of continuing their exposure to the risk of infection. In Pakistan, both Uber and Careem [announced](#) sick leave and insurance for workers at risk.

The inadequacy of these measures raises concerns about their intentions. Are they meant to ensure the well-being of workers or to allay customers’ fears about contracting the disease? In Asia, few companies have provided income support to workers. Those who have extended support have made compensations that are woefully inadequate and then only to a small proportion of workers. Grab in Singapore, for instance, extended income support to drivers who remained active through the lockdown. Uber in India [made announcements](#)

regarding cash support to a limited set of drivers without any details of the criteria used to filter workers.

Fighting income loss through social protection and labour regulations

Civil society groups have demanded that governments step in to provide relief to gig workers. While some governments have been able to do so, there exists severe intra-regional disparity. The Government of Singapore, for instance, offered to [pay workers 7.50 Singaporean dollars per hour](#) for taking classes to upskill themselves. No such response has been offered by most governments in South and South-East Asia.

Companies have not released any public data about the income loss of workers, which could be used to ease the process of providing relief. This could include a comparison of workers’ earnings before and after lockdown and the number of workers who continue to remain logged in through this period. Gig workers are thus forced to collect such data themselves to make a credible claim about loss of income. Workers in creative industries across

South-East Asia, among other regions, have launched the campaign [I Lost My Gig](#) that aims to publicly gather data about income loss and lists resources for financial support.

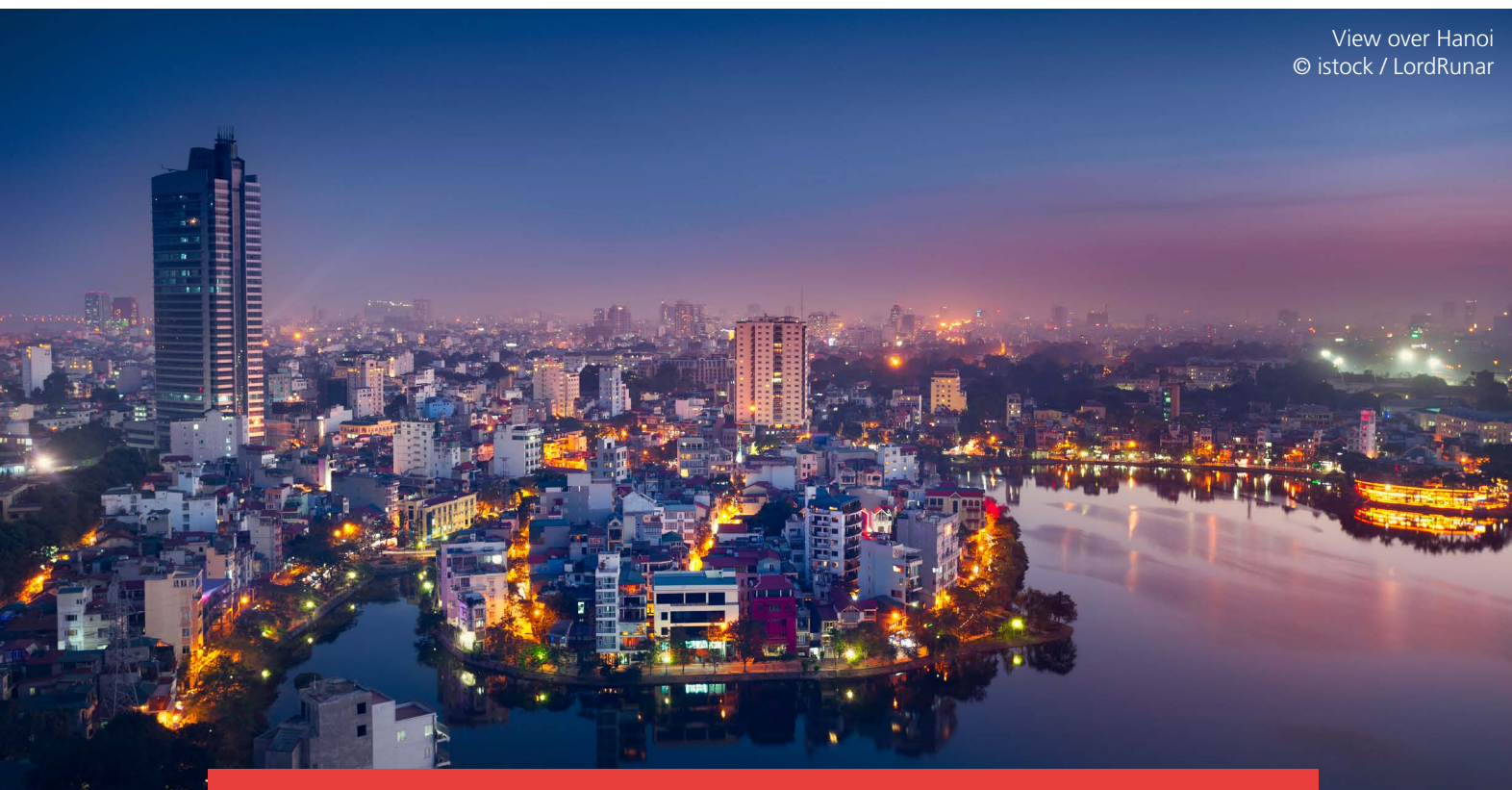
Such campaigns point to the potential for workers to collectively mobilize in this moment of crisis in labour. Several unions and collectives have emerged in the Global South to offer a model for collectivizing workers in the gig economy. This could be the moment to catalyse social protections for gig workers and push for better labour regulation that recognizes and corrects the misrepresentation of the employment relationship.

Life after lockdown: Vietnam's COVID-19 success story

25 May 2020

The remarkable success in keeping the number of coronavirus infections low and deaths at zero has allowed Vietnam to gradually reopen its economy. Life is slowly returning to a kind of normalcy that has been missing for months. Why was Vietnam's COVID-19 trajectory distinctively different from other countries in the region?

Developments in Vietnam after 25 May 2020 are not reflected in this article.



View over Hanoi
© istock / LordRunar

Tran Hong Hanh

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Vietnam is an often-overlooked coronavirus success story. While other countries in the region and beyond saw their numbers rise, Vietnam was able to ease its lockdown restrictions as early as 23 April. As of today, the country has reported only 325 cases and no deaths related to COVID-19.

At first glance, Vietnam would seem as vulnerable to a large virus outbreak as other countries around the world. It is well integrated in the global economy, a hub for trade and a major destination for international tourists. It also shares a long border with China, and it saw the return of a large number of Vietnamese citizens from countries that are most impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. So, how did Vietnam manage to defy the odds? The short answer: clear communication and active government–citizen cooperation.

No miracle but a resolute stance

The first factor contributing to Vietnam performing well in this crisis is the early response and strategic approach. As of 27 January, Prime Minister Nguyen Xuan Phuc made it clear that the government accepts economic loss to protect people's lives and health. The country's previous experience with SARS in 2003 and awareness of its own limited resources regarding health care facilities meant that it would impose wide-ranging social distancing measures and movement restrictions early on. Making full use of the central–local government system, it mobilized as many contact tracers as possible to contain the spread of the virus.

A second piece of the puzzle was clear communication and in-time interaction between the State and its citizens. Vietnam did not rely on a sophisticated contact tracing app, as many other countries attempted to, but actually applied a rather low-cost approach to communication. Awareness-raising campaigns through loudspeakers, the press, social media and other means, such as music videos, greatly resonated with the Vietnamese public. Citizens were supported and updated with information on the latest developments and medical advisories through websites, hotlines, SMS and other mobile telephone applications. For instance, the handwashing campaign #GhenCovy, launched by the Ministry of Health, went viral (even globally) as social media influencers added their own dance moves to the catchy tune of the campaign video.

Solidarity and lessons learned from history

Third, the long and costly Vietnam War, which ended 45 years ago, taught people how solidarity strengthens one nation's power to overcome huge challenges. COVID-19 is no exception. Indeed, the Vietnamese people seem more united than ever in this fight against an "invisible enemy", as the government puts it. People generally display

a high level of trust and willingness to follow the guidelines in this exceptional crisis.

Especially when it comes to saving life and ensuring public safety, the need to sacrifice one's own interest for common objectives seems accepted by the majority of the population. Slogans such as "Fighting the epidemic is like fighting against the enemy" or "Staying at home is a patriot act" circulated widely in the media and triggered an active response in the struggle against the virus.

Last but not least, there was wide acceptance for wearing face masks in public even before the pandemic. Large cities in Vietnam are unfortunately well known for their bad air quality due to emissions, waste burning and smog. People are thus familiar with wearing masks and other gear to protect themselves from respiratory illnesses and unhealthy exposure. In the context of COVID-19, this good habit—which originally grew out of an unfortunate necessity—appears to have been helpful in preventing people-to-people transmissions.

Opening the way for economic recovery and a new normal

For the government, businesses and people, it is now time to revive the economy. The bustling traffic in the busy streets of Hanoi and Ho Chi Minh City is back, and domestic tourism is resuming as hotels reopen. Most localities are allowed to organize events with large groups of people again, including sporting events, festivals and gatherings in public places. Most non-essential services have also resumed operations, except for karaoke bars and nightclubs, following an announcement by the prime minister on 7 May, which came as a relief, especially for retailers. Restrictions of movement have been lifted as well, with social distancing measures removed on all forms of transport. Schools reopened in the beginning of May and initially experimented with various protection and distancing measures. By now, normal operations have resumed, and schools go largely without these measures.

All that said, Vietnam is keeping its guard up and understands all too well that the COVID-19 pandemic is not yet over. People are still advised to wear face masks and use hand sanitizer. To follow the government's instructions on hygiene and distancing standards, some shop owners must improve their old way of doing business or introduce their guests to new rules and formats. For smaller street restaurants, it might be more difficult to implement the new guidelines. This is an urgent issue that needs to be addressed. Overall, though, the Vietnamese people and government, which reacted quickly and early on with bailout packages and new supporting policies, remain optimistic about a post-COVID-19 slow-but-stable economic recovery.

Social media and public discourse in Mongolia

27 May 2020

Social media is a dominating force in public discourse. In the case of Mongolia, its proactive and transparent use by public health authorities has helped to limit the spread and impact of misinformation, populist messages and fear.

Bulgan Batdorj studies at the University of British Columbia and previously worked with the Canadian Embassy in Mongolia as a foreign policy and diplomacy officer.

The impact of social media on Mongolia's young and fragile democracy is ambivalent. On one hand, there is a clear benefit from more direct and open communication of politicians, journalists and scientists. But on the other hand, digital populism, with all its detrimental effects on democratic discourse, has been rising for several years.

Creating trust in public health authorities

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted the more positive aspects of social media's impact on society. Surely Facebook and, to a lesser extent Twitter, were used for increased attempts of social media fraud, hacking, fake charities, fake news and the spread of misinformation. But importantly, though, was its successful proactive use by the Ministry of Health.

Since January, the Ministry has been providing daily updates on COVID-19, informing the public on the global spread of the virus, the country's number of cases and response

measures it is taking. The briefings quickly became the main source of information for the public and limited the potential spread of misinformation and fear significantly. In addition to its regular updates, the government developed information dashboards, infographics, a series of cartoon videos advising kids on prevention measures and translated materials, which helped equip the public with knowledge and information while building trust in the public health measures.

Changing the tone of public discourse

Mongolia also can serve as an example of how social media can set and change the tone in public discourse on certain issues. The first COVID-19 case in the country was recorded on 15 March. The patient, who has now recovered, is a French citizen who did not follow the two-week self-isolation warning when he entered the country. At first, the situation escalated quickly when Mongolians expressed their discontent, calling out all foreigners for having a neo-colonial attitude by ignoring the country's

strict quarantine rules. But quickly the tone of this conversation shifted from discriminatory to compassionate after a letter from a Mongolian grade 5 student to the French patient was made public. The letter expressed the girl's concerns for the French patient's physical and mental health. Although the letter was not published through Facebook, a photo of that letter emerged on the platform and went viral. The French citizen's reply and its translation followed and went viral as well. Subsequently, hatred gave way to compassion. The Frenchman was even awarded a Mongolian nickname: Ankh-Otgon, which loosely translates to First-Last, meaning that he was hoped to be the first and last case of COVID-19 in Mongolia. This kind of positive viral story demonstrates how quickly the tone of public attitude and behaviour can be changed on social media.

Criticizing government actions

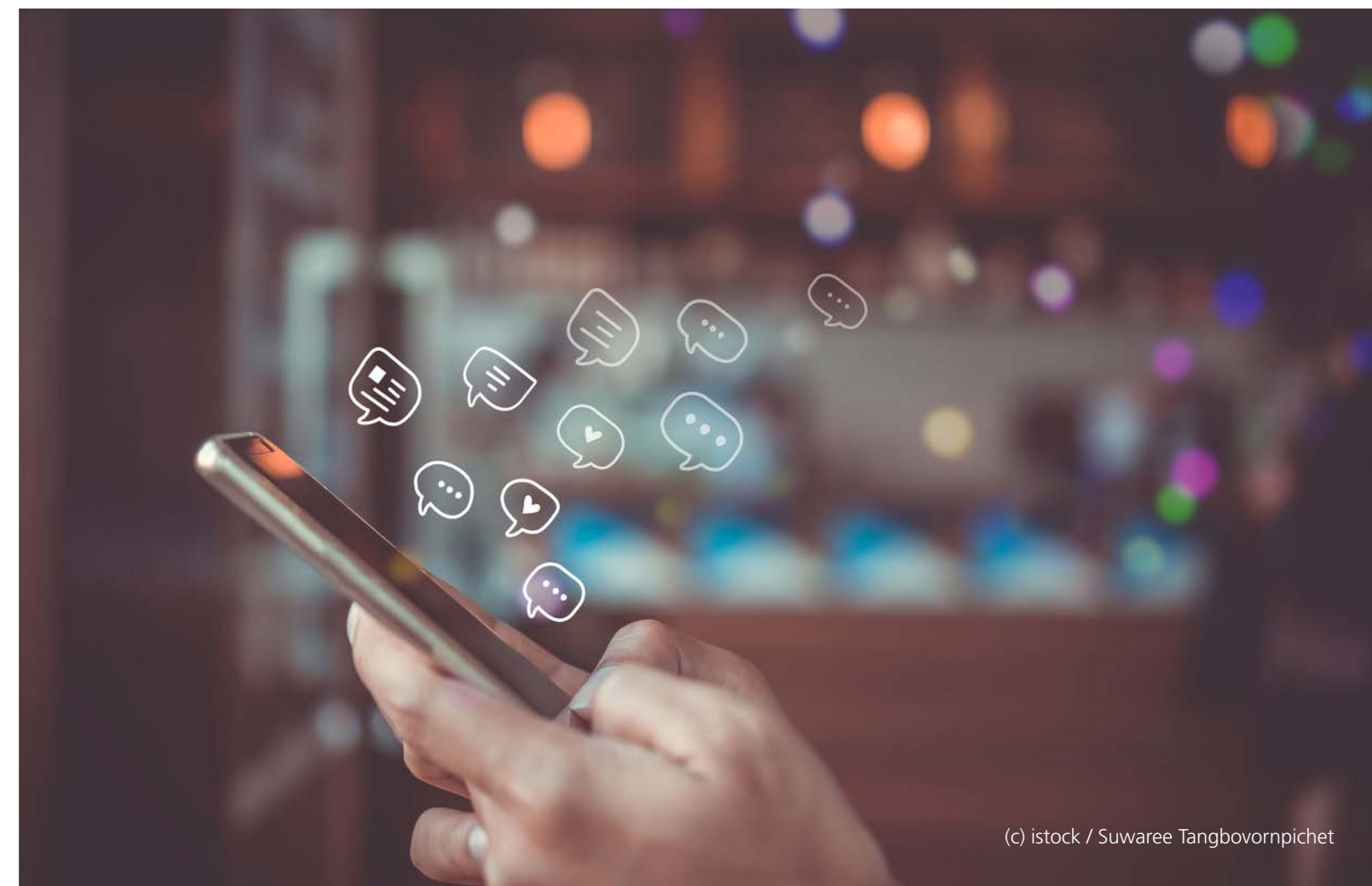
Another hot topic on social media was the evacuation of Mongolians stranded abroad. Because all known

cases of COVID-19 in Mongolia were imported from abroad, public opinion was (and still is) split on the issue of Mongolians returning home. A large-scale repatriation effort would naturally lead to increased risk to people in the country. Many families with relatives stuck abroad, most of them in hard-hit countries like the United States, China and South Korea, criticized the government for not doing enough. Frustrated citizens took matters to social media, calling out the government and the State Emergency Commission for selecting citizens for repatriation based on their power, money and relationships. Those citizens organized into a Facebook group (11,790 members) and demanded action from the president and prime minister. The group also asked family and friends in Mongolia to "Do not forgive—do not vote".

The parliamentary election scheduled for 24 June complicates the matter even further. Parties and candidates are using social media as their main communication platform. Without

bringing home many of the stranded citizens, the election could be overshadowed by the new public movement, while at the same time, evacuating citizens prior to the election could mean increased public health risk.

Social media is instantaneous and more viral than the current pandemic in reaching people. These stories from Mongolia affirm the positive impact of social media in the current crisis from building solidarity and offering tools for citizens to organize and voice their concerns.



Fair trade for all is crucial in times of COVID-19

28 May 2020

The negotiations on the Asia-Pacific Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership are in their final stages. The agreement, once ratified, will cover 30 per cent of the world's population and almost 30 per cent of the world's GDP. IndustriALL Southeast Asia Regional Secretary, Annie Adviento, stresses the importance of an inclusive and just deal that ensures access to medical supplies and food amid the global pandemic.

Maintaining open supply chains and trade is crucial amid the ongoing pandemic. Making sure that free trade agreements benefit all people and that unions are consulted in the negotiations is equally crucial. In the midst of lockdown and social distancing measures implemented in most countries in the region, free trade negotiations have continued over the past few months.

First among them is the negotiation for the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), with its latest round of talks in mid-April, with the partner countries committed to concluding the agreement this year. The main concern for IndustriALL Global Union is not when and where the trade agreement will be signed or ratified but whether it and any trade agreement in the region complies with the 10 principles for trade agreements of IndustriALL, which aim to protect workers' rights and the benefit for people.

Still no enforceable labour rights

According to ASEAN officials, the participating countries have completed six chapters and are working towards conclusion of the remaining 14 chapters. Still, there appears to be no commitment

for the inclusion of enforceable labour rights or incorporation of International Labour Organization conventions and recommendations into the agreement. The non-public negotiations for the RCEP have left workers in the dark. Governments must have proper consultations with trade unions, and the negotiating texts must be deliberated in parliament, state or provincial assemblies and local governments. Democratic due process should be adhered to.

The withdrawal of India from the RCEP due to pressure from Indian businesses, farmers and civil society indicates that its citizens and government have concerns as to the possible influx of import products that might eliminate local businesses. This reflects the importance of one the IndustriALL principle that each country must utilize policy space to regulate trade activities. The Indian government has every right to impose trade tariffs to protect sectors of national interest.

Countries should not be sued for just social and economic policies

In August 2019, IndustriALL affiliates in the Asia-Pacific region sent letters to respective governments and requested they adhere to the 10 principles in the RCEP negotiation process. Subsequently, the Malaysian government announced that member countries of RCEP had agreed to drop investor-state dispute settlements for now from the trade deal and to revisit the issue once the agreement is in force. The decision is commendable because every country should be free to implement social and economic policies in the interest of its people without threat of being sued by a publicly unaccountable arbitration mechanism.

International trade must ensure access to medicine and food

The COVID-19 pandemic threatens the lives and livelihoods of workers across the region. At the same time, it is providing an opportunity for governments and workers to rethink the intertwining relationship between trade, human rights and a solidarity economy. The pandemic might even strengthen mutual support among nation states in Southeast Asia.

Given that some countries have imposed export bans on medical products, the World Trade Organization (WTO) emphasized the role of international trade for ensuring access to medicines. Nevertheless, the WTO respects member country's policy space to protect public health and make life-saving medicine affordable through a flexibility provision of the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights.

Export bans amid the pandemic asymmetrically impact least developed countries because they heavily rely on the import of these products for domestic use. These countries do not have the manufacturing capacity to produce the goods for local consumption. Hence, countries should utilize multilateral trade forums, such as the WTO, to mitigate the adverse

impact of unilateral trade policies on least developing countries.

It is crucial that trade facilitates people's right to health and right to food. IndustriALL emphasizes that intellectual property regimes should help governments achieve the Sustainable Development Goals, not impede them. Life-saving medicine and personal protective equipment must be made available to workers and people throughout the health crisis.

Intensified cooperation between ASEAN countries in this crisis?

In fact, ASEAN has given a proactive response to COVID-19, calling for intensified cooperation when it comes to the provision of medicines and medical supplies, manifested by the development of regional reserves of medical supplies to cope with the public health emergencies. The regional body also declared that it aims to ensure food security by utilizing the ASEAN Plus Three Emergency Rice Reserve.

On the RCEP though, Southeast Asian governments ought to ensure that the negotiation process for trade agreements is participatory and transparent. All stakeholders, including trade unions, should be consulted, and workers' interests should be protected in the agreements.

Free trade must aid the realization of universal human rights—everyone should have an adequate living standard, with sufficient food and affordable medicine or medical supplies.

Annie Adviento is the IndustriALL Regional Secretary for Southeast Asia. IndustriALL Global Union represents 50 million workers in 140 countries in the mining, energy and manufacturing sectors and is a force in global solidarity, taking up the fight for better working conditions and trade union rights. Visit www.industrialunion.org for more information about their work.



In the fall of 2019, 50 young trade union leaders of Bangladesh came together to explore their preferred work in 2040 at a futures thinking workshop, jointly organized by the Bangladesh Institute of Labour Studies and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. While the participants came from a spectrum of sectors, including ready-made garments (RMG), textile, transport, electronic, domestic work and hairdressing, their visions for the future shared commonalities. They wanted fair jobs, job security, social security, physically and emotionally safe workplaces and equal rights for all genders. The participants wanted freedom to form trade unions, educational opportunities for skills development and technological adaptation. They envisioned facilities for child care. In their mind, these were thoughts for a distant future, and, of course, COVID-19 had not yet appeared.

Putting workers' safety first

With COVID-19 on the scene, 2040 can't seem to wait. We can't wait for social security—we need it now. We can't wait for physically and emotionally safe workplaces—this must happen now. We not only want a green and smart work environment now, we must also want a COVID-proof smart workplace. While we are battling a pandemic, can we leapfrog to a desired future, when technology can work as a bridge between the tensions and aspirations of workers and their employers?

A rapid response survey undertaken by the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development in Bangladesh found that approximately 3 million workers (about 80 per cent of workers) had opened a mobile financial service account as of 3 May 2020. This illustrates a steep increase from the findings of a national survey conducted by Innovision Consulting in 2019, which revealed that only 35.4 per cent of RMG workers had a mobile wallet. The huge spike in contactless payments occurred as a result of the stimulus package (cheap loans) that the government gave to factory owners as a COVID-19 counter-measure. To receive the package, factories were required to pay wages through mobile wallets.

The need for better safety for workers is triggering demand for improved occupational health facilities in factories. Numerous innovations in disinfection chambers have been made by the Bangladesh University of Engineering and Technology, the Institute of Diploma Engineers Bangladesh, Wizkit and others. While these chambers are being installed in hospitals, some factories are also installing the chambers, hoping that it can add an additional layer of safety against the virus.

The coronavirus pandemic is challenging frontiers as organizations and individuals search for ways to remain protected by avoiding public places or gatherings. This provides an opportunity to use technology to deliver services that have been

traditionally exchanged through face-to-face interaction. For example, the factories can work with technology service providers to create digital platforms to list workers' demands for food, medicine and other household products and work with local traders to have these products delivered to or near factory premises. This would help ensure that workers avoid crowded marketplaces but also keep local traders and pharmacists in business.

Organizations engaged with workers have attempted to promote the reporting of sexual harassment and gender-based violence through technology platforms. These might get more traction now. The Amader Kotha Helpline was established in 2014 as a mechanism for workers to report and resolve safety and other concerns in the RMG sector in Bangladesh. UN Women in Bangladesh has also developed a [learning app](#) for RMG workers to address sexual harassment in the workplace and public places in their vicinity. Users can access information on what sexual harassment means and where they can seek help if they are harassed.

New horizons for e-learning and the new normal

Newly emerging opportunities are also being used to launch e-learning programmes or to pivot others based on previous experiences. On 1 June, the Global Labor University is launching an online course to support a global debate on policy solutions and strategies to address the main challenges exposed and exacerbated by COVID-19. These formats also need to be translated into different languages and contexts. In 2019, the Bangladesh Institute of Labor Studies, in collaboration with the German Trade Union Confederation, launched a [Bangla Massive Open Online Course](#), primarily targeting mid-level trade unionists and labour activists to develop strategies for improving workers' rights and strengthening industrial relations to achieve sustainable and inclusive development.

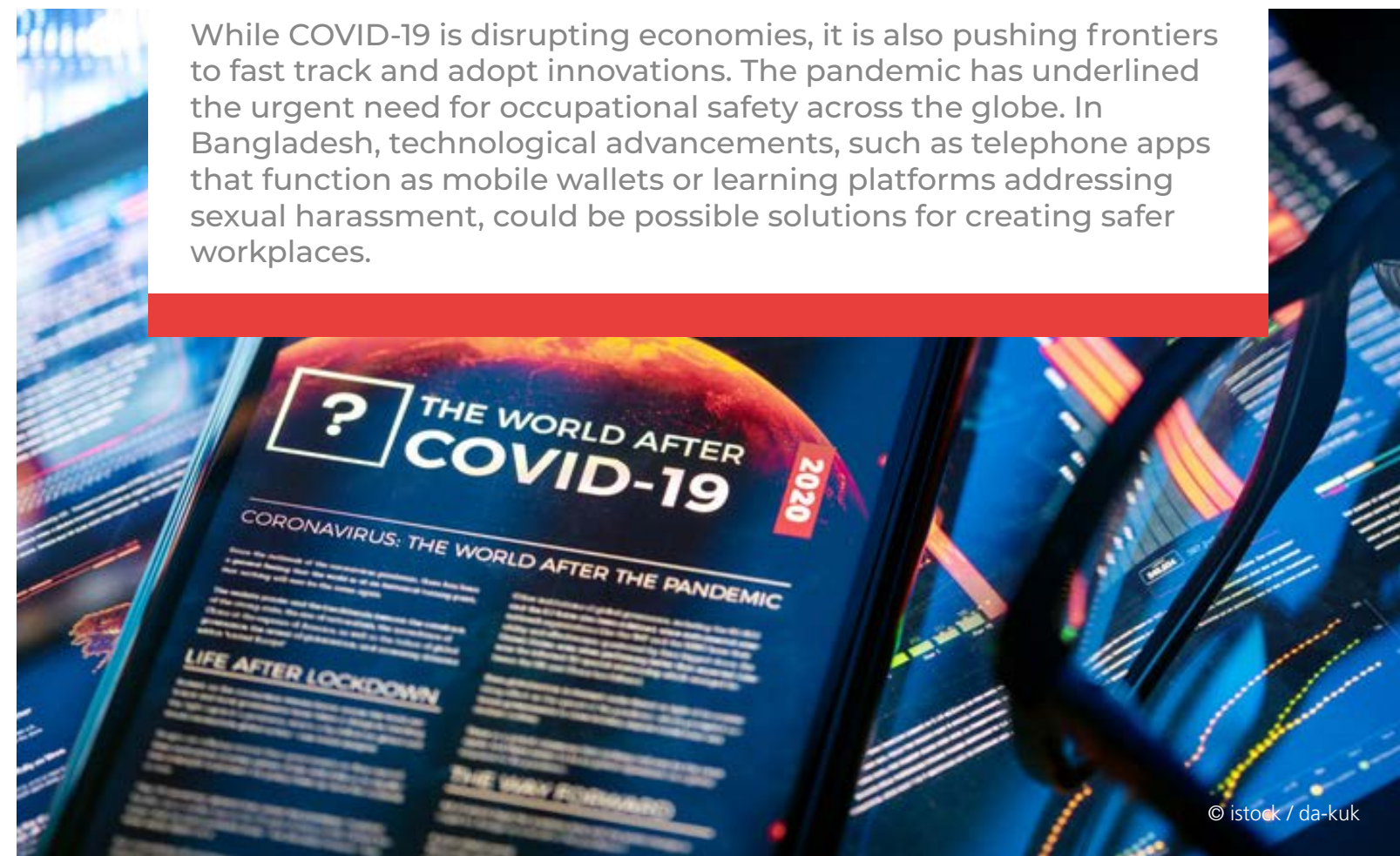
The "new normal" enforced by COVID-19 provides the opportunity to increase the use of such content by workers. Lessons can be also learned from storytelling initiatives from other sectors, such as Karunavirus.org, which has been created to amplify the voice of collective compassion through stories that are shared of everyday people choosing love over fear. Such storytelling platforms can enable diversity of voice in the RMG sector as well as improve relationships among relevant stakeholders.

While COVID-19 is disrupting economies, it is also pushing frontiers to fast track development and/or adoption of innovations. We can start with little steps by acting now to lay the foundation of a COVID-proof smart workplace. It is a step that we need for the safety of workers and increased trust between workers and employers. It is one small step that can lead to a giant leapfrog to a preferred future of work, starting from today.

Leapfrogging to a COVID-proof smart workplace

29 May 2020

While COVID-19 is disrupting economies, it is also pushing frontiers to fast track and adopt innovations. The pandemic has underlined the urgent need for occupational safety across the globe. In Bangladesh, technological advancements, such as telephone apps that function as mobile wallets or learning platforms addressing sexual harassment, could be possible solutions for creating safer workplaces.



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Managing a triple crisis in Malaysia

01 June 2020

Ever since the first case of COVID-19 emerged on 25 January, Malaysia has been battling not one, not two, but three crises. First, the public health crisis of combating the pandemic and flattening the curve. Second, the economic recession induced by the lockdown measures. And third, a political crisis unfolding in parallel to the outbreak and resulting in a change of government in late February.

Ivy Kwek Ai Wei is the Research Director at Research for Social Advancement, a non-profit think tank in Kuala Lumpur, established in 2004. She previously served as Special Functions Officer to the Deputy Minister of Defence.

This crisis has shone a light on the economic insecurity of average Malaysians and the lack of social safety nets in the country's social protection system. Workers in the informal sector, which constitutes **10.6 per cent** of the workforce (excluding the agriculture sector), are not able to access the unemployment benefits provided in the stimulus package.

A lack of emphasis on wage support also means that many people risk losing their job; the wage subsidy programme provided by the government is seen to be insufficient for small businesses to retain staff. It is unclear how much the economy will pick up after the relaxation of the extended movement control order, which is now poised to end on 9 June, with the public having less spending power and global demand for goods most likely still low.

Political crisis

As if that's not bad enough, the political conundrum has added to the complexity. Even as the pandemic rages, political horse-trading is playing out in the background. So far, the Kedah state government has **fallen after** two state assembly persons switched sides. The government's **serial appointments** of political personalities linked to corporations have also been seen as an attempt to shore up political support from allies. Talks about shifting alignments, rumours of more elected representatives crossing over and the race to achieve a majority in parliament (at least 112 seats) have become an almost daily affair and reveal the divides within the political coalition now in place. Other events include a series of **leaked recordings**, one of which was the internal Pakatan Harapan high-level meeting that preceded the political coup, as well as the dismissal of former Prime Minister Tun Mahathir from his own party. In short, the government led by Prime Minister Muhyiddin Yassin is far from stable. Much is still up for grabs.

The unwillingness of the new Perikatan Nasional (National Alliance) government to convene the parliament has in a way restricted its ability to respond. In the only parliamentary session so far, on 18 May—**cut short to only half a day**, no supplementary bills were passed. This also means that there is no mechanism for checks and balances currently in place to discuss the COVID-19 policies and measures introduced by the government,

including the 260 billion-ringgit stimulus package. As other countries are doing, the Malaysian parliament could have adopted the practice of **virtual conferences** or restricted the number of members present in plenary. Instead, all 222 members of parliament were flown into the capital to listen to the royal address and then swiftly dismissed. The short session, it seems, was merely to fulfil a **standing order** stipulating that not more than 60 days should pass between two sittings of parliament.

More telling, the general public has not been upbeat about having a more active parliament during this crisis time. Despite some campaign efforts to extend the parliament sitting, a majority seems to perceive it as an unnecessary distraction because the government's efforts should be focused on crisis management. Clearly, people appear to weigh the importance of parliament as a venue for discussing policies pertaining to people's well-being differently. Parliament is often equated with political fanfare, and the faith among the wider public in the separation of power between the executive and legislative branches seems limited.

Continued uncertainties

The first half of 2020 has been a triple whammy for Malaysia. With the next parliamentary sitting scheduled for July, the drama is expected to last as politicians on both sides will do all they can to gain support and show they have the majority. Meanwhile, the economic recession will only worsen, with a gloomy global outlook, and there's every risk that the pandemic will strike again if we let our guard down.

More will need to be done to ensure that the government is held accountable for its policies in handling COVID-19. For one, a bipartisan parliamentary committee should be established to discuss related budgets and policies. The government has also just announced the tabling of a COVID-19 temporary relief bill that will include law amendments to address the economic and health situations. Waiting until July might be a little too late. It is important that Malaysia gets its act together before the new normal becomes too much to handle and that parliament retakes its place as an essential service for the country in this time of crisis.

While Malaysia was embroiled in a political turmoil dubbed Langkah Sheraton (the Sheraton Move), which saw the fall of the Pakatan Harapan (Alliance of Hope) government, a *tabligh* gathering took place with some 16,000 people from across the region. The gathering led to a large cluster of COVID-19 cases, including some overseas. As of 20 May, the *tabligh* cluster **contributed** at least 3,347 cases, or half of the total cases in Malaysia. Despite this initial oversight in stopping large-scale gatherings, Malaysia has in general been quite successful in its pandemic response, not least thanks to the stringent movement-control measures in place since 18 March.

Economic crisis

These measures, however, have come at a cost. As economic activities grind to a halt, many people are suffering, especially small business and low-income workers. Many own-account workers who have been unable to work due to the movement restrictions rely on government assistance, such as the Bantuan Prihatin Nasional cash transfer scheme, to sustain their livelihood. But the monthly payment of 1,000 ringgit (around \$239) for households earning less than 4,000 ringgit (and 500 ringgit for single households earning less than 2,000 ringgit) was only to last until May.

From diagnosis to cure: A post-pandemic paradigm shift

02 June 2020

The COVID-19 crisis is forcing us to recognize the failures of existing social and economic systems. If we continue with neoliberalism as usual, it will lead to increased inequalities and more extreme poverty. Instead, we can use the rupture to mould new, just, healthy and redistributive systems.

Kate Lappin

is the Asia-Pacific Regional Secretary of Public Services International, a global union federation for workers in public services that brings together more than 30 million workers represented by more than 700 unions.

The Indian writer Arundhati Roy has called COVID-19 a “societal MRI”, exposing the sicknesses within our systems. Neoliberalism shifted societal risks, including the risk of public health crises, on to individuals. But the virus has forced governments to suspend some of the key tenants of neoliberal capitalism. Suddenly, they are investing in public services, recognizing the need for local production and the nationalizing of essential services. The imperative for the state to step up in this time of turmoil is a clear illustration that the current systems are fundamentally incapable of dealing with crises.

Governments will need to build recovery plans unlike any seen outside of war. Political leaders have the unprecedented opportunity to leave a legacy of a more just, equitable and sustainable society. The default position of many countries in the Asia-Pacific region will be to revert quickly to type and impose austerity measures for years to come. Instead, we must build trade union capacity to advocate for COVID recovery plans that can fundamentally reshape the social contract.

These plans must not be simply framed around economic stimulus. Instead, they must reorganize our societies around the capacity to care for all people and the environment we depend on. Governments should embrace the prospect of the largest delivery of public goods in a life time—new public health infrastructure and research, new universities, new public broadcasters and data systems, new public clean energy, new public spaces and guaranteed universal social protection.

Public health once and for all

Governments have been repeatedly advised to prepare for a global pandemic. They have also known that we are facing a global shortage of 18 million health workers, with the [largest shortfalls](#) in Asia. Governments must now significantly increase funding to the public health system, improve the wages and conditions of health workers and care workers to attract and keep qualified workers and reduce the large loss of workers through professional health migration out of the region.

Substantial public resources are being mobilized to support the development of diagnostics, treatments and vaccines. Yet, we have not been guaranteed that they will deliver universal free services to the public or even stay in the public domain. We need a global consensus that all research, data, equipment, treatments and vaccines are global public goods, unrestricted by proprietary interests.

Decommodification of life, decent work and green recovery

Perhaps the biggest change required in the post-COVID-19 world is a change in the way we measure value. Instead of measuring financial efficiency and profitability, all public and private entities could have fiduciary obligations towards the greater public good, including to provide decent work. Workers’ representatives and community representatives should be required on all boards to ensure real primary accountabilities.

Trade rules restrict the policy space that governments need to respond to crises, to nationalize public services and to prioritize public health, the

environment and the public good over corporate interests. We must reform the global trade rules so that we can make economies work for people, not the other way around.

The pandemic proves that governments can shut down some sections of an economy and take monumental steps to address a crisis when required. A public-led, green recovery can deliver a jobs guarantee, public renewable energies and expanded public transport as well as more jobs in health and care, education and sustainable services.

Redistribution of wealth, power and resources

To fund the COVID-19 recovery plans, governments must rapidly expand their revenue base. At least \$36 trillion is currently hiding in tax havens, which means at least \$500 billion of corporate tax revenue is lost every year through the use of such havens.

To take an example from Europe, both Denmark and Poland have excluded companies that operate in some tax havens from receiving government bailouts. We need that to go further and exclude these companies from any government procurement and include all low tax and secrecy jurisdictions.

Tax revenue options for governments include excessive profits taxes, digital services taxes and wealth taxes, until global tax reforms [allow unitary taxation](#) so that corporations are taxed regardless of where they hide their wealth.

While rich countries can create funds by having central banks buy government bonds, weaker currencies and external US dollar debt makes more debt dangerous for many developing countries. Thus, the [global call](#) for the permanent cancellation of all principal, interest and charges on sovereign external debt due in 2020–2021 must be implemented.

The reality is that the global social and economic order will change as a result of the pandemic. Corporate interests are already working to cement even greater corporate power. It is our job to make sure that the change is just, equitable and healthy.





Building power: A just and sustainable recovery in Asia

05 June 2020

Improvements in environmental indicators due to COVID-19 present an unprecedented opportunity for an economic transformation that is ecologically sustainable and socially just. Building power through movements can ensure that this happens.

WIn the ho would have thought it was possible for environmental and climate change indicators in Asia to significantly improve within two months? Well, the lockdown forced by the coronavirus pandemic has done exactly that.

With an almost complete freeze on the movements of motor vehicles and airplanes as well as the large-scale closing of industries, air quality has improved across Asia, including in New Delhi, which is known for chronic air pollution. The only city without any improvement is Jakarta. But [experts](#) link this to the 12 coal-fired power plants surrounding the city and continuing their day-to-day business as usual, which emphasizes the urgent need for industries to take a stronger stand on creating an ecologically sustainable future.

Limited human and economic activities have also added to improved water quality in certain rivers, for example in [Malaysia](#) and [India](#). Noise pollution, too, has reduced as well as the generation of hazardous waste and solid waste in general. With people confined indoors, [even wildlife has started making their way further into urban spaces](#). Unfortunately, these positive developments have largely been a result of a virus and not due to voluntary human behaviour and government intervention. COVID-19 has had tragic consequences—a devastating toll on lives, livelihoods and economic activities. Even so, it has presented the opportunity to create a new normal and initiate the transition to an economic model centred on low-carbon development with

ecological sustainability, social inclusion and equity. Civil society organizations (CSOs) in Asia have seized this opportunity to offer a vision of a new normal to decision makers. It is action also prompted by the mobilization of staggering amounts of money—previously declared unaffordable—as economic stimulus packages.

In Malaysia, after the government had announced two such packages, CSOs came together to develop and submit a detailed letter to the Minister of Finance in late March. The Ministry was urged to address environmental concerns while managing the ravages of the pandemic, such as efficient use of energy and resources and sustainable production and consumption of natural resources with positive impacts towards society and environment. Civil society organizations in India have made similar interventions.

At the global level, the Climate Action Network—represented by more than 1,300 CSOs in more than 130 countries—is developing a detailed policy paper entitled “A Just Reboot: A Proposal for Recovery and Economic Stimulus Packages” through an ongoing consultation process for adaptation and application worldwide. Its central argument is that stimulus packages need to be designed and implemented in alignment with the goals of the Paris Agreement while supporting adequate measures to deal with the health emergency and immediate social needs arising from the COVID-19 impacts.

How effective are these efforts and is anyone listening?

Immediate reactions of some Asian governments to the crisis do not offer an optimistic scenario. During a call on 11 May hosted by the NDC Partnership, senior officials in Indonesia from the Department of Climate Change and the Ministry of National Development Planning said the country will not increase its climate ambition in its revised Nationally Determined Contributions due to the adverse economic impacts of COVID-19.

During lockdown in India, the government approved or discussed [30 infrastructure projects in biodiverse forests](#), including a coal mine, highway and limestone mine. In China, [five new coal-fired power plants were approved for construction](#) between 1 and 18 March as a means to boost the country's domestic economy. In Australia, the federal government is pushing for the [expansion of coal mines](#) to keep people in work. And the list goes on and on.

So how do we effect a shift?

CAN International in March adopted a cross-cutting objective on Building Power Through Movements

Nithi Nesadurai

was involved with the creation of the Climate Action Network Southeast Asia in 1992. He has been serving as its regional coordinator since late 2016.

as the means to achieve our climate goals. Building power applies to all levels, from the grass-roots to the highest levels of policymaking. This includes movement building with local constituencies, such as women, youth, indigenous peoples and faith groups, to create critical mass. At the other end, it involves reaching out to non-state actors, including the private sector and city governments.

In the latter context, CAN Southeast Asia member organizations last year set up multi-stakeholder partnerships: the Indonesia Low Emissions Network, the Vietnam Coalition for Climate Change and the Climate Action Partnership, Philippines. Comprising government agencies, city governments, corporations, businesses, universities, think tanks and CSOs with shared values on transitioning to low-carbon development, shifting financial flows and raising climate ambition, these multistakeholder partnerships were established to create a transformative alliance and stronger voice for advocacy on these issues.

In Malaysia, a non-traditional ally for CSOs to target major corporations to reduce emissions is Climate Governance Malaysia, an association of non-executive directors of public listed companies. It was set up last year—as an initiative of the World Economic Forum—to pressure companies to reduce their carbon footprints, from a position of influence on the inside.

Harnessing all these positive initiatives in a concerted manner will help build power and generate a stronger momentum for a just and green recovery. Because the key players are finance ministries in this context, a strong message needs to be sent that increased climate ambition through enhanced Nationally Determined Contributions is not only good for the climate but also good for the economy. [New research](#) shows every country in the world would be economically better off if all could agree to strengthen the commitments on the climate crisis through international cooperation. Conversely, weak action will lead to steep economic losses and loss of life.

Living in the new normal

The lockdown has shown pathways to a new horizon for many of us, such as not having to consume beyond our needs; not having to commute and not needing an office space just to work; and not having to travel overseas just to attend global meetings. There is merit in continuing to live in this new normal because it will lead us to living within the ecological limits of our planet, which we currently exceed.

Glancing through official statistics, it would seem as though Malaysians are doing increasingly well. Median incomes almost quadrupled between 1995 and 2016. The country's Gini coefficient has fallen by more than 8 per cent in the past two decades. Poverty has been largely eliminated. If this were truly reflective of the pre-COVID-19 reality, the recovery from the crisis might not be so steep.

Not so fast...

A walk through many areas of Kuala Lumpur will make you question these purported truths. Poverty and destitution are abundant, sometimes mere minutes away from incredible luxury. Philip Alston, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, did precisely this walk on his visit to the country in August 2019. Among his conclusions, "[T]here has been a significant underinvestment in poverty reduction, a widespread misunderstanding of who is poor, neglect of the poor in many official plans and programmes and an inadequate social safety net."

Academic studies routinely cast doubt on official statistics, too. For instance, a study by the Khazanah Research Institute, a government-linked outfit, found that the gap between the top and bottom of Malaysia's income distribution more than doubled during the period when median wages were quadrupling. The World Bank found that increasing numbers of Malaysians earn incomes that are insufficient to meet the cost of living and highlighted four factors contributing to this, especially in urban areas: inflation, low income and income growth, low savings rates, and an acute shortage of affordable housing.

To assuage these concerns, Malaysia has utilized a system of direct financial assistance since 2012 and currently known as Bantuan Sara Hidup (BSH), which provides 1,000 ringgit (plus a top-up of 120 ringgit per child) to the lowest-income households (who earn no more than 2,000 ringgit per month) on an annual basis. But it does so in a geographically uniform manner. This means that low-income households in the most expensive areas of the country receive the same payments as households residing in the most inexpensive areas, despite the cost of living in the latter being significantly lower than in the former. The cost of basic goods and services in Kuala Lumpur, for instance, is 67 per cent higher than in rural Kelantan, the least expensive region of the country; property prices, meanwhile, are more than four times higher.

Given this and the increasing presence of economic hardship in Malaysia's urban areas, it is likely that existing levels of aid are insufficient to act as the sort of robust social safety net that will be required to enhance the economic security of low-income households across the country—

something that is likely to worsen in the near future as income and job losses mount due to the coronavirus lockdown measures.

A silver lining

Help might be on the way. For all the mayhem the COVID-19 crisis has caused, it has also shed light on the importance of strong systems of social protection. The political palatability of a generous and targeted basic income scheme may never be higher, not just in Malaysia but around the world. Malaysia's crisis of low wages might take years to solve through painful but necessary labour market reforms. But in the interim, it would be prudent for the government to significantly ramp up its social safety net.

A system of monthly payments that varies in quantity by location would be much better placed to address the plight of low-income Malaysians than the existing BSH framework. With unemployment projected to rise to levels not seen for decades as a result of COVID-19, such a policy is urgently required to sustain households in the short term and prevent the economic crisis from totally compromising their welfare.

Back-of-the-envelope calculations indicate that should the existing BSH policy be turned into a monthly basic income provision, this would cost the government no more than 48 billion ringgit annually, a figure just more than double what Malaysia spends on welfare policies and subsidies. Rolling back the existing policies, largely unnecessary in the presence of a basic income, would therefore free up funds that would cover almost half of the new policy.

To raise revenue to fund the rest of it, attention should turn to new forms of taxation. To maximize effectiveness and efficacy, these should simultaneously assist in solving other issues the country faces. With only real property gains taxed in Malaysia at present, the first option is a wider-ranging wealth tax that would have the effect of mitigating inequality. Another option is the implementation of a carbon tax. A tax rate of just \$8 per tonne of CO₂, or less than a fifth of the estimates of the social cost of carbon, would raise roughly 8 billion ringgit in annual revenue and spur the transition towards a more sustainable economy by forcing polluters to internalize the externality costs of emissions. Taken together, these three policies would have the impact of lessening economic insecurity, emissions and inequality.

The struggles faced by low-income Malaysians have long been clear. Now the coronavirus crisis offers a lifeline: It has firmly brought into mainstream thought—and popularity—the benefits of robust systems of social protection. It is up to the policymakers to take advantage of the crisis and take concrete steps towards securing a safer and more inclusive future for all Malaysians.

For low-income Malaysia, a lifeline amid a crisis?

09 June 2020

The struggles faced by low-income Malaysians have long been clear. Now the COVID-19 crisis offers a lifeline: It has firmly brought into mainstream thought and popularity the benefits of robust systems of social protection.

Darshan Joshi

is a researcher at Research for Social Advancement, a think-tank based in Malaysia. His work deals mainly with climate, economic and energy policy as well as inequality.

Bangladesh's fiscal policy in the pandemic

10 June 2020

Countries have resorted to various policy tools to create the fiscal space needed to underwrite the expenditure of stimulus packages, conceding that they may be forced to cross the rubicon of keeping the fiscal deficit within 5 per cent of the GDP. Bangladesh is no exception.

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To create fiscal space for the needed resources in its COVID-19 response, Bangladesh has resorted to expansionary monetary policy through the central bank's purchase of treasury bills and bonds from the market, extension of credit lines and the creation of new money through adjustments of bank rate policies. The country's central bank, the Bangladesh Bank, purchased bills and treasury bonds to expand the money supply; the advance-deposit ratio and investment-deposit ratio were both raised by 2 percentage points in an attempt to raise liquidity in the banking system. The budget for the ongoing fiscal year 2019–20 was further revised with a view to reprioritizing expenditures and so as to create additional financial space.

Budgeting for health care, food security and economic recovery

The response mechanism that the government came up with was geared towards (a) addressing the immediate health risks, (b) addressing the humanitarian crisis, particularly the food security aspects, (c) mitigating

the losses suffered by the private sector and (d) extending support to help enterprises in the recovery phase. An initial allocation of about \$30 million was made in support of the health sector, which was subsequently complemented through procurement of health safety equipment and the setting up of dedicated health facilities. The remit of the food distribution network was enhanced through the expansion of food safety net programmes, with increased numbers of beneficiaries. A cash transfer scheme has been planned, including \$30 to be distributed to each of 5 million beneficiaries, and open market sales were introduced by making rice available at a reduced price.

A set of five stimulus packages worth about \$10.5 billion (or about 3 per cent of GDP) was announced. These aim towards providing working capital to cash-starved enterprises and shoring up investment in view of the recovery phase. A common feature of these packages are refinancing windows created by the central bank and availability of credit at lower-than-the-prevailing annual market rate of 9 per cent, with the subsidy ranging

between 1 and 5 percentage points. Repayment of loans is made easier, and foreign trade transaction payments and settlements are flexible. Some of these measures are already at work, while others are still in the planning stage.

A critical assessment

The Bangladesh policy response resonates with the ones being pursued by many other low-income countries to mitigate the impacts of the pandemic and to help the entrepreneurs and enterprises grounded to a halt by the lockdown to sustain and then bounce back on the path of recovery. The success of the measures taken will critically hinge on a number of factors—proper targeting, appropriate enforcement of regulatory measures, and transparency and accountability in execution. The central bank will need to significantly strengthen its oversight capacity to ensure that the subsidized loans are well targeted, reach the intended groups and are used for the earmarked purposes. While speed of disbursements is critical, safeguards will need to be in place so that loan applications are properly assessed and the money does not end up in the

bank accounts of habitual and wilful defaulters. Also, where the loans are given for working capital support, it must be ensured that the money is used to pay workers their due wages on time. Many of the cottage, small and medium-sized enterprises are not used to dealing with banks. Providing credit support from the stimulus packages to this group remains a challenging task. Here, support of business associations and the SME Foundation should be sought out to channel financial resources to the needy.

Addressing exclusion and inclusion

It is important that the problem of “exclusion” and “inclusion” is addressed with due diligence and the support of digital platforms and the capacity of local grass-roots organizations, including non-state actor groups. About 20 per cent of people in Bangladesh live on income below the national poverty line, with about 9.5 per cent living below the extreme poverty line. As various rapid surveys indicate, an equal number of the “new poors” have joined the ranks of those already in poverty. Thus, the

number of beneficiaries of the cash transfer scheme should be significantly increased. The earmarked number of \$30 for 5 million beneficiaries is far lower than what is required. The Centre for Policy Dialogue, a reputed think tank in Dhaka, had earlier proposed that about \$200 should be given to each member of at least 17 million households—an allocation of about \$3 billion (equivalent to 1 per cent of the GDP).

Notwithstanding the robust growth performance of the past decade, the ongoing pandemic has revealed Bangladesh's weak capacity to deal with health emergencies and to absorb economic shocks. The upcoming FY 2020–21 budget, to be announced on 11 June, should be seen as an opportunity to undertake the necessary reforms and initiatives to set in motion the required steps needed to address the embedded vulnerabilities that the ongoing pandemic has exposed.



People collect goods from a truck in downtown Dhaka.
© istock / Saikat Bhadra

The overlooked impact of art in times of crisis

11 June 2020

Almost everything we are doing in isolation is connected to the arts: we read more, watch more movies, listen to more music. We all are trying to find creative solutions to the problems at hand. Yet, art is not considered essential in the pandemic.

Sharad Shama

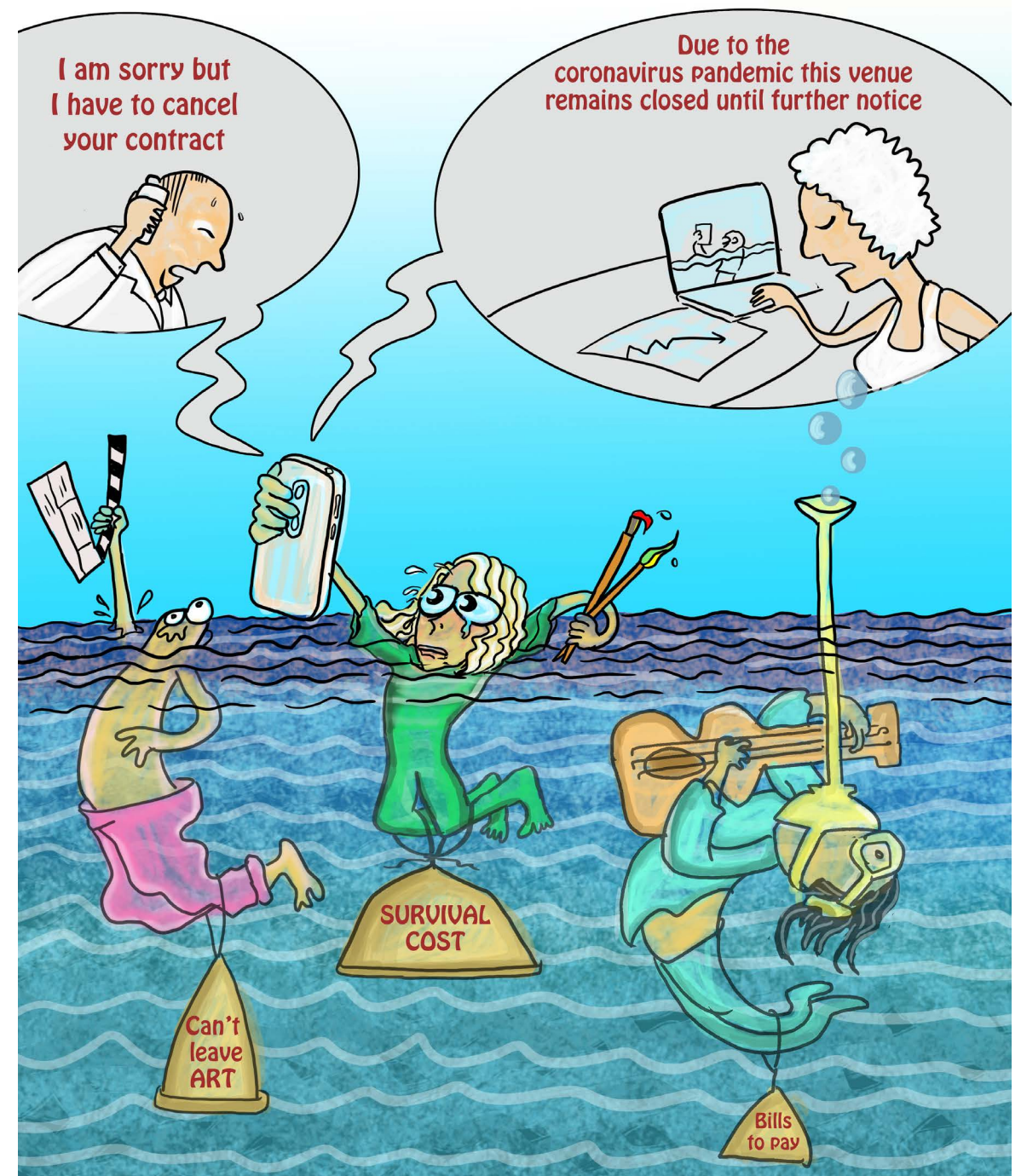
is an internationally acclaimed Indian cartoonist based in New Delhi. In the late 1990s, he founded the organisation World Comics India to introduce the idea of grassroots comics. He is a recipient of the Real Heroes Award by CNN IBN & Reliance Industries and was among the KarmaVeer Puraskaar laureates in the category "Social Communication and Campaign Strategist".

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FES Asia spoke to three artists from Asia about the role of art and artists in societies amid the COVID-19 crisis. Nawarat Welployngam, a 33-year-old artist from Thailand and founder of the Baan Nang Lerng art community in Nang Lerng district, Bangkok; Pooja Pant, the founder of Voices of Women Media in Nepal; and Monnyreak Ket, a graphic designer and illustrator from Cambodia, shared their answers.

Artists are facing challenging conditions during the pandemic

Whether one wants to admit it or not, the arts have accompanied us all of throughout our lives. Different art forms have not just given us something to do in our free time, but they have always been known to give people hope in times of despair.

But what happens when artists are no longer able to create or share their art? The Baan Nang Lerng art community in Bangkok used to regularly organize cultural events and showcase art from national as well as international artists; but due to the pandemic, they were not able to organize a single event. This does not only take away opportunities to create a livelihood for artists, but also limits the ways in which art can be used to create awareness.



Voices of Women Media in Nepal uses the art of [storytelling](#) as a medium for change. “Our stories are all we have. It is what makes us human and keeps our struggles relatable to anyone who reads them. We firmly believe in the saying “Personal is Political”, the founder Pooja Pant explains. She stresses that, “...right now, in these isolated times when we think we are the only ones going through intense social, mental, emotional and political turmoil, it is the perfect medium to connect us to others. To show that we may be isolated physically but we are still connected in our struggles.”

Dealing with the crisis as an artist

While Australia has just announced a AUD 250 million COVID-19 Creative Economy Support Package, most countries in the Asia Pacific do not offer such targeted programmes to support artists and cultural organizations or businesses – “even though everything we are doing in isolation is connected to the arts,” Pant stresses. Nonetheless, artists in Cambodia, Thailand and Nepal have decided to not only help each other out but to also give back to their communities.

“Since artists in the community could not organize any events, we decided to communicate and share food with people within our community who are in need of supplies. We launched a Facebook page called “[Community x Covid](#)”, as a platform to reach out to people and to get donations. Within a month, we reached 10,000 households across Bangkok.”
- Nawarat Welployngam.



Graphic designer Monnyreak Ket has not only started a [fundraising campaign](#) in which he donates 70 per cent of his profits to the Friends-International's COVID-19 emergency response project, but he has also been hosting online art lessons and continues to find ways to start discussions on coming up with new ways of enabling support to those in need.

The new normal – a world without the arts?

While it is certainly true that other sectors such as healthcare and the food industry have required a more urgent and continuous focus, we should not underestimate the role that the arts are having on supporting our mental health and overall wellbeing. Particularly while many of us are forced to remain socially distant. Art is, and has always been, essential.

India's changing geopolitics in post-COVID-19 Asia

22 June 2020

The bloody clashes in the high Himalayas between Indian and Chinese soldiers in mid-June add yet another dimension to the unfolding geopolitical churn in post-COVID Asia. They have shattered Delhi's belief that it can make an incremental transition to a new geopolitics.



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The emerging dynamic on the Himalayan boundary between India and China is likely to be at least as consequential as the multiple other crises unfolding in East Asia, including in the Korean Peninsula, Hong Kong, Taiwan and the waters of the East and South China Sea. Even if it is contained and defused, the current crisis is likely to accelerate the reorientation of Indian geopolitics and intersect with the breakdown of the China–United States relationship that is reordering the regional and international system in multiple ways.

The deadly confrontation on June 15 followed a standoff between the two armies that began in early May and resulted in the death of 20 Indian soldiers and an unspecified number of men from the People's Liberation Army. The clash came after the two sides had declared their interest in de-escalation and a road map to get there. Whatever might be the immediate reasons for the bloody encounter—the first in nearly four and a half decades—it sparked an outrage in India and is compelling Delhi to re-evaluate and reset its increasingly testy relationship with Beijing.

India–China relations in perspective

This is not the first crisis in recent years on the long and contested Sino–Indian frontier. The relative peace and tranquillity on the border since the late 1980s was punctured by three earlier crises, in 2013, 2014 and 2017. There are apparent reasons for these recurring crises, including the undefined nature of the boundary and the deep disagreements on the ambiguous concept of a line of actual control.

Over the past two decades, China has modernized its military infrastructure on the frontier and has sought to constrain India, which has been trying to catch up. Both militaries operate close to the border and frequently run into each other. But protocols designed to limit the friction have become increasingly inadequate amid the growing securitization of the frontier. There is a larger factor, however, shaping the boundary tensions. This is the dramatic transformation in relative power of China and India. The sense of rough parity between the two

nations in the 1980s has turned into a huge gap. China's current GDP is at \$15 trillion and is nearly five times that of India's \$3 trillion. China's military expenditure of \$261 billion is nearly four times larger than that of India's \$71 billion. Combined with political and military assertiveness, China has sought to deploy a power differential to redeem its long-standing territorial claims on the Himalayan frontier. Unlike similar situations in the South China Sea, though, India has a stronger military muscle than Beijing's South-East Asian neighbours, and Delhi has thrown its vast armies to defend its northern frontier. Having a larger force, however, does not necessarily make it any easier for India to stare down Beijing to restore the status quo that existed prior to May.

Beyond the intensifying territorial dispute, India has had to cope with three additional challenges from China—a massive trade deficit, Beijing's growing political and economic influence in Delhi's South Asian and Indian Ocean neighbourhoods and the blocking of India's global aspirations, such as a permanent seat on the UN Security Council. As the severity of these challenges mounted in recent years and as China has emerged as the single most important challenge to India, Delhi has responded with a number of different strategic adjustments. Five broad themes stand out.

Strategic foreign policy adjustments

One is India's readiness under Prime Minister Narendra Modi to shed the historic hesitation to a deeper partnership with the United States. Unlike his predecessors, Mr Modi has ramped up India's security, political and economic cooperation with the United States, and the bilateral relationship has never been as robust as it is today.

Two, Delhi like most of America's allies and partners, is acutely aware of the turbulent domestic situation in the United States and its uncertain external trajectory. While India has enjoyed solid bipartisan cooperation with successive administrations in Washington, Delhi is eager to develop strategic partnerships with other Western powers, including France, Europe, Britain, Japan and Australia, to compensate for the

volatility in the United States policies. This tilt towards the West is an important shift away from India's traditional prickly post-colonial anti-Westernism.

Three, while Russia remains an important part of India's great power relations, its deepening ties to Beijing and continuous confrontation with the West have begun to introduce some strains in Delhi's ties with Moscow. More fundamentally, the idea of promoting a multipolar world that would limit American power that brought Delhi and Moscow together in the mid-1990s is now in shambles. For India, the threat today comes not from the United States-dominated unipolar world but the unfolding of a unipolar Asia.

Four, because it recognized the political consequences of China's economic rise, Delhi was among the first to reject President Xi Jinping's Belt and Road Initiative, and, more recently, it walked out of the agreement on the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership—an Asia-wide compact for trade liberalization—citing the economic threat from China that has hollowed out India's manufacturing industry. Today, India is considering the emerging ideas for economic cooperation among like-minded countries as an alternative to Chinese domination of the global supply chains.

Five, while reaffirming India's long-standing equities in the Global South, Delhi is looking beyond the Non-Aligned Movement to participate in a range of global coalitions. India's participation in the recent German initiative for an Alliance for Multilateralism, the United States-led Quad and Quad Plus initiatives and the building of the International Solar Alliance with France are part of India's new thinking on its role in constructing a stable global order.

While many of these initiatives had preceded the COVID-19 crisis and the fresh military crisis with China, they are bound to get a more intensive Indian push in the days ahead. The belief that Delhi can make an incremental transition to a new geopolitics, however, has been shattered by the latest trans-Himalayan military confrontation.

Geopolitics and Nepal's future in a post-COVID-19 world

23 June 2020

Nepal's foreign and security policy is traditionally characterized by a balancing act between India, China and the United States. The geopolitical rivalries exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis make an even stronger case for Kathmandu's continued neutrality and for regional cooperation.

Early into the COVID-19 crisis, on 15 March, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi called for a video conference with the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) member countries. It was attended by all heads of state except for Pakistan, which was represented by the Prime Minister's Special Secretary on Health. Prime Minister Modi made eight specific propositions to address the spread of COVID-19, the most important being the establishment of a [SAARC COVID-19 Emergency Fund](#).

The video conference demonstrated a renewed South Asian spirit of collaboration and seemed to suggest a surprising revival of SAARC as an effective regional organization—a position that had been questioned many times before because of its apparent stagnation. India used the opportunity to position itself as an advocate of SAARC.

Regional frameworks: SAARC and BIMSTEC

SAARC has a 35-year history and includes Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka. To date, 18 summits have taken place. And even though 11 SAARC summits were cancelled in the past, [a large network of regional centres](#) was successfully established throughout the member

countries. Similarly, it has specialized bodies, such as the South Asian University in New Delhi, the SAARC Arbitration Council in Islamabad and the South Asian Regional Standards Organization in Dhaka.

Despite these developments, SAARC has never fully met its objectives, primarily due to the seemingly perpetual India–Pakistan rivalry. SAARC is a forum to raise regional issues, but the bilateral tensions between India and Pakistan continue to jeopardize any regional momentum. None of the other member countries was or is in a position to pressure the two nuclear powers into meaningfully committing to regional cooperation and keeping it separate from their bilateral relationships.

In recent times, India has been pushing for the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) as an alternative to SAARC. During his first tenure, Prime Minister Modi seemed to prefer SAARC, as observers concluded from his invitation to the heads of state of all SAARC member countries at his swearing-in ceremony. To explore new opportunities for dialogue with Pakistan, he made a surprise visit to Islamabad. But relations between the two countries further deteriorated in the years following. At the start of his second term, Prime Minister Modi's preferences had clearly shifted: He

invited the heads of BIMSTEC member countries for his swearing-in.

Like SAARC, BIMSTEC faces many challenges. Its member states (Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Myanmar, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Thailand) are the least integrated in terms of trade, connectivity and cooperation, and their progress is usually at a snail's pace. BIMSTEC took 17 years to establish a Permanent Secretariat (now located in Dhaka) and has failed to come up with a BIMSTEC Charter for two decades.

The case for regional cooperation

Looking at the situation in the region, the case for cooperation couldn't be clearer though. The COVID-19 crisis, both the pandemic and the corresponding economic and social fallout, can only be addressed jointly. Humanitarian and refugee crises require urgent action. On top of that, SAARC and BIMSTEC face several non-traditional security threats, such as trafficking of narcotics, weapons and people, the illegal exploitation of natural resources, the emergence of rebel insurgencies and terrorist groups, and natural disasters.

There is not only an overlap of member countries in both regional forums but they also have almost similar objectives and areas of cooperation. Their challenges, too, are similar. While it has often been stated that India wants

to use BIMSTEC as an alternative to China's Belt and Road Initiative, the fact is that neither SAARC nor BIMSTEC have lucrative and feasible development plans related to connectivity and economic cooperation.

If India and other member states wanted to genuinely push for regional cooperation, SAARC and BIMSTEC should work as partners rather than competitors. In the past three and half decades, SAARC has created a number of institutions and an infrastructure that might take decades for BIMSTEC to create. The COVID-19 crisis has forced all member states, including India, to acknowledge the importance of regional frameworks. Robust regional institutions, like the SAARC Tuberculosis and HIV/AIDS Centre and the SAARC Disaster Management Centre, have important roles, if only that the pandemic has taught the world that no country can fight it in isolation.

Nepal would stand to gain immensely from a reinvigorated SAARC and BIMSTEC. While Kathmandu is located at the centre of the SAARC framework and hosts the SAARC Secretariat, through BIMSTEC it would not only connect itself with the South and Southeast Asian region but it also would be an ideal platform to gain greater visibility in the wider Indo-Pacific region.

Nepal caught in geopolitical rivalry

While the world, including Nepal, is struggling with the COVID-19 pandemic, Nepali Prime Minister KP Sharma Oli must fight yet another

battle. He is facing strong pressure from several directions regarding the United States-funded Millennium Challenge Corporation (MCC), which is a \$500 million-investment scheme for roads and electricity transmission lines. Though none of the political parties had shown any objection to the MCC in the past, the strong opposition from senior leaders of the ruling party has put its fate in limbo. Interestingly, the MCC was not a matter of controversy until a senior United States official, David J. Ranz, Assistant Secretary of South Asia at the State Department, visited Nepal in May 2019 and stated that it is considered an important initiative under the Indo-Pacific Strategy.

It is unlikely that the MCC will be endorsed by Nepal's parliament without amendments. Nepal, a country deprived of connectivity due to its geography, should make the best use of this huge United States grant. Like with BRI projects, Nepal should benefit from the MCC for its rapid economic development.

The biggest challenge for Nepal remains maintaining a balance between the three regional and global powers. While subscribing to any projects under China's Belt and Road Initiative, the United States' MCC or Indian projects, Nepal will need to fully assure all its neighbours and partners that their concerns and sentiments are taken into account as it accepts economic assistance. How Kathmandu manoeuvres in this complex geopolitical setting and continues to economically benefit from all three major powers will shape the future of Nepal.

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Aerial view of boats near the market
on Inle Lake, Myanmar
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A wake-up call to cooperation in Myanmar?

26 June 2020

The coronavirus pandemic is uncovering the possible downfalls of Myanmar's co-dependent development model. In a post-COVID world, the Southeast Asian latecomer needs a new model that prioritizes indigenous sectors over growth models based on international investments.

The range of challenges to economic development, state-building, peace and social welfare during Myanmar's transformation process are immense. Add to that common political transformation hold-ups, including those induced by established elites (patronage and clientelism), chauvinistic ideologies, enduring polarization rooted in history and political infighting and the result is a perfect mix for a self-absorbed political landscape. In this mélange, a lacking oversight and ability among policymakers and stakeholders to connect domestic challenges with global trends is not surprising. Although in the initial stages, the coronavirus pandemic was only adding to the long list of challenges, it soon became the government's priority.

At first it was questionable whether it would amplify domestic political demeanour. But this trend has not lingered. In fact, it became possible for the fragmented government system to set up complementing initiatives rather than competing ones. What is still missing is a vision of how to create a sustainable economic and social development model after the pandemic. Here, the ability for cooperation among government agencies and stakeholders of Myanmar's vast political landscape to focus on issues and compromise will finally be put to the test.

Myanmar's response to the crisis

Due to the unpredictability of the COVID-19 pandemic, most political actors came to realize that it was impossible to politically capitalize from the crisis. Even overselling performance and achievements in managing the crisis could easily backfire. Overall, it appears that none of the government actors and agencies have sought to take direct responsibility. Rather, a pragmatic approach within the means at hand came onto the agenda. In view of the astonishingly small number of infections, it still remains unclear whether or not Myanmar is a success story, of if it has simply been lucky and the real story will go unnoticed.

Given the country's not too distant history, the confidence in the capabilities of established elites and the intentions of the military leadership in handling the crisis has been generally low. After Vice-President U Myint Swe instated the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Containment and Emergency Response Committee in late March, thereby partially duplicating the previously appointed Central Committee for Prevention, Control and Treatment of Coronavirus Disease 2019, under the chairmanship of State Councillor Aung San Suu Kyi, some observers interpreted the move as a quasi mini coup.

Indeed, at first sight, the initiative looked like a conservative, security sector-centred approach that would take over and, opposed to its civilian counterpart, demonstrate resolve in order to achieve political gains. The new commission excluded crucial institutions, such as the Ministry of Health and Sports, and visible increases of grass-roots surveillance and monitoring of movement in the wards underpinned this kind of assumption. Yet, the previously set up committee similarly did not reflect a more sensitive civil–military balance nor did any consultation take place in that direction. A response was thus only a matter of time. While at this stage, both committees are in session, a *modus operandi* has evolved that divides tasks of public health and enforcement and tracing in managing the crisis.

In the short to medium terms, the government has achieved a range of results that will help the country to soften the coronavirus pandemic's impact on the economy and society. In mid-April, the government succeeded to secure a \$50 million fast-tracked World Bank credit for an emergency response project to fill the financial gaps in strengthening its public health emergency preparedness according to its National Emergency Response Plan.

Likewise, the EU created a EUR 5 million COVID-19 emergency fund to assist garment workers who became unemployed during the crisis. It thereby added to the \$25 million Livelihoods and Food Security Fund that was also supported by Australian and United States donations.

Managing the impact on the labour market

Overall, the task of handling the social consequences of the coronavirus crisis in Myanmar's labour market is not an easy one. The most vulnerable groups have turned out to be the cross-cutting informal sector (including day labourers), which amounts to as much as an estimated 80 per cent of the country's work force (nearly 18 million workers) and the 4 million migrant workers in other countries. Those who tried to return during the crisis have found themselves in a limbo of quarantine camps by the border.

At the same time, the economic pillars have suffered as well. In particular, the agriculture sector, which accounts for about 30 per cent of GDP, is having problems because harvests are not finding their way into the

markets due to the closed borders. Additionally, state-of-the-art storage facilities and transport systems are still lacking. The industrial manufacturing sector also contributes 30 per cent of GDP. Most manufacturing companies are micro-sized, and a modern industry sector is still on the rise. Thus, estimates of how much the sector has suffered from cuts in supply and value chains are still difficult to make.

While the government has engaged in tripartite talks to handle the crisis, the legal means and standards are often still lacking the ability to facilitate better protection of employees. In view of labour strikes, reductions of work force and layoffs of trade union members, the government asked the parties to find a compromise. As early as March, it also announced a 100 billion-kyat loan programme for employers in the garment industry, hotel sector and SMEs. More than 200,000 workers have become unemployed due to the pandemic. Many companies only paid compensation according to the current minimum wage (in need of review) and not actual income.

What's in store for the long term?

Possible disruptors to Myanmar's current development model are manifold. Doubts that there may not be a return to the way things were before the COVID-19 pandemic are justified. At this stage, the indirect international implications of the crisis outweigh any direct costs for the vulnerable economy. Industries that are dependent on value, supply chains and exports or the tourism sector are already heavily affected.

With fragmenting globalization, the reliance on China and other East Asian partners, such as Japan and Korea as investment partners, poses high risk. European and United States firms have by and large abstained from entering the market to begin with, most likely due to political reasons. China is especially struggling to maintain the status quo of globalization. With increasing tensions in trade and access with the United States and the EU, the primary target region for open markets and investment will be the immediate Asian neighbourhood. Yet, investments there depend on international markets as well. It is thus uncertain whether industries will return or stay in Myanmar or concentrate on economically more advanced countries with higher efficiency rates in the region.

Since Myanmar at this stage is not only vulnerable to international trends but internal governance and development, which is also constrained by factors that the government cannot possibly solve alone, a broader social alliance of government, businesses, sector associations, trade unions, military and ethnic representations would be vital. Such an approach would need to be laid out in a road map with a clear timeline that also emphasizes two elements: a continuous focus on future industries, technologies and strategies for leapfrogging and a new development model that prioritizes indigenous sectors over growth models based on international investments. This would not only help to strengthen the economy's resilience but also reduce international dependencies.



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Lessons from Thailand's COVID conundrum

Under the COVID-19 lockdown, India's unemployment rate has shot up from 8 per cent to 26 per cent. In these dark and dismal times, platform-mediated work is likely to be an increasingly significant option for informal workers with limited education and skills.

There are already signs that e-commerce in grocery and food retail is bucking the trend of the otherwise-depressed economic activity. At the height of the lockdown, online grocery suppliers bigbasket.com and Grofers recruited 12,000 workers between them to meet surging demand. Platforms Swiggy and Zomato, previously focused on delivering cooked meals, have been laying off staff. But their diversifying into groceries and essentials is set to sustain their demand for delivery workers. Other less-essential services are also expected to see expanded platform-mediated delivery as more affluent customers choose to avoid public spaces out of fear of contagion. These could include domestic work, care work, beauty and wellness. Other sectors are likely to adapt or form new alliances to survive. The ride-hailing sector, for example, has been hit by plummeting demand but could find some business niche to bounce back in, such as tying up with state ambulance services.

Gigs of the platform economy are here to stay, well and truly.

With a view to addressing this reality and other issues, the Government of India initiated a grand project of labour law reform. Unfortunately, this has so far not paid adequate attention to the issues and concerns of platform workers. The Code on Wages Bill, passed by parliament in August 2019, includes only two categories of worker: "contract worker" and "employee". The law could have introduced a third status of "dependent self-employment" that exclusively covers platform workers. Its silence on their status is a failure to address their precarity. The Draft Code on Social Security, introduced in 2019, attempts to make some amends for this oversight. It provides for the central government to set up social security schemes for gig workers in all levels of e-commerce value chains, such as logistics and delivery.

However, the Draft Code on Social Security does not go far enough in making platform companies liable as employers for ensuring the rights of all their workers. Although the Code introduces the categories of "contract worker", "gig worker" and "platform worker", it fails to address the question of what rights are held by a platform worker who is de facto employed as a contract worker. This question may in due course be answered by a court of law, for example, if unions take legal action. But it would be more useful to clear it up at this earlier stage in the legislation under development.

Leading platform companies maintain the fiction that they are mere intermediaries matching "independent service providers" with their clients. This allows them to position themselves as compassionate capitalists. Uber and Indian taxi-hailing platform Ola have made a great deal of noise about all the financial support they are giving their drivers during the lockdown, says Sangam Tripathy, Assistant Regional Secretary (Asia-Pacific region) of the International Transport Workers' Federation. "But the process of funds allocation and eligibility criteria for drivers lacks transparency," he explains. "What we need is for these companies to own up and fulfil their mandatory labour rights obligations to their driver workers."

Against this backdrop, what must the Indian labour movement do to protect and promote the labour rights of platform workers? The government's approach is to encourage corporate contributions through a corporate social responsibility framework and thus create social security funds for non-organized workers. The labour movement must push for mandatory contributions by platform employers to social security funds for platform workers. Lobbying for state-level legislation is also important. In the meantime, the 2019 recommendations of the Global Commission on the Future of Work of the International Labour Organization provides helpful guidance. The Commission underlines that universal labour guarantees (adequate living wage, limit on working hours, safe and healthy working conditions, collective bargaining and access to social protection) must be available to all workers, regardless of their contractual arrangement or

employment status. This is a useful peg on which to build legal guarantees for platform workers.

Concerted thinking and action are also needed to assert the data rights of platform workers, as articulated by global unions. The 2019 Personal Data Protection Bill, currently before parliament, does not adequately account for the imbalance of power between employers and workers. Additional safeguards, such as a collective-agreements mechanism to govern data processing by employers, need to be introduced to protect workers from excessive data surveillance, in particular in the guise of contact tracing for public health reasons.

To effectively pursue these agendas, traditional trade unions need to make room for platform workers' demands and for leadership from platform workers' associations. In the current scenario, in which the entire Indian workforce is in distress and unions are firefighting to prevent the roll-back of hard-won labour protections, it is easy to forget the specific concerns of platform workers. But this impulse must be consciously resisted. Workers must stand united: In the words of The Internationale, "This is the time and place", if not the "final drama".

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Protecting platform workers' rights in the post-COVID economy: Reflections from India

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As employment in India bounces back from the COVID-19 lockdown, platform-mediated work is expected to come into its own. Indian legislation must take the right steps to protect the status and labour rights of gig workers in these changing times, while unions also need to bring these new workers into the fold.



UN peacekeeping battalion parade in Ulaanbaatar.
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Mongolia's diplomacy amid the pandemic and geopolitical rivalries

03 July 2020

Rising geopolitical tensions and the COVID-19 pandemic constitute major challenges for Mongolia's multilateral and regional initiatives. To avoid becoming a geopolitical chessboard, Mongolian leaders and diplomats need to continue working hard to promote the country as a neutral place for all great powers to talk and collaborate.

For Mongolians, 24 June was a busy but good day. Adding a new passion to its democratic culture, the youth dressed up in modern, stylish deal to elect 76-members of the legislature, the State Ikh Khural. And in Moscow, the Mongolian military marched in the Victory Day Parade, marking the 75th anniversary of the Soviet victory in the Second World War, in which Mongolia stood as a close ally.

For medical and emergency professionals, it was another successful day preventing community spread of the coronavirus, even as the country is surrounded by pandemic epicentres: In the north, Russia has the third-highest toll of infections, and in the south, Chinese authorities took tough measures as the virus returned to Beijing. With the continuing outbreak and geopolitical rivalries heightening, Mongolian leaders and diplomats have been struggling to avoid being caught in the great power competitions while trying to keep multilateral diplomacy intact.

Mongolia's approach to great powers— A friend in need is a friend indeed

By fate of geography, Mongolia needs to survive between two great powers and to increase its connections with the international community, particularly those with capacity to negotiate with Beijing or Moscow in support of Mongolia. Mongolia's deft diplomatic moves during the pandemic outbreak demonstrated this complexity and were applauded by the Mongolian public.

Despite Mongolia's complex relations with China and deep-seated public sentiments, neither Mongolian political leaders nor the wider society joined the coronavirus blame game that the United States administration and some other countries have pursued. Rather, on 29 February, Mongolian President Battulga Khaltmaa became the first foreign dignitary to visit China in the midst of the pandemic and extended a gift of 30,000 sheep as a goodwill gesture. Despite his earlier stance on China, President Battulga apparently endorsed the

collective decision to show empathy to the southern neighbour during a difficult time. Mongolian organizations, alumni and students immediately raised funds to support Chinese people in the fight against the pandemic.

Mongolians did not blame Russia for the imported cases of the infection either, even though 90 per cent of its imported cases (more than 200) originated from there. Similar to Mongolia's diplomacy with China, Prime Minister Khurelsukh Ukhnaa extended \$1 million in humanitarian assistance, and Mongolian graduates from Russian schools and universities raised funds for the Russian people. Despite the vast spread of the virus in Russia, Mongolia sent its military honour guard and dignitaries to attend the Victory Parade. However, the Russian Embassy's Facebook post disparaging Mongolia's central television's decision to not broadcast the parade live on the election day agitated many Mongolians, including former Prime Minister Bayar Sanjaa.

Mongolia delivered more than \$1 million worth of assistance and 60,000 PPEs to the United States, which has been recognized as an important third-partner country. This provided a historic opportunity for Mongolian Airlines to conduct a most-wanted flight to North America while delivering the assistance and repatriating 254 citizens stuck in the States. In addition to the two governments' regular statements on shared values of democracy and respect for human rights, the public gratefully remembers the United States assistance during the difficult times of the 1990s—when Mongolia was at the edge of state collapse after abandonment by Russia. Although Mongolia's assistance to great powers is small, it clearly demonstrates its will to avoid being drawn into geopolitical competitions.

Constrained multilateralism— OSCE, UB Dialogue, and Khaan Quest

The pandemic outbreak and geopolitical rivalries have led to constraints for Mongolia's multilateral

diplomacy to increase its international profile and to reach out to organizations beyond its immediate neighbours, mostly to overcome its “regionless” fate and fear. Here are three examples.

First, the Election Observation Mission of the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) for Mongolia’s parliamentary election was cancelled due to the COVID-19 outbreak. After years of diplomatic efforts, Mongolia became the 57th participating State of the OSCE in 2012. Since then, this partnership has evolved in mutually beneficial ways. The independent observation by the Office for Democratic Institutions and Human Rights has become crucial for Mongolian authorities to uphold the OSCE standards of free, fair and inclusive elections. At the same time, Mongolia extends the OSCE boundary into North-East Asia as well as promotes cross-learning with European democracies.

Second, Mongolia’s annual Ulaanbaatar Dialogue, a track 1.5 meeting for government officials and academics from all countries in Northeast Asia, had to be cancelled. Building on the country’s earlier efforts to provide a Helsinki-style platform for regional States, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Institute for Strategic Studies formally initiated the Ulaanbaatar Dialogue on Northeast Asian Security in 2013. Mongolia is the only country that has amicable relations with all States in the region, including the two Koreas, and can provide a neutral platform. Now, as tensions sharply increase on the Korean Peninsula, it will become more difficult for Mongolia to fulfil its decades-long dream of providing a multilateral forum.

Finally, the annual exercise—Khaan Quest—has now also been cancelled. This has evolved as the only exercise that welcomes the Chinese military along with the militaries of the United States, Japan, South Korea, NATO countries and other emerging troop contributors for peacekeeping training. Over the past decade, Mongolia became the second-largest East Asian troop contributor to UN peacekeeping, after China, and a steadfast contributor to the NATO missions in Afghanistan. At the same time, Mongolia transformed a former military base into a state-of-the-art regional peacekeeping training centre with the capacity to host up to 2,000 military personnel. Interestingly, Mongolia is the only place where all major powers, including the United States, China, Russia, Japan, and Germany, provide assistance to develop peacekeeping capacities. If tensions between the United States and Mongolia’s neighbours increase, Mongolia’s ability to bring them together for peacekeeping purposes will become difficult.

Difficult time for the new government

The pandemic and geopolitical rivalries of great powers present a tough terrain for Mongolia’s

ruling party, the Mongolian People’s Party, which recently won another landslide victory, with 62 of 76 parliamentary seats, and will remain in power for the next four years. Mongolia needs to avoid being caught in the Cold War-style, ideologically driven competition between the Western democracies and Eastern autocracies. It needs to strengthen its parliamentary system to withstand any potential reversal to authoritarianism solely with domestic forces. The external promotion of Mongolia’s fragile democracy as a provocative tool in a wider geopolitical competition is counterproductive for Mongolia.

The new parliament needs to figure out how to cope with the growing geopolitical and geo-economic competition between China and the United States. Both have claimed Mongolia is important for their competing visions: China’s Belt and Road Initiative and the United States’ Free and Open Indo-Pacific.

The parliament also needs to manage conflicting interests with Russia and China. Beijing hopes Mongolia will join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and permit Chinese banks and companies to invest in major projects. Moscow assumes Mongolia would be of use for Russia’s geopolitical interests by accommodating the Kremlin’s assertive behaviours in the energy, infrastructure and security sectors. To avoid becoming a geopolitical chessboard, Mongolian leaders and diplomats need to work hard to promote Mongolia as a neutral place where all great powers can talk and collaborate.

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Demilitarized Zone on the border between North Korea and South Korea
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Tough choices in a tough neighbourhood: Challenges and opportunities for the two Koreas

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Buffeted by domestic difficulties and degradation of the international context at both the global and regional levels, the two Koreas are already presented with tricky decisions that will impact their respective strategic situations.

This FES Asia Corona Brief examines the international environment in which Seoul and Pyongyang face these difficult choices, outlines looming decisions in the short and medium terms and identifies some of the possible response measures. These decisions include how to grow their economies in the face of international headwinds, how to gain space for more autonomous action, how to make trade-offs between security and economic imperatives and how to position themselves in their respective alliances with the United States and China.

The state of play

Three international factors are broadly outlining the two Koreas’ scope for action. In the first place, frictional competition between the United States and China, including some economic decoupling, will likely continue to destabilize economic and security structures that had become foundational for Northeast Asia over the past 30 years. Regional and global commercial relations could be disrupted and reordered, the development of which would be critical for export-reliant countries, such as South Korea. Increased geostrategic competition between Beijing and Washington would increase risk and threat levels for conflict in the region.

Second, the international rules-based order is becoming more frayed. Nationalism worldwide—including in all three major Northeast Asian states—is growing in social strength and political influence. Meanwhile, China's aim to change the status quo seems unabated for Hong Kong, Taiwan, the South and East China Seas and the Sino-Indian border, even as a relatively declining United States schizophrenically signals defensive assertiveness mixed with transactional isolationism.

Lastly, the COVID-19 pandemic is exacting a terrible toll on public health, with devastating knock-on social and economic consequences. The political and diplomatic fallout of COVID-19 has fed into the two aforementioned factors, as China-United States relations soured even more in the context of assigning blame for the pandemic, while most state governments' reactions have exhibited an internally focused, externally mistrustful attitude that has hindered effective international cooperation in responding to the virus.

Implications for both Koreas

Certainly, the three factors are interrelated. But on a regional level, the most impactful development is the intensifying strategic rivalry between China and the United States. Underpinning this rivalry is the relative strengthening of China and the relative weakening of the United States. In light of the fact that Seoul and Pyongyang each have different relationships with Beijing and Washington, the Sino-United States rivalry presents different challenges and opportunities for the two Koreas. In both cases, however, the upshot is similar: Seoul and Pyongyang would each benefit from increased room for strategic manoeuvre.

South Korea's constraints and options

For South Korea, the overarching problem is well known. Seoul finds itself between the security hammer of military alliance with the United States and the economic anvil of trade preponderance with China. Additionally, both Washington and Beijing are critical (albeit with diverging priorities) to Korean Peninsula diplomacy with North Korea, which is a major desideratum of South Korea's Moon Jae-in administration.

In general, to the extent the United States pushes its East Asian interests concerning China, notably via pressing for cooperation from South Korea in the security domain, the greater the risk that China adopts tough economic countermeasures. Beijing did this starting in 2017, when Seoul's acquiescence to the United States' installation of its anti-ballistic missile defence system (the Terminal High Altitude Area Defense) battery on South Korean territory prompted harsh Chinese economic action against South Korean businesses.

In short, the Moon administration is navigating competing pressures from both the Trump administration and President Xi Jinping's foreign policy team. The state of the United States-South Korea alliance is parlous, given Trump's antipathy for alliances and demands for large increases in South Korea's portion of alliance cost-and-burden sharing.

The Moon administration is also pressing to retake wartime operational control of its military, about which the United States is reluctant (the United States leads a United States-South Korea Combined Forces Command in which it currently holds wartime operational control over all the involved forces). For its part, China has its own stipulations, including an expectation that South Korea does not join the United States-led Indo-Pacific strategy (which Beijing considers an anti-China containment policy) and possibly that South Korea integrates Huawei technology into its 5G architecture. This is a development the United States would fight bitterly.

Beyond hedging in its commitments to both China and the United States, South Korea's strategy for countering its dilemma position is a take on Eisenhower's famous dictum: If you can't solve a given problem, make it bigger. Indeed, Seoul is expanding its partner options, notably via the New Southern Policy—an economic policy of growing trade, investment, social and diplomatic links with Southeast Asia. Despite the sword of Damocles hanging over the multilateral rules-based order, South Korea also counts on “middle-power” diplomacy to open pathways to advance its interests globally and inter-regionally through cooperation in international forums with like-minded partners.

There is apparently significant low-hanging fruit, especially in emerging areas (cybersecurity, environment, sustainable energy, connectivity, fourth industrial revolution) with such partners as the EU. On the other hand, the fact that this low-hanging fruit is available speaks to domestic and international hurdles to taking it: Seoul's diplomatic horizon is limited by domestic political bandwidth disproportionately dedicated to North Korea, while its difficult relations with Japan are a stumbling block to multilateral and mini-lateral cooperation with groupings in which Japan is a major player.

North Korea's dilemma

North Korea is in a somewhat different situation with respect to the need for strategic room to manoeuvre: Its problem is not that it is caught between Beijing and Washington, but rather that it is grossly economically dependent on China. This is now even more problematic, given the border closure due to COVID-19. It is a real weakness that North Korea relies for more than 90 per cent of its licit trade on a Beijing leadership that Pyongyang distrusts.

Moreover, the proximate source of this over-reliance, the international sanctions (which also preclude significant inter-Korean economic cooperation), remain an enormous brake on North Korea's economic growth. Negotiations designed to lead to sanctions relief in exchange for denuclearization are stalled. That China and the United States, who are necessary players in such negotiations, are in an escalating rivalry means it is difficult to imagine Beijing-Washington diplomacy kick-starting a return to talks.

The small upside to the situation is that degraded China-United States relations make it easier for North Korea to engage in provocations designed to force Seoul into actions that are either pro-Beijing or pro-Washington. This occasionally functions to drive a wedge between Seoul and Washington, which Pyongyang desires for strategic reasons—some of Pyongyang's long-term designs for the Korean Peninsula, for instance, require the withdrawal of United States soldiers from South Korean territory. This is a long-term goal, however, and the Kim regime badly needs economic growth (and thus sanctions relief) now to make certain that his core military and party supporters remain loyal.

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Seoul skyline at night.
Ping Onganankun / Unsplash



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Geopolitical headwinds under and beyond COVID-19

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The COVID-19 pandemic has accentuated patterns of bilateral acrimony and geopolitical rivalry. The United States and China are missing a critical opportunity to shape a post-coronavirus international order that is based on mutual respect and multilateral cooperation. The continued downward trend in relations between the two superpowers has implications for the entire Asia-Pacific region.

The coronavirus pandemic has become humanity's most mortal and indiscriminate enemy so far in the 21st century. While its nature and potency are fundamentally global, the impact of the virus is mainly local because of the international system of state sovereignty, borders and divergent national interests. What is needed to manage, contain and overcome the pandemic is more international cooperation. Yet, international efforts to fight COVID-19 collectively have been inadequate, with individual states fending for themselves in a self-help fashion and putting up borders and restrictions on international trade, travel and tourism.

Never in the contemporary era has the world been less travelled and so many global citizens confined to their home countries. Similarly, states and societies have never had to rely so heavily on communication technologies at the expense of transport and in-person interaction due to distancing measures taking precedence to keep the virus away. As a result, the pandemic has alarmingly reinforced the fracture and fragmentation of the post-Second World War

rules-based liberal international order, with far-reaching ramifications for future geopolitical outcomes.

“G-2” partnership: A missed opportunity

Front and centre in determining such outcomes on the geopolitical canvas is the relationship between the United States and China. It is easy now to see how the competition and confrontation between the two countries have intensified. Yet, it is worth remembering that the initial phase of the pandemic in January and February entailed bilateral cordiality and goodwill between President Donald Trump and President Xi Jinping. The ideal response to the COVID-19 crisis would have been a “G-2” partnership between the two superpowers deploying all of their combined medical expertise and resources that could be brought to bear. After all, past outbreaks, such as SARS, avian influenza (bird flu) and Ebola, elicited coordinated global responses facilitated by the World Health Organization.

The same could have happened with the coronavirus. Strong US-China leadership could have galvanized a global response to systemically mitigate and stop the virus in its tracks. Their bilateral trade and technology war at the time could have paused and given way to an anti-virus war fought by humanity against a lethal and existential threat. But in the prevailing circumstances, the pandemic accentuated patterns of bilateral acrimony and geopolitical rivalry. The US and China are now so constrained by domestic imperatives and irreversibly locked into global competition that their friends, partners and allies in Southeast Asia and beyond will be increasingly pressured to take one side or the other.

A downward spiral

As a joint response by the two superpowers proved elusive, more dire scenarios came into play. Diplomatic bilateral relations are at a historical low, with the closure of the Chinese consulate in Houston and US consulate in Chengdu the latest episodes. The worst-case scenario now is open conflict arising from the increasing geopolitical tensions between the two countries. Rumbles in the South China Sea, marked most recently by US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's statement calling Beijing's claims to the maritime area “unlawful”, are a potential harbinger of further escalation. After China expanded these claims during the virus period, Vietnam and the US upgraded their partnership in fear of Chinese maritime dominance.

In addition, the economic headwinds China is facing will bring additional challenges for President Xi at home, ahead of the Chinese Communist Party's centennial anniversary next year, while President Trump faces domestic political pressure, an unprecedented public health emergency and deep economic contraction in an election year. Incentives to boost nationalist inclinations and popularity at home by finding scapegoats abroad are high and not limited to the two superpowers.

Almost inconceivable not long ago, an open conflict between Washington and Beijing could unintentionally spiral out of a minor skirmish or an accident involving the armed forces of both sides, perhaps via third parties, such as Vietnam or the Philippines. Manila though appears to be turning into an increasingly distant US strategic partner. In recent months, the US-Philippine relations continued to suffer several setbacks: President Duterte is seeking stronger ties with China. In his latest State of the Nation Address, he stressed that the United States cannot re-establish a military base in the Philippines, and he ruled out confronting Beijing in the South China Sea. This follows an earlier much-noticed statement by ASEAN leaders citing the 1982 UN Convention on the Law of the Sea as the proper framework for settling disputes.

Finally, because profound crises often beget cathartic changes, there could be domestic political developments that lead not to war and conflict but to structural reforms and adjustments at home in both the US and China that realign their interests abroad into a workable convergence. For example, Trump could lose the election this year, while Xi and the Chinese Communist Party could be incentivized at some point to take a different and more conciliatory tack.

A Trump loss to Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden could revive multilateralism and climate priorities, toning down at least the rhetoric if not the substance of US-China tensions and salvaging what is left of the liberal international order. On the other hand, China is suffering as well, even though it is the “first-in and first-out” patient of the COVID-19 ward—provided there is no major second wave. Its signature geostrategic Belt and Road Initiative has lost momentum as partner and client countries face economic maelstrom from the pandemic. China's own economic expansion this year is projected to be around 2–3 per cent, less than half of the pre-pandemic forecast. So, while the US has fared abysmally in COVID-19 times, China has not re-emerged unscathed, especially in view of potential virus spikes.

A way out for middle and smaller countries

If the pandemic's consequences lead to outright leadership changes and/or adjustments in geostrategic directions, the US-China relationship may be steered away from confrontation towards peaceful coexistence and a revamped international order that satisfies both, with a bigger role for China and enough of a role for the US. The rest of the region would then not have to choose in this second-best scenario. Whatever the outcome, the middle and smaller ASEAN states, Japan and South Korea should do more to stand together and away from the US-China jostle, building on and broadening cooperative vehicles, such as the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership, as a third way beyond superpower dominance in their neighbourhood.

Lessons from Thailand's COVID conundrum

25 August 2020

Thailand is steadily heading towards 100 days without a local transmission. However, some experts are warning that the country risks becoming a victim of its success because its “zero case” strategy is detrimental to its economy and people's livelihoods.

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As the ongoing pandemic wreaks havoc on governments and societies everywhere, national responses to cope with COVID-19 focus on containing and minimizing infections and deaths. While most countries are still trying to come to grips with the pandemic, others are grappling with a second wave and sudden spikes. Among the few that have slowed or practically stopped the outbreak is Thailand, which is steadily heading towards 100 days without a local transmission. But Thailand's seemingly impressive virus-fighting strategy has become a victim of its own success. As recent virus recurrences in Vietnam and New Zealand attest, after more than three months of virus-free conditions, the optimal strategy may be to find a way to live with COVID-19 rather than to keep it out completely.

Learning to live with and beyond COVID-19

As widely noted, Thailand has done well by keeping infection numbers steadily low, at fewer than 3,400, with a comparatively low death count of 58, ranking the country impressively around 114th among 215 states and territories. New daily infections could be counted on a single hand, and all of them have been among returnees and visitors holed up after arrival in a mandatory 14-day quarantine.

Through its Centre for COVID-19 Situation Administration, the government of Prime Minister Prayut Chan-o-cha has made clear that its strategy is to hold out for a vaccine, keeping local infections to a bare minimum. But therein lies the problem. As infections became the focus, a local momentum of

single-digit to zero cases built up. Each daily COVID-19 centre briefing became a sort of battle cry and a call for victory, quietly cheered and celebrated with relief and national pride. It promoted an air of triumphalism, as if Thailand had somehow conquered the pandemic.

A moving mix of objectives

But fighting COVID-19 is not a war to be lost or won. It must be a resilient process with sustained effort of management, mitigation and minimization that overcomes and outlasts a deadly virus that will be around for a long time. Thailand's virus numbers will inevitably rise again. The key is to live with and beyond them. The COVID-19 centre has itself to blame for setting the bar so high: It is the outcome of having medical professionals in charge of a policymaking operation. By training, medical doctors are geared to cure diseases and eliminate infections. If the Thai Government leaves it solely to the doctors, the aim will be low to nil infections at the expense of all other policy priorities. When the COVID-19 outbreak was at its peak in March and April, Thailand needed its doctors to take charge. But now other experts must be listened to, and a more holistic approach should be taken.

What Thailand needs is a new approach in view of a moving mix of objectives. The “zero” mentality is detrimental to the Thai economy and people's livelihoods. It makes Thais afraid of reopening and taking calculated and inevitable risks in a trade-off between public health safety and economic well-being. The Thai authorities need to come up with a rolling average of Thailand's health-care capacity for pandemic management. This would indicate the range of case infections that Thailand can put up with in an ongoing fashion, taking into account all available hospital beds, ventilators, doctors and so on. This range can then be worked into a system of testing, tracing and isolating (TTI). Because infections can become recoveries through TTI, the rolling health-care capacity can be adjusted and maintained as needed.

Reviving the economy

With this number to work with, the government can then look at priority areas in Thailand's services-dominated economy to resuscitate and revive, with all precautions and hygienic requirements in place. Green lanes and “bubbles” for essential business travel would be a priority. While mass tourism of the recent past is now unattractive, niche medical tourism can still work.

Foreign talent and direct investment connected to the Eastern Economic Corridor and Thailand 4.0 projects should be at the forefront. The alternative is to maintain single-digit or zero infections in a relatively autarkic economy, with lost jobs, corporate bankruptcies, non-performing loans and diminished or dimming prospects for local livelihoods. These dire prospects already have fed into Thailand's youth movement that wants to overhaul and remake the country. Although taking these chances to reopen will only shore up the Thai economy from what will be a deep economic contraction, it is a start.

The extremes of having uncontrollable outbreaks or flattening infections to zero or single digits may not be a long-term optimal answer. Somewhere in the middle of tolerating infections for the sake of economic activity and livelihoods while upholding recoveries and minimizing deaths may ultimately prove most effective under the fluid virus conditions and shifting priorities. Countries that have lived with the virus more widely and effectively will stand in better stead to move on.



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The many faces of COVID-19 in Asia

In **1 joint effort** to understand the repercussions of this crisis, the FES Asia Corona Brief brought together **52 authors** who documented and analyzed the situation in **16 countries** with **48 articles**. But the work does not stop here. Now is the time to discuss the issues highlighted, look closer into the many faces of the pandemic and to jointly shape the new normal.



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