

# Pandemic of Hunger

Asserting  
People's  
Rights Amid  
COVID-19



## Pandemic of Hunger: Asserting People's Rights Amid COVID-19

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# Introduction

We were in the thick of preparations for our annual Steering Council Meeting (SCM), usually held in mid-March, when the COVID-19 crisis exploded into a full-blown global pandemic. As lockdowns and travel restrictions were imposed, we were forced to cancel the physical meeting that we host yearly in Penang. It was a major decision that had to be made, as the SCM is the time when we plan and unite on the direction and priorities of PAN Asia Pacific (PANAP) for the year.

But the COVID-19 crisis made it unmistakably clear what PANAP's direction and priorities should be. This is a historic period as the pandemic continues to ravage livelihoods and push hundreds of millions more to debilitating poverty and hunger. As we have noted in one of our articles on COVID-19, "the projected number of additional hungry people in the world because of the pandemic will be equivalent to, if not even higher, than the accumulated increase in the number of severely food insecure in the past several years. This could be a major crisis in Asia, where there is a big concentration of people suffering from hunger and food insecurity."

To confront the challenges of the pandemic, the PANAP Secretariat immediately organised a series of online meetings with our partners from the different programs in mid-April 2020. These meetings became the initial venue for PANAP to start gathering information on the situation of our partners and their communities amid the crisis. The meetings also served as an opportunity for the PANAP partners and the Secretariat to share our views and analyses on COVID-19, including its impacts on food security and the rights and welfare of rural communities and working peoples in general, and unite on how we should collectively respond as advocates of food sovereignty and agroecology.

One of the outputs of these initial meetings with our partners was the campaign **#FoodAndRightsNow**. It aims to: (a) articulate the issues and demands on food security and the rights of rural people amid the COVID-19 pandemic and generate public awareness, mobilisation and broad support for these issues and demands; and (b) consolidate and strengthen PANAP's network in this time of serious crisis by promoting strong cooperation, unity and solidarity among our partners.

To achieve these objectives, the campaign has five components, namely:

Monitoring and documentation of impacts and people's initiatives;

Education and information through the production of various materials and maximising online platforms;

Resource generation and mobilisation for vulnerable communities or sectors that need assistance;

Policy advocacy to articulate and promote immediate and long-term policy demands for food security and the rights of rural peoples; and,

Media and social media campaign to popularise the campaign and help galvanise public sentiments on issues of food and rights into a broad, unifying call for change.

The production of this book is part of the #FoodAndRightsNow campaign. The materials compiled here are the product of our research, monitoring and interviews as we attempt to document COVID-19's impacts on food security and how rural communities are responding to the crisis and asserting their right to food, including through the promotion and practice of agroecology. Through this book, we hope to share our analysis and stand on COVID-19 and how it is deeply rooted to environmental plunder and destructive corporate agriculture; how the pandemic is undermining food sovereignty and deepening the structural flaws of the prevailing neoliberal and profit-driven system of food and agricultural production; and how the crisis is being used by repressive regimes in the region to inflict even harsher blows to human rights.

Lastly, we also hope that the book can contribute to the promotion of immediate and long-term policy reforms that will address the chronic and worsening poverty and hunger of the most vulnerable sectors, including those who directly produce the world's food – the small farmers, agricultural workers, fishers, and indigenous people – amid the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

We cannot let the policy makers and institutions who are behind the same food and agriculture policies that made the world vulnerable to the impacts of COVID-19 define for us what the so-called new normal should be. Today, more than ever, as we struggle to rise up from the ravages of this pandemic, the people must shape a true new normal that reflects their aspirations – a world that can produce food and feed the people in a manner that is truly environmentally sustainable and socially just.

**Ms. Sarojeni Rengam**  
**Executive Director**  
**PAN Asia Pacific**



## PART 1

# Not normal: A failed global system



Volunteers distribute food to migrant workers in Mumbai, India traveling on their journey back home during a nationwide lockdown. An estimated 130 million more people will be pushed to starvation due to pandemic, according to the World Food Programme. (Photo credit: Manoj Paatel/ Shutterstock.com)





# Of pandemics and profits: How industrial agriculture is exposing humanity to killer outbreaks

COVID-19 has already infected more than 23 million people worldwide, as of late August 2020. Many have resorted to lockdowns and quarantines of entire communities and countries, desperate to contain the rapid spread of the disease that has already killed more than 800 million. By the time you finished reading this article, a hundred new cases may have already been confirmed; several additional deaths may have already been recorded.

The grim reality is that humanity is exposed to global pandemics today more than ever. According to a 2008 study published by the Nature journal<sup>1</sup>, the number of new infectious diseases that emerged every decade between 1940 and 2004 had almost quadrupled. Another study published in 2014 by The Royal Society<sup>2</sup> said that the number of outbreaks of infectious diseases per decade between 1980 and 2013 had more than tripled.

Like the COVID-19, many of these diseases are zoonotic — that is, caused by viruses, bacteria and other harmful germs that jump from animals to humans. It is estimated that some 60% of new infectious diseases<sup>3</sup> that harm humans are from animals, mostly forest-dwelling wildlife. What's more, about 1.6 million viral species<sup>4</sup> in mammal and bird populations are said to be still unknown, with as much as half of them potentially harmful to people. That is a massive army of animal microbes waiting to be unleashed on human populations.

But the important question is why these animal pathogens that for centuries have been harmlessly contained and regulated by nature now pose a dreadful threat to humanity. Some blame the wildlife trade; the official narrative on the COVID-19 outbreak puts a live animal market in China as ground zero. While transmission of diseases from animals to humans in such settings is likely, it does not tell the whole story of our exposure to pandemics. If anything, it merely paints pandemics



Many new and emerging diseases are linked to land-use change such as deforestation, which are usually carried out to give way to monoculture production of raw materials such as palm oil. Globally, only about 15% of the world's forest cover remains intact.

as unfortunate spontaneous events rather than a structural phenomenon.

The real answer lies in understanding how the global capitalist mode of production, including in agriculture, has destroyed complex ecosystems in a manner that is both systematic and unsparing, and radically altered nature in ways that will maximise corporate profits. It lies in exposing how this system of production monopolised land and resources in the hands of big capital, and in the process drove people already in the margins of subsistence further into the hinterlands.

Deforestation has disrupted the natural habitat of wildlife such as bats and monkeys, which host viruses known or suspected

to have caused deadly outbreaks like HIV, Ebola, and SARS, a relative of COVID-19. In a recently published article, the National Geographic noted that “over the past two decades, a growing body of scientific evidence suggests that deforestation, by triggering a complex cascade of events, creates the conditions for a range of deadly pathogens... to spread to people.” The same article, citing a 2015 study by the US-based non-profit Ecohealth Alliance<sup>5</sup>, also pointed out that one in three outbreaks of new and emerging diseases are linked to land-use change like deforestation.

Globally, only about 15% of the world’s forest cover remain intact, according to a research by the World Resources Institute (WRI)<sup>6</sup>. The rest are either cleared, degraded or fragmented to give way to mostly industrial farms and cattle ranges as well as mining operations.

Industrial plantations are among the biggest drivers of deforestation, clearing away huge swaths of biodiversity in favor of monoculture mass production of raw materials for industries. Oil palm plantations, for instance, which supply ingredients for various consumer products from lipstick to ice cream, are being linked by experts to the spillover of deadly pathogens from forests to human populations. These plantations are mainly export-oriented, serving the raw material needs of mostly industrialised countries.

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“ Industrial land grabs and monocrops cause a shift in equilibrium between animal populations and viruses in forests, which increases the probability of spillover to alternative hosts.

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The palm oil industry’s encroachment and deep-cutting into forests has breached natural barriers to the evolution and spread of specific pathogens, an article published in the environmental news platform EcoWatch<sup>7</sup> noted. Industrial land grabs and monocrops cause a shift in equilibrium between animal populations and viruses in forests, which increases the probability of spillover to alternative hosts.

In a commentary published in 2014, researchers from the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and other academic

institutions, raised the possibility that the Ebola outbreak in West Africa that began in 2013 could have been triggered by the disruption of fruit bat populations by oil palm plantations. Some species of fruit bats are considered the natural reservoirs of the Ebola virus. The World Health Organization (WHO)<sup>8</sup>, in a separate report, also articulated the same concern – that forest loss in Africa brought the Ebola-bearing bat species into closer contact with human settlements.

Another process by which animal viruses break out and become pandemics for humans is the shift to large-scale, industrial animal farm operations. Like industrial plantations, industrial animal farms also lead to massive deforestation. According to the World Bank, for example, cattle ranching, or the export-driven beef production, accounted for 91% of cleared forests in the Amazon between 1970 and 2004, a trend that continues<sup>9</sup> until today.

The current model of industrial animal farms likewise creates the perfect conditions for zoonotic diseases like swine flu, bird flu, mad cow disease and their future mutations to rapidly spread and become pandemics.

Inside these factory farms, “animals are raised in cramped quarters, in constant contact with their waste, and fed corn and soybeans in place of the forage for which their digestive systems evolved,” noted an article by an environmental health expert published in *The Atlantic*<sup>10</sup>. Further, the animals are subjected to constant respiratory exposure to high concentration of gases like ammonia, hydrogen sulfide and others. All this leaves them susceptible to repeated viral infections and mutations that can be efficiently transmitted to humans.

As the landmark report on industrial animal farm production by the Pew Research Center in 2008 warned<sup>11</sup>, “the continual cycling of viruses ... in large herds or flocks [will] increase opportunities for the generation of novel virus through mutation



or recombinant events that could result in more efficient human-to-human transmission.”

From plantations to industrial animal farms, the most vulnerable and exposed to infections are the low-paid agricultural workers and the adjacent poor rural communities, who have no immediate and reliable access to health and medical services to be diagnosed and treated. But authorities are only alerted to possible outbreaks when the infection has already reached the cities or urban centers. This is how pandemics explode.

Multibillion-dollar global agricultural industries are behind the pandemic-producing factory farms. And in every outbreak of a disease, after countless infections and deaths, there arises opportunity for another multibillion-dollar industry to profit – Big Pharma. Capitalism’s quest for profits is making us sick, and then it profits further from our disease.

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# Using hunger to feed an empire: How the agrochemical industry is exploiting the COVID-19 crisis

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the world's biggest agrochemical corporations already exercise a staggering amount of control over the global food and agricultural system. After mergers and acquisitions worth USD 352 billion, just four conglomerates or the “Big Four” (Bayer/Monsanto, Syngenta/ChemChina, BASF, and Corteva Agriscience formerly Dow/DuPont) now dominate 70% of the agrochemical industry.<sup>1</sup> It is an unprecedented extent of control over commercial seeds and chemical inputs, the use of which largely defines the dominant food and agricultural system.

The pandemic has however exposed how the current system has failed to ensure food security or people's access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food. In fact, such moments of crises leave the majority of food producers who are dependent on agrochemical inputs even more vulnerable to hunger and disease. For instance, smallholder farmers in Cambodia—who before the pandemic had always been just one harvest loss away from bankruptcy—cannot buy inputs for the new planting season because of low farm gate prices and loss of farming families' supplemental income due to business closures in the cities.<sup>2</sup> In palm oil plantations in Malaysia, workers continue to work with hazardous pesticides as usual, but without adequate health protection and lowered wages due to reduced work hours.<sup>3</sup>

In a communique, the International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems has affirmed that “a paradigm shift” from corporate-controlled industrial agriculture to diversified agroecological systems is “more urgent than ever” due to COVID-19.<sup>4</sup> It stressed that agroecology allows for the production of healthy food while protecting the environment,

increases disease resistance by harnessing diversity, and reduces vulnerability to trade disruptions and price shocks.

In contrast, the widespread use of agrochemical products has been a major driving factor in the drastic decline in biodiversity, which affects food security in a profound way.<sup>5</sup> According to a FAO's State of the World's Biodiversity for Food and Agriculture, loss of biodiversity is affecting the world's capacity to produce food. Approximately 20% of the earth's vegetated surface has become less productive because of biodiversity loss. Many species crucial to food production—such as birds and pollinators—are under threat of extinction. Loss of genetic diversity has also been alarming, with only nine crops accounting for two-thirds of global food production.<sup>6</sup>

Yet, the agrochemical industry and its collaborating institutions are using concerns over food security during the pandemic to push for even greater corporate control over food and agriculture, with even less accountability over the health and environmental impacts of hazardous technologies.

### **Bailouts and aid: Profiting from the pandemic**

Data shows that the pandemic has had minimal impact on the profits of the world's agrochemical giants, even while some have acknowledged that COVID-19 disruptions have reduced the ability of farmers to invest in chemical fertilisers and pesticides.<sup>7</sup> For the first six months of 2020, Syngenta posted a 2% increase in sales to USD 12 billion, with sales in the Asia Pacific region up by 12%.<sup>8</sup> The half-year sales of Corteva increased by 5% to USD 9.4 billion, while the net income of FMC Corporation also rose to 5% in the first quarter of 2020.<sup>9</sup> Bayer's CropScience division also posted a 3.2% sales increase to EUR 4 billion for the first half of 2020.<sup>10</sup> Only BASF reported a decline in sales and income due to COVID-19 impacts. This, however, was mostly due to lesser demand for auto manufacturing chemicals

and petrochemicals; sales of seeds and agrochemicals still increased during the first quarter of the year.<sup>11</sup>

Despite retaining market share and robust profits, Bayer and BASF were among the companies that received a massive amount of bailout funds from the British government. BASF received GBP 1 billion, while Bayer was handed GBP 600 million in British taxpayers' money under a COVID-19 emergency loan scheme. These public funds, according to Greenpeace UK, were given without conditions such as commitments for workers' welfare or environmental protection, and were received by the two companies just weeks after they announced plans to distribute billions to shareholders in dividends.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly, it is business-as-usual for the agrochemical industry. The pandemic, in fact, has provided corporations with the perfect cover to further expand their reach, especially among smallholder farmers, who provide up to 80% of food supply in Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, and are responsible for keeping many traditional, climate-resilient breeds alive.<sup>13</sup>

Through its 'Better Farms, Better Lives' initiative, for instance, Bayer is targeting to donate commercial seeds, "crop protection products" (chemical inputs), and personal protective equipment to two million smallholder farmers in Asia, Africa and Latin America supposedly to "help boost food security" amid the pandemic.<sup>14</sup> In Thailand, this involves Bayer's distribution, in collaboration with the Thai Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, of THB 20 million worth of "starter kits" to 50,000 smallholder rice farmers along the Chao Phraya River Basin.<sup>15</sup> In India, 400,000 smallholder farmers in 17 states will each receive a package of Bayer's hybrid seeds and inputs.<sup>16</sup>

Syngenta is also actively involved in the Indian government's COVID-19 relief operations. Through its network of Agri Entrepreneurs (AE), and in collaboration with state government

of Bihar, Syngenta AEs claim to have “ensured the availability of 13,266 ration cards for families below the poverty line” and helped farmers to earn INR 4.87 crore amid the lockdown by “facilitating digital financial transactions.”<sup>17</sup>

In the Philippines, Bayer and Corteva have expressed support for the government’s “Plant, Plant, Plant” program, an initiative led by the Department of Agriculture’s (DA) to ensure food security amid COVID-19. Since last year, Corteva has partnered with the DA to establish 80 Educational Farms (EduFarms) covering 50,000 hectares in 40 municipalities. Farmers are trained on “new seed preparation and crop protection technologies” in these EduFarms, and since the pandemic, Corteva has conducted activities in nearby farming communities as well.<sup>18</sup> Meanwhile, Bayer said that it will intensify its processing and distribution of Dekalb corn seeds to help boost food production during the pandemic.<sup>19</sup> Many of Bayer’s Dekalb corn hybrid products<sup>20</sup> are genetically modified to resist the popular weedkiller Round Up or glyphosate, a Monsanto product at the center of thousands of lawsuits in the US because of its link to cancer and other diseases. Last March, at a time when COVID-19 cases started rising in the country, Bayer announced plans to penetrate the market in Mindanao, Southern Philippines<sup>21</sup> with Vt Double Pro Dekalb<sup>22</sup>, a new product that is genetically engineered to be both glyphosate-tolerant and resistant to the fall armyworm.

Bayer has also capitalised on growing public interest in urban farming as a result of the pandemic. It recently partnered with Singapore-based Temasek to launch Unfold, a joint investment company that focuses on developing new seed varieties tailored for the indoor environment or vertical farming, which, according to Bayer is “an efficient way of boosting food supply in cities and urban areas amid the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.” The German firm has already built a 300-square-meter urban farm in the village of Ususan, Taguig City in the Philippines.<sup>23</sup>

## Skirting health and environmental rules

The COVID-19 pandemic not only gave agrochemical companies the opportunity to aggressively promote their products under the guise of aid and ensuring food security, it also allowed them to use pandemic-related restrictions to flout environmental and health standards.

Last March, the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced that it would indefinitely suspend the enforcement of environmental laws, and that the agency will not “seek penalties for noncompliance with routine monitoring and reporting obligations” during the coronavirus outbreak.<sup>24</sup> Not surprisingly, the EPA granted Syngenta’s request a couple of months later to suspend atrazine monitoring in US waterways due to COVID-19 restrictions. Atrazine, a weedkiller linked to reproductive issues and cancer, is banned by the European Union. The US has required Syngenta to conduct ecological monitoring of atrazine since 2004—an obligation that the company had tried to get out of as early as December 2019 or prior to the pandemic outbreak.<sup>25</sup>

Civil society organisations in the US also accused the EPA of using the pandemic to secretly approve BASF’s herbicide isoxaflutole, a likely human carcinogen that can drift up to 1,000 feet and cause significant damage to plants and wildlife. The agency sidestepped the usual public input process by not listing isoxaflutole’s registration for public comment in the federal register.<sup>26</sup>

Meanwhile, the Scottish Environmental Protection Agency permitted the relaxation of standards on the use of pesticides in salmon farming, “to help salmon farms cope with staff shortages and social distancing.” Following industry pressure, salmon farms were allowed to breach safety limits on the use of anti-lice insecticides emamectin and azamethiphos, resulting in increased toxic discharge into the seas.<sup>27</sup>



Another example is the Pesticides Manufacturers and Formulators Association of India (PMFAI). In the PMFAI's appeal to the Indian government to strengthen the domestic pesticides industry to ensure supplies amid the pandemic, it called for the suspension of “unreasonable stringent environmental requirements” by the Ministry of Environment, Forest & Climate Change, Central Pollution Control Board, and the National Green Tribunal. “Presently, unscientific pollution mitigation measures lead to industrial stress rather than encouraging investment in the chemical sector,” the PMFAI said.<sup>28</sup>

Everywhere, the agrochemical industry seems to be one of mind in trying to wheedle regulatory agencies to further loosen environmental and health rules; ironically using what is essentially a health and ecological crisis to do so.

It is notable that in a set of key actionables for implementing the prescriptions of the World Health Organization (WHO) Manifesto for a healthy recovery from COVID-19, the WHO recommended the promotion of agrobiodiversity and reduction

Vietnamese rice farmers standing with advertisements of Syngenta products in their fields. (Photo credit: Syngenta Vietnam)





Agrochemical giants Bayer and BASF were among the companies given massive amounts of bailout money by the British government in response to the COVID-19 crisis.

of the need for chemical pesticides and herbicides. It also recommended to “eliminate or reform incentives, including subsidies that are harmful to biodiversity, including those that promote monoculture production systems.”<sup>29</sup>

Yet, the pandemic has been used to push for the adoption of genetically modified (GM) crops, which have increased the global usage of chemical inputs, notably herbicides, and led to the rise of monocultures and loss of agrobiodiversity. In this regard, collaborating research institutions such as the International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) and the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) play a big role.

In the webinar “The future of food systems in Southeast Asia post-COVID19” organised by IRRI and the FAO, Jean Balie, IRRI’s head of Agri-Food Policy, said that they are “looking to increase the mineral and vitamin content in rice grains” or crop biofortification as a response to the pandemic. One such biofortified crop is the genetically modified Golden Rice, which was recently approved for commercial use in the Philippines. Golden Rice is being opposed by farmers and other groups as a tool of corporate dominance and for its deceptive claims of addressing hunger and malnutrition—its negligible Vitamin A content, lack of safety, and potential to cause contamination of native rice varieties.<sup>30</sup>

In Bolivia, the pandemic was used to railroad the approval of GM crops. Citing the coronavirus emergency and the need to “reactivate the economy,” Bolivian de-facto President Jeanine Añez passed on May 7 Supreme Decree 4232 allowing the use of GM seeds for corn, soy, wheat, sugar cane, and cotton. In its opposition, the farmers group Coordinator of the Six Federations of the Tropic of Cochabamba said that the move was an abuse of power and will only serve the interests of “sectors of the national oligarchy.”<sup>31</sup>

## Digitalisation and corporate control

COVID-19 also fast tracked the push for digitalisation, or the use of new digital technologies in the agricultural sector, which the agrochemical industry had already made significant investments in prior to the pandemic. Bayer, for instance, had invested in drones for “precision spraying” of pesticides<sup>32</sup> and image analytics and AI technology to collect farm data.<sup>33</sup> In 2019, Syngenta acquired the agricultural technology firm Cropio Group, with the aim to digitally manage 40 million hectares of land globally.<sup>34</sup>

Long before the pandemic, policymakers have been paving the way for the needed environment where increased monopoly control of agriculture through digital technology could thrive. As early as January 2019, for instance, agricultural ministers and multilateral institutions (such as the World Bank, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, and the World Trade Organization) had already proposed the establishment

The COVID-19 pandemic has seen an increase in the sales of agricultural drones used to spray pesticides—thereby also increasing the possibility of exposing rural families to toxic aerial drift. (Photo credit: Liu Xiaozhong/ Pixabay)



of the International Digital Council for Food and Agriculture to the FAO. It put forth digitalisation as one of the solutions to global agri-food challenges: “With stable access to the Internet, farmers can receive and share technical information even internationally, improving productivity, resilience and access to markets...Mobile technologies and web-based devices also connect farmers to supply chains, giving access to higher quality seeds and fertilizers that can boost production and quality, and also enable them to sell directly to consumers, maximizing profitability by avoiding intermediates.”<sup>35</sup>

The pandemic suddenly saw some of these possibilities realised. For instance, governments and civic organisations started using digital platforms to help farmers to sell produce directly to consumers amid restrictions. At the FAO’s recently concluded 35th Regional Conference for Asia and the Pacific, FAO Director-General QU Dongyu said that big data, a digital economy and mobile technology “will lead us through the challenges presented by COVID-19 and help us conquer malnutrition and poverty.”<sup>36</sup>

But digitalisation under the same neoliberal framework of the current food and agricultural system and driven by the same corporate agenda of greater monopoly control for profits is unlikely to lift food producers, especially in developing countries, from hunger and poverty as promised. It is not an issue of “leaving no one behind” in these technologies—as the World Economic Forum argues in its push for digital farming amid COVID-19<sup>37</sup>—but rather, an issue of control.

Digital farming (also called “precision agriculture” and “smart agriculture”) involves “utilising digital technology to observe, monitor and manage farming activities and other parts of the supply chain in an integrated manner, with mass data collection, storage and analysis forming a fundamental component.” Big Data on agriculture exploits data on weather, plant growth,



pests and pesticide spraying, among others, supposedly for increased efficiency and risk management.

But civil society organisations are raising the alarm on how corporate ownership of big data platforms could undermine the potential benefits of these technologies. In a communique, the research group ETC Group pointed out how digitalisation encompasses not just “consumption and production data related to the industrial food system,” but “control of the genomic data of the world’s flora and fauna as well.”<sup>38</sup> Meanwhile, Friends of the Earth Europe observed how asset management firms, financial institutions, commodity traders, seed and agrochemical giants, as well as giant IT companies such as Microsoft and Google, are pushing for digital farming in Europe primarily to cash in on a potentially new revenue stream. “The danger is that with such unprecedented market power, firms can collaborate to set the parameters of algorithms and promote dependency on the inputs that they themselves offer, leaving producers with weak bargaining power and severely curtailed decision-making autonomy. This serves to further entrench a techno-centric model and divert attention from viable sustainable alternatives,” the group said.<sup>39</sup>

Indeed, targeted “agricultural advice” using digital technologies may mean little more than farmers’ increased dependency on commercial inputs. A December 2019 study showed that transmission of agricultural information through mobile technologies in sub-Saharan Africa and India increased the odds of adoption of recommended agrochemical inputs by as much as 22 percent.<sup>40</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic provided agrochemical companies with the perfect opportunity to demonstrate further how digitalisation can more efficiently market their products. Last June, Syngenta Philippines launched the TIWALA mobile application, an app that can identify

geographically-specific crops and pests, and recommend Syngenta products “with corresponding application rates and optimum window of application.”<sup>41</sup> Such apps increase the ease with which farmers can purchase highly toxic pesticides without proper training, protective equipment and information on their potential hazards.

Digitalisation can also facilitate the adoption of commercial seeds among smallholder farmers using local or traditional seeds. The International Crops Research Institute for Semi-Arid Tropics (ICRISAT), an attached CGIAR agency, pointed out that in India, there is a “strong informal seed sector through which farmers access seeds.” The ICRISAT recommends “e-Commerce platforms that offer farm inputs” to reduce the impact of disruptions caused by lockdown measures.<sup>42</sup>

Another area of concern is the increasing use of drones for pesticides application. This is particularly harmful in developing countries where houses are situated near farms and aerial drift can easily poison an entire village population. In China, drone companies cited an increase in the demand for agricultural drones and unmanned aerial vehicles since the pandemic outbreak, with sales expected to quadruple by the end of the year, and the Chinese agriculture ministry planning to deploy more than 30,000 drones for “targeted crop protection.”<sup>43</sup>

Moves of the agrochemical industry to further tighten their stranglehold over food producers amid the COVID-19 crisis must continuously be tracked and exposed. With more than 130 million people estimated to join the ranks of the world’s hungry and food insecure by the end of 2020 as a result of the crisis, it is more important than ever to push for essential reforms to the food and agricultural system, with agroecology and people’s food sovereignty at its core.

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# Global pandemics and food insecurity: The role of IRRI and WTO

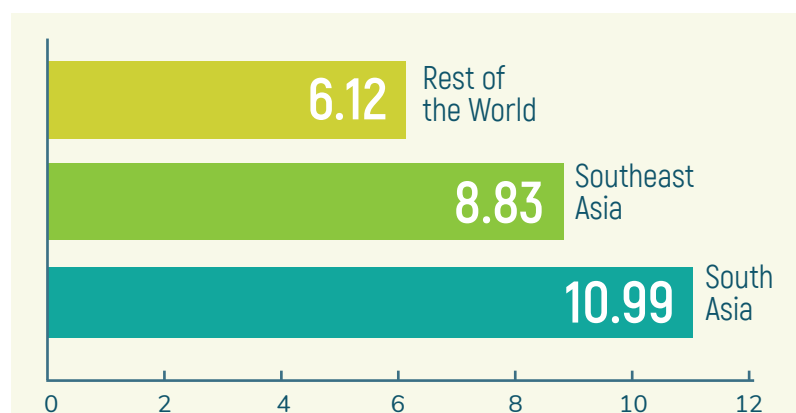
The COVID-19 global pandemic is now threatening the food security of many countries and communities around the world. Initially, Vietnam halted its exports of rice<sup>1</sup> to know whether it had enough for its own domestic use as the world rushed to cope with the new coronavirus. For China, the Philippines and several African countries that relied on Vietnam for their rice supply, the situation was precarious. A few major rice and food exporting countries soon followed Vietnam's lead, especially as the COVID-19 crisis got prolonged.

This predicament illustrates how more vulnerable, in terms of their food security, many countries have become to global crises such as pandemics, due to flawed policies and programs on food and agriculture. Countries that were once capable of producing their own food needs such as rice have now become dependent on foreign markets. Local farmers have been alienated from their lands and seeds, destroying their capacity to produce food for the people.

At the heart of this destruction of domestic food systems and displacement of local producers are global institutions like the

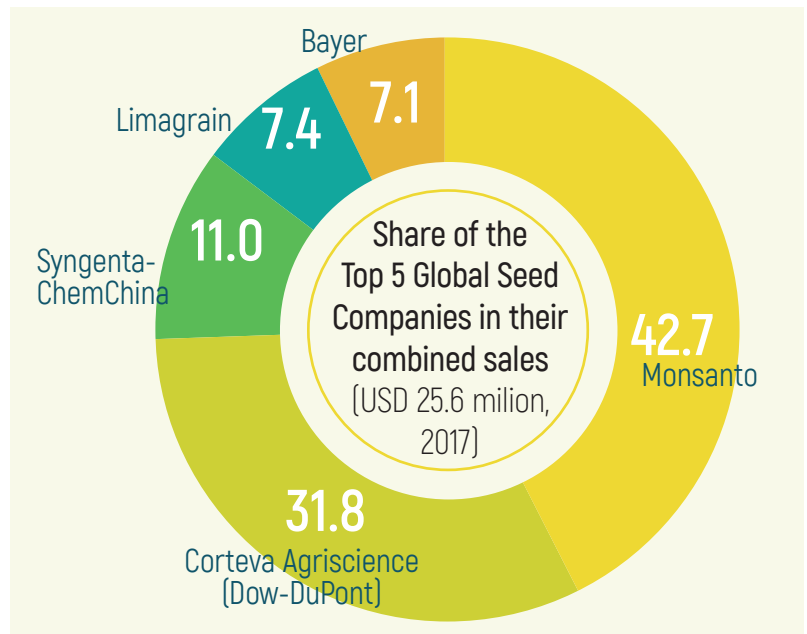
## Share of the Top 5 Global Seed Companies in their combined sales (USD 25.6 million, 2017)

In its 25 years, the World Trade Organization (WTO) has allowed transnational agribusinesses from developed countries to pour their cheap agricultural products into the markets of previously self-sufficient regions like Southeast Asia and South Asia. The average annual growth rate of import value of total crops and feed in these regions are almost double the global average, according to UN FAO.



Contrary to the Green Revolution's promise of entrusting seeds to farmers, only a handful of big agrochemical companies — dominated over the years by Bayer-Monsanto, Corteva (or Dow-DuPont), BASF, and Syngenta-ChemChina — cash in on the seed market. They maintain control of the seed industry and outcompete small farmers through mergers and acquisitions, commercial concentration of genetic modification (GM) technology, and weaponising skewed patent laws.

Source: Data compiled by Agro Pages from 2017 annual reports of prime industry players; monetary values converted at the exchange rate, according to PoundSterling Live, on the last day of the fiscal year



International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) and the World Trade Organization (WTO).

What peasant groups call IRRI's failure to "improve livelihoods and nutrition, abolishing poverty, hunger and malnutrition," as stated in its mission, could not be more apparent in the Philippines where it is headquartered. The country finds itself among the top rice importers globally<sup>2</sup> and its farmers no better off than before. This assessment is remarkably similar in other previously self-sufficient nations in Asia.

Globalized trade has introduced a deluge of cheap agricultural products to countries where small-scale farmers are, at the same time, bullied into cultivating cash crops for exports rather than food crops, using seeds, fertilizers, and other chemical inputs that IRRI and its allies have helped foist on the market.

The rules for an international trade order set by the WTO, since its institution 25 years ago, further skew the playing field perilously in favor of developed countries. To the detriment of their poorer counterparts, backward agriculture — further stunted by huge

agribusiness interventions — reins in developing economies from heading off the impact of trade liberalization<sup>3</sup> policies.

In more ways than one, trade and research under the current profit-driven global economy have gone hand in hand to tighten the grip of transnational corporations on agriculture while thrusting hundreds of millions of rural people deeper into food insecurity and poverty. The roles played by IRRI and the WTO in this scheme stand out and signal betrayal of and utter disregard for the mandates they claim to fulfill.

Global institutions such as the World Trade Organization and International Rice Research Institution have further impoverished rice farmers in Asia through input-dependency and trade liberalisation. (Photo credit: Nanan Burgos/ Shutterstock.com)

## **Business as usual for IRRI**

The so-called revolution that IRRI has waged marches in lockstep with the interest of private institutions and philanthropic foundations that bankroll its operations. Among these are the



very companies that cash in on the seed market<sup>4</sup> which IRRI has assembled by snapping up genetic rice varieties from farmers.

In 2017, one of IRRI's key funders, the US-based biotechnology corporation Monsanto Company, earned USD 10.9 million in the sales of field crops and vegetable seeds, according to data compiled by Agro Pages<sup>5</sup>, an online media platform devoted exclusively to the global agribusiness. Bayer's acquisition of Monsanto<sup>6</sup> in 2018 is projected to secure the latter's dominance in the global seed industry given the research capacity of Bayer, one of the largest multinational pharmaceutical companies in the world.

Meanwhile, another one of IRRI's investors, the Swedish pesticide and seed company Syngenta, reaped USD 2.8 million in seed sales in 2017, marking a 6.4% increase following its acquisition<sup>7</sup> by the Chinese state-owned petrochemical company ChemChina that same year. But Syngenta is yet to narrow its sales gap from that of Corteva Agriscience, the new agricultural brand after the Dow-DuPont merger in 2017<sup>8</sup>.

The common ground among these three, despite their penchant for mergers and acquisitions<sup>9</sup> to cache capital, is their aggressive push for GM seeds, which IRRI is more than willing to promote and provide.

IRRI has, in fact, upgraded its Green Revolution to the Gene Revolution. Besides genetic engineering, big data from agrochemical transnationals would help more easily identify and pry open new markets to absorb novel high-yielding varieties<sup>10</sup> and heavy chemical inputs like synthetic pesticides and fertilizers.

Yet there is much in history to hark back to as a caution against the high cost of IRRI's program.

In the 1960s, the first high-yielding variety dubbed "miracle rice" rose as the most widely planted food crop in the world



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“ More than half of this severely food-insecure population comes from Asia and 40% from Africa. It is no mere coincidence that these were the regions originally born down by IRRI's Green Revolution. Today, not only are they under siege of food insecurity; most countries in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa in particular fall within serious or alarming levels of hunger, based on the Global Hunger Index in 2018.

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— so much so that traditional paddy varieties in Asia grew less and less profitable to cultivate until they have effectively been wiped out<sup>11</sup>, along with the diverse farming methods long practiced by generations of local food growers. Entrepreneurial farming has co-opted previously self-sustaining agricultural systems, locking the dwindling peasant population<sup>12</sup> in usurious debts for seeds and inputs.

The 1990s registered a gradual downturn<sup>13</sup> in agricultural productivity as monocrop plantations expanded, costs of farm inputs soared, and incomes of smallholders and farmers plunged. Obscenely contrary to IRRI's promise of food security, the lack of adequate access to nutritious and sufficient diet among over 697 million people worldwide<sup>14</sup>, per 2017 estimates by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), puts them at greater risk of hunger.

More than half of this severely food-insecure population comes from Asia and 40% from Africa. It is no mere coincidence that these were the regions originally born down by IRRI's Green Revolution. Today, not only are they under siege of food insecurity; most countries in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa in particular fall within serious or alarming levels of hunger, based on the Global Hunger Index in 2018<sup>15</sup>.

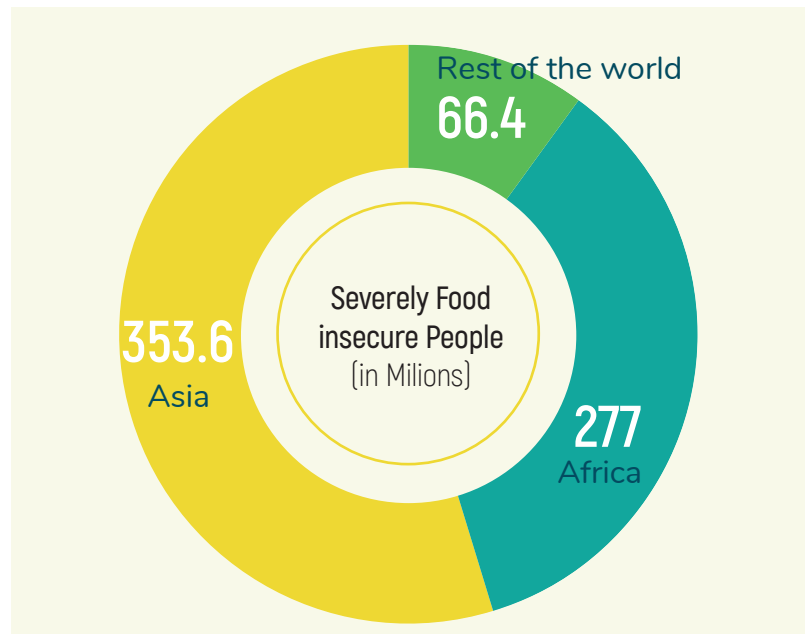
Golden Rice and the like, touted as biofortified staple crops, may have raised calorie consumption in the developing world, but lack the nutrients<sup>16</sup> and health benefits otherwise offered by once-diverse diets. Still, these crops flood the markets, due chiefly to trade inequalities that the WTO ostensibly dismisses.

More deleteriously, the WTO has been chiefly responsible for raising many underdeveloped countries' reliance on imports, undercutting small farmer livelihoods. Feeble agrarian economies could hardly put back up the trade barriers dismantled by the WTO's predatory policies for unchecked liberalization.

The International Rice Research Institute (IRRI) has promised to ensure food security by breeding new variety of staple crops, among others. Yet data from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UN FAO) estimates around 697 million lack sufficient access to adequate amounts of safe and nutritious diet in 2018. More than half of this population comes from Asia and 40% from Africa.

Source: United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (UN FAO)

\* Data culled from the number of severely food insecure people by region relative to global population, according to a suite of food security indicators.



## WTO's tricks of the trade

The “free trade” system backed by the WTO has over the last decades increasingly resembled a robbery of domestic markets in less industrialized nations. The WTO’s Agreement on Agriculture<sup>17</sup> subsumes said countries under commitments to either substituting all restrictions on agricultural imports with tariffs — the taxes or duties to be paid on a class of trading goods — or through a progressive reduction of extant tariffs. Neither of these provisions have proven advantageous in the least for the developing world.

At the losing end stand member states whose agricultural production capacity — already impaired by chronic budget slashes and state neglect — can scarcely outpace the onslaught of far cheaper imports. Conversely, their export subsidies must incrementally decrease<sup>18</sup> under the WTO regime.

They may be given supposed special and differential (S&D) treatment<sup>19</sup>, via longer implementation periods, but heavily subsidised agricultural trading systems in their richer counterparts are, by design, accorded with more concessions.

For instance, the latter may be exempted<sup>20</sup>, to a certain measure, from the WTO's subsidy reduction provision through payments for environmental or regional assistance programs which, after all, they can afford without correspondingly exacting a dent on agricultural production support.

It is quite telling, in fact, how imports surge more copiously into developing countries. Based on the annual growth rate of aggregate import value of crops and feed, Asian countries receive almost twice the global average of imports, from 1995 to 2017, according to the UN FAO.

Even food-producing countries are compelled to follow suit. The Philippines, whose self-sufficiency ratio averaged 90% over three decades<sup>21</sup>, now ranks as a major importer of rice, after a recently signed law has removed quantitative restrictions on imports of the staple. This new policy is feared to widen food trade deficits<sup>22</sup>. The Philippines might follow the trajectory of its neighbor Indonesia, whose rice imports more than doubled the average before 1998, when the government opted to liberalize the agricultural sector<sup>23</sup>.

Similarly, in much of the Global South, the rudimentary technological core of agricultural production already rules out fair competition in the international market. Small-scale farmers thus fare no better<sup>24</sup>. On top of exorbitant rents on land, farm machinery, and post-harvest facilities, they have to cut corners to afford the seeds and chemical-based methods forced on them by agribusinesses and local merchants.

Their experience paints a glaring contrast with the consolidated control of transnational companies<sup>25</sup> in the global agricultural trade. Family-based farmers in Europe and America just scrimp on the spoils from their share of expanded market access. But multinational agribusiness operations, from trading to input supply and marketing, feast on the lion's share of overseas markets for their agricultural surplus goods.

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“ The confluence of globalisation policies on trade and corporate research and development has undermined the food sovereignty of developing nations – thanks in no small part to both the WTO and IRRI. Majority of farmers languish in landlessness and poverty, while food production systems have been stymied. ”

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Even at the negotiating table in the WTO, they and their allies constitute lobby groups<sup>26</sup> that arguably exert more influence over various trade concerns or agenda than many governments of poor member states.

For one, the Intellectual Property Committee<sup>27</sup> — composed of agrochemical conglomerates like DuPont and Monsanto, among others — weaponise patent laws to wheedle, for example, agroecological farms into ceding their seed varieties, or peasant and indigenous communities their traditional knowledge<sup>28</sup> of food systems, to privatised agencies. From 1989 to 1990, the WTO's predecessor, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)<sup>29</sup>, began to enforce this regime under the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS)<sup>30</sup>, which the WTO then continued to impose.

From all this, the leverage gained by agribusinesses easily translates into immense profits. The confluence of globalization policies on trade and corporate research and development has undermined the food sovereignty of developing nations — thanks in no small part to both the WTO and IRRI. Majority of farmers languish in landlessness and poverty, while food production systems have been stymied.

Such are the conditions that pave the way for an alternative pathway of development — one that places the rural people, instead of a few global corporations, at the center of decision-making; that upholds the socially just framework of food sovereignty; and that genuinely responds to the people's needs.

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# Hunger of 'biblical proportions' already here, to stay even after pandemic

Several global institutions have repeatedly warned of an impending food crisis as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The World Food Programme (WFP) gave the direst warning yet, sounding the alarm of famines of 'biblical proportions'<sup>1</sup> that will shove 130 million people more to the verge of starvation. This is alarming not only because of the huge number of people who could die of hunger – perhaps, tragically even higher than the death toll from the novel coronavirus itself.

It is especially disquieting due to the fact that even without COVID-19, those who are famished are already at 'biblical proportions.' The WFP itself noted that 135 million people were already facing acute food shortages before the pandemic. COVID-19 is expected to double that number.

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“ With the health crisis now transformed into a global economic recession that could be potentially the most severe since the Great Depression almost a century ago, and which could wipe out the livelihood of 1.6 billion people, poverty levels are bound to deteriorate as wealth and resources become even more concentrated among the rich within and between countries.

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Furthermore, the projected number of additional hungry people in the world because of the pandemic will be equivalent to, if not even higher, than the accumulated increase in the number of severely food insecure in the past several years. This could be a major crisis in Asia, where there is a big concentration of people suffering from hunger and food insecurity.

Prior to the pandemic, there are about 821.6 million<sup>2</sup> chronically hungry people worldwide, based on estimates by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). Six out of every 10 chronically hungry people in the world are Asians – or about 513.9 million. The UN food agency says chronic hunger is when a person does not consume sufficient calories (dietary energy) on a regular basis leading to undernourishment.

Using another indicator, the FAO also estimates that there are more than two billion people<sup>3</sup> worldwide who face food insecurity – 1.3 billion on a “moderate” level and 704.3 million

on a “severe” level. Regardless of degree of intensity, out of every two people in the world who are food insecure, one of them is Asian.

More than a billion people in the region experience food insecurity. About 684.9 million Asians face moderate food insecurity, or as defined by the FAO, a condition of lack of consistent access to food due to lack of money or other resources. Some 353.6 million Asians, meanwhile, experience hunger or worse, gone for days without eating – or what is called severe food insecurity. (See **Table**)

### Chronic hunger and food insecurity in the world, by region (in millions), As of 2018

Region	No. of people facing food insecurity			No. of people facing chronic hunger
	Moderate	Severe	Total	
Asia	684.9	353.6	1,038.5	513.9
Africa	339.1	277.0	676.1	256.1
North America & Europe	78.1	10.6	88.7	NR
Latin America & the Caribbean*	133.1	54.7	187.8	42.5
Oceania	ND	ND	ND	2.6
World	1,309.5	704.3	2,1013.8	821.6

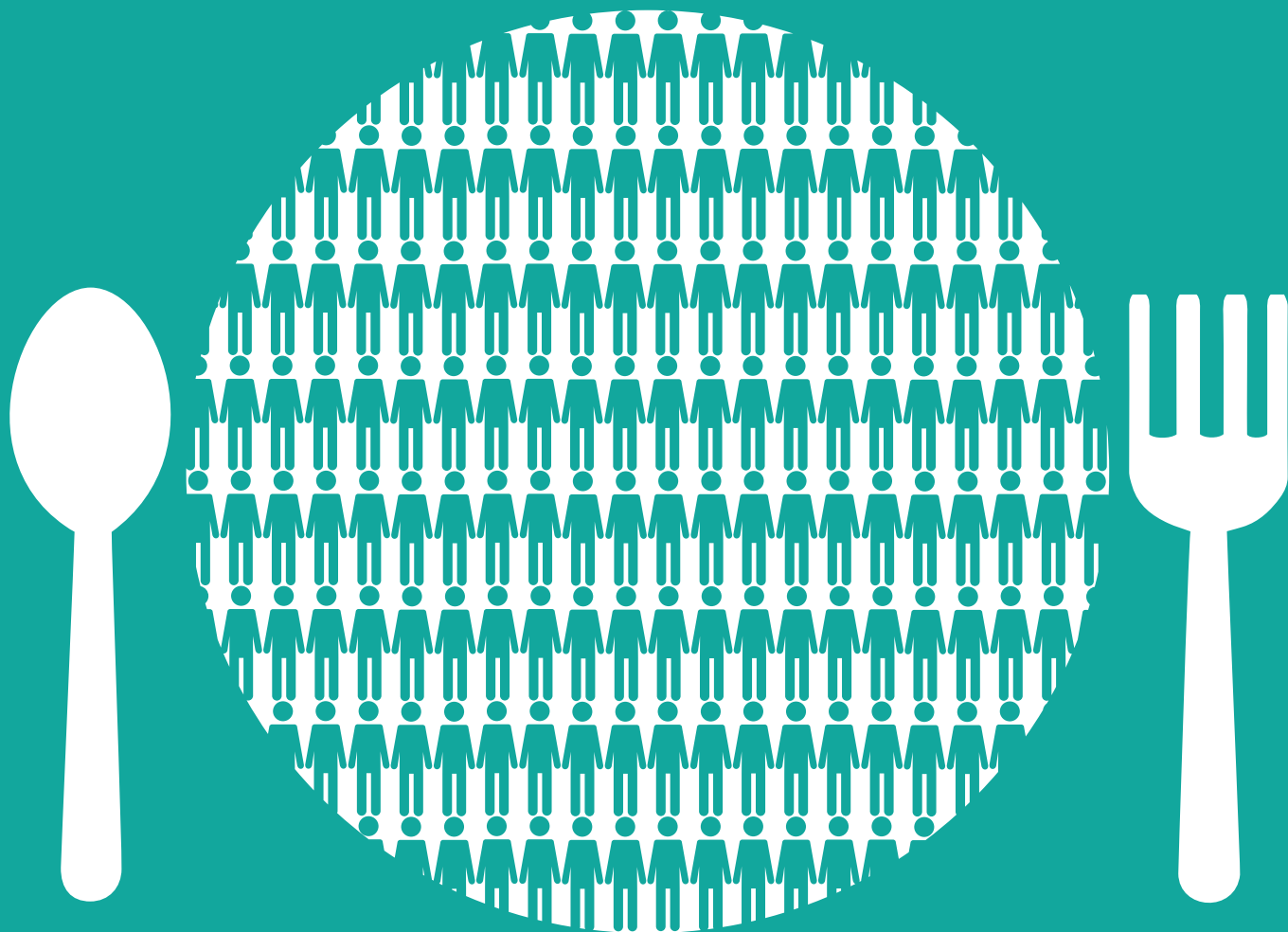
Notes: NR - Not Report ND - No Data

\*Food insecurity data for Latin America & the Carivvean exclude the Caribbean (no data)

Source: Food and Agriculture Organization

Note that relative to population size, the situation is worst in Africa where one out of five are severely food insecure and chronically hungry. In Asia, the prevalence of severe food insecurity is 7.8% while the prevalence of undernourishment (or chronic hunger) is 11.3 percent.

A quick note on the FAO's measures of hunger and food insecurity. Its indicator on food insecurity – the prevalence of



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**⚠ WARNING**

moderate or severe food insecurity based on the Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) – is an estimate of how many people lack access to nutritious and sufficient food gathered by directly asking people through surveys. On the other hand, its indicator on undernourishment/chronic hunger – the prevalence of undernourishment (PoU) – is an estimate of how many people lack enough dietary energy computed using macro data on food availability and consumption.

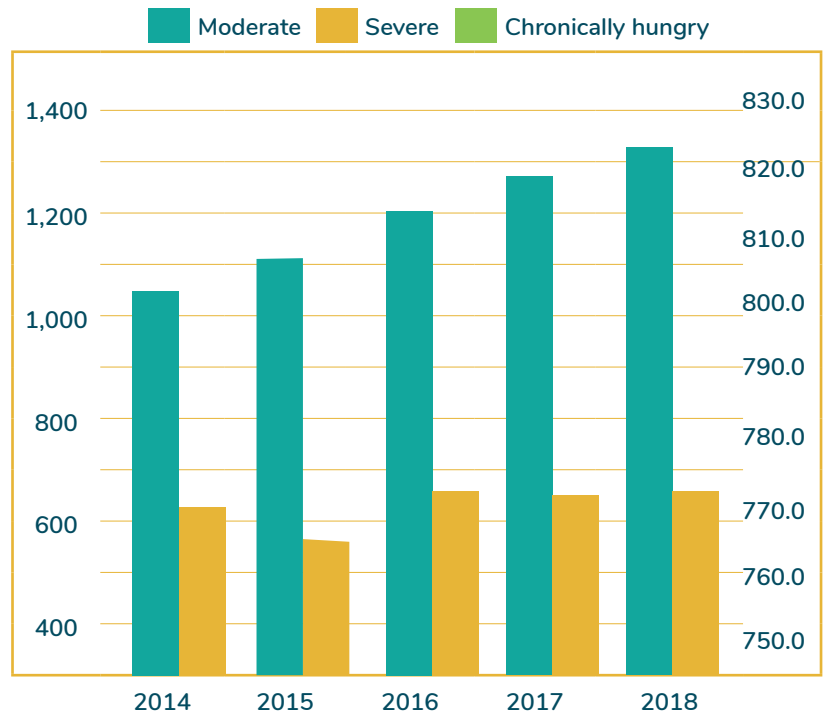
While these FAO indicators have been criticised for their tendency to underestimate the extent<sup>4</sup> of the problem, they are nonetheless the currently available data that attempt to capture at the global and regional levels the magnitude and incidence of hunger and food insecurity in relation to the dimensions of availability of food and people's ability to access it.

As it is, the hunger prognosis driven by the pandemic is unsettling given the previously deteriorating global trend in food insecurity based on both the PoU and the FIES. The number of undernourished jumped by 36.1 million between 2014 and 2018, growing steadily every year. This trend in the PoU in recent years is a complete reversal of decades of steady decline.

Similarly, during the same period, the number of people experiencing food insecurity increased by 317.5 million; of this number, the severely food insecure grew by 119.3 million. This means that the expected increase of 130 million people on the brink of starvation in 2020 due to COVID-19 will easily eclipse the cumulative annual increases in the number of undernourished and severely food insecure during that five-year span (2014 to 2018) when data are available. (See **Chart**)

Again, Asia accounted for more than half (51.3% or 162.9 million) of the global increase in the number of food insecure and lion's share (40% or 47.7 million) of the increase in severely food insecure during the 2014-2018 period. Looking more closely within Asia, the spread of food insecurity in the region

### No. of people who are chronically hungry & experience moderate & severe food insecurity (in M), 2014 to 2018



Source: Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)

is pushed by huge increases in South Asia, which comprised 51.2% or 83.4 million of the total regional increase in the number of people who are food insecure. South Asia also accounted for 51.6% or 24.6 million of the increase among the severely food insecure in the region.

The situation of hunger and food insecurity in South Asia should be closely monitored in light of the pandemic and how governments have responded to deal with the health crisis. India, in particular, was among the first to implement the world's largest lockdown<sup>5</sup> to contain the spread of the new coronavirus. It is just behind the Philippines in terms of the restrictions and other measures<sup>6</sup> taken to enforce the lockdown, based on Google's movement data. India accounts for about 70% of the undernourished in South Asia, based on available data from

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the FAO. Eighty percent<sup>7</sup> of 470 million Indian workers are in the informal economy – manual laborers in the country's fields, factories and streets – who are further impoverished by the lockdown and pushed to starvation.

For people like them who live from hand to mouth, to be placed on lockdown is like being condemned to starve. It does not help that in many cases, government assistance is unreliable due to lack of resources; misplaced priorities and twisted agenda, such as using the pandemic for more repression as many authoritarian regimes in Asia<sup>8</sup> do; and/or bureaucratic neglect, inefficiency and corruption.

Indeed, longstanding structural issues of poverty and economic dislocations of the great majority of the world's population are the underlying factors behind a deteriorating hunger crisis, which the COVID-19 pandemic is accelerating at a catastrophic rate. The poor are vulnerable, but especially the poor in poor countries. As the level of national incomes fall, the prevalence of food insecurity and the proportion of severe food insecurity both increases, based on FAO data. About 62% of people in low-income countries are food insecure, while 27% are severely food insecure. In contrast, just 9% of people in high-income countries are food insecure; barely 2% are severely food insecure.

With the health crisis now transformed into a global economic recession<sup>9</sup> that could be potentially the most severe since the Great Depression almost a century ago, and which could wipe out the livelihood of 1.6 billion<sup>10</sup> people, poverty levels are bound to deteriorate as wealth and resources become even more concentrated among the rich within and between countries. There is a direct correlation between economic slowdown or downturn and worsening hunger or food insecurity. To illustrate, 84% of countries that saw chronic hunger rise among their population between 2011 and 2017 also saw their economy decelerate or decline during the period, based on FAO data.

While other countries could suffer greater hunger due to climate crisis or conflict, the impact of economic crisis on hunger and food insecurity is doubly potent. An economic downturn can raise the prevalence of chronic hunger by 5.1 percentage points, a climate crisis by 2.3 points, and conflict by 2.2 points. But of course, what we have been witnessing are multiple, inter-related crises of the economy, climate and conflict, and now we add the pandemic. The outlook for the famished is truly grim, to say the least.

Another dimension of the hunger and food insecurity facing many underdeveloped countries in Asia and elsewhere is their greatly weakened, if not decimated, capacity under neoliberal globalisation to feed their people through their own production. These countries were previously capable of domestic food production for local consumption, even with surpluses for exports until agreements like those in the World Trade Organization (WTO) and even earlier structural adjustment programs under the auspices of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) opened the floodgates of imported food and agricultural commodities.

Take the case of the Philippines, which accounts for almost a quarter of the chronically hungry and almost half of the severely food insecure in Southeast Asia. From food trade surpluses averaging USD 275.6 million in the 1960s; USD 760.2 million in the 1970s; and USD 691.6 million in the 1980s; it has been posting food trade deficits of USD 250.4 million in the 1990s; USD 960.2 million in the 2010s; and USD 1.7 billion this decade, using FAO data which exclude fish imports and exports.

Food and agricultural imports killed the livelihood of already impoverished local farmers and other small food producers, driving a quarter of the labor force into the vicious cycle of debt, poverty and hunger. Meanwhile, overall food prices remained high for majority of the population despite the influx of heavily subsidized food imports, with food expenditures



comprising as high as 59% of family expenditure of the poorest income groups.

Its import-dependent food supply has been put in greater peril by the COVID-19 pandemic. Last year, the Philippines further liberalised its rice importation to comply with a WTO obligation; consequently, the country overtook China to become the world's largest rice importer<sup>11</sup>. Alas, its traditional suppliers like Vietnam and Thailand as well as Cambodia started restricting exports<sup>12</sup> to protect their own domestic needs amid the COVID-19 pandemic and historic drought.

A recent FAO study<sup>13</sup> of 129 low and middle-income countries concluded that high levels of export and import dependence on primary commodities (e.g., raw materials, food and other agricultural goods) have a statistically significant and negative effect on food security. Covering the period 1995 to 2017, the FAO said that a one-percent increase in dependence on the exports of primary commodities translates to a 2.2% increase in the prevalence of chronic hunger. For countries that are import-dependent for food and other primary commodities, the correlation is stronger – a one-percent increase in import dependence translates to a 3.8% increase in the prevalence of chronic hunger.

All this belies the shallow narrative that the intensification of global hunger and food insecurity is merely due to disruptions in the supply chain and logistical bottlenecks caused by the COVID-19 lockdowns. To be sure, restrictions in transportation and mobility do impact the availability and supply of food. But these are just immediate, temporary impacts that can be addressed once lockdowns are gradually eased.

Even then, the long-term devastating impacts of the global recession on productive forces, along with the lingering structural issues of poverty and destructive neoliberal food policies provide the objective conditions for hunger and food

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insecurity to persist and worsen even after the pandemic. To reverse the trend, a serious rethinking of prevailing food and economic policies and systems at the global and national levels must take place.

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# Asia Pacific states' skewed priorities laid bare by COVID-19

Even before countries in Asia Pacific began to relax COVID-19 lockdowns and restrictions, most governments had already focused their policies more on getting economies off the ground than on providing relief to hard-hit sectors. In some cases, the pandemic has also functioned as a pretext for severe, often militarist interventions that would have been ordinarily more easily opposed. Civil society and human rights groups say the crisis has not so much exacerbated as laid bare such misguided priorities.

Myanmar is a case in point. With generals and allies installed in parliament, the country's military has jockeyed with civilian lawmakers for a more outsized role<sup>1</sup> in handling COVID-19. Meanwhile, Aung San Suu Kyi, Myanmar's de facto leader, who, in the 2015 elections, pitched a campaign in defense of minorities, has yet to put the brakes on the military's continued offensives against ethnic communities.

"It seems that the ethnic people are more afraid of the military than of COVID-19," said Wahkushee Tenner, joint general secretary of the Karen Women's Organization, in a webinar hosted by the International League of Peoples' Struggles (ILPS) on May 14. "The Burmese government, the military, see COVID-19 as an opportunity. So there's more militarisation in ethnic areas," she said.

Tenner recounted how, on May 6, the Burma Army burned down two COVID-19 screening posts<sup>2</sup> set up at controlled boundaries in Karen State, where the Karen National Union (KNU) fought for self-government for over 60 years. The pandemic struck at a moment of stalled peace negotiations, which ethnic groups fear the military has exploited to the hilt to undermine the former's autonomy.

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A ceasefire agreement<sup>3</sup>, from May 10 to August 31, does not even apply to certain areas such as the Rakhine state, where UN human rights experts claim the military carries out war crimes against hundreds of thousands of Rohingya<sup>4</sup> using expanded powers supposedly meant to curb COVID-19.

“It shows that they are not sincere about peace but want to show the international media that they are cooperative to lessen some of the pressure from the international community,” Tenner said. “All these actions by the Burma military and government show glaring double standards.”

Military and police overkill are likewise magnified in the Philippines. International pressure has not done much to deter President Rodrigo Duterte from emboldening state forces, using congressionally approved emergency powers<sup>5</sup>, to crack down on supposed quarantine violators.

Limitations to people’s movement due to an island-wide lockdown had over 30,000 Filipinos locked up, notwithstanding about 120,000 quarantine violations, which critics believe to



A COVID-19 Karen Health screening point burned down by the Burmese Army on May 6 at War Tho Ko village, Dwe Lo township, southern Mu Traw district, Myanmar. (Photo credit: Progressive Voice Myanmar)

be the highest tally<sup>6</sup> globally. “You cannot just have militarist interventions at this time, although we understand the need for a strong response,” said Dr. Edelina Dela Paz, chair of the Health Alliance for Democracy (HEAD). “But it should not be at the expense of people’s livelihoods and people’s right to life.”

Dr. Dela Paz noted that the majority of those behind bars since the lockdown belong to low-income groups. Most of them have been deprived of COVID-19 testing, and their incomes have also easily run out. “There should be some support from the government in the sense of really providing space where they can go and perhaps, really, giving more than what is given now,” she said. “Like one kilo of rice and three canned goods — how can they survive on that?”

The Philippine government has promised so-called social amelioration but failed to deliver it on the scale the people need to recover their losses and tide them over. In the country, as in the rest of rural Asia, the biggest losers are farmers who await the government’s much-touted but delayed relief.

Similarly, such is the tragic irony in Pakistan, a net food exporter that employs almost half of its workforce<sup>7</sup> in agricultural and forest-based production. Many humanitarian groups worry if the USD 7 billion stimulus package<sup>8</sup>, which Prime Minister Imran Khan had loaned from multilateral creditors like the World Bank, would reach farmers and agricultural laborers, said Azra Sayeed, founder of the development nonprofit Roots for Equity.

In the meantime, they were told to shelter in place and, with the movement of goods halted, essentially leave their crops ripe for harvest to rot in the fields. “Social distancing is actually basically mocking the working class, in my opinion,” Sayeed said. “The rich can actually live in these five-star hotels and be quarantined in better and plush settings, whereas the people are really in an abominable situation.”

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“ The pandemic is a far cry from the equal-opportunity disaster that most governments would like the public to believe it is. ”

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The pandemic is a far cry from the equal-opportunity disaster that most governments would like the public to believe it is. In India, this much is also true. Despite coronavirus infections still climbing fast, health experts worry that the country is reopening too soon<sup>9</sup> — the same way Prime Minister Narendra Modi imposed a lockdown over two months ago, leaving millions of migrant workers in a lurch, with barely four hours to scramble their way back to villages.

The few lucky ones were able to do so, but the rest either died of starvation and exhaustion from traveling for miles on foot or rounded up into quarantine outposts. There, “they all suffer these 50 days like animals — no water, no sanitation facilities, no lighting, no fans, at 40-degree Celsius,” said Poguri Chennaiah of Andhra Pradesh Vyavasaya Vruthidarula Union (APVVU), one of the largest agricultural union federations in southern India, and chairperson of the Asian Peasant Coalition (APC).

Several state governments, such as in Manipur<sup>10</sup>, have opted to shoulder the train fare of their residents who are stranded elsewhere. “The government took up some evacuation process to bring back the migrants, but then this was too slow and suffered from a high amount of mismanagement,” said Malem Ningthouja, founder and chairperson of the Campaign for Peace & Democracy (Manipur).

Officials began to question the union government’s consensus about the lockdown having effectively stemmed the contagion. It appeared to be the other way around in remote areas of India. Fresh case curves<sup>11</sup> were emerging from clusters traced to migrant workers who have returned from New Delhi.

Despite the still-mounting caseload, worries for India’s economy, which has already been buckling over the past months, plague the government too much for lockdown rules to drag out much longer. The same justification underlies most other countries’ decision to loosen quarantine restrictions one by one.



In Australia, Prime Minister Scott Morrison boasted of a downturn in confirmed coronavirus cases and deaths, supposedly due to a healthcare system that is, in theory, universally accessible unlike in the Global South. Morrison laid out a three-step plan<sup>12</sup> to get people back to work and industries back on track, upon individual states' discretion. The move came at the rear of businesses' plunging revenues, as reported by seven in 10 Australian companies.<sup>13</sup>

"Their priority is to rescue big business profits, not the health and safety and lives of ordinary people," said Shirley Winton of the Spirit of Eureka<sup>14</sup>, a non-government committee that seeks to build a people's mass movement in Australia. Winton shared that there are not nearly as many people, especially casual and contract workers, on the government's flagship JobKeeper program as previously promised.

Homeless people queue up for food aid during the COVID-19 outbreak in Dhaka, Bangladesh. (Photo credit: Mamunur Rashid/ Shutterstock.com)



A report on the federal government's miscalculation<sup>15</sup> supported this observation. A staggering accounting error overestimated the wage subsidy's recipients at 6.5 million Australians, whereas the actual number is only around 3.5 million, according to the Treasury. This does not mean, however, that the uptick in unemployment is any lower than 10% as per the Labour Force survey's initial forecast.

Carrie Lam, Hong Kong's chief executive, was also quick to bail out the city's businesses battered by the pandemic, with a USD 10.32 billion subsidy scheme<sup>16</sup> in early May. But the devil is in the details — the first tranche is up for grabs, if only for employers, within three to four weeks of their application. There is not a foolproof way to ensure the cash would trickle down to their employees, many of whom are compelled to take a no-pay leave, said Charles Fung, a columnist and critic from Chinese University of Hong Kong.

"An indirect consequence of the COVID-19 is that it attacks the mass base of the movement," Fung said, referring to the broad pro-democracy camp that led one of the biggest rounds of demonstrations in the territory in the recent decade. Tensions have been brewing. Many Hong Kongers, afraid of losing their jobs, are progressively drawn to the protest movement. "You can see this as an ironic twist in how the neoliberal policies in Hong Kong reinforced the business-government hegemony," Fung added.

The legacies of successive colonial governments have sustained workers' marginalisation, Fung said. Initially, the coronavirus seemed to have lulled the unrest, but as the outbreak wanes, the city's political framework in Hong Kong, dubbed "one country, two systems," is once again falling apart at the seams.

Social distancing fell by the wayside as workers frustrated with big businesses and Lam's pro-Beijing sympathies joined pro-democracy demonstrators<sup>17</sup> to swarm the city's busiest

neighborhoods on March 24. This first large-scale protest since COVID-19 was triggered by China's new security legislation to stiffen control over the semi-autonomous city. For the protesters, however, it is but a follow-through on their defiance of crises that their government's imperial loyalty has wrought long before the pandemic.

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# Pandemic ushers in heightened rural repression

Attacks continue to siege rural communities with impunity, with data indicating an escalation of atrocities against farmers, indigenous peoples and their advocates amid the COVID-19 pandemic. PAN Asia Pacific's (PANAP) monitoring of land-related human rights violations worldwide shows that the spike in such cases from mid-March to June 2020 has so far outpaced the frequency recorded in 2019.

During the pandemic, within just 18 weeks, 80 rural people have been killed — around four every week, compared with last year's peasant death toll of two every week. Legal persecution has almost the same surpassed average rate of three victims per week as last year's, with 59 farmers, activists, or indigenous people — or four every week — arrested or detained while the pandemic runs rampant.

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“ Communities cannot mobilise to the degree they probably would have, if not for the pandemic, as politically motivated killings remain on the rise. ”

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In particular, two countries, Colombia and the Philippines, continue top PANAP's list of deadliest places for land rights defenders, with cases mounting more frequently amid the COVID-19 crisis than their averages last year. Both countries' leaders have not made any strides in curbing these reported abuses, further inflaming tensions instead, between beleaguered sectors and retrograde actors, with ever-repressive policies or general indifference to their countries' poor.

## **In Colombia, social leaders face greater hostility**

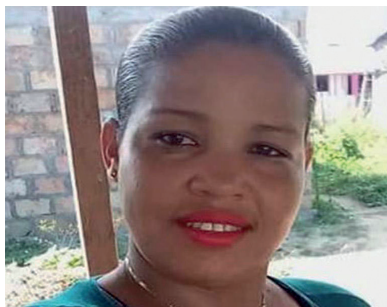
The knock-on impacts of the pandemic has crippled the peace deal<sup>1</sup> that the Colombian government signed with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC), the largest of the country's guerilla movements, in 2016, which has since made only halting progress. Not much has been done to stem the bloodshed. Normal security protocols have been

derailed in the government's myopic focus on its coronavirus response, leaving social leaders more vulnerable to death squads and paramilitaries keen on exploiting the panic over COVID-19 to ramp up such illegal economies<sup>2</sup> as mining and drug trafficking.

There has indeed not been a letup in violence against Colombians who have suffered over five decades of a civil war<sup>3</sup> largely rooted in the struggle for land. Armed conflicts have been documented to overlap with regions caught in the crossfire between vested interests claiming their stakes in these territories. Despite the peace deal's promises, the demobilisation and exodus<sup>4</sup> of FARC rebels left criminal gangs, big landholders, drug cartels, and corporate interests more emboldened to scramble for power grabs<sup>5</sup>. Local communities have either been expelled from their lands or routinely harassed and intimidated.

President Ivan Duque, who assumed office in August 2018, kept on with the implementation of the peace deal, even though he had initially campaigned against the agreement. His administration's patchy commitment to enforcing the deal propelled country-wide protests<sup>6</sup> at the tail-end of 2019. Though the mass demonstrations did not convulse on the scale seen in other Latin American countries, they threw an unrelenting spotlight on Duque's unpopular economic policies<sup>7</sup> and, in particular, the absence of state support for indigenous communities still reeling from generations-long strife and underdevelopment.

Having just gathered food donations to peasant families, Carlota Isabel Salinas Pérez was murdered by unknown assailants outside her home in the municipality of San Pablo, Bolívar, Colombia on March 24.



These communities cannot mobilise to the degree they probably would have, if not for the pandemic, as politically motivated killings remain on the rise. PANAP's data show that, between mid-March and the end of July 2020, there have been at least two farmers, farmworkers, land activists, or indigenous leaders killed every week, even surpassing the total number of victims tallied in 2019 (see **Table 1**).



Table 1. Number of victims of land-related human rights violations in Colombia, in 2019 and during COVID-19

	January to December 2019	Mid-March to end-July 2020
Killings	27	45
Threats, harassment, and physical assault	9	13
Displacement	700	1640

These numbers account for only rural peoples murdered but are certainly higher when the tally includes social leaders and human rights defenders working with other historically marginalised sectors. As early as March, international organisations like the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (UNHCHR) already expressed alarm<sup>8</sup> at brutal human

A Pakistani Army soldier stands guard at a checkpoint during lockdown in Lahore, Pakistan. (Photo credit: A M Syed/ Shutterstock.com)





rights abuses, such as in the province of Chocó, where three people had been beheaded even weeks before Duque declared a nationwide quarantine.

The lockdown was initially supposed to end on July 15<sup>9</sup>. With no state sanction, armed groups have taken it upon themselves to supposedly enforce local COVID-19 measures like curfews and bans on mass gatherings; failure to comply is punishable by, at worst, death.

“This abusive social control reflects the government’s long-standing failure to establish a meaningful state presence in remote areas of the country, including to protect at-risk populations,” said José Miguel Vivanco, Americas director at Human Rights Watch (HRW)<sup>10</sup>, in the international watchdog’s recent report documenting human rights violations in Colombia from March to June.

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“ Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities suffer overcrowded conditions, and harsh social control measures have especially undermined their access to food. ”

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HRW has also found that armed groups impose movement restrictions with threats, harassment, or outright physical assaults against local residents, many of whom work out of street food stands, peddling fish or produce. In poor and remote areas, subsistence farmers and fisherfolk doubly carry the brunt of such unreasonably conceived measures meant to, authorities claim, slow the COVID-19 spread.

Checkpoints at provincial borders also hamper the work of humanitarian volunteers. They have provided relief aid, particularly to internally displaced civilians<sup>11</sup>, who cannot now collect at community centers the periodic stipend the state has promised them. Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities suffer overcrowded conditions, and harsh social control measures have especially undermined their access to food.

Civil society organisations, including even workers from largely conservative church groups, have spoken out. Recently, Archbishop Dario Monsalve of Cali, the capital of the Valle del Cauca department in southwest Bogota, called attention to

Duque's inaction amid human rights violations and accused<sup>12</sup> him of a “genocidal revenge to completely dismember society, social organisations and democracy in the fields and in the territories.”

Ethnic minorities have also slammed the government's hardening stance against mechanisms provided for by the 2016 peace deal, such as the war crimes tribunal and the special investigation unit for the search of disappeared persons. Another such mechanism, a land restitution process<sup>13</sup>, but has yet to lead to substantial headway in redressing the grievances of vast swaths of the population driven off their lands.

### **Crackdown on Filipino farmers and activists intensifies**

In the Philippines, President Rodrigo Duterte's COVID-19 handling is marked by not so much indifference as hostility to the country's most vulnerable. The human rights situation has taken a nosedive since the onset of the pandemic. Meanwhile, the curve of COVID-19 infections is far from flattening despite officials' claims. Both are causes for concern and ultimately hit oft-sidelined rural communities the hardest.

Democratic backsliding has already been in the works since Duterte's ascent to the presidency in 2016. Instead of boosting public healthcare capacity amid mounting cases, official policies have been fast-tracked to the detriment of the people, especially farmers, land activists, and indigenous rights' defenders.

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**“ In April, local police accosted and illegally detained six relief volunteers and a former lawmaker who were on their way to distributing food aid to urban-poor and peasant households in the town of Norzagaray in Bulacan province.**

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The newly enacted Anti-Terrorism Law, in particular, raises fears<sup>14</sup> of unbridled state power to brand the peasant sector and indigenous peoples – long the main targets of Duterte's counterinsurgency campaign – as subversives or terrorists. State forces often crack down on them, with blatant brutality and various forms of legal persecution. In April, local police accosted and illegally detained six relief volunteers<sup>15</sup> and a former lawmaker who were on their way to distributing food aid to urban-poor and peasant households in the town of

Norzagaray in Bulacan province (54.5 kilometers north of Manila). Local human rights groups have also worried of extrajudicial killings by vigilantes during the pandemic **(see Table 2)**.

**Table 2. Number of victims of land-related human rights violations in the Philippines, in 2019 and during COVID-19**

Region	January to December 2019	Mid-March to end-July 2020
Killings	54	16
Threats, harassment, and physical assault	8	4
Arrests, detention, and legal persecution	48	46

At least one Filipino farmer or land defender is killed weekly, which is the same rate as last year's. Within just 18 weeks since regional lockdowns were imposed in the Philippines, PANAP's monitoring also recorded almost the same number of cases of legal persecution as it did in 2019, with two to three rural people detained or arrested every week. The pandemic has provided cover for land-related human rights violations to continue unchecked in such short order, while communities sink deeper in the throes of a yet-uncontrolled public health emergency.

"We can list a thousand and one reasons to protest the government's negligence — mass testing targets remain lagging<sup>16</sup>; there are tens of thousands of locally stranded individuals<sup>17</sup>; millions have lost their jobs and livelihood; millions have not received promised cash aid<sup>18</sup>; the people have no means of public transport<sup>19</sup>; cases of COVID-19 in the provinces rise as a result of the government's Balik Probinsya program<sup>20</sup>, which encourages urban dwellers to flock to the countryside," said Danilo Ramos, chairperson of the Peasant Movement of the Philippines (KMP), one of PANAP's partners, at an independence day rally last July 12.

Ramos is worried that the Anti-Terrorism Law will be used to silence people's grievances. For instance, KMP itself became one

of the targets of a Facebook post by the government's National Task Force To End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) that maliciously brands them as a "terrorist group."<sup>21</sup> The peasant leader expected that such defamatory attacks would be more common—and more dangerous—following the law's implementation.

The new law derives from what has so far been a heavily militarist position<sup>22</sup> in tackling the pandemic. An example is a plan to deploy police officers and local officials to round up civilians with COVID-19 symptoms — a strategy that, according to human rights groups, resembles Duterte's drug war tactics<sup>23</sup> of house-to-house inspection and wholesale raids.

Welcome developments are on the horizon, however. The United Nations Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights' (UN OHCHR) recommends to conduct an on-the-ground, impartial, and independent probe into the regressing human rights situation<sup>24</sup> in the Philippines, including into violations against land and environmental rights of rural sectors. "We believe that such an inquiry could contribute to the process of

Nine volunteers of Anakpawis Party-list delivering relief goods to peasant communities in Norzagaray town, Bulacan province, Philippines were arrested on April 19 on sedition charges, which were later dismissed in court. (Photo credit: Anakpawis Party-list)



Pan Asia Pacific Monitoring of Land-Related Human Rights Violations (HRVs) Worldwide shows that there were more victims of HRVs during the Covid-19 Pandemic

## Pandemic Heightens Rural Repression



**Who were the victims?** Farmers, Land rights activists, Women, Indigenous People

reversing the environment of impunity in the country, help exact accountability from those behind these atrocities,” PANAP said in a statement on June 27.

Pressure from the international community can help push back against the Duterte administration’s escalating human rights violations and troubling policies of political repression, using the COVID-19 pandemic as an excuse or cover. Advocates believe that the worst is yet to come in Duterte’s bid to maintain power. His popularity is waning. Public frustration welcomed his fifth State of the Nation Address<sup>25</sup>—a distressful marker for a presidential term that has been an active part of the global resurgence of regimes weakening democratic institutions and values, at the expense of millions of people.

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# Food and Rights Talk

A man with a mustache, wearing a pink long-sleeved shirt and a white and blue striped dhoti, is sitting on a large, flat, woven basket. He is surrounded by massive piles of fresh green leafy vegetables, likely spinach or chard, which fill the background and foreground. He is looking off to the side with a thoughtful or worried expression, his right hand resting on his chin. The scene is outdoors, with natural light illuminating the vegetables and the man.

A local vegetable seller in Dhaka, Bangladesh is worried because of the low price of produce due to the pandemic. (Photo credit: Alchemist from India/ Shutterstock.com)

# Introduction

**Food And Rights Talk** is a series of interviews with PAN Asia Pacific (PANAP) partners across the globe to find out the situation of rural peoples, in relation to food security and human rights, amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

The interviews were conducted during different stages of the outbreak, in various countries in the Asia Pacific region battling with varying levels of the spread of the virus. Still, many common issues affecting rural peoples emerged. This includes the inability of farmers to recover costs of production due to very low farm gate prices; rural families losing valuable sources of income due to business closures and job losses; rising debt and food insecurity as a result of the COVID-19 crisis. But these interviews reveal that structural causes, and not just temporary disruptions in the food supply system, underlie the sufferings of rural peoples. Our partners—individuals working in or closely with grassroots organisations—also talk about the folly of dependence on imported food, the need to dismantle food cartels, protection of agricultural workers, and the necessity of land reform and genuine rural development, including agroecology, as long-term, thoroughgoing demands made more urgent by the pandemic.

These interviews also make apparent how marginalised sectors, including rural peoples, are denied of their rights to health and social services at a time when they need them most. They show how civil and political rights are being ruthlessly violated, when the exercise of these rights is most crucial in ensuring collective survival amid a pandemic. Finally, these interviews provide a glimpse of how crisis can be turned into opportunity, through people's solidarity and response.

# Fear and hunger in rural India

The following is PANAP's interview on 16 April 2020 with Poguri Chennaiah, national secretary of APVVU (Andhra Pradesh Vyavasaya Vruthidarula Union), one of the largest federation of unions of agricultural workers and marginalised farmers in Southern India. Chennaiah is also the president of the Asian Peasant Coalition.



**PAN Asia Pacific (PANAP):** What is the situation now of farmers and agricultural workers in India, particularly in the state of Andhra Pradesh?

**Poguri Chennaiah:** Since the lockdown, farmers could not harvest their crops because the workers are not going to their fields. There is so much police harassment. Even if they want to do some work, police are beating people up. Agricultural workers are also really suffering because of not being able to get employment outside of their village. Only recently the government has relaxed its policy for agricultural work, but because of the panic that has been created, workers are now scared to go outside to work.

The government promised to give food grains one week after the lockdown. But the government took 10 days before they were able to deliver. During these 10 days, farmers and agricultural workers suffered a lot because they don't have any surplus to keep in their homes. Now the government has given five kilos of rice per head, one kilo of sugar, one liter of oil and INR 1,000 (USD 14) in cash per family. These just cover the bare minimum of their needs. They don't have vegetables, the spices that they use for curries. Relief materials are only offered to those who have cards, which the government gives to people who they classify as living below the poverty line. But in Andhra Pradesh alone, there are 157,000 families who don't have cards but are below the poverty line. They are not given the same equal treatment. It's a terrible situation.

Another concern is that the government didn't give farmers any opportunity to sell their produce. There are no facilities provided for marketing. So they didn't harvest. I can tell you, in summertime, tomatoes in Chittoor generally costs INR 50 (USD 0.68) per kg. Now it sells for INR 2 (USD 0.03). Farmers cannot even recover their cost for harvest labor, let alone transportation costs and other investments they had made. So the farmers let the tomatoes just sit in the fields. Another example is milk. With





Farmer destroying vegetables crops due to COVID-19 lockdown in Maharashtra, India. (Photo credit: Alchemist from India/Shutterstock.com)

Andhra Pradesh being a drought region, people depend a lot on milk. Rural families sell milk everyday to the milk dairies and earn around an average of INR 500 (USD 7) per day. Now they can't get anything because there is no market. They cannot drink five to 10 liters of milk per day in their home, you know.

The government said that they have relaxed the rules on markets. Markets can open for a limited time and people can transport goods from 6 to 11 a.m. The problem is, people who live far away from the marketplace cannot transport their goods. Within one hour they have to sell their produce, then run back to their villages before the lockdown. So it is nearly impossible for the farmers to do all these. They get delayed by even just five minutes, the police comes and beats them up. If they're going by bullock cart, the police will beat the farmer driving the bullock cart.

Meanwhile, rural workers employed under the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA)--a 100-day government employment program for the poor where they do public works such as digging canals—have been

abandoned. They didn't get one month's worth of back wages. There is currently no work for them because farmers are not allowed to employ these workers.

### **PANAP: So how then are they surviving?**

**Chennaiah:** The rural poor are just depending on the five kilos of grains—without any other ingredients—to fill their bellies. That is the only way they've been surviving. The government says we're attending to every family. But in the states of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, that is simply not true.

### **PANAP: How about vegetables in their farms, can they survive on that?**

**Chennaiah:** If within their village there are vegetable growers, then local families can get them freely. But it is not in every village that people grow vegetables because it depends on the water availability and all that. The problem is, each village is blocked from the entry of other villagers. Villages are closing the village roads, by felling the trees across the road and all that. A villager cannot go to another village. If they do, people in the other village will shout and send them back.

### **PANAP: Do rural people have access to health care and testing kits for COVID-19?**

**Chennaiah:** Government doesn't have enough equipment for testing in all the Primary Health Centers. But to some extent, India's primary health care system is better compared to other countries, despite the continuing problems of corporatisation and privatisation. In every district, two to three centers are established for testing. So whenever the government gets to know from the PHCs that there are patients with coronavirus symptoms, immediately they are linked to the testing centers in district hospitals. Testing and health services are better here in the Southern states such as Andhra Pradesh, Telangana, Kerala, and Karnataka, compared to Northern Indian states.

## **PANAP: How is the food security situation in urban areas?**

**Chennaiah:** Urban areas are equally bad for the poor who are unregistered or do not have the card. They are really suffering, because government is not supporting them the way they are supporting the cardholders. The lockdown was announced only 4 hours before it was implemented. This left 20 million inter-state migrant workers stranded in various urban centers. They are shelterless, without food and benefits. So we are pushing government to provide them proper relief packages. Right now migrant workers are accommodated in schools, public buses and train compartments. The situation is terrible because of lack of access to water and electricity. The temperature in India is now 40 degrees so you can imagine in the railway compartments and buses, without A/C, it is like being boiled inside.

## **PANAP: Have you documented any rights abuses among your constituents during this lockdown period?**

**Chennaiah:** In one factory premises in the special economic zone of Sri City, 187 families were stranded without food. We informed the authorities and after a long bureaucratic process, 15 days after the lockdown, each family received aid. But it was only one kilo of rice each— they are supposed to be given five kilos. So you can imagine the suffering these families went through, and still not getting what they were due.

Also one of our union secretaries in the coastal areas was beaten up by the police. Despite an official identity card and permission to do service, the police officials, upon finding out that he is Muslim, started beating him up very badly. They accused him of carrying the virus and told him to go back to home. His vehicle was also confiscated, and they broke its glass windows. These kind of cases are rampant.





Police personnel wielding lathis disperse workers in Mumbai, India for flouting social distancing rules while trying to board a special train back home during a nationwide lockdown. (Photo credit: Manoj Paateel/ Shutterstock.com)

The context is that there was this one Islamic meeting in Delhi where around 1,400 people from Andhra Pradesh and Telangana went and got infected. Because of that, there is so much discrimination against Muslims across the country. Everybody looks at them as virus carriers. Most street vendors of fruits and vegetables, meat and fish are Muslims. Now, you will see that there will be no people in the meat shop that belongs to Muslims, but there will be crowds in the non-Muslim shops. There had always been discrimination against minorities—led by the media, politicians, and religious fundamentalists. But now, everybody is looking at Muslims as carriers of COVID-19. It is a very dangerous situation.

### **PANAP: What are your demands?**

**Chennaiah:** APVVU wrote a letter to the governments of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, asking them to provide food grains and cash sufficient for all days of the lockdown. We also demanded



to distribute this aid to all eligible people, irrespective of having cards or not. Because it is the failure of the government for not issuing them cards when it's their responsibility to take care of the poor. Government should also release all back wages of MGNREGA workers, and continue to provide them 100 days employment. They can still maintain social distancing while doing community work.

The government should plan the budgetary allocation for health in proportion to people living in rural areas. Sixty percent should go to rural areas because 60% are living in rural areas—budget can be used for infrastructure building for primary health care. Workers should also be linked to state insurance schemes so that they can get free health care.

**PANAP: It is said that we have entered or are entering a global recession brought on by the pandemic. How do you think the Indian government should respond to this?**

**Chennaiah:** The government should increase the budget allocation to agriculture—and to sustainable agriculture, not corporate agriculture. That is one long-term demand for food security. Globally, it is really going to be a really big problem, economies are going to collapse. So the Indian government must provide support mechanisms for workers and farmers. If not, suicide cases will multiply. We want the government to plan properly for the future of workers.

# Vietnam's 'success story'

The following is PANAP's interview on 24 April 2020 with **Phuong Hai**, project staff of Research Centre for Gender, Family and Environment in Development (CGFED), an NGO based in Hanoi, Vietnam. CGFED acts for gender equality based on freedom, diversity and human rights. Protection of women and children rights, especially the right to a free-toxic environment, is one of CGFED's strategic actions.



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## PAN Asia Pacific (PANAP): How are the Vietnamese people generally coping with the pandemic?

**Phuong Hai:** Right now the government is loosening up some social distancing requirements. People are allowed to travel but we still have to obey health care checks and requirements. Some of the essential stores have been reopened on April 23 because Vietnam has recorded no new cases within six recent days. This week, we have no new cases and things seem to be better now. We are reaching nearer and nearer our regular daily life. Next month, schools will open for children after a few months of being closed.

## PANAP: How has the pandemic affected farmers in Vietnam?

**Hai:** COVID-19 has remarkably affected people involved in agriculture, forestry and fisheries production. Farmers have difficulty in finding consumers for produce due to export restrictions and social distancing requirements. The most clearly and directly affected are the farmers who produce fresh vegetables, fruit and aquatic products, which are difficult to preserve in the long-term. Especially in the lockdown areas, production has been heavily affected because farming activity is suspended. People are required to stay at home and are just allowed to do some gardening work inside their own areas.

But the government has promised compensation support for farmers who have been heavily affected. Maybe at first the farmers were not so happy with the government's lockdown. But when the new cases rapidly increased in mid-March, they feel it's better for them to follow directions to stay at home in order to reduce the risk of community spread. In Vietnam, people fully understand that the health care system cannot afford to treat too many infected people, that a community spread might be disastrous for the Vietnamese people. That's the reason why even if their incomes are heavily affected, there is consensus that it's the right thing to do.

## PANAP: Does lockdown cover the entire country?



The Vietnamese government conducts free COVID-19 testing for locals and tourists in Da Nang City. (Photo credit: Lusin\_da\_ra/ Shutterstock.com)

**Hai:** No, lockdown is enforced in just small areas with a high number of new infected cases. In Hanoi City, only one street has been locked down for 14 days since early March. And it's not the entire street but a certain portion of it, covering only 66 households. Or, in another district, there's only this one village that is on lockdown, not the entire district.

In areas that are not in lockdown, farmers are free to engage in agricultural production. They are allowed to do daily work in the fields, but they have to follow health requirements like wearing of face masks, and keeping at least two meters distance from other people, and no gathering of more than two persons. We are still allowed to go to the markets/supermarkets but with the same requirements, especially body temperature check. Government is also encouraging people to move to online purchasing instead, but people who are not used to it are still allowed to go to the markets/supermarkets.

**PANAP:** So the government is able to trace where the cases are and be selective about the areas they put on lockdown?

**Hai:** Yes. It is quite different in Vietnam because we have gained enough experience from the SARS epidemic more than

10 years ago. So the public health care system from the central to commune level is quite prepared. Government has launched TV ads, a website, and a smartphone app, which provides the necessary information and directions. If you suspect that you might be infected, you can call the hotline and you will be guided to which hospital you can take the test or they can send a medical team to your home to administer the test for free. Then they quarantine the infected people and do contact tracing—all contacts of the infected person are also placed under quarantine. Cases are quickly identified and isolated, and that is why the government is confident that it's not necessary to quarantine the entire province or country.

**PANAP: How about economic and food aid for affected people? Is it enough and has it reached intended beneficiaries?**

**Hai:** The government has announced an emergency financial assistance package for 20 million people who belong to seven beneficiary groups. Right now, local governments are still in the process of contacting each household and identifying if you belong to one of the beneficiary groups or not.

In terms of food assistance, there are various methods. In lockdown areas, government serves daily food to the people living there. They also receive a small amount of money (VND 100,000 per day) from the government to support them during the lockdown days. Daily free meals, health care checks and COVID-19 tests are also provided in designated quarantine places for those who had direct contact with positive cases, including COVID-19 suspected foreigners or Vietnamese citizens abroad entering the country. People, regardless if Vietnamese or foreigners, are not charged any fee during their quarantine period in those designated places by the government. Only foreigners who test positive and have to be on treatment have to pay for health care expenses since mid-March. But of course the fees here are more reasonable or much cheaper than in other countries as far as we know.

Many social organisations and individuals have also launched campaigns or initiatives to provide food freely for people who have difficulties in earning money and surviving during the pandemic. If you do not have enough money to buy in the supermarket, you can go to the Free Rice ATM machines where you can receive a maximum of 3 kilos of rice for free. Apart from Ho Chi Minh City, the Free Rice ATM model has also appeared in other provinces and cities across the country like Hanoi, Hue, Binh Dinh, Khanh Hoa, Da Nang, Dak Lak, Ben Tre, Kien Giang, Tien Giang, Long An, Can Tho, Hai Phong, Ha Tinh, etc.

We also have the Zero-VND Happy Supermarket where everything is free. If you want, you can take not only food but also clothing. *[There is a limit of five products with total amount of VND 100,000 value per shopper, who can also only shop twice a week.--Ed.]* This market model has been established in eight provinces across Vietnam. It mostly caters to poor or migrant workers from different provinces who have to temporarily stay in Hanoi or in other provinces where the market is run. We also have free delivery centers on some streets across the country where people can pick up what they need for free, and people who have things they want to share with others can bring them at these centers. So there are initiatives not only from government, but also the private sector and local people.

**PANAP: The Vietnamese is limiting rice exports to ensure the country's food security. Do you think it's a good measure?**

**Hai:** I think the better word to use is not "limit" but "control." The Vietnamese government is trying to control rice exports to balance both food security in the country and revenues. If we still allow the normal amount of rice exports, it might create a local rice crisis, especially if the pandemic lasts for more than a year. We think it's a good measure. Perhaps the farmers at first were unsatisfied with the decision. But because of the global situation and the lessons learned from other countries, most





The Zero Cost Happy Supermarket in Vietnam allows shoppers to get an amount of essential items for free, to help people cope with the impacts of COVID-19. (Photo credit: Zing)

think that it's better to firstly secure our food and our lives, and then we can restore the economy after the pandemic has been controlled.

**PANAP:** As of now how would you say is the food security situation both in the rural and urban areas?

**Hai:** As CGFED, we are in contact with farmers groups that we work with. Luckily, we are still receiving good signals from them both in terms of health and agricultural production. The situation is not as good as before, but still, they are not that badly affected. Only those in lockdown areas are heavily affected. For most of the local farmers, it is mostly the marketing of their agricultural products that is the problem, because the market may not be as crowded as in normal days because of the restrictions. People seem to go to market only when it is really necessary. Some have adapted to the situation, and are using online marketing or motorbikes to bring produce to buyers within their area.

In the urban areas, also, there are not much problems because we believe that Vietnam is a rice-growing country and that the government will not lead people to hunger. The fact is that we have avoided panic buying in the supermarkets just to buy rice and other essential food. There was panic buying for only one day at the beginning. The next day, things went back to normal because the government announced that we have enough food to provide for the Vietnamese people and that it's not necessary to go panic buying. After the announcement, the people didn't crowd as much in the supermarkets.

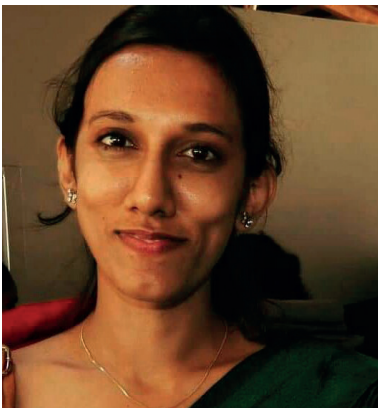
**PANAP: Vietnam has been called by the international community as a “success story” in terms of handling the pandemic. Do you think that’s true?**

**Hai:** Well, some of my relatives who live abroad in Europe and the US say that they want to come back to Vietnam during this pandemic period. Actually, since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, Vietnam has arranged flights to different countries in order to “save” our citizens who want to come back to the country. They would have to stay in quarantine for 14 days for risk screening. After that, if they have negative results, people are allowed to come back to their hometown although they still have to isolate themselves for 14 days at home. It is true that our policies have been widely recognised not only by the Vietnamese people but also in other countries. Many Vietnamese children have been sent back to their mother country in order to avoid the pandemic. Because it is acknowledged that if they are unlucky enough to be infected, they don't have enough money to afford medical treatment abroad. Here, medical treatment of COVID-19 is free for every Vietnamese. That's why many decide to go back to their hometown.



# Perils and possibilities in Sri Lanka

The following is PANAP's interview on 29 April 2020 with Chathu Sewwandi, project coordinator of Vikalpani Women's Federation in Sri Lanka. Vikalpani is an NGO working with rural women for enhanced living standards, protection of the environment and asserting the food sovereignty.



## PAN Asia Pacific (PANAP): How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected farmers in Sri Lanka?

**Chathu Sewwandi:** The general situation here is that we are on lockdown. Some districts are open, but they suddenly closed because of the recent rise in COVID-19 cases. There's a curfew and people can't move around. The government has told farmers that they can continue with their agricultural activities. But farmers have limited access to markets. Usually farmers have diverse markets, but with this situation, they can't reach their usual markets. Usually the middleman comes to them and collects the fruits and vegetables. Now, the middlemen have problems with transportation facilities, and have to ask for special permission. Upper country farmers, especially, can't sell their harvest at a fair price. Government has this program to assure continuous food supply to consumers, but there are a lot of difficulties. Many farmers are unable to harvest. Some of their produce—such as pumpkin, beets—were instead burned or distributed locally for free.

## PANAP: How is the food security situation in the urban areas?

**Chathu:** The Sri Lanka government has a special program in coordination with government markets and cooperative societies. They started some distribution channels—the government gave out some numbers and people can call and order what they want. The thing is, it is only possible for people who have money. But people who live in slums, and those who earn daily wages, they are facing a lot of difficulties. So recently the government gave out LKR 5,000 (USD 27) for individuals to purchase what they need. This aid is distributed through local officers. But it is not enough, because Colombo and other urban areas are still totally closed and therefore people are facing a lot of livelihood issues.

But there are a lot of positive things as well. People are turning to home gardening and seeking a lot of strategies and methods

on how they can manage their space for gardening, to cultivate the fruits and vegetables that they need. People are enthusiastic about it. There are also some programs led by NGOs and voluntary organisations. In general, people collectively look out for each other. They collect food and distribute them to daily wage earners and other poor people.

**PANAP: Would you say that people are going hungry?**

**Chathu:** We don't have the worst situation where people have nothing to eat. But I don't know what will happen in the near future. If the situation prevails, people will go hungry. Especially people who don't have their own space or access to land for cultivation, and those who are earning daily wages.

**PANAP: Agricultural workers are among those who don't have land. What is their situation?**

**Chathu:** Some plantation workers are out of work. They are facing difficulties because they don't have their own land to cultivate. They only stay in small houses in tea estates. If our export system collapses with this COVID-19 situation, and we can't export as much tea and rubber as we used to, then it will directly affect these workers.

Garment exports are also affected. Most village women work in garments factories. Nowadays they receive only half of their salary or none at all. European countries are not ordering that much—consumer patterns have changed, they don't go out to buy clothes as often. So as a country that depends a lot on exports, we need to think about this.

**PANAP: Can you tell me more about the situation of rural women?**

**Chathu:** In Monaragala where I live, most women are daily wage earners. With this COVID-19 pandemic, they are not called to work, especially if there are local movement restrictions. For



Rural women of Vikalpani run village-level markets of organic produce in Monaragala district. These markets have proven even more essential during a pandemic. (Photo credit: PANAP)

example, I'm working with this society of rural women that had to stop production. Usually they produce handicrafts, garments, and food products. Now these women can't, they are calling me up and asking me what to do. So rural women face a lot of problems.

### **PANAP: Do people have access to adequate healthcare and testing?**

**Chathu:** In Sri Lanka, the program to identify COVID-19 patients is very good. Medical officers do inspections at the village level, observing people. If there is a suspected COVID-19 case or someone had contact with a suspected case, medical officers go their homes and ask people to go on quarantine or send them to quarantine camps. They are continuously doing COVID-19 tests—some university students are developing machines for local testing. Medical service is also totally free. People can go to the government hospitals and everything will be supplied free of charge.

But we were not ready for this situation, and have limited Personal Protective Equipment in hospitals. Because of that, we began to produce them locally. Garment workers started to produce PPE, and hospitals ordered from them. Government also now directly purchases PPE from community groups. I am not saying we have enough. We still have a lot of shortages in rural hospitals. And if the situation continues, there will be more shortages. We don't have enough materials and have to import them from China.

**PANAP: Vikalapani, your organisation, is promoting agroecology. In these times, do you think that farmers who are practicing agroecology have an advantage over those who are not?**

**Chathu:** Yes, definitely. Farmers doing conventional farming have to depend on chemical inputs. In a situation like this, they don't have access to that anymore. Also the economic costs—most don't have enough money to invest on chemical inputs since they don't have much savings. Here in Monaragala, we have 50 women who practice agroecology. They make their own organic fertilisers and inputs. The pandemic does not affect what they're doing and in fact increases the demand for it because people are seeking organic inputs for their farmlands. We also started a local farmers market. A lot of people come to these markets because they can't go to the big markets and they have to depend on village-level markets.

So this is a very good opportunity to make them understand the need for agroecology. Now people are starting to believe in a self-sufficient system, and are starting to change their consumption patterns. A lot of people are now interested in organic home gardening. So recently we started a website where we share our knowledge through videos and photos. I think it's a very good opportunity to teach others and spread what we as rural communities believe in. They come to our women for advice, and we share what we can in our capacity.

# Cambodian farmers deeper In debt

The following is PANAP's interview on 13 May 2020 with Keo Chanra, secretary general of the Coalition of Cambodian Farmer Community (CCFC), an organisation composed of farming communities that work towards addressing land issues, natural resource extraction, and forced evictions.



**PAN Asia Pacific (PANAP):** What are the most significant impacts that COVID-19 pandemic on the daily activity and livelihoods of farmers in Cambodia?

**Keo Chanra:** We see the situation here regarding the COVID-19 pandemic is not so bad. The case numbers do not rise as fast (as in other countries). However, the situation of workers and farmers is not so good. Currently, our communities face many issues not really because of COVID-19, but because of the interventions or actions done by the government. Many workplaces are still closed, from KTVs to garment and footwear factories. Many workers have lost their jobs. Most of these workers have family members who are farmers.

In Cambodia, 90% of farmers are indebted. They get their capital from micro-financiers, or from the income of family members who have migrated from their hometowns and are working in different areas as agro-industrial workers or as informal workers. So when COVID-19 came, these family members lost their jobs and don't have money to pay for the farmers' debts. So they do not have the capital to start production.

Many of our members are also farmers who cultivate agro-industrial crops like rubber and sugarcane. These farmers are suffering from the low price of their products these days because of the lack of demand. Because of low prices, they don't have money to pay back the loans they took out from micro-financiers.

Earlier this week, I visited a rural community near Phnom Penh. The community there is badly affected because their family members are losing their jobs. But they cannot easily seek for food in their area because mass gatherings are not allowed. Their basic rights to freedom of assembly and expression are affected. As a result, the problems they are facing are not voiced out to the public—they have to struggle with these problems





Many farming families in Cambodia lost supplemental income that they depend upon because of job losses caused by pandemic-related business shutdowns in the cities. (Photo credit: wdeon/Shutterstock.com)

themselves. Outsiders or NGOs cannot help them during this time because it is not allowed. Just yesterday, one of our staff went to one province to interview farmers about their situation, but the activity was banned by the commune council because of COVID-19.

**PANAP: Has the government made any interventions to assist these workers who have lost jobs?**

**Chanra:** The government cooperates with the private sector. Some factories have temporarily closed and the government shared the responsibility for paying the salary of workers. The company pays USD 30 and the government pays USD 40, so one worker gets USD 70 per month as they stay at

home. But this assistance is not widely provided. It is only for bigger companies who have thousands of workers. There are many others, like entertainment workers and massage workers, who don't receive any assistance. The intervention is not equal to all.

### **PANAP: How is the food security situation? Do people have access to food?**

**Chanra:** Across the country, food prices have increased. It's difficult for the poor to buy. Borders with neighbouring countries like Thailand and Vietnam have been blocked. Cambodia imports many of its food from these countries, so when the borders were blocked, the quantity of imports are not like before, and this has affected food prices. For instance, normally, one kilo of pork is KHR 35,000 (USD 8.50), but during the pandemic the price is now KHR 42,000 (USD 10.20). Even some ingredients like salt, which used to cost KHR 10,000 (USD 2.43) per kilo, now costs KHR 14,000 (3.40 USD).

### **PANAP: What are the measures that the government has done to ensure food security?**

**Chanra:** To ensure food security, the Ministry of Agriculture has encouraged farmers to plant, they call it Good Agriculture Practice (GAP). In Cambodia, farmers nowadays don't have big lands, only small lands. So they can practice GAP even in their own home and their own land, a kind of home gardening to serve their daily food needs.

The government has disallowed the exporting of rice abroad, except for luxury (fragrant) rice. I think that this is good in terms of ensuring food security inside the country. But if we look closer, who manages or controls the buying of rice from farmers? It is these big rice milling companies. Farmers sell their rice to these companies at a very low price. So the government is just focusing on the amount of rice that we have, but not on



the farmers, and how the rice industry is controlled by a few big companies that can also dictate rice prices.

**PANAP: You said earlier that Cambodia is dependent on food imports. Do you think that the pandemic is a good time to start developing your local agriculture industry more?**

**Chanra:** Yes, we have been complaining about this for many years. We call ourselves an agricultural country, but many of our food we import from our neighbouring countries. It is a good time for reflection and to see what Cambodia can do to promote the agriculture sector.

**PANAP: Cambodia has among the lowest number of COVID-19 cases in ASEAN and still has zero deaths. Why do you think this is so?**

**Chanra:** One opinion is that it's because of the good practice and timely interventions of the government. Another opinion is that it can be because of lack of mass testing. Here, there is no mass testing, so many people still have doubts regarding the number of cases that are being reported. But we cannot say anything because when someone criticises government intervention on COVID-19, they are charged and accused. Sometimes they are immediately arrested. So they don't want to raise criticisms in public.

**PANAP: What are the health interventions that the government has done?**

**Chanra:** The Ministry of Health updates the rate of COVID-19 infections everyday. They produce informational materials like posters and videos to educate the public, they provide masks and other protective equipment. But we see that people don't change their behaviours that much. There are still gatherings in some places, and the government takes action—sometimes using the reason of COVID-19 to take action against groups that are critical of them, like NGOs.



Farmers of the Coalition of Cambodian Farmer Community (CCFC) troop to various Cambodian ministries to submit petitions related to health and livelihood amid the COVID-19 pandemic. (Photo credit: CCFC)

## PANAP: How is CCFC helping farmers cope with the crisis?

**Chanra:** We are trying to augment our labour fund to support our members. Also at the end of April, together with partners, we submitted several petitions to ministries, seeking for their support. We asked the Ministry of Health to provide small-scale farmers and urban poor communities with masks and food aid. We submitted an open letter to the Ministry of Economy to request them to lift work suspensions, because workers have been suffering from loss of income. We also sent a petition to the Ministry of Agriculture and Land Management to give farmers their land and to provide them with technical support for the GAP.

We are also starting to collect information and document farmers who really need support. We desire to strengthen our

farmers' capacity to cultivate food during the pandemic. We are also seeking outside funding support to respond to this food emergency. Many farmers, in reality, don't fear COVID-19, but they fear that they won't have food to eat because many of them cannot afford food, whose prices have gone up.

**PANAP: What can you say about observations by the international community that the COVID-19 pandemic is being used by the Cambodian government to silence critics?**

**Chanra:** Well, a journalist was arrested when he repeated the quote of Prime Minister Hun Sen about the government not being able to help tuk-tuk drivers who have lost their income because of COVID-19. It is threatening for anyone speak or raise issues regarding COVID-19, especially if they criticise government intervention. But we as NGOs still do our work because we think we are doing nothing wrong. You know, when we submitted our petitions to the relevant ministries, one farmer who joined us in the submission was surveilled. He was asked questions from 3 to 10 p.m. They asked him who are the groups behind these petitions. But those demands are not from us; they were raised by the farmers themselves. We are just here to provide technical support and respond to their problems. We don't think we are doing anything wrong.

# COVID-19 worsens injustice in Indonesia

The following is PANAP's interview on 26 May 2020 with Rahmat Ajiguna, secretary general of the Aliansi Gerakan Reforma Agraria (AGRA), an alliance of peasant movements working on land reform and other agrarian issues in Indonesia.



**PAN Asia Pacific (PANAP):** What is the extent of the COVID-19 pandemic in Indonesia? Latest reports indicate that COVID-19 cases are rising.

**Rahmat Ajiguna:** It is clearly shown by government data that day by day, the cases of COVID-19 are rising, including deaths and people suspected to have the disease. The efforts of the government in handling the pandemic is not really effective because there is an increasing number of victims. This is because the Indonesian government just follows and depends on imperialist or developed countries in the way they handle the pandemic, with no relevant and adequate resources to overcome it based on the needs and culture of Indonesians. Therefore, the efforts are only focused on restrictions to limit the activity of people. They call it big-scale social distancing or PSBB, but the effect is more of territorial quarantine.

The government ignores its responsibility to address the health and medical aspect of COVID-19. It does not sufficiently fulfill the needs of the people in this regard. They don't provide food and good nutrition for the people to increase their immunity during the pandemic. They don't provide medical tests or mass access to health care, which can halt the rise of this pandemic. That is why there are some areas in the red zone where people are sick and hungry.

**PANAP:** Does the government implement mass testing for COVID-19?

**Rahmat:** So far, the government does not really provide mass testing. They just say that we need such testing but our capacity is far behind our neighbours. Right now, they don't provide facilities for people to get a comprehensive medical test, that's why the people rely on their own efforts to check their health situation. The government designated certain hospitals in province and cities to facilitate testing for COVID-19. But it's still in the scheme of health as business. It's very expensive for

people to have themselves checked. The prices vary based on the hospitals. Each test costs from IDR 300,000 (USD 20) to IDR 700,000 (USD 47). Especially for poor families, that is very expensive. That's why there's a limited number of people who can access these tests.

This situation increases the uncertainty and anxiety of the people. People don't know how long they have to wait for conditions to get better, while at the same time, the government does not provide a comprehensive scheme for handling COVID-19, especially in the medical and health care aspect. The government predicts that the situation will continue until 2021, and tells us that we need to be patient, that we need to wait. But they are not making an effort to halt the rise of this pandemic in a way that assures people.

### **PANAP: What are the most significant impacts that COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of Indonesian farmers?**

**Rahmat:** Conditions in Indonesian rural areas have worsened. Agricultural production of peasants is decreasing while the burden of life rapidly increases. It puts Indonesian peasants under a lot of stress. During the pandemic, the buying price of agricultural commodities such as rubber, palm oil, vegetables, and other farming produce is decreasing. So farmers do not have sufficient income. At the same time, farmers need to shoulder the daily costs of living, which have become more burdensome. During the pandemic, the prices of food and other daily needs are increasing. Even families' costs for education are increasing.

In the rural areas, there is increasing unemployment—they cannot go to another city or province for work because of movement restrictions. Aside from farming, people can't have other jobs. But families need to pay off their loans and land rent amid tightening usury. Since farmers don't have sufficient income, they have to take on new loans to fulfill their daily





Students in South Sulawesi province, Indonesia are looking for signals to carry out learning online. Daily expenses of rural families—including for online education—are increasing amid the COVID-19 pandemic. (Photo credit: Moch Farabi Wardana/ Shutterstock.com)

needs. At the same time, they have to pay off their previous loans. So debts are actually increasing. We can just imagine how difficult the life of a farmer is at this time.

### **PANAP: Are farmers allowed to go to their fields to farm?**

**Rahmat:** Yes, because Indonesia relies on the export of agricultural commodities while at the same time depends on the import of food commodities for domestic consumption. We see that farmers are still tilling their fields, but under uncertain conditions for their products, whose buying prices are decreasing because there is no protection from the government. There's no assistance for farmers if they fail in their farming, no provisions for them to directly distribute their products. Meanwhile, we see the government providing assistance to corporations, to ensure

that their production and their income continues. But for farmer families, there is no assistance.

**PANAP: What kind of assistance is the government giving to corporations vis-a-vis the assistance it gives to farmers?**

Rahmat: There are no subsidies for agricultural production and consumption, staple food, and other basic needs of the farmers. The government does provide assistance through the social aid program, but it's very insufficient. It is mostly focused on urban areas and the number of families that can access it is very small. For rural families, access is even more limited, and the amount of the money given is very small—just enough for us to survive for a while, but can't provide for our other daily needs.

It is very different if we compare it to the assistance they give to corporations. For example, the government allowed corporations to temporarily suspend work without giving their workers any assistance. In fact, they can unilaterally lay off their workers without any penalties. They are also allowed to pay just half of workers' wages during the pandemic. The government also provides incentives to corporations in order for them to avoid bankruptcy. But they don't provide social and health protection for workers. So many workers are forced to work without sufficient protection. Corporations continue to make profits, at the expense of workers. It's a huge injustice.

**PANAP: You mentioned that food prices are increasing. Why is this so?**

Rahmat: This is because the government just relies on speculation about the amount of food needed by the people. They don't have exact calculations on how to fulfill our needs during the pandemic. Furthermore, as the government implements movement restrictions, the situation is being used





Cemetery workers work wearing personal protective equipment during a COVID-19 victim's funeral in Surabaya City, East Java, Indonesia. (Photo credit: Robertus Pudyanto/ Shutterstock.com)

by traders and speculators to increase food prices. They say that the supply is difficult, it costs more to transport and distribute food, and they need longer time to deliver food. However it is also true that transportation is limited, even public transport, so that transportation providers have all increased their costs—this is another factor in the increase of food prices.

Furthermore, the people are being pushed to rely on online platforms for buying and selling food commodities. Food prices in online platforms are higher. At the same time, consumers need to shoulder additional costs—for internet connection, for higher electricity consumption, even the smartphone itself. Finally, the

government does not provide good prices for the products of local farmers and just rely on imported food. They need to wait for these imported products, and usually, the prices are higher.

**PANAP: Has your government adopted measures to ensure food security amid the pandemic?**

Rahmat: Even before COVID-19, the government already has policies for food security. But what they mean by food security is to rely on imported food products. The export and import of food commodities are clearly not favoring the people, but are instead serving the interests of imperialists, landlords, and capitalist bureaucrats. The government just ensures the supply of particular products, but does not work on how we can have sufficient food and nutrition based on our domestic production.

Our farmers can produce their own rice, maize, etc. but the government does not really see this as part of their food security policies. They are just focused on importation to ensure food supply in Indonesia. During the pandemic, the government is continuing this policy by increasing food imports, but they do not consider the purchasing power of the people—whether they can actually afford food or not. To ensure the exports of agricultural commodities, the government even assigned the police and military to secure the agricultural production of corporations, guard the shed of Logistic Agency (Bulog), and forced the peasants to sell their products at unfair prices.

**PANAP: Are there human rights violations in relation to the government's response to COVID-19?**

**Rahmat:** There are so many types of human rights violations in relation to the government's handling of the pandemic. Political expression, assembly, and mass protests, even raising certain demands to help us cope with COVID-19 are prohibited. Anyone engaging in protests can be arrested and be penalised.

There are even instructions from the government and police that if there is a mass protest, and people do not obey social distancing regulations, they can be shot on the spot. The reality today is that dozens of Indonesians are getting intimidated and even arrested. The government also restricts what is being said online or in social media, especially criticisms. They have formed a cyber task force to monitor all online information. If anyone posts about demands that violates regulations, they arrest them as well as the people who distribute these posts online. The government also implements restrictions for cultural and religious ceremonies. This Eid Mubarak, the government prohibited the people to go back to their villages as is the tradition. So the people's social and cultural rights are not protected.

**PANAP: How does AGRA help farmers in coping with these impacts, and in asserting their demands?**

**Rahmat:** We call on our members to be really careful about their health condition, and make them aware of COVID-19 by providing sufficient information. But while we call their attention to the dangers of COVID-19, we tell them that they really need to keep their unity and solidarity, and continue with food production. We are relying on their farming efforts during this pandemic. We are encouraging them to rise up and assert their political demands, and really fight against these unjust conditions and policies imposed by the government and imperialists. We need to have a strong voice and greater effort during this pandemic because there is a lot of injustice.

**PANAP: Do you think the pandemic is an opportunity for the peasant movement in Indonesia to grow stronger?**

**Rahmat:** Yes, the pandemic in our opinion clearly shows the crisis of imperialism, how it has failed to protect and ensure the lives of the people. People are doubly exploited, while corporations get to

secure their profits. It is a good time for the peasant movement to show strong unity and to fight back. Especially now we can see that the people's trust in the government and the economic system has really plummeted. People don't trust the system anymore, so we as a people's movement must show the alternative.

We also need to push and encourage the solidarity of oppressed and exploited people at the regional and global levels. This pandemic has shown that the global system has totally failed the peoples of the world. We need to fight imperialism as the root cause of this pandemic and the suffering of the people. The pandemic must be an opportunity for the unity of the oppressed and exploited classes to become stronger.

# Malaysia's xenophobic crackdown amid pandemic

*The following is PANAP's interview on 2 June 2020 with Glorene Das, executive director of Tenaganita, an organisation protecting and promoting the rights of women, migrants and refugees in Malaysia.*



**PAN Asia Pacific (PANAP): Can you describe the plight of migrant workers in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic? Are their basic rights to food and health care being met?**

**Glorene Das:** There are about 2.2 million documented workers in Malaysia and though the numbers have never been confirmed, there are about 4 million undocumented persons. This includes asylum seekers and stateless workers, otherwise known as “illegals” in our law. These are the groups of people who are seen as national security threats, as enemies to be flushed out. With the restrictions on movement since March 18, communities of migrants have been pushed really close to the edge. Their access to food, water, and health care is so uncertain, what more with so many of them without work and wages. Some of them told us that they haven't been paid since February because of the lockdown. The Movement Control Order (MCO) has taken away their only source of survival in Malaysia. In fact, if you speak to many of them, they will tell you that they are more afraid of starvation and being thrown away from their houses for not being able to pay the rent rather the virus itself. With most workplaces closed and activities suspended, migrants living in cramped, closed quarters are beginning to feel the pangs of hunger as their money is running out. And I quote some of them, “We eat bread and rice, but we haven't had vegetables or meat in a while.” There is massive food insecurity that exists among migrant workers who need immediate aid.

**PANAP: What is your reaction to the arrests of hundreds of undocumented migrant workers in Kuala Lumpur last May? Are these arrests ongoing?**

**Glorene:** Yes, the raids and arrests of migrant workers are still ongoing, but they are not being reported. We are getting news of arrests now and then, across various locations throughout Malaysia, and we strongly denounce these operations as

inhumane and cruel. While we acknowledge the presence of millions of undocumented workers in Malaysia as an issue, it should be addressed with a more comprehensive and transparent approach. This is not the time to address this issue, when we have a serious pandemic that's threatening our lives.

Because of these raids, more fear is being instilled in the communities of migrant workers, deterring them from coming forward to be tested for COVID-19 and to seek further treatment, therefore regressing efforts by the Health Ministry to curb this virus. So we really hope that the government will stop and halt these arrests, otherwise it will look like the government is responsible for putting 30 million Malaysians at risk. Despite the many warnings we have given to the government from the beginning that there has to be immediate repatriation of those in detention camps and that the refugees need to be released to the UNHCR, they didn't take us seriously. Today, we have more than 300 cases within just a couple of detention camps. These detention camps have become a hotbed of the spread of the virus, and this is of great concern to us. We're just talking about two detention camps, and in Malaysia we have a lot. We have not been informed if tests and screening are taking place in these camps. Because there's an outcry by the general public, human rights groups, and health activists—stating that there should not be anybody in the detention camps at this point.

There has been a decrease in cases of late. But we also question if the statistics being shared are correct, or if possibly that's just a government strategy to keep us quiet and not to make any more demands.

**PANAP: Why is the government carrying out these arrests of undocumented workers now, amid the pandemic?**

**Glorene:** To curb what it calls "illegals," there was a Malaysian Action Plan introduced by the former government, headed by





Undocumented migrant workers in Kuala Lumpur being arrested by the police amid the COVID-19 lockdown. (Photo credit: Tenaganita)

the current Prime Minister. One of the main points is to make the situation really demeaning and difficult for migrants to stay on, to the point that they will surrender themselves to be deported. Unfortunately, after many attempts there still remains a lot of undocumented workers. This is an ideal situation for them to “kill two birds with one stone,” so to speak. They used the pandemic as a way to simply flush out the “illegals.”

Now why are they doing this? Let's go to how one becomes undocumented. There are many reasons. The refugees who have fled from their countries because of persecution, war and conflict. But there are also migrant workers who went into the country using the regular channel, they've got passports and visas but because of the system, the corruption that takes place and unscrupulous agents and employers who failed to renew

their work permits, they have become undocumented. In the past couple of years the government did introduce this re-hiring program. Many of them—700,000 workers—paid an amount of MYR 6,000 (USD 1,442) each to be re-legalised. But only 110,000 workers were given the permit. The rest of them are still lingering, and are the ones being arrested.

We see a pattern over the years. There is not much profit to be made through the re-hiring program. Because once all these undocumented workers have been deported and blacklisted, in a year or two they will bring more than 1.5 million workers from Bangladesh, India, Nepal, and other countries. In comparison to the re-legalisation programs, there's more profit there because there will be new workers—which means they can be more exploited, compared to the ones who have been in this country for five to 10 years, who are a little bit more assertive. At the end of the day, it's all about exploitation.

### **PANAP: What are situation in these detention camps?**

**Glorene:** The information we have received are from workers who have been arrested, released or deported from detention camps, and from another group of NGOs who give health services once a month. Based on the data, it's very clear that these camps don't have the right facilities to curb the virus. I just got a message from a nurse who has been in the camp, saying that there is a great need for masks, clothes and sanitisers. We've long been saying that the camps must be monitored by independent bodies but this has not been allowed for the longest time. It is really worrying, what are the health services and Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) in place? Who is monitoring? Those are the questions that we continue to ask.

### **PANAP: In other countries, migrant workers face discrimination because of misconceptions that they are “carriers” of the virus. Is it the same in Malaysia?**



Migrant worker families include women and children, who are kept in poor conditions at detention camps across Malaysia. (Photo credit: Tenaganita)

**Glorene:** I would say so, based on the tremendous slandering we have received the past month from politicians and populists. Social media is filled with xenophobic and violent hatred along with demands that these migrants “go back to where they come from.” Some of these xenophobic campaigns have included having our names and photographs circulated along with accusations. This has injected further fear in communities which are already struggling with food and shelter during this lockdown. Quite frankly, there are a lot of misconceptions surrounding the undocumented among the general public in Malaysia. We are continuously discrediting these with facts and evidence that we have collected throughout the years. The thing is, undocumented migrant workers and refugees have become the convenient whipping boy to blame for the pandemic. But migrants had nothing to do with COVID-19. In fact, we gave them COVID-19. Like the 19 migrant workers who were deported to Myanmar. They were positive but where

would they have contracted the virus? Definitely in the holding centers and detention camps.

### **PANAP: What is the situation of migrant workers in agriculture, those working in plantations?**

**Glorene:** In the beginning of the movement control, the government exempted the plantation sector. The Ministry of Plantation Industries and Commodities decided to allow plantations to continue operating and provided stakeholders with SOPs that must be complied with. But who is monitoring? What are the protection mechanisms for the workers? As time went on, we heard about the outbreak in a plantation in Sarawak. Immediately after the outbreak, a directive was sent to the plantation industry to close down. But we have been informed that some of these plantations are not closed. Workers, in particular women and migrant workers, are actually working on a rotation basis. They would work for 10 days in a row on rotation. Their full salary is not being paid, instead, they are being paid only for 10 days. These workers are also living in cramped, shared quarters where it is not possible to practice strict social distancing.

In our analysis, this pandemic could trigger another wave of human rights violations. Industries are immersed deeply in making profits off the back of workers, and they will continue to prioritise profit over people. During these times, employers have a huge responsibility towards workers. But we are receiving reports that they are not providing workers with sufficient food, that wages are not being paid. We're currently in the midst of collecting more evidence and once we have done so, we will not hesitate to expose these companies.

### **PANAP: What is Tenaganita doing to help migrant workers and refugees at this time?**

**Glorene:** We have been disseminating information on COVID-19 to migrant and refugee communities in the languages that they





A worker is resting at the palm oil plantation at Selangor, Malaysia. During the COVID-19 pandemic, plantation workers, many of whom are migrants, have been getting reduced wages due to shorter work hours. (Photo credit: Izlan Somai/ Shutterstock.com)

understand. When we knew that many of them, especially the Muslim community, participated in this big public gathering along with 15,000 others, we immediately had our volunteers on the ground, facilitating them for tests and screening. We had our hotlines open 24/7 should they need assistance. Then we embarked on a food aid program with three other local organisations. We had fundraising efforts, and it's amazing how Malaysians have come together to contribute to this initiative where we are able to feed more than 41,000 migrants, refugees, and low-income Malaysians.

We had also been embarking on a rent relief initiative, which has been a bit more difficult compared to the relief. A lot of migrants and refugees have been receiving notices of eviction, been thrown out of the house, and are begging us to pay their rent. Some of us, in our own capacity, have been calling the owners and negotiating for a later payment, or trying to source

funds to pay their rent in installment so they will not be thrown out of their houses. Despite the pandemic, we maintain our shelter, we continue to work with cases of domestic violence and human trafficking, which are actually increasing.

### **PANAP: What are your demands to the Malaysian government?**

**Glorene:** We are very fearful that Malaysia is becoming an imperialist state, instilling fear in a community that is already marginalised and most vulnerable. We don't want that. So we continue to demand, protest, dialogue, and plead for Malaysians to come forward and put a stop to this inhumane and cruel act of arrest, detention and deportation during this pandemic. Because we must be saving and improving lives, not traumatising lives. There's also an immediate need for a clear health policy that diagnosis and treatment will be free if migrants are suspected of having COVID-19, regardless of their status. There is an urgent need for a comprehensive response that respects human rights and dignity, which includes migrants and refugees in the current financial and health planning of the pandemic response.

We also want the government to make sure that employers play full salaries during the lockdown without any form of deductions. We want improved living conditions for migrant workers. As you know they are already in congested spaces, and this cannot be the new norm anymore. So the government needs to think about what would be the best living conditions for migrant workers. In the long-term, the government must develop a policy that accounts for our true needs for migrant workers, one that is inclusive instead of exclusive in its efforts and approaches.

### **PANAP: Is there any way we can turn the pandemic around into an opportunity that would benefit workers and the people?**



**Glorene:** When we're grappling with situations, sometimes it's difficult for us to think long-term so we tend to see short-term. I believe that what we have learned from the HIV pandemic and the SARS outbreak is that all preparations, responses and recovery must be grounded in human rights. Through this basis it will bring about solidarity, it will bring about social movements despite social distancing. Empathy and compassion subsequently reduce suffering, increase protection and save lives. So I'm really hoping that we can do this effectively through dialogues, engagements, and collaborations with many different stakeholders. We should continue organising and mobilising affected communities to speak for themselves. We have to keep resisting neoliberal impositions that gravely impact these communities and struggle for genuine change.

We need to address forced migration, modern-day slavery and above all, the commodification of migrants. And I hope that if we can work together, one day we can see national policies in both host and destination countries where migrants are included in medical, financial and economic aid, and all other relief—not just during crisis but also at all times with lasting improvement in public health and social protection. I want to see a comprehensive migration and employment policy based on industry needs and I definitely want to see an end to the weaponisation of migrants and refugees and displaced people as national security threats and instead, to welcome them so they too can contribute to the development of Malaysia and the well-being of society. Finally, I want to see a borderless world, with no barbed wires, no walls and no corruption, and finally claim that we are citizens of the world and everyone can live a life of dignity and rights.

# Building resilience in Bangladesh

The following is PANAP's interview on 15 June 2020 with Sakiul Millat Morshed, executive director of SHISUK, an organisation working on facilitating self-reliant sustainable community development in Bangladesh.



## PAN Asia Pacific (PANAP): What is the extent of the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh?

**Sakiul Millat Morshed:** With our total positive cases over 100,000, Bangladesh right now is among the top 20 countries with the highest number of infections. This is just the tip of the iceberg, because the number of tests being done here is very minimal. Less than 15,000 tests are happening in the country everyday, which is very insignificant considering our population of 170 million people.

We started our lockdown on March 26 and it continued til May 30. We thought that it would be manageable within that time and we would be able to begin anew in July. But unfortunately, after opening up on the first week of June, the detected cases are increasing everyday, along with deaths. So we are passing through the most difficult time right now. Since yesterday, the government again declared a lockdown situation in the big cities.

## PANAP: Why do you think Bangladesh has one of the highest cases of COVID-19?

**Morshed:** One major factor is that our government didn't take it seriously in the beginning. They thought it was just for the Western countries, not for people like us. The government publicised that Bangladesh will not be much affected by this pandemic. Another factor could be religion. In Bangladesh, most people are Muslim, and the religious leaders propagated that Muslims will not be infected because they are doing ablutions at least five times a day.

But it has become very much clear that the main factor is that our health system is nowhere near in providing standard health services. We have only 5,300 beds (158 ICU beds with ventilation facilities) in the whole country, and not enough facilities to get treatment. Private hospitals and clinics are also refusing to take COVID-19 patients. Especially the rural people, they don't have any place to go for treatment. If you are

identified as COVID-19 positive, there's no place to go to get support for yourself.

Moreover during the lockdown, garment factory owners still tried to open up their factories. Huge numbers of garment workers travelled from different parts of the countries to the cities. That also created a surge in cases.

### **PANAP: What are the most significant impacts that COVID-19 pandemic on the daily activity and livelihoods of Bangladeshi farmers?**

**Morshed:** The farmers are mostly affected because this is the peak time of the harvest season. So they couldn't really market their harvest properly because of lack of transportation facilities, as well as a marketplace system to really channel their products to customers. That was one of the major shocks experienced by our farmers. On the other hand, farmers are now preparing for the next cropping season, and they don't have the resources to go for it. Though government has declared bloc support for agriculture, most of it hasn't really reached the farmers so far. So that is the situation right now: farmers couldn't sell their crops and are short of funds for the next cropping season.

### **PANAP: During the lockdown, are farmers allowed to go to the fields?**

**Morshed:** They can go to the fields, but when you do harvesting, there are zones where people usually travel from other places to harvest the crops. In some cases the lockdown delayed harvest and spoiled some of the rice. There were two cyclones that affected the harvest as well.

### **PANAP: How is the food security situation?**

**Morshed:** It is difficult to say at this point in time. We've just had a good harvest. People also still have some savings to buy food at this point in time. But there is expert opinion that



SHISUK's Shatgram fisheries project wherein more than 500 households surrounding a floodplain engage in community enterprise, which makes them resilient to shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic. (Photo credit: SHISUK)

within a few months, the general population will face a very hard time. As per government, there is enough rice stocks. We had a very good burrow rice production, and if we can harvest this rain-fed rice (Aman) that farmers are planting right now, rice might not be a problem. But for other crops like vegetables, that is not the case.

People will be facing problems for other expenses because their livelihoods are at stake. A lot of garment workers are going back to the villages because garment factories are shutting down. A huge number of migrant workers are also coming back. A lot of rural households depend on these migrant workers' earnings. As you know, globally, migration is shrinking as migrant workers are repatriated to their home countries. That will add another pressure on our rural livelihood situation and create a crisis for rural workers.

### **PANAP: What are people doing to cope with unemployment?**

**Morshed:** People are trying to survive off their savings, mostly.

For the marginalised poor, the government has a safety net program. That is definitely not enough, but still, people are surviving on that. Over-all the situation is not really clear because in Bangladesh, there is a lot of media embargo and there is a lack of real reporting of what is happening exactly on the ground. In communities where SHISUK is working, farmers are better off because we have a different approach—a community enterprise approach where we organise farmers. So their farming is not that much affected because they can systematically manage their activities. But in other communities they are really passing through a hard time.

**PANAP: Can you talk more about the advantages of this community enterprise approach? Does it include less reliance on chemical inputs?**

**Morshed:** Our community enterprise is based on the flood plain management. Bangladesh is a flood-prone country, we have 2.8 million hectares of floodplain that are usually left idle in the monsoon season. SHISUK helps to organise the community to work together to manage bigger flood plains of at least 100 hectares. The model is to convince all the people surrounding that flood plain to raise collective capital by subscribing equitable shares for an enterprise initiative during the monsoon season. With our intervention, they transform this flood plain to fish culture fields by connecting villages with an environment-friendly structure to regulate water flow and sustain fish culture. After the monsoon, farmers then do agriculture.

The community is not using pesticides because it will affect their fish—when you are doing the fish culture, the flood plain also remains clean, so there is less pest manifestation and this eliminates the need for pesticides. Furthermore, when we are doing fish culture we use supplementary feed like rice bran and mustard oil. The feed residue and fish droppings also contribute to the fertility of the flood plain. So this is the kind of cycle that

helps you produce safe food and establish agroecology.

**PANAP: Would you say that this kind of farming is more resilient to the kind of shocks brought on by the pandemic?**

**Morshed:** Obviously this is really a model of resilience-building, and we are now promoting this model to the national level. When the whole community is working together, they can face any situation. In different areas, small farmers are struggling to market their products. But our situation is different because farmers are not marketing their products individually. When it's a collective process, farmers can do better management and this helps them to be resilient.

**PANAP: What would be your recommendations to the Bangladesh government?**

**Morshed:** This is our budgeting month and there is a lot of talk about government support for the agriculture sector. Government has given some bloc grants for those affected but what we are trying to pursue is for the government to build a system where farmers can get access to this support directly. Because what happens is when there is some kind of bloc grant, usually most of the corporate sector takes advantage of it, and the marginal farmer has little access because the system doesn't really allow them to get it directly.

For instance, civil society is raising issues on the zero-interest bank loans, which is basically addressed to big farmers or corporate groups. This is because most small farmers don't have access to bank facilities or don't have collateral. They cannot comply with the conditions for these loans and will not benefit from it. In Bangladesh, 94% of land is owned by men, while 70% of agriculture labor is done by women. And most of these men are absentee landowners. There is need for land reform if we really want to support the farming community. Along with that we need to recognise women farmers, because





Low-income people who lost their job during the coronavirus pandemic wait at different intersections of Dhaka City in the hope of getting food and relief. (Photo credit: Sk Hasan Ali/ Shutterstock.com)

their contributions are not recognised.

We are also demanding the government to support community enterprises so that producer groups can have better market access and access to technology at a reasonable price. Government should also subsidise fish feed. There's also a huge need for storage facilities because farmers are forced to sell their produce to middlemen at a loss because they don't have any storage facilities. So we're demanding that community-level storage facilities be created so that they can store their crops and sell them at a reasonable price. We also need cold chain and storage support for dairy and poultry industries. So these are the issues that need to be addressed for food security.

There is another big issue we'll be facing. In Bangladesh, most marginal farmers usually rear cows to sell during Eid ul-Azha, this festival where Muslims sacrifice animals (cow, goat, etc.) for Allah. That day is coming within one and half months time but our COVID-19 situation is still reaching the peak. So we are

worried that during that time, if the situation doesn't improve, then the farmers will face problems in selling their livestock. And that would be a real disaster for our farmers, for their food security and survival because this is one of their guaranteed sources of income. If they can't sell their livestock, that will be a real challenge so government has to do something in that regard.

Due to this COVID-19 situation, people are also demanding more safe and nutritious food. So government should take more initiative so that farmers can produce more safe food and market it directly to consumers. There should be a farm to fork marketing process.

**PANAP: Do you think that this pandemic is also an opportunity to bring change to the agriculture sector?**

**Morshed:** Yes, this is an interesting opportunity as well. In a way people are going back to the rural communities because in the urban areas there are less and less employment opportunities—so people are forced to go back to their origins. Ours is an agriculture-based economy so we really have the opportunity to strengthen the agricultural sector. If we can capitalise on this human capital and our natural resources, that can really give us a strong and sustainable economic base. We have a lot of room to improve our productivity, as we have a lot of natural resources. As I said, 2.8 million hectares of flood plains remains unutilised.

Our people are hardworking and there was a kind of illusion, with the young people going to the urban areas and overseas for employment opportunities. But nowadays this is difficult. So I think that the new generation will have to think of something at their home base. If we can really gather enterprise initiative at the community level to produce safe food, this will give us food security for the country and also rural development. This could be the best opportunity for us.

# Japan's forgotten poor

*The following is PANAP's  
interview on 1 July 2020  
with Koa Tasaka, a steering  
council member of PANAP  
and former director of the  
Asian Rural Institute based  
in Tochigi, Japan.*



## **PAN Asia Pacific (PANAP): What is the extent of the COVID-19 pandemic in Japan?**

**Koa Tasaka:** The pandemic problem in Japan started in February when the Diamond Princess cruise ship arrived from a worldwide tour, and it was found later that there were 723 people infected by the virus. Right now, the total number of infected people is 18,700, and the number of deaths is at 972. Compared to many other countries that is still a small number. But for us it was a really big shock.

## **PANAP: How does the Japanese government address this pandemic?**

**Tasaka:** There is a group of medical experts who gives advice to the government, then the policy is made according to their advice. Testing is done by medical teams that have now been established all over Japan. So whenever someone gets infected they will immediately be hospitalised and isolated from other people. The numbers have decreased since the pandemic began, but now I think the second wave of the infection is starting. In Tokyo, everyday there are around 50 people being tested positive for COVID-19.

## **PANAP: What have been the effects of the pandemic on Japanese farmers?**

**Tasaka:** The large number of victims are concentrated in the big cities, such as Tokyo, Osaka, and Sapporo. In the rural areas, there are much less victims, and in some prefectures there has been zero cases. The sectors that have been most affected are the part-time workers in restaurants and shops, which were told to close for three months. They lost their income, and many of them have no way to get food. So some NGOs provide food for them. Also affected are the foreign workers from Bangladesh and other countries. They have very big problems—some of them lost not only jobs but a place to stay. NGOs are also helping them to find a place to stay and some food to sustain



A homeless man in Sakai Ward, Osaka during the COVID-19 outbreak. The poor of Japan are left behind in efforts to revive the economy amid the pandemic. (Photo credit: Charlie Manx/ Shutterstock.com)

them. Japan is rather different compared to other countries in Asia, in the sense that farmers are not so much affected by the pandemic. But the people in the big cities, especially workers, are highly affected.

**PANAP: Have there been any food supply chain disruptions?**

**Tasaka:** We can still find enough food supplies in shops even during the peak of the pandemic. The farmers were also allowed to have access to markets to sell their products. Although from March to May, schools were closed, so the school lunch system was stopped. Many farmers producing a huge amount of food for school lunches suddenly cannot sell them. Some NGOs are utilising this food to help those who have lost jobs in the big cities.

**PANAP: Would you say that food security has been affected by the pandemic?**

**Tasaka:** Food security is immediately affected by losing your job or income. In Japan, unless you have money you cannot get



any food. It's very, very difficult. In the rural areas, they have something to eat because they are producing all kinds of food. There is no hunger problem in rural areas. But in big cities there are so many people who suffer because they cannot eat three times a day.

**PANAP: Is there government aid for those who have lost their jobs because of the pandemic?**

**Tasaka:** Right now, the Abe administration is so slow to respond to that need. The government very quickly organised a medical response. Health experts collaborate day by day so all those who are infected are hospitalised and then tested. Suspected cases can also stay in some hotels which have provided space. In that respect, our government is doing a good job. But those who are at the bottomline of the economic system really suffer. Although the government has decided to give JPY 100,000 (USD 942) for all people who have registered in the local administration office, it is not enough. It also excludes foreign workers staying for temporary work in Japan. So they are really suffering.

The government is eager to help big businesses in order for them to avoid bankruptcy. But they have no plans for those who are suffering from hunger in Japan, where many people are rich but some people are very, very poor. JPY 100,000 is not enough for those people who are very seriously hit by this pandemic and have no income at all. These are mostly part-time workers, whose numbers have been increasing in recent years. The government is not eager to look at their reality and do not have any policy to help them.

**PANAP: You work with organic farmers. Do you think there are advantages of being an organic farmer during a pandemic?**

**Tasaka:** Even before the pandemic, we started a school lunch system that promoted organic rice instead of bread made from

imported wheat from the US, which is highly contaminated by organophosphate pesticides. Everyday, children are eating this contaminated bread all over Japan for the past 50 years. But we now have a movement to feed children safe food through organic rice. Although in Japan, the number of organic farmers is very small—just 0.5% of farmers, which means 99% use huge amounts of pesticides—we are trying to promote organic farming through the school lunch system. Because even mayors who are not progressive agree with us that children should have safe food for lunch. Through this movement, we are now training farmers in organic rice production and many farmers now have an incentive to change from conventional to organic farming.

**PANAP: Is safe food more important now for children to have stronger immune system and better health?**

**Tasaka:** Yes. Although until now the infection and death rate of COVID-19 among children is minimal, I think that if children are provided with safe food, it will help them get better immunity against these types of pandemic. Even older people can have a stronger immune system by eating healthy food, and have much less probability to die because of COVID-19.

**PANAP: What do you think are the changes needed in agriculture and food policy to ensure food security?**

**Tasaka:** I think the biggest problem in Japan is that we are depending too much on food imports. We are importing 60% of our food. That means the self-sufficiency rate is just around 40%. Wheat, for instance, is 90% imported. Because of too much wheat imports, children have gotten used to a bread-eating habit. So rice is produced every year by our farmers but they are not making enough income for selling rice. Another example is soybeans. Before the Second World War, Japan was 100% self-sufficient in soybeans, which is used in miso, tofu, and most of the daily food of the Japanese. But now soybean production is limited and there are so much soybeans coming



from China and Brazil. There is also the problem of genetically-modified soybeans. NGOs have been rejecting the import of GM soybeans and so far have been successful in their resistance. The only solution is local food production and consumption. We must promote local food production and consumption so that we don't need to rely on imports and pay so much money to buy food that we can produce ourselves.

**PANAP: What can other countries learn from the relatively successful containment of COVID-19 in Japan?**

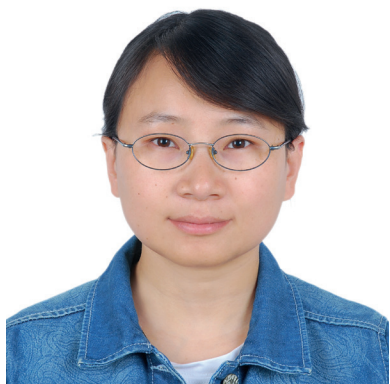
**Tasaka:** Our medical teams put a lot of effort in establishing the system of testing for COVID-19. Some of the people who are infected have no symptoms, so it's very difficult to identify who has the virus. So the top priority should be the testing system, then isolating infected people while the virus is still active. I think because of the effort of medical teams all over the country, from Hokkaido to Okinawa, each provincial government has set up a system for testing, isolation, and treatment. So we are able to achieve a high recovery rate. It is the way to fight the virus, which unfortunately top leaders in US and Brazil are not doing. It is very tragic for the people there that the government does not do anything to protect them.

**PANAP: So the strength of the public health system is crucial? Do people get free treatment?**

**Tasaka:** Yes, those who get COVID-19 are given free medical service. Like in Bhutan and Cuba, free medical service for patients is essential to protect the people, especially the poor people.

# 'Back to normal' in Yunnan

The following is PANAP's interview on 9 July 2020 with Hongyan Yang, executive director of the Pesticide Eco-Alternative Center (PEAC), an organisation dedicated to reduce the use of harmful pesticides and to promote ecological alternatives, based in Kunming City, Yunnan Province of China.



## PAN Asia Pacific (PANAP): What is the extent of the COVID-19 pandemic in your province?

**Hongyan Yang:** Currently (as of July 9), there are around 85,400 people infected by COVID-19 in China. But in Yunnan Province, there are just 187 infected people. So Yunnan Province has not been seriously affected by COVID-19. Since the end of February, everything seems to be back to normal.

## PANAP: Why do you think that there is lesser impact of COVID-19 in Yunnan compared to other places in China?

**Yang:** There are many reasons. First, there is also a huge distance from Yunnan to Beijing and Wuhan, about 3,000 kilometers. As soon as COVID-19 broke out at the national level, public transportation have been stopped and stopped the mobility of people, so the virus has not been transmitted to Yunnan so much. I think that's the most important reason. Secondly, there is strict control when people who are from other places enter Yunnan. When people from other provinces enter, they need to input their profile, especially their travel paths, into the system and undergo 14 days monitoring. Everyone entering public places needs to input their information using mobile phones. The government can monitor if people had been to other provinces or if they have health problems. So, there are a lot of measures to prevent the virus from entering.

## PANAP: What has been the impact of COVID-19 on farmers?

**Yang:** Our organisation works with farmers. Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have interviewed our farmers to learn about the problems they are facing. According to the farmers, one of the biggest impacts is that they cannot go out to work in urban areas. Normally, in rural areas after the Winter harvest and the Spring festival (Chinese New Year), some farmers especially the young farmers go to city to work

for several months and then they go back to the villages when field work begins. But this year, because of COVID-19, they had to stay at home and wait for the announcement of the government. But the proportion of farmers that work in the city is not so high so the impact is not so much. Overall, COVID-19 did not seriously impact agriculture and the people of Yunnan. Right now, most farmers are beginning to prepare for ploughing and seeding for the new season as usual.

**PANAP: Did they face any difficulties in getting their produce to the market?**

**Yang:** Yes, because of transportation control, it was not so easy for farmers to sell their products to the cities as before. So transportation was the biggest challenge for them. But since the end of February, step by step, transportation began to be opened to the public. Now everything is back to normal.

**PANAP: What is the food security situation both in the rural areas and in the cities?**

**Yang:** For rural areas there is no problem because most are smallholder farmers who can sustain their lives through agricultural production. For the cities, the period with the most serious impacts was when COVID-19 was spreading and because of transportation control, we had limited access to some fresh supplies. But the government undertook some strategies to ensure that fresh food products are available. For instance, the government provided pork to supermarkets every several days. It also said that transportation for food supply should not be stopped even during transportation control, because we need to ensure food supplies. But because of different reasons, some transportation for food supplies couldn't get to the cities as fast as before. But I think now everything is back to normal.

**PANAP: Has there been some food wastage like we have seen in other countries?**



Villagers getting to the paddy field early in the morning in Yuanyang County, Yunnan province, China. Farmers are impacted less by COVID-19 disruptions because of agroecological practices and food self-sufficiency. (Photo credit: LinXiaoFu/ Shutterstock.com)

**Yang:** According to my experience, we did not see that problem. This is because Yunnan Province is 90% mountainous area and our farmers are mostly engaged in smallholder farming. Our production is mainly to meet the requirements of Yunnan Province, not for export to other countries.

**PANAP:** Do you think that is kind of self-sufficiency is an advantage?

**Yang:** Yes.

**PANAP:** Can you talk a little about this sustainable model of farming?

**Yang:** Yunnan is the best place for practicing the agroecological model because of the good climate and mountainous area. A large portion of the mountainous area has been developed by smallholder farmers into the agroecological model of farming. We do not have large-scale farming and monocultures. To

some extent, farmers here don't rely on chemicals so much. So this is good for the health of farmers and consumers.

**PANAP: Do people have access to COVID-19 testing and health care?**

**Yang:** Yes, people can go to the hospital and apply for COVID-19 testing. Everyday in rural areas the government does popularisation about COVID-19 through radio and village broadcasts. It doesn't matter if you're in the urban or rural area, people have access to COVID-19 information and testing. And in case somebody is infected by COVID-19, when they go to the hospital for healthcare, the whole process is free. The government will pay.

**PANAP: So with COVID-19 controlled, everything now is really back to normal in Yunnan?**

**Yang:** Yes, everything has been returned to normal including businesses, agriculture, tourism, universities, primary and secondary school, everything. But everywhere we go, we need to input information. And everyone is required to wear masks in public places. People believe that if they take these prevention measures by themselves, they have nothing to fear.

# Pakistan's rural economy under Stress

The following is PANAP's interview on 21 July 2020 with Nasira Habib, an educationist and development activist who is the founder director of Khoj Society for People's Education in Lahore, Pakistan. She is also a member of the Steering Council of PANAP.



## PAN Asia Pacific (PANAP): How are things in Pakistan in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic?

**Nasira Habib:** Our Prime Minister was not in favor of the lockdown. He was very firm that lockdown was not needed, and always spoke about livelihoods. So it was strange when the Prime Minister said that there will not be any lockdown and the next day, on March 23, lockdown was imposed. COVID-19 entered Pakistan through pilgrims from Iran. A number of people who went to Iran to visit holy shrines were infected when they came back. Now the present situation is, as of July 21, there are 265,791 confirmed cases in Pakistan, and the reported deaths are 5,641.

I think it's because of the unclear, confused policy of the government. The government believed in herd immunity. And there is also this mindset that the day of your death is fixed so whatever you do, if you are destined to die, you cannot stop it. That is the prevalent mindset. And it translates to the kind of behaviour that people have.

## PANAP: What is the state of your public health system, has it been able to cope with the COVID-19 cases?

**Nasira:** Our health system was totally exposed. The hospitals do not have adequate facilities for the infected patients. The most dreadful thing was that our health professionals—doctors, nurses and health workers—had to work in very unfavourable conditions. Doctors kept on demanding that the threat of COVID-19 was very serious and that the government should take it very seriously. Health professionals were not provided with proper protective equipment and that became a very big reason why a good number of them contracted the disease, and many of them have died. There are also not enough ventilators in the country, nor does the country have enough testing facilities to cope with the situation. The government tried to increase the testing capacity with the target of 50,000 tests



a day—but that is still small given the population of Pakistan which is 220 million. The government also claims that the cases are going down, but many think that the reported decline in the cases is because of a decline in testing. There are 133 testing labs in the country but currently, only 40% of capacity is being used, according to the Ministry of National Health Services Regulation and Coordination.

Hospitals are not equipped. Even if people are admitted to the hospital, there is no specific treatment protocol, so people believe they are better off at home. Additionally, if you are infected with COVID-19, it is seen as a big social stigma. That is another reason why people don't go for tests and don't report symptoms. The press also reports that there are instructions to hospitals that they should underreport cases. Additionally, because the government wants to open up everything, now there is no lockdown in place. Except for educational institutions, most working places and shops are now open. The government says that people should observe SOPs but when the Prime Minister says you should not worry, that only 2 to 3% of those infected get seriously ill, people get very confused. So not a very big portion of society is observing what needs to be done.

### **PANAP: Is COVID-19 healthcare and testing free?**

**Nasira:** There are free COVID-19 tests as well as paid ones. People opt for private laboratories because their results are believed to be more reliable, but the testing fee in those places are very high, up to PKR 9,500 (USD 57), which is obviously not affordable for majority of the population. But the problem is, with the free tests, results are given at least after a week, which makes the testing pointless. In many cases, even after a week you are not able to get your results.

### **PANAP: What has been the impact of COVID-19 on farmers and rural communities?**



Closed shops at a market in Karachi, Pakistan while business activities shutdown during a lockdown imposed by government due to increasing coronavirus cases. (Photo credit:Asianet-Pakistan/ Shutterstock.com)

**Nasira:** For the last two years, Pakistan economy has been performing very poorly and we have been in an economic crisis. Pakistan is also one of those top 10 countries most affected by climate change, and last year came the locust attacks, which kept ruining the crops until 2020, and which has devastated the rural economy. Amid these challenges came COVID-19.

There is no data on the impact of COVID-19 on urban and rural areas, but the general impression is that urban areas are more affected by the virus itself. But the impact of lockdown on farming communities is quite obvious. April was the peak season of harvesting wheat in Pakistan. The provinces of Punjab and Sind grow most of the wheat in the country. Farmers have to hire machines such as combined harvesters, and have to get their produce to the market. It became very challenging for them to have access to machines. On top of that, farmers had to sell their produce at a lower price and obviously they were not

getting the fruit of their labor. Farmers around the big cities who grow flowers and supply restaurants were also badly affected. There was no demand for flowers, and they had to plough back their produce in the fields.

The livestock sector was also hit very badly. Because transportation was not available, the dairy plants were also not buying milk from farmers, and the farmers were forced to sell it at a very, very low price. Now we're going to have Eid ul-Azha, a religious festival where animals are sacrificed. The recommendation is that animals should not be sacrificed otherwise it will increase the risk of getting infected by the virus. The livestock people keep animals and rear them the whole year in the hope that on this Eid they will earn money because the animals get a good price at this occasion. As many people decided not to sacrifice animals this Eid, the demand will be less, which means their income will also be less. Usually a month before Eid you can see livestock people bring their goats, cows, camels and sell them by the roadside. But now, nobody is allowed to sell animals on the road, which decreases the opportunities to sell animals. Still, a big number of the population are driven by their religious sentiments and intend to sacrifice animals. So nobody knows what will be the impact of sacrificing of animals on the spread of coronavirus.

### **PANAP: How is the food security situation in Pakistan?**

**Nasira:** The situation is strange. Pakistan grows surplus food—surplus wheat, surplus rice—and still 37% of the population or 87 million people live below the poverty line. A recently released Economic Survey of Pakistan estimates that 10 million more people will be added to those living below the poverty line due to the impacts of COVID-19. That's a big number. Despite food surpluses, Pakistan experiences high levels of food insecurity. Funnily, rural people are more food insecure.

## **PANAP: Why are food producers more food insecure?**

**Nasira:** Almost one-third of the rural population are landless. They are daily wage workers. Daily wages have increased but food prices have increased even more. Food price inflation has reduced the purchasing power of rural people. And women and children are particularly affected because women don't pay attention to their own food and nutrition. According to one report only 15% of women and children consume a minimally acceptable diet.

## **PANAP: So the pandemic worsened this food insecurity among food producers?**

**Nasira:** It has rendered many people jobless. The arrangement usually is that in most of rural households, families partially work in the farm and live in the village, and then partially they migrate to the cities and work there. This is their strategy to survive. With COVID-19, that urban labor had to go back to the villages. It has created not only a social crisis but a very big economic challenge. The daily wage earners going from the villages to the towns were unable to go because all the work places were closed down. Although the lockdown has been lifted, things are still not back to what they used to be.

## **PANAP: Has the government provided relief measures for those affected?**

**Nasira:** A month after the first COVID-19 case was confirmed they launched a poverty relief package with a value of PKR 1.25 trillion. But if you analyze this package, one can come to know that it's basically the previous schemes that are repackaged. There is a Benazir Income Support Program (BISP) already in place, which started more than 10 years back. When COVID-19 came, they didn't know how to reach the most affected people and what would be the criteria. So they identified the most vulnerable families through the BISP registry and district authorities, and just changed the name. They repackaged the

same fund and instead of paying PKR 4,000 (USD 54) per month they made a three-month payment of PKR 12,000 (USD 73). So before the advent of COVID-19, the scheme was already there. As you can well imagine, there is no consideration of agriculture and of farming families who are affected by COVID-19. They are dispersing money to people using a decade-old criterion.

There are some food subsidies, with a network of utility stores selling items that are subsidised by the government. The provincial governments also has this practice of purchasing 40% of the wheat produce of farmers in order to stabilise prices. This was also made part of the COVID-19 relief package. These are actually old programs—the wheat procurement program I still remember from my childhood. It's not very simple and easy, a lot of farmers are not able to sell to the government. It's not a major scheme that's focused on the impacts of COVID-19. There is another PKR 70 billion (USD 425.81 million) allotted for other programs in relation to COVID-19, but there is no data on what is being done with that amount of money.

**PANAP: You have been advocating for growing food agroecologically for some time now. Do you think that this movement is even more relevant now with this pandemic?**

**Nasira:** COVID-19 has created a huge opportunity for agroecology, for organic agriculture, because COVID-19 is seen by a section of society as a result of going against nature, and that nature has backfired. So there is a surge in interest in the urban areas—people who don't have land for agriculture but have houses with backyards—there is awareness among these people that something should be done to go back to growing safe food and natural practices. After working for more than 30 years with the urban and rural communities, I concluded that the economic argument works best with the farming communities. The argument of safety doesn't work with them. But with the growing interest among the urban consumers in safe food, the

potential of creating a movement is more if we take advantage of the situation of COVID-19.

Already, we are witnessing that. Farmers are becoming more interested in organic agriculture, though the number is still small. So I think that we should take advantage of the situation and use it as a strategy to build a strong movement which is focused on safety and security of food. Khoj has been already playing its role by way of training home gardeners and farmers in natural practices. Our first focus is to build a movement of natural urban gardening that can motivate farmers to convert to agroecology.

The other thing is, we don't have organic seeds in Pakistan—everyone is focused on hybrid seeds. At Khoj we have already started working on organic seed saving that leads to seed sovereignty. If you want to be the master of your situation, you need your own seeds. So COVID-19, in a way, has created a lot of opportunity for treading upon an alternative path of growing safe food that makes people food secure and sovereign. The lockdown with imposed limited movement has provided an opportunity that made people rethink their situation and change. They themselves came to the conclusion that they should do something to grow food that is safe, nutritious, and builds immunity. Different people have different reasons but the end result is, a lot of interest has been generated. So we want to capitalise on that.



# Farmer solidarity amid attacks in the Philippines

The following is PANAP's interview on 20 August 2020 with Danilo "Ka Daning" Ramos, chairperson of the Peasant Movement of the Philippines (Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas or KMP). KMP is a movement of landless peasants, small farmers, farmworkers, rural youth and peasant women with 65 provincial chapters in the Philippines.



**PAN Asia Pacific (PANAP):** What are the most significant impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on farmers in the Philippines, based on reports from KMP members?

**Ka Daning:** For the past eight months, the impact of COVID-19 has been greater poverty, hunger, and fear among farmers, agricultural workers and fisherfolk. Even before the pandemic, they've been impoverished because of feudal and semi-feudal exploitation, lack of support for farmers, import liberalisation and other government policies. Now there is greater fear because instead of medical solutions, the government employs military action to control the pandemic.

Farmers fear for their health and safety. Under the so-called Enhanced Community Quarantine, farmers were unable to go out of their homes, their production was affected. In several KMP chapters, farmers were unable to sell their products, many of which were wasted. Although the government's Inter-Agency Task Force said that agricultural production and transport of agricultural goods from provinces to the National Capital Region are allowed, a lot of reports indicate that they weren't.

**PANAP:** So farmers weren't allowed to go to the fields?

**Ka Daning:** In the beginning, a lot of farmers were afraid to go out because there's this list of Authorized Persons Outside of Residence. A significant number of farmers are senior men and women who aren't allowed to go out. That had an effect. But in the provinces, the reality is that houses are far away from each other, so farmers are free to go out. In my experience, I was able to leave Manila and go to my home province during the later part of the lockdown. I was able to plant on my fields—bitter melon, ladyfingers, eggplant, sweet potato, and other vegetables. So we are able to harvest when our household needs something to eat. We thought that the lockdown will only last a few months but it has lasted for longer.

A truck of Chinese cabbage is thrown away because of oversupply in Benguet province, Philippines, where it only fetches a measly price of PHP 3 or USD 0.062 per kilo. (Photo credit: Angely Luis Ma)



### **PANAP: What about the impacts of COVID-19 on fisherfolk?**

**Ka Daning:** There is also a huge effect on the livelihoods of fisherfolk. For instance, in the province of Sorsogon, there were reports that the selling price of one vat of fish went down to PHP 100 (USD 2). They couldn't take it to the market because the ports were closed, and in general, the government doesn't have a mechanism to buy local produce.

### **PANAP: How is the food security situation in the country both in the urban and rural areas?**

**Ka Daning:** In the countryside, those who produce food have nothing to eat. Meanwhile, in urban centers, more people are experiencing hunger and begging on the streets. Research from the FAO shows that prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number

of Filipinos who went hungry jumped by 31%. There were 44.9 million hungry Filipinos from 2014 to 2016, and it increased to 59 million from 2017 to 2019, according to a FAO study that was released in July 2020. The FAO's State of Food Security and Nutrition also listed the Philippines as having the biggest number of food insecure citizens in Southeast Asia compared to Cambodia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam. One of the factors is that food production, which relies heavily on small farmers and fisherfolk, has little government support.

So even before the COVID-19 pandemic, rural people have already been suffering from hunger and food insecurity. Farmers and consumers alike have been affected by rice trade liberalisation in a negative way. Government spends billions of pesos in importing rice even if the Philippines is an agricultural country. We also import meat even though there is enough chicken and pork supply in the country, because of the thrust of the government to import under neoliberal policies imposed by the World Trade Organization and the program of imperialist globalisation.

### **PANAP: Have food prices increased?**

**Ka Daning:** The Department of Agriculture (DA) rolled out the KADIWA Program to stabilise food prices, but data shows that it does not really result in lower prices. For instance, the price of commercial rice remains high. Even before the pandemic, the cheaper National Food Authority (NFA) rice was unavailable, so people are forced to buy rice at higher prices, at PHP 42-45 per kilo, while premium rice is priced PHP 50 (USD 1) per kilo or more. The government does not implement a price ceiling so the traders can impose whatever price they want. Rice traders monopolise the buying of rice in the countryside because under rice trade liberalisation law, the NFA doesn't buy local rice anymore. So big rice cartels—who in practice are also the big rice importers—monopolise the buying, milling, and selling of rice at the price they want.

**PANAP: What are the measures that the government have done to ensure food security? Are these measures enough?**

**Ka Daning:** At the height of the pandemic, the government launched a Plant, Plant, Plant program through the DA. Its main component is financial assistance to rice farmers, retail selling on wheels and online, urban agriculture, and food logistics. Unconditional cash transfer is worth PHP 5,000 (USD 103) for eligible farmers who must be registered with the DA and own one hectare of land and below. The DA's target is 591,246 rice farmers. But there are 2.7 million rice farmers in the country. So the target is already way below the total number of farmers. An altogether different issue is if this aid reaches the intended beneficiaries, and we're getting a lot of reports that it does not. Furthermore, coconut farmers, agricultural workers, and fisherfolk are not included in the government's financial assistance program.

Secondly, the program focuses on food logistics—the DA allotted PHP 20 billion (USD 412.99 million) for marketing alone. Who will profit from this? The merchants, traders, big corporations, landlord-usurers, and cartels engaged in trading and marketing. In contrast, they allocated such a small amount to production. But you first have to develop agricultural production so that you have something to sell. The money should be given instead to the 9.7 million Filipino farmers, fisherfolk, and agricultural workers so they have something to sell in the first place. Another point is on urban agriculture. We aren't against it; those in urban areas should be encouraged to plant in their backyards. But if you look at the National Capital Region, more than one-third are informal settlers, urban poor who don't have a house or have no space for gardening at all.

It's not the role of the government to sell products to consumers in Manila. Its main role is to develop local production and food self-sufficiency in our country. But production assistance is almost non-existent, like a single drop of rain in a vast rice

field. What's worse is that even amid the pandemic, corrupt government officials are having a field day. During April to May, the government purchased PHP 1.8 billion (USD 37.17 million) worth of fertilisers at PHP 995 (USD 20) per bag. The commercial retail price of one bag of urea fertilizer is only PHP 810-850 (around USD 17), so the cost of government procurement per bag should've been cheaper since they bought in bulk. At the minimum, we estimate that fertilisers were overpriced by more than PHP 271 million (USD 5.58 million). So here you have farmers already suffering, and yet the little aid that is due to them is even being stolen by corrupt officials. That's how bad the system is.

### **PANAP: The Philippines has among the highest COVID-19 cases in Southeast Asia. Why do you think this is so?**

**Ka Daning:** The COVID-19 pandemic is a medical problem, and yet the government response is military action. Those who are in key positions leading the pandemic response are ex-generals. So when COVID-19 positive cases increased in Cebu province, they sent Special Action Forces instead of additional doctors and nurses. But even before the pandemic, the government didn't prioritise fixing the health system. It's not in its budgetary priorities. For instance, the Department of Health budget for 2020 was reduced. The Research Institute for Tropical Medicine in 2019 got more than PHP 200 million (USD 4.13 million), in 2020 it only got PHP 115 million (USD 2.37 million). And that the primary institution we rely on for testing. A lot of hospitals had their budgets cut. So health workers are paid little but overworked.

The government wants to blame Filipinos who don't follow rules and protocols for the rising number of COVID-19 cases. But according to a survey, an overwhelming majority of Filipinos follow protocols such as hand washing, physical distancing, and wearing of face masks. In South Korea, before the government imposed face mask wearing as a policy, the government gave the people masks. Here, the government doesn't give out face

masks, and lately they even imposed the use of face shields. We know the importance of these protocols, but we need government support. If you have just a little money, before you buy alcohol, you will first buy food for your family.

**PANAP: Do rural people have access to healthcare and COVID-19 testing?**

**Ka Daning:** The rural poor don't have access to healthcare. In rural areas, there are limited doctors, usually only municipal or city health officers who don't go to the villages. Access to COVID-19 testing is even more limited. For instance, when I went home to my province from Manila, I asked the local government if I can get tested, and they said no. It's safe to assume that there are a lot more COVID-19 cases that have not been tested and identified.

**PANAP: Recently, one of your top peasant leaders, Randall Echanis, was killed inside his home by suspected state security forces. Would you say that attacks against farmers have increased during this pandemic?**

**Ka Daning:** Yes, state-led attacks against rural peoples have been increasing and becoming more violent. Amid the pandemic, President Duterte signed the Anti-Terrorism Law, which allows the government greater—even unconstitutional—powers that can be used against critics and activists. Last May, six farmers and village officials were arrested in Calaca, Batangas province on trumped-up cases. Elena Tijamo, project officer of Farmers Development Center based in Cebu, was abducted at her home after dinner last June. Last April, the police arrested nine relief operation volunteers for farmers in Norzagaray, Bulacan province. As you already mentioned, our deputy secretary-general Randall Echanis was tortured and brutally killed on the early morning of August 10, along with his neighbour Louie Tagapia. Just two days ago, Zara Alvarez, a human rights worker and very active in the struggle of Negros farmworkers,



Funeral protest march of KMP deputy secretary-general Randall Echanis, who was shot inside his home by unknown assailants last August 10. (Photo credit: AMIHAN)



was killed. We were together in many fact-finding missions, investigating the series of massacres of sugar workers whose main perpetrators were state security forces. We are calling for immediate justice for the killing of Zara Alvarez. There have also been massive bombings in farming and indigenous peoples communities across the country, especially in Mindanao, including Lumad schools where they practice and promote agroecological farming.

### **PANAP: Why is this happening?**

**Ka Daning:** Under Executive Order 70 or the Whole of Nation Approach to ending local insurgency, the government uses the entire state machinery, including the judiciary, against activists and ordinary citizens. What's happening is that the Duterte government can no longer rule in the ordinary way, and so it resorts to the iron fist. I think that worldwide, its tyrannical and dictatorial rule is only second to that of Brazil's Jair Bolsonaro. But we believe that farmers, the toiling masses won't be afraid and will continue to resist the terrorism of the state in many ways.

### **PANAP: How is KMP helping farmers cope with impacts of the pandemic?**

**Ka Daning:** Farmers practice *bayanihan*, or the tradition of helping each other out through this period of hardship and hunger. They show solidarity in facing the pandemic. Despite harassment, KMP has conducted relief operations (called Tulong Anakpawis) in the regions of Central Luzon, Central Visayas, Eastern Visayas, Bicol, and Ilocos to help farmers, agricultural workers and fisherfolk in need. We have this Bagsakan market where farmers' produce are sold in urban centers. We also initiate livelihood programs so that their products are processed and don't go to waste. In Bicol and the island of Mindoro, we worked with the local government so that instead of giving away canned goods as relief, they bought and distributed local agricultural products such as vegetables, fish and pork.

**PANAP: Are there are any positive developments on the ground despite the hardships amid the pandemic?**

**Ka Daning:** As I've already mentioned, farmers help farmers in different ways. Our advocacy campaigns continue. At the hearing of the House of Representatives on the COVID-19 stimulus package, KMP made concrete demands such as PHP 15,000 (USD 310) immediate cash assistance, production subsidy, and production loans to 9.7 million farmers. We hold webinars, fora, and other activities. Farmers don't give up and continue to struggle for their interests.

This month, the planting season will once again start in many parts of the country. In our province, the land is ready for cultivation and some farmers are already starting to plant. In relation to this, we must struggle for genuine land reform and national industrialisation. We need enough, safe, and affordable food through sustainable agriculture or agriculture that is free from chemical fertilisers and pesticides that are bad for our health. The issue of farmers is the issue of the people as a whole—not just in the Philippines but globally. So the continuing support of other sectors to genuine rural development is important.



# Essential change: People's demands and the way forward



Garment workers block a road in protest in Dhaka, Bangladesh due to unpaid wages during the lockdown. Many farmers depend on income from family members working in the garment industry. (Photo credit: Sk Hasan Ali/ Shutterstock.com)



# Health, environment and the immune system

Romeo Quijano M.D. is a toxicologist and retired professor of the College of Medicine, University of the Philippines-Manila. He is the chairperson of PANAP and former co-chair of the International Pollutants Elimination Network.

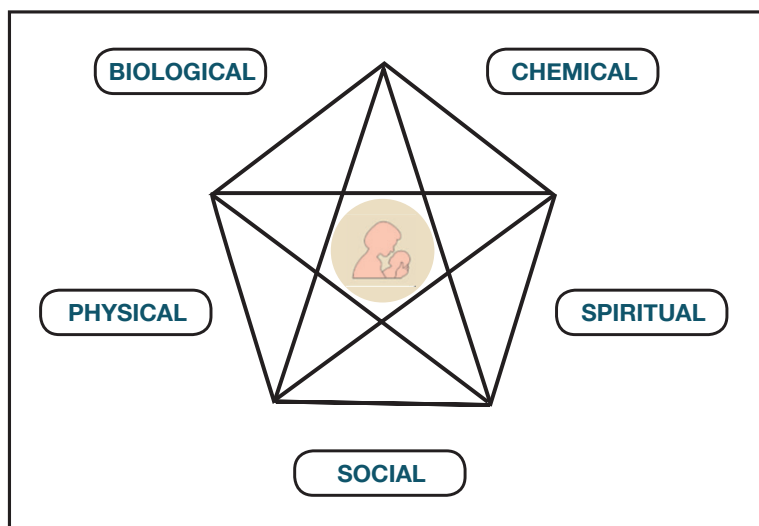


*In celebration of World Environment Day 2020, PAN Asia Pacific (PANAP) hosted a webinar entitled, 'Protecting Children from Toxins amid COVID-19.' The following is the presentation of one of the guest speakers, Romeo Quijano, M.D.*

I was given the task of sharing my views on how to boost the immune system naturally, given the unprecedented COVID-19 crisis we are all facing now. But to be more meaningful, I would like to approach the issue from a broad and holistic perspective. I strongly believe that it is important to look at the immune system as an integral part of health as a whole and to understand that health is an integral part of the environment. I will, therefore, discuss first what I think should be our understanding of what health is from a holistic perspective and how health is intimately related to our environment before I go into a discussion of the immune system, the various threats to the immune system and how to protect, prevent, maintain and boost our immune system.

Good health is not only the absence of disease but the state of complete physical, mental, spiritual and social well-being in harmony with the environment. Illness, on the other hand, is the result of disruption of the harmony between the individual and the environment. I think a holistic perspective emphasising the role of the environment is crucial, especially when we go into the discussion of the immune system, which has been viewed almost exclusively from a very narrow biological perspective.

The diagram I made (pictured below) illustrates the intimate relationship of health with the environment. The five main dimensions in this relationship are the physical, chemical, biological, psychological/spiritual and social. A particular issue within these dimensions can be put at the center, for example, the immune system as depicted by the mother and child figure. The connecting lines depict the integral relationships among the dimensions, which means one cannot be separated from all



the others. I purposely put the social dimension at the base of the diagram to illustrate the fundamental role of this dimension in relation to the other dimensions.

Let us now go over quickly first through the different dimensions. We will go back to these with more details when we discuss later the threats to the immune system.

Agricultural chemicals, industrial chemicals, persistent organic pollutants, pharmaceuticals, carcinogenic substances, embryotoxic agents, endocrine disruptors, and others are the different categories of chemicals that cause disruption of our harmony with the environment. The science, policies, production, distribution, use and disposal of toxic chemicals are influenced by political, economic, and cultural factors. Power relations largely determine the toxic chemicals agenda, which mainly serves the privileged class of the rich and the powerful. Early in my career about four decades ago, I was once a member of government committees dealing with pesticides and pharmaceuticals. But when we recommended a ban or phase-out of certain hazardous agrochemical and pharmaceutical products, it was our committees that were eventually phased-out, not the hazardous pesticides and pharmaceuticals.



The biological environment or physiologic functions, including the immune system, for example, are also disrupted by various causes such as lifestyle, inadequate or improper diet, unhygienic surroundings or practices and many others. Infectious agents, like viruses, bacteria and fungi can also be biologic disruptors, as well as Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs).

Meanwhile, examples of disruptions of the physical environment are unsafe working conditions, as well as the destruction of habitat and displacement of communities by mining operations, dams, plantations, and similar developmental aggression projects that disrupt the people's harmony with their environment.

The role of the psychological/spiritual dimension is an integral element of the human being, who, at the same time, is an integral element of the social environment. The psyche and/or the "spirit" of the individual must therefore be in harmony with social reality if one is to be healthy psychologically/spiritually. Manifestations of psychological/spiritual disruption include abusive, oppressive and exploitative behavior, selfishness, greed and arrogance, apathy and lack of social consciousness, silence in the face of oppression, ignorance, subservience and defeatism in the midst of injustice and violations of human rights.

The most important disruption that leads to ill health is the disruption of the social environment. Unjust social structures have led to the deprivation of fundamental socio-economic, cultural and political rights such as the right to self-determination, adequate health care, education, employment, safe working and living conditions, and the right to live in human dignity, free from exploitation and oppression. The social system that concentrates power and wealth in a few individuals and disempowers most of the people is the greatest disruptor of the harmony of humans with the environment (and with each other) and thus the most important underlying determinant of ill health and damaged immune system.

Let me now talk about the immune system. The immune system is a network of biological elements and processes that protects against harmful organisms, substances, or any other material perceived as non-self-constituent. “Immunity” is the protection provided by the immune system from the perceived potentially harmful invading agent.

The potentially harmful foreign invader has an “antigen” that stimulates the immune system to attack it. The antigen, which is usually a protein, is recognised through receptors on the membrane of the cells of the immune system, which are usually the lymphocytes. Normally, the body does not consider its own proteins as foreign. Immune disruptors, however, could mislead the body into perceiving its own proteins as foreign and these proteins are then attacked, resulting to what we call auto-immune diseases, such as lupus, rheumatoid arthritis, and many other chronic debilitating diseases.

The body's first line of defense against invading pathogens is called “innate immunity,” consisting mostly of physical and chemical barriers such as the skin, sweat, tears, saliva, mucus, and stomach acid. The first line of defense also has its “fronliner” immune cells, such as the neutrophils, eosinophils, monocytes, macrophages, and natural killer cells, all of which can directly destroy the invader with a wide array of biochemical and other weapons. These host factors—which include the physical barriers such as the skin, the microbicidal, biochemical secretions, and the microbiome are all elements of the “innate immunity.” The pathogen factors include the dose (how much of the pathogen manage to enter the body), virulence (ability to cause severe disease), reproduction rate, transmissibility and other factors.

The second line of immune defense is called “adaptive immunity,” a much more comprehensive and extremely complicated element of the immune system. In simple terms, the adaptive immune system (also referred as the acquired immune system)

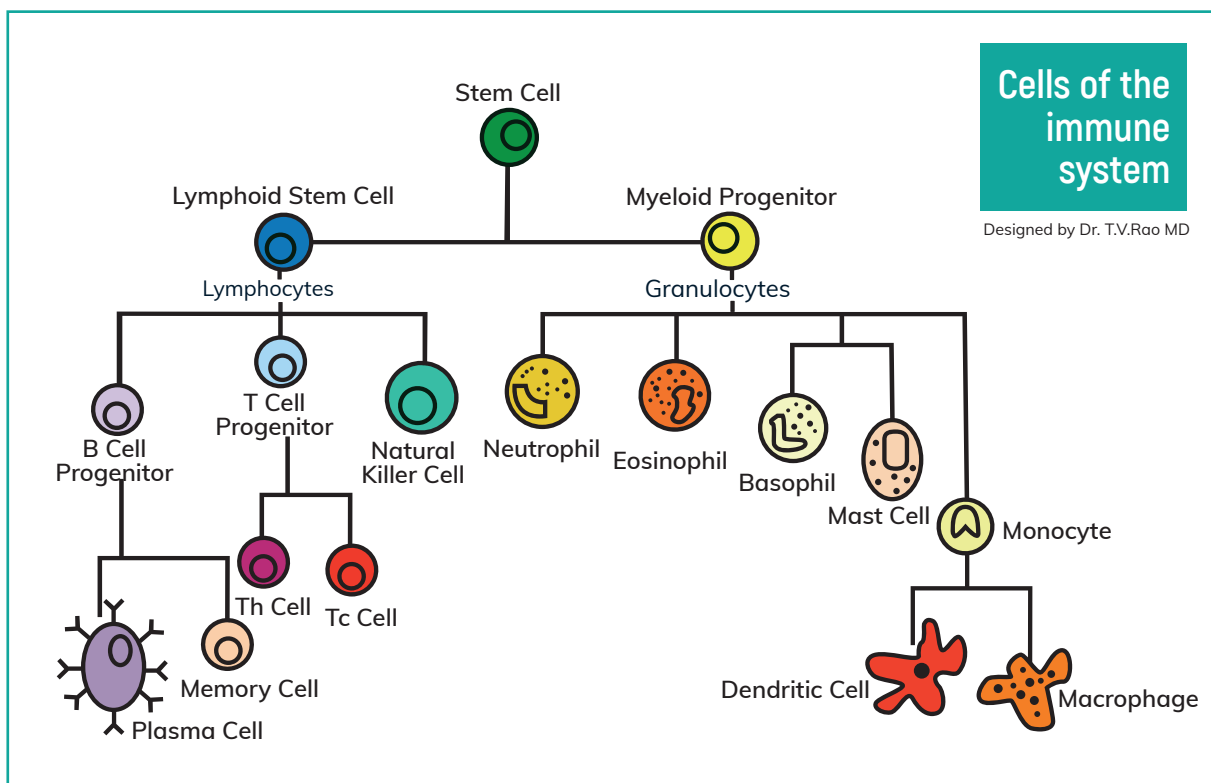
is a subsystem that is composed of specialised, systemic cells and processes that eliminate invading organisms or substances. In innate immunity, the response is relatively fast, not antigen specific and there is no memory. In adaptive immunity, the response is relatively slow, with a lag time, antigen specific and there is memory (when the host is exposed the next time, the response will be faster because there are memory cells that would immediately attack the invading pathogen).

Adaptive immunity can be naturally acquired by going through the natural course of the infecting organism, in which case, there is usually a life-long protection or acquired immunity to the organism. Artificially acquired (induced) immunity can be either active (through vaccination) or passive through administration of pre-formed antibodies or immunoglobulins.

Some of the immune cells involved in adaptive immunity are the B cells, produced by B lymphocytes and the T cells, produced by the T lymphocytes. The B cells usually produce the antibodies for specific antigens while the T cells usually attack the invading organism directly through various ways. There are actually much more cells and biochemical elements involved in adaptive immunity with multiple functions and working in very complex multiple mechanisms.

Ultimately, responses of the immune system would play the balance between wellness and illness, of immunosuppression and immune stimulation, and the balance of altered resistance to infectious disease/cancer and hypersensitivity/autoimmunity. In a state of good health, a normal balance is maintained. When the individual is exposed to a disease-causing organism or substance, there might be a tilt on either side and if it is an appropriate tilt, a normal balance will be restored; if not, the balance is disrupted and a state of illness ensues.

Let me now focus on the development of the immune system in the very young. It is a common belief that the developing immune



Cells of the immune system

system is highly susceptible to modification and disruption by environmental influences and it is significantly at greater risk than the fully matured immune system of an adult. However, this belief actually resulted in inappropriate interventions that disrupt the normal, natural immune system development and responses of the child. For example, this belief led to the erroneous justification for vaccination during fetal, neonatal, and infancy stages.

The immune system during fetal development, birth and infancy has been designed by nature with an intricate balance of immunosuppression and immunostimulation, among others. These stages of development are actually training stages for the developing immune system to gradually adapt to a new environment and to recognise self from non-self, potentially antigenic proteins and substances. It was not designed to immediately release antibodies because at this stage, these

antibodies do not yet fully recognise what is self and what is non-self. At this stage, the mother provides the antibodies and other necessary elements to protect the infant through appropriate nutrition, vaginal delivery, and the mother's milk. Vaccination has disrupted this nature-designed developmental process and has resulted in disastrous outcomes.

If we examine carefully the mother's milk, we will see that it is fully equipped with all the necessary elements to protect the newly born child from invading organisms. This is to give the developing immune system of the newborn sufficient time to adapt to its new environment. Apart from basic nutritional elements necessary for growth, mother's milk is endowed with immune cells and constituents that are capable of protecting the newborn from potentially harmful pathogens from its new environment. Together with the naturally acquired microbiome from vaginal delivery and proper perinatal care, the infant is secure. No artificial intervention like vaccination or formula feeding can ever substitute for this wonderfully designed natural protection.

Among the remarkable constituents of breast milk with multiple immune and other functions are millions of mRNAs, microRNAs and wild RNAs. They orchestrate various types of responses of the immune system and exert various types of epigenetic effects

The immune system during fetal development, birth and infancy has been designed by nature with an intricate balance of immunosuppression and immunostimulation, among others.



on thousands of genes. An example of the remarkable clinical effect is that the transfer of wild RNA from a healthy wet nurse could result in permanent correction of clinical manifestations of a genetic disease.

Another extraordinary constituent is HAMLET or Human Alpha Lactalbumin Made Lethal to Tumour Cells. Among other properties, HAMLET also kills microbes. This is a remarkable addition to the armamentarium of immune defenses provided by breast milk to the nursing infant.

The immune system of the infant is meant to be anti-inflammatory and not meant at this stage of its development to mount an inflammatory defensive response of its own against invading organisms. It is actually fully functional but appropriately restrained to allow for the building of a good microbiome and to allow the infant to learn what is safe. When the intestine is bombarded with antibiotics and vaccination during this stage of immune development and learning, the most significant damage is inflicted. The consequence may be carried until later in life in the form of increased susceptibility to infections, allergies/hypersensitivities, neurobehavioral disorders, autoimmune diseases and other illnesses.

At this point, you probably already have an idea about some of the threats to the immune system that need to be addressed. I would like to bring you back now to the five dimensions on the intimate relationship between health and environment; the physical, chemical, biological, psychological/spiritual and social disruptors. As I mentioned earlier, I will present more details regarding this.

Let us start with the list of physical disruptors of the immune system. First is ionizing radiation, probably the most potent and long lasting yet barely recognised threat. Ionizing radiation can destroy the immune system even at very low levels of exposure from various sources and, at worst, can exterminate the entire human race in case of a nuclear war among those who possess





Highly Hazardous Pesticides are among the chemical disruptions of the harmony between the individual and the environment.

nuclear weapons. Next is electromagnetic radiation. The most talked about potential threat in this category is 5G, or fifth generation mobile network. 5G will employ millimeter waves for the first time, in addition to microwaves, exposing people to millimeter wave radiation.

Other examples of physical disruptors of the immune system are physical injury, trauma, lack of sleep, extreme physical activity, physical restraint, physical isolation, suffocation, heat stress, cold stress and crowding.

Chemical disruptions that are considered threats to the immune system are pesticides, heavy metals (e.g. mercury, arsenic, aluminum lead), vaccines, pharmaceuticals, industrial chemicals, air pollutant emissions, and polyaromatic hydrocarbons (e.g. smoking, wood smoke, garbage burning). Other chemical disruptions are plastics, other persistent toxic chemicals and pollutants, food preservatives and additives, chemicals used in special industries, nanoparticles, and toxic chemicals of

natural origin (e.g. from plants and animals). Among these chemical disruptions, probably those that pose the greatest threats would be agrochemicals, industrial chemicals, vaccines, pharmaceuticals, and air pollutants.

Meanwhile, biological disruption that pose threats to the immune system includes GMOs (microbes, plants, nanoparticles), viruses, bacteria, fungi, parasitic organisms, heritable defective genes, nutritional deficiencies, underlying disease or abnormality, maladaptation and among others. Among these, the greatest potential threat, I think, would be GMOs, pathogenic microbes (at the moment, the greatest threat is COVID-19), and nutritional deficiencies.

Next are psychological /spiritual disruptors, which are psychological torture, bullying and other forms of oppression, threats and intimidation, fanaticism and occultism, racism, bigotry, prejudice, and selfish and arrogant behavior. Silence, ignorance, subservience, apathy and defeatism in the midst of social injustice and exploitation, and utter disregard of humanistic qualities, moral and spiritual values can also be seen as psychological/spiritual disruptors.

Finally, the social disruptors are systematically imposed social dominance and control by the power elite—outright occupation, neo-colonialism, semi-feudalism, imperialism, monopoly capitalism, development aggression, corporate globalisation, neoliberalism, chronic dependency and underdevelopment, worsening social inequity and poverty, dictatorship, authoritarianism, militarisation, national security and the perpetual terror war doctrine. Corporate control of science and technology, health systems and care, essential public utilities and industries, land and agricultural resources, food production and distribution, etc. as well as corporate control of telecommunications and media, education, and culture can also be considered social disruptions. So is global

superpower rivalry leading to ever-increasing threats of bio warfare pandemics and nuclear annihilation.

What can we do to address the various threats to the immune system? Some of the specific mitigating measures to strengthen the immune system is to ensure adequate general nutritional status and take the nutrient supplementation as needed—Vitamins C, A, D, E, B complex, Omega-3 fatty acids as well as essential minerals (zinc, selenium, magnesium). Other nutrient supplementation for its antioxidant, anti-inflammatory, anti-viral and immunomodulatory effects are citrus and other fruits (e.g. lime, lemon, orange, guava, kiwi, mulberry), Vitamin A rich vegetables (e.g. moringa leaves, okra, radish, jute leaves, taro, leaves, chilies, carrots, beets), Omega-3 fatty acid rich food (e.g. fish oil, nuts, and seeds) and mineral-rich food (e.g. fish, meat, nuts, legumes).

Medicinal plants such as *Andrographis paniculata* (creat or green chiretta), *Euphorbia hirta* (asthma plants), *Vitex negundo* (chaste tree or lagundi), *Cannabis sativa* (medicinal marijuana, hemp plant), *Curcuma longa* (turmeric), *Zingiber officinale* (ginger), *Allium sativum* (garlic), *Melissa officinalis* (lemon balm), *Eucalyptus* spp. (flowering gum, blue gum tree, eucalyptus, fever tree), *Mentha* spp. (mint), *Thymus vulgaris* (thyme), *Origanum vulgare* (oregano), *Ocimum basilicum* (basil), *Piper nigrum* (black pepper), *Hibiscus sabdariffa* (roselle), *Spondias pinnata* (wild/forest mango, hog plum), and *Phyllanthus emblica* (Indian gooseberry) also help boost the immune system.

Other specific mitigating measures are maintaining a healthy microbiome at all times—avoiding the inappropriate use of antibiotics, antimicrobials, and antiseptics, and a liberal intake of microbiome friendly foods. These include high-fiber food, as well as the intermittent intake of fermented foods, drinks, probiotics and prebiotics (e.g. fermented vegetables and fruits, kimchi, miso, yogurt, kefir). We should avoid too much intake of



## Examples of medicinal plants that help boost the immune system



sugary food, fatty food, processed food with synthetic chemical additives, meat, and processed cow's milk. We should generally regularly eat a biodiverse and balanced diet that is free of chemical toxins as much as possible.

Some activities that can boost the immune system include acupuncture, mindfulness meditation, yoga, tai chi/ qi gong, appropriate exercises as well as homeopathy.

Finally, and more importantly, I would give some general measures that would address the most significant and fundamental threats to the immune system and the most important underlying structural disruptors of the harmony between health and the environment.

There must be immediate and long-term precautionary, preventive, and protective measures (laws, policies, and governance at all levels) against as many threats as possible, especially during the most vulnerable developmental period of the immune system (conception, embryonic stage, fetal development, birth, infancy and childhood). There must be awareness-raising and education of the people, especially would-be mothers, on the extreme importance of the immune system on the health and survival of succeeding generations of humankind.

We must also confront the underlying social/structural threats to the immune system and people's health at the local up to the international levels. Build, unify, and strengthen people's movements for social justice and equity, genuine peace, basic human rights, environmental justice, and a toxics-free future.

We must struggle for the dismantling of the neoliberal world order of corporate globalisation. Struggle for the implementation of genuine agrarian reform and rural development. Struggle for the implementation of pro-people industrialisation and

economic development. Let us demand effective measures for environmental and ecosystems protection and rehabilitation, ensure the enjoyment of socio-economic rights, women and children's rights, indigenous and other sectoral rights. Lastly, let us propagate a progressive and liberative mass culture.

So, what needs to be done? Follow the ANTIDOTE:

**A**wareness raising

**N**etworking among groups

**T**echnical capacity building

**I**nformation exchange/monitoring

**D**eepening of understanding

**O**rganising concerned people

**T**ransformative action

**E**mpowerment of people!



# Agroecology: A holistic approach to sustainable food production

The COVID-19 pandemic further exposed the unsustainability and inability to feed the world of the profit-driven, market-oriented corporate model of agricultural and food production. The crisis – as interviews with our partners across the region amid the pandemic illustrate – is reaffirming the legitimacy and urgency of agroecology as a long existing and viable, but systematically undermined alternative to the prevalent input-intensive, chemical-based agricultural systems.

PAN Asia Pacific (PANAP) views agroecology as a holistic approach to sustainable agriculture and food systems. Beyond its biophysical and ecological aspects, PANAP looks at agroecology as being strongly grounded on the environmental; social and cultural; economic; and political dimensions of sustainability, as defined and outlined by the Pesticide Action Network (PAN) International and CIDSE<sup>1</sup> and whose main elements are described below.

Its environmental dimension encompasses farming practices built on harmony with natural cycles and processes and the positive interaction, synergy, integration and complementarities between the various components of agroecosystems and food systems, and their reciprocal relationship with the natural world and society. Such farming practices eliminate the dependence on external and harmful synthetic inputs to control pests and weeds and improve soil fertility, and support climate adaptation and resilience.

Its social and cultural dimension captures and harnesses the close integration of science and research with the culture, identity, tradition, innovation, knowledge and practice of local and indigenous communities. Through such integration, the food and agricultural system is able to produce and provide nutritious, diversified and culturally appropriate diets for the



More than 200 indigenous varieties of rice paddy grown in a Rice Diversity Block at the Thanal Agroecology Centre in Kerala, India. (Photo credit: Thanal)

people in a truly sustainable manner. It creates opportunities for solidarity among farmers; between farmers and researchers; between diverse cultures and spiritual beliefs; and between rural and urban population, while recognising and promoting the role of women and youth in food and agricultural production.

Its economic dimension focuses on creating the conditions for local economies to flourish and the livelihoods and incomes of small food producers to thrive. This entails, among others, promoting independence from external inputs that unnecessarily drive up production costs and reduce farm income as well as promoting fair and transparent distribution and marketing networks that link small producers and consumers, where farmers are able to sell their produce at fair prices and in a manner that responds to local needs.

Its political dimension puts the needs and interests of farmers, agricultural workers, community-based processors and consumers above the interests of large industrial food and agricultural systems, and at the center of decisions and policies affecting, and governance structures determining,

food and agricultural production. It entails ensuring access and effective control of the direct food producers over land and other agricultural resources such as seeds, water, etc. It is a key component of food sovereignty, resulting from dynamic dialogues between farmers, scientists and social movements.

Indeed, as PANAP has repeatedly emphasised, agroecology can only be truly viable and beneficial if pursued in the context of thoroughgoing agrarian reform and long-term rural development. Agroecology can only thrive when land and other productive resources necessary to produce food and other agricultural products are unencumbered by corporate or landlord monopoly control; when there is substantial and reliable state support for production and extension services; and when there is a steady domestic market that will absorb locally and agroecologically grown farm produce.

Filipino farmers practicing agroecology are more self-sufficient and less affected by the pandemic. (Photo credit: Masipag Mindanao)

As part of the PAN International network, PANAP is supporting specific policy recommendations that can advance agroecology in a meaningful manner.<sup>2</sup> (See **Box**)



**PAN calls for strong and enforceable regulatory frameworks to reverse the damaging effects of chemical-intensive, resource-extractive agriculture, along with global commitment to support the transition towards agroecology.** We urge redirection of investments towards agroecological research, extension and education that centres the leadership of farmers, workers and rural communities. We call for national and international commitment to uphold the rights of women, farmers, workers, Indigenous peoples, environmental and social movements, as they organise in support of agroecology.

Concrete actions towards these goals include:

- 1. Establish global policy mechanisms to replace HHPs with agroecology**
  - Establish a global legally binding treaty for the life-cycle management of pesticides, including the replacement of HHPs with agroecology.
  - SAICM, FAO, UNEP, UNDP and GEF should promote, take action on and fund the replacement of HHPs and chemical-intensive farming with agroecology.
- 2. Build local and national capacity in agroecological research, extension and innovation**
  - Encourage farmer-to-farmer learning and horizontal collaboration among farmers, Indigenous peoples and scientists in problem-identification, experimentation and innovation to strengthen capacity in agroecology.
  - Prioritise participatory research and farmer-led innovation in agroecological practices that reduce reliance on HHPs, support adaptation to and mitigation of climate change, and integrate locally adapted seeds, cultivars and livestock breeds.
- 3. Support small and medium scale farmers and their organizations**
  - Strengthen women's, farmers', Indigenous and community-based organisations' capacity to develop and adapt agroecology to meet their priorities, particularly for food, land, seeds, water, health, livelihood, self-determination and the right to organise.
  - Bring women, farmer and Indigenous leaders into national and international decision-making processes.
- 4. Establish supportive economic policies, financial incentives and market opportunities**
  - Provide financial incentives and supports (credit, crop insurance, payment for ecosystem services) and expand market opportunities for farmers adopting agroecological practices.
  - Remove perverse incentives (e.g. government subsidies for chemical inputs) that favour continued dependence on hazardous inputs.
  - In accord with the Polluter Pays Principle, establish independent funding mechanisms to support widespread adoption of agroecology, funded in part by contributions from polluting industries, e.g. agrochemical companies.
- 5. Strengthen institutional supports**
  - Implement comprehensive agrarian reform that ensures equitable access to and ownership by small-scale farmers, revise intellectual property rights to uphold farmers' rights to save, breed and exchange seed, and disallow land, genetic and water grabs by corporations.
  - Establish fair local, regional and global trade arrangements that enable farmers to meet food and livelihood security needs and build relationships between producers and consumers in local markets.
  - Manage the private sector to ensure alignment with equitable and sustainable development goals: reward private investment in safe, sustainable products and technologies; implement and enforce anti-trust and competition regulations to reverse current trends in agribusiness consolidation of market share.
  - Evaluate and internalise the social, health and environmental costs of input-intensive production systems, to assist implementation of agroecology.

### (ENDNOTES)

- 1 PAN International, Agroecology position paper (2019); CIDSE, The principles of agroecology (2018)
- 2 Agroecology: The solution to highly hazardous pesticides, a PAN International position paper (2019)



# COVID-19 and beyond: People's fighting demands for food and rights

Along with the promotion and practice of agroecology as a key component of the people's assertion of food sovereignty to deal with the COVID-19 crisis, PANAP is supporting specific policy reforms that national governments, state food and agriculture agencies and multilateral institutions must urgently implement to address the worsening hunger and food insecurity brought about by the pandemic.

PANAP was among the 126 groups from 32 countries that issued a joint statement on the Day of the Landless on March 29, 2020 reiterating the immediate demands of the landless and all toiling peoples as the COVID-19 outbreak began to spread across the world.<sup>1</sup> (See Appendix 1 for a copy of the said statement)

Meanwhile, PANAP is campaigning for the following concrete policy reforms based on the demands put together by the **People's Coalition on Food Sovereignty** (PCFS), a broad and global network of grassroots groups of farmers, agricultural workers and other small food producers and their support NGOs:<sup>3</sup>

1. States must guarantee that in the measures being undertaken to prevent the spread of the new coronavirus, the right to food is included and respected at all times through the provision of direct food subsidies and unconditional cash transfers to the most vulnerable sectors, and through effective price control on staple food. Urban poor communities and homeless people must be given adequate, safe, and nutritious food if self-quarantine is to be observed.
2. States should prioritise robust and farmer-led domestic food production as the best safeguard against market price



The pandemic did not stop farmers from Svay Rieng province, Cambodia from holding a protest in front of the Ministry of Interior to demand their rights to land. Genuine land reform is matter of social justice and a necessary step towards achieving environmental sustainability. (Photo credit: CCFC Cambodia)

volatility. Input subsidies (for PANAP, in particular, local seeds and non-chemical inputs) must be directly given to smallholder farmers to ensure adequate domestic food supply. Investments in irrigation, soil conservation, and farm subsidies must be expanded to ensure sustainability of production. Imports of staple food crops that countries can grow domestically must be progressively reduced to shield both producers and consumers from global market shocks.

3. States must recognise farmers as essential workers and as such extend the necessary and adequate support. Farmers and rural peoples are at the frontlines of producing food for the world. Governments thus should ensure that the landless farmers, women farmers, farm workers, indigenous peoples, Dalits, pastoralists, and fisherfolk are given sufficient assistance as essential workers. Policies that curtail their right to produce and displace them from their areas of production should be discontinued immediately.
4. States should give utmost support to local markets led by



food producers that are strongly linked with urban and peri-urban consumers. Among others, this includes setting up and supporting local trading centers to facilitate exchange in agricultural goods in a decentralised manner. In addition, government must assist small farmers and small producers to access small towns and other urban centers so that they can bring their produce to the market.

5. States must establish and/or strengthen substantially their strategic national reserves in order to ensure price control and food supplies. This requires the nationalisation of privatised food buffer stock schemes. Commitments in the WTO's Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) must be dropped to ensure that governments can employ the necessary policy tools to protect the people's food security. National food purchasing agencies must be established or strengthened to ensure fair farmgate prices for food producers while stabilising consumer prices. Priority should be given at all times to locally produced food for buffer stocks.
6. States should review and revise national land use policies to reflect the increased need for domestic food production. Moratorium on the production of export-oriented non-food crops (for PANAP, specifically those meant for industrial uses) must be implemented. Large farmlands that are owned or operated by foreign and private companies (in particular, the large-scale monocrop plantations that cater to the export market) must be transformed into domestic food production hubs. Subsidies for export crops must be realigned towards domestic food production.
7. Donor agencies such as those from the Development Assistance Committee (DAC) of the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), multilateral institutions, and South-South Cooperation mechanisms must provide development assistance, including food aid, without conditions attached to countries

Filipino farmers call for free mass COVID-testing, and decry the mass arrests of peasants and government critics. (Photo credit: Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas)



that are most at-risk of food supply shortage. Especially in West Asia and North Africa and other countries in conflict and fragility, food aid must be unconditional to expedite access and distribution.

8. Multilateral institutions, regional governmental organisations and individual states must lift economic sanctions that restrict trade in food and agriculture for countries like Palestine, Iran, Cuba, and Venezuela. All forms of military aggression that hamper food production and trade, on top of other human rights atrocities, must be stopped.
9. States and public officials must be held to the highest standards of accountability in addressing the urgent needs of the people amid the COVID-19 crisis. The participation of vulnerable sectors including the rural poor, rural women, and indigenous peoples in crafting emergency response, relief, and long-term rehabilitation should be guaranteed.
10. States must impose stringent policies against commercial activities that lead to price gouging, hoarding, or the impediment of the people's right to food. Reliable and strong mechanisms for tighter corporate control and accountability should be put in place to ensure that corporate interests do not take over the strategic goals of food security and social justice.

In addition to these demands, PANAP is reiterating its firm support for key policy shifts in agricultural production and rural development that are even more relevant and urgent amid the pandemic and deteriorating hunger, in particular:

- States and multilateral institutions must provide institutional and material support to agroecology. This requires both the allocation of public resources and adoption of public policies that will help expand and further enrich the practice of biodiverse ecological agriculture to address domestic food needs. This means discontinuing current policy



agroecology to flourish. Genuine agrarian reform, with free land distribution as its basic principle, must be pursued as a matter of social justice and as a necessary step towards achieving environmental sustainability.

All these urgent policy reforms and demands are still just the initial steps in building a food system that is radically and fundamentally different from the prevailing system that not only makes the poor extremely vulnerable to the harsh impacts of pandemics and crises but actually breeds calamitous pandemics and crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic is providing opportunities to further articulate and advance the people's aspirations on food sovereignty and on long-term rural development that truly promotes the interests and welfare of the direct food producers. Indeed, what will pave the way to end this vicious cycle of destruction are structural changes that will transfer the effective ownership and control of the means to produce food to those who directly produce it to feed the world – the landless peasants, small farmers, agricultural workers, marginal fishers, etc.

With the unwavering resolve of rural communities across the world to assert their rights, there is reason to believe and hope that stronger people's movements that will struggle to make such aspirations a reality will emerge from this crisis.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 "Assert and defend the rights of rural and all toiling peoples amid the COVID-19 pandemic!", Joint statement of 126 global, regional, national and local organizations from 32 countries, Day of the Landless, Mar 29, 2020, <https://panap.net/2020/03/assert-and-defend-the-rights-of-rural-and-all-toiling-peoples-amid-the-covid-19-pandemic/>
- 2 "Global food security, a ticking timebomb," People's Coalition on Food Sovereignty (PCFS), Apr 16, 2020, <https://foodsoy.org/global-food-security-a-ticking-time-bomb/>
- 3 See PAN International's consolidated list of banned pesticides (<http://pan-international.org/pan-international-consolidated-list-of-banned-pesticides/>)



## **From the Introduction**

Part of the #FoodAndRightsNow campaign, the materials compiled here are the product of PANAP's research, monitoring and interviews as we attempt to document COVID-19's impacts on food security and how rural communities are responding to the crisis and asserting their right to food.

We hope that the book can contribute to the promotion of immediate and long-term policy reforms that will address the chronic and worsening poverty and hunger of the most vulnerable sectors, including those who directly produce the world's food – the small farmers, agricultural workers, fishers, and indigenous people – amid the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

## **About PANAP**

PAN Asia Pacific (PANAP) is one of the five regional centres of Pesticide Action Network (PAN). PANAP works for the elimination of harm caused by pesticides on human health and the environment. PANAP also promotes agroecology, helps strengthen people's movements in their assertion of rights to land and livelihood, and advances food sovereignty and gender justice.

As a network, PANAP is currently comprised of more than 100 partner organisations from the Asia Pacific region and has links with about 400 other regional and global civil society and grassroots organisations.



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