



We Are All Vulnerable, But Some More Than Others

COVID-19 Worsens Existing Inequalities and Creates New Inequities

Statement by GCAP Asia released on the eve of 7th APFSD, 20 May 2020

1. We are all vulnerable. But some more than others. Anyone - rich or poor, powerful or not - can become infected and potentially die from COVID-19. Day labourers and CEOs alike are affected by lockdowns and quarantines, though the spaces in which they are constricted are vastly different.
2. The COVID-19 outbreak and accompanying economic contraction - along with government measures to address these dual threats - is heightening existing inequalities. The United Nations warns that the world could witness famines of 'biblical proportions'. Half the world's workforce risks losing their livelihoods, according to the International Labour Organisation. Families that were 'middle class' are being pushed into poverty. Xenophobia, discrimination, domestic violence and incidence of mental illness are all on the rise.
3. Here are just a few examples of how COVID-19 is heightening inequalities and hurting communities across the region:
 - Eighty percent of **urban workers** in India have lost their livelihoods. Nearly half of all households across the country do not have enough money to buy a week's worth of essentials.¹
 - Across South Asia, the 'sudden and large-scale loss of low-paid work has driven a **mass exodus** of migrant workers' from cities to rural areas².
 - People **desperately searching for food** have been shot, detained and abused for breaking curfews, while it has become difficult or dangerous for **women seeking to give birth** to get to hospital. In the Philippines alone, a 'highly militarised response'³ has led to the arrests of 120,000 people.
 - Migrant **workers** constitute more than 90 percent of COVID-19 cases in Singapore, as overcrowded dormitories and initial inattention compromised foreign worker health.
 - Marginalized communities in Pakistan - including **people with disabilities, the aged, female-headed households and transgender individuals** - are not receiving government assistance as many lack computerised national identity cards and mobile phone numbers, or are illiterate and cannot reply to official [SEP] registration messages. **Religious minorities** have also been deprived of food relief as donors tie

¹ Survey by Azim Premji University, conducted between 15 April - 9 May

² World Bank Group, South Asia Economic Focus, Spring 2020

³ Statement by the UN Human Rights Committee, 27 April 2020 [SEP]

aid to the recitation of Islamic prayers.

- Africans in China and Chinese outside the PRC have been threatened, denied shelter and faced other forms of **discrimination** by communities frightened by the pandemic, while public officials take no action to protect their rights.
- **The Dalits**, groups that encounter recurring prejudice and inequitable treatment due to their work and descent, face discrimination in COVID-19 disaster responses.
- **Individuals diagnosed with COVID-19** face discrimination, even after recovery.
- The majority of **front-line health workers** and hospital staff (including cleaners, laundry and food services) are women and at greater risk of infection. Yet many health facilities lack sufficient quantities or adequate sizes of personal protective equipment.

4. The COVID-19 pandemic has created a false choice in parts of the region between life and livelihood.
5. Yet people across the region continue to demonstrate resilience and compassion. Medical teams at the Philippine General Hospital in Manila, for example, have developed local testing kits that cost a small fraction of imported ones; while music students serenade health care workers and NGOs in Nepal raise awareness of the need for proper distancing and sanitation.
6. We express solidarity with people and communities across the globe whose lives have been upended by this pandemic.
7. In the face of COVID-19, some private sector leaders are recognising the importance of safeguarding employee and consumer health. We commend these efforts, while calling on all companies to uphold employees' rights to health and decent work, and to adopt triple-bottom lines in support of people and planet.
8. GCAP Asia also recognises the enormous challenges faced by leaders as they address the public health and financial implications of COVID-19, and we note that governments across the region have enacted relief packages and monetary stimulus to stem the economic pain.
9. Now more than ever, civil society input is needed to address global challenges.
10. GCAP Asia expresses its extreme disappointment to the UNESCAP for scuttling civil society participation in the 7th Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development. While we understand the difficulties of time, the process could have been more inclusive had there been substantive interaction with CSOs prior to the APFSD and by holding a two-day meeting instead of a single day encounter
11. **Moving forward, we call on Asian and global leaders to:**
 - a) Support the call for a safe, effective COVID-19 'People's Vaccine',⁴ that once available, will be produced rapidly, at scale, and made available to all countries and people, free

⁴ The 'People's Vaccine' petition, initiated by UNAIDS, has been signed by more than 140 world leaders, including the Prime Ministers of Korea, Pakistan and New Zealand.^[1]

of charge. The same applies to all treatments, diagnostics and other technologies related to the coronavirus.

- b) Respect the human rights of all, even in the face of extraordinary measures to safeguard public health. The rights to life, food, health and access to justice are inalienable, as are prohibitions against torture, arbitrary detainment and other ill-treatment.⁵
- c) Work with civil society to develop emergency and long-term solutions. While governments are turning to charities to implement food and relief programmes, people's input on issues of life and livelihood is needed now more than ever.
- d) Recognise and reverse the rising poverty and inequalities, both domestic and international, that are resulting from efforts to address the pandemic.
- e) Prevent discrimination and uphold the rights of all individuals, including Dalits, women, children, people diagnosed with COVID-19 and other marginalised communities. Provide resources to stop gender-based violence and assist those affected by it.
- f) Invest fiscal stimulus in sustainable development that is people and planet friendly. Deploy the vast COVID-relief resources to ensure the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.
- g) Adopt a gender-sensitive approach to the global health emergency and its economic aftermath. Ensure there are sufficient quantities and adequate sizes of personal protective equipment.
- h) Distribute sufficient COVID-response funds to low- and middle-income countries, to support health systems and address the rising poverty and inequalities associated with quarantines and other lockdown measures.
- i) We urge UNESCAP to keep the process of civil society interaction open from the region for providing inputs to the HLPF.

Signatories:

1. Sanayee Development Organization (GCAP Afghanistan)
2. Pakistan Development Alliance (GCAP Pakistan)
3. Wada Na Todo Abhiyan (GCAP India)
4. NGO Federation of Nepal (GCAP Nepal)
5. Noakhali Rural Development Society (GCAP Bangladesh)
6. SUNFO People's Movement (GCAP Sri Lanka)
7. Asia Dalit Rights Forum (Social Justice Task Force, GCAP)
8. Cooperation Committee for Cambodia (GCAP Cambodia)
9. Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (GCAP Philippines)
10. Japan Civil Society Network on SDGs (GCAP Japan)
11. ONE Singapore (GCAP Singapore)
12. GCAP China
13. GCAP Indonesia

⁵ See also statement by the UN Human Rights Committee, 27 April 2020