

Hunger and malnutrition have been constant struggles across Asian countries long before the COVID-19 pandemic hit the region, with an overwhelming 418 **million** people undernourished. Ironically, countries such as India feature among the **top food producing countries of the world**, while at the same time struggling with some of the **highest rates of malnutrition**. Deep-rooted inequalities and poverty, linked to widespread unemployment, landlessness, and poor wages, have been exacerbated under the pandemic, with the gap between the poor and rich widening significantly in countries such as **Bangladesh**. Moreover, many parts of the region continue to experience a rise of authoritarianism, coupled with a shrinking space for civil society and oppression of human rights defenders.

**Indonesia** slipped into its **first economic recession in 22 years**, pushing **unemployment** and poverty rates to record levels. The official number of poor people in **Bangladesh** shot up by nearly 50% to **49.43 million in 2020**, almost sending the country back to the 2010 poverty level.

*“The rise of extreme poverty and the loss of income and employment meant that people had no money to buy food and they could not survive. Basically, most people were suffering from starvation and those who somehow managed to have food, lacked nutrition because of low quality of food... (Most of them) only had rice and starch and potatoes, so it led to malnutrition.”*  
UBINIG/ PHM, Bangladesh

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Lockdown measures, often applied in an authoritarian manner (e.g., **India** and **Philippines**), have worsened the already dire situation of people, causing a sharp decline in economic activities and incomes. The situation has particularly impacted workers from the informal and low-paying sectors of the economy, who spend a high percentage (up to 70%) of their income on food. Combined with a rise in prices of food staples in several countries, the result has been an exponential rise in hunger, malnutrition, and deaths among the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups in society.

Small-scale food producers have been badly affected by the lockdown. In **Bangladesh**, for example, 66 days of continuous lockdown disrupted the entire food system. Production and sale of dairy, meat, poultry, vegetables and fruits experienced a sharp decline. In **Nepal**, the imposed lockdown as well as official prohibitions have caused **severe setbacks on the lives of highly impacted groups** such as small-scale food producers, especially women, migrant returnees, daily wage laborers, women-headed families, disabled people, and Dalits (especially Dalit women). The rate of food and nutrition insecurity **increased by 8%** in one month of the lockdown alone. Due to lack of mobility exacerbated by transportation constraints, the routines of harvesting, planting and marketing of crops were disturbed. Farmers who grow highly perishable products were hit the hardest. Almost all agriculture workers lost their jobs and wages.

In a report released in December 2020, the GNRtFN noted that the March 2020 lockdown in **India**, which was imposed without any public consultation, resulted in “chaos and hardships to many sections of society, endangering lives and leading to huge losses, including an exponential rise in hunger and deaths of the most vulnerable people.” In a survey carried out by the Right to Food Campaign (RTFC) and the Centre for Equity Studies from September to October 2020, 62% of the nearly 4,000 respondents reported that incomes were lower than during pre-pandemic times. The same survey revealed that 45% needed to borrow money to purchase food; 71% said the nutritional quality of the food they were consuming had worsened; and 27% sometimes went to bed without eating.

In Asia, as in other regions, those who had already been most marginalized and oppressed were also the ones hit hardest by the crisis, while often falling through the cracks of social protection measures. Women as key food system actors were particularly affected by restrictions in movement, had to assume the bulk of additional care work due to assigned gender roles, were frequently discriminated against in social protection measures (see below), and faced an increase in domestic violence. In **Nepal**, for example, women small-scale vegetable farmers who sell vegetables door-to-door have lost their main source of income. As most migrant male workers returned home due to COVID-19, the household and care work traditionally relegated to women has increased. Gender-based violence equally increased.

Another case of extreme hardship was that of migrant workers. In a survey of 11,000 migrant workers across **India** during the first 21 days of the lockdown, the Stranded Workers Action Network noted that 96% had not received rations from the government and 70% had not received any cooked food, while 89% had not been paid by their employers at all during the lockdown. According to media reports at least 989 deaths were directly attributable to the lockdown.



The plight of Indigenous Peoples during the pandemic was exacerbated by the structural discrimination and resulting socio-economic conditions that they have been placed under since the colonial period. In **Bangladesh**, the government's failure to recognize the status of ancestral lands and the sequestration of lands has meant that the traditional Jhum (shifting) cultivation no longer is viable. The loss of land and related livelihoods has left Indigenous Peoples with no choice but to work as daily laborers, and yet now, in the midst of the pandemic, many have lost their jobs and incomes.

In several countries, including **Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh,** and the **Philippines**, the food crisis that emerged amid government responses to curb the pandemic was compounded by natural disasters triggered by climate change and eco-destruction, such as locust outbreaks, untimely rains, flooding, snowfall, drought, and typhoons.

While marginalized and disadvantaged population groups have been pushed to the brink of survival, there have also been those who took advantage and benefited from the pandemic. In **Indonesia**, for example, state-imposed social distancing measures that restricted movement and prohibited public activities such as protests have been used as a leverage to intensify land grabbing and exploit nature. Pulpwood, palm oil, logging, sugar, and tobacco companies aggressively expanded their operations by encroaching into customary territories and forest zones that were home to Indigenous Peoples and local communities, resulting in the increase of land-related disputes, and further marginalization of already disenfranchised groups. According to a report by Konsorsium Pembaruan Agraria (KPA), a total of 138 land conflicts occurred between April and September 2020. At least 11 people were killed, 19 hurt, and 134 others handed criminal charges in connection to land-grabbing incidents. Those affected were mostly Indigenous Peoples, peasants, and activists.

In the **Philippines**, the pandemic has been used as a cover for further militarization of rural areas and increased state violence and killings of human rights and land rights activists. Protesters are considered “quarantine violators” and met with harsh measures, while many progressive organizations have been labeled as communist-linked.

The measures taken by governments to address the food crisis have been marked by serious shortcomings. Significant parts of the population entitled to benefits have been excluded with reasons ranging from outdated population statistics and formality issues (**India** and **Philippines**), to discrimination based on gender, ethnicity, and caste (**Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India**).

In **Pakistan**, for example, the fact that many women do not hold national identity cards, nor mobile phones, both of which has been required to register for social protection benefits, has resulted in the exclusion of up to one third of eligible women. One reason why women lack identity cards is restrictions in women’s mobility, already present before the lockdowns, which prevent them from obtaining the document in respective government offices. The need for mobile phones and national identity cards has also resulted in the de-facto exclusion of Indigenous Peoples in **Bangladesh** from the opportunity to receive government cash transfers. There are also reports that the military and Bengali settlers have prevented the distribution of non-state food relief packages to Indigenous Peoples’ areas.

Emergency support moreover often came too late (**Philippines**) and was based on a budget that was too limited to cover all in need (**Bangladesh**). There was also reported corruption, wrong targeting, and mismanagement.

Importantly, measures have largely consisted in food and cash transfers, allowing only for a temporary relief, while failing to present opportunities for actual recovery of livelihoods, and for addressing the deep-rooted inequalities that created vulnerabilities in the first place. Some of the solutions to the food crisis have also been met with harsh criticism, as they further compound the root causes of the crisis. One example is the establishment of food estates in **Indonesia**, and the connected clearing of forested areas on nearly two million hectares of land in Central Kalimantan, Papua, and North Sumatra, that may lead to another ecological disaster similar to the failed mega rice plantation project during the Suharto regime. The **Philippines** has further lowered its rice tariffs to address inflation, thereby worsening the situation of peasants who were already struggling with cheap rice imports before the pandemic.

Some governments also used the pandemic as a cover for introducing new laws that pose significant threats to the enjoyment of the right to food and nutrition. One example is **India's** hurried enactment, without any public participation, of three farm laws in September 2020 that sparked widespread and extended demonstrations involving thousands of peasants across the country. In April this year, despite the steep rise in COVID-19 cases, protesters vowed to continue their round-the-clock sit-ins. They demand the government to repeal the laws, which they say would dismantle the public procurement system, push down the prices of farm produce, encourage large-scale monocultures, and allow private companies to stock up and speculate on essential pulses and cereals, thus driving up food prices. In **Indonesia**, the House of Representatives adopted the “Omnibus Law”, a package of laws aimed at attracting foreign investment. The development of the law was marked by a lack of transparency and public participation, and was met with massive opposition from social movements, workers, CSOs and communities due to grave human rights, labor and environmental concerns.



On a positive note, in January 2021 the **Philippine** House of Representatives approved the *Right to Adequate Food Act* that puts into law the constitutional guarantee of the right to adequate food. At the same time, however, important gains made with regard to the realization of RtFN, through the 1988 agrarian reform program, are currently threatened with reversal. A 2020 Supreme Court ruling threatens peasant communities that benefited from the reform, such as the Sariaya farmers, with dispossessing them of their land and livelihood, by using a bogus local zoning ordinance to exempt their 295-hectare landholding from the reform.

Also worth highlighting is the April 2021 announcement by the president of **Sri Lanka** on the transition of the country to a “Green Socio-economy with Sustainable Solutions for Climate Changes”, which includes a ban on all chemical

fertilizers and pesticides in the country to protect people's health and biodiversity. Again, although a historic decision, it needs to be taken with caution. In Sri Lanka, a constitutional amendment from October 2020 dangerously paved the way for concentration of power in the hands of the presidency, reversing important civil society-led reforms dating back to 2015 to curtail authoritarianism. In this context, it will be important to closely follow how the transition will be implemented, and what the impacts for small-scale producers will be.

#### **CIVIL SOCIETY AND COMMUNITY RESPONSES**

Across countries, a multitude of people's initiatives have emerged to tackle the food crisis, and move towards healthier and more sustainable food systems.

In April 2021, a group of farmers, local vegetable vendors, and a young entrepreneur **took the first initiative to stave off hunger** in the **Philippines** by providing free food to people. In Quezon City, the group put up carts filled with rice, vegetables, canned goods, and other basic goods. Signboards in the open-air grocery booths advised people to either take free food supplies based on their need or donate food and other basic necessities based on their capability. The red-tagging of the organizers of the feeding initiative did not deter them from setting up more community pantries. **Towards the end of April, at least 80 citizen-established community pantries sprouted in Metro Manila, and over 300 others mushroomed across Philippine streets and alleys.**

Through these pantries, peasant communities were able to directly deliver their free produce to famished Filipinos. For instance, farmers of Tarlac province **donated heaps of sweet potatoes.** Fishers from Rizal province, meanwhile, contributed at least 50 kilograms of fresh tilapia to a pantry in Quezon City. Also, **farmers of Sariaya** town, belonging to the group Ugnayan-Katarungan, delivered their vegetable produce not just to the residents of the nearby **Lucena City**, but also to the more distant dwellers of **Quezon City**.

In **Indonesia**, several **solidarity initiatives 'from below'** emerged. These include: public kitchens that offer food for informal workers and communities in vulnerable situations, such as sex workers, people with disabilities, and scavengers; communal planting of local food crops; and producer-consumer partnerships.

Peasant communities in **India** have put into practice sustainable solutions to health and hunger problems. For instance, in the state of Manipur, women farmers assisted by the **Centre for Social Development** have started to engage in organic farming and vermicomposting to produce nutritious food and avoid the use of harmful pesticides and fertilizers.

Civil society groups, such as Maleya Foundation and KHANI in **Bangladesh**, have also actively engaged in monitoring the reach and impact of COVID-19 related measures, and engaged in national and international advocacy to urge actions with regard to addressing the destitute situation of marginalized groups. One concrete result of this advocacy has been the launch of a dedicated train service for alternative transportation of agricultural products and the announcement of several stimulation packages for the agriculture sector.



Photo | Ugnayan-Katarungan