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\* Cover Photo: Concrete Building Under Blue Sky by Jeffrey Czum (New York, USA)



# ONCE CORONA LOCKDOWN IS OVER

HEMANtha WITHANAGE, CENTRE FOR ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE

**C**orona has infected 4.5 million people around the world and about 300,000 people are dead by mid-May 2020. Only 1.6 million people have been recovered. Millions of others so far safe from Corona are suffering from lockdown. Lack of food, access to livelihood, health facilities, discrimination, human rights violations, domestic violations, loss of small businesses are few issues. Meantime digital world has a boom through online marketing, online education, online meetings etc. Some experts forecast that world online market giant Amazon will make their first trillion and even Bill Gate will increase his wealth exponentially. Although world is going to lose few hundred thousand people, WHO forecast at least 7 million unintended pregnancies during the lockdown.

#### Learn from Spanish Flu

It is estimated that about 500 million people or one-third of the world's population became infected with H1N1 Spanish flu or Influenza virus between 1918-1919. The number of deaths was estimated to be at least 50 million worldwide with about 675,000 occurring in the United States. Corona could be equally harmful according to the medical experts.

Spanish flu killed that many people during the peak of the first world war. Although the environmental pollution was very low, poverty was very high during that time. More than 60 percent American lived below the poverty line then. The poverty incidents around the world was some 80 percent. Some research suggests that over 300,000 Sri Lankans died from Spanish flu although official figures are approximately 90,000 persons.

Since the second world war the industrialization began and the poverty situation got better in the Europe and other developed countries, but about 736 million people still live below the poverty line. As of 2018, 55 per cent of the world's population have no access to at least one social protection cash benefit. Using the most recent data, the World Bank has predicted coronavirus is pushing 40-60 million people into extreme poverty. So called growth has not reached everyone and Worldwide, 780 million people do not have access to an improved water source. Estimated 2.5 billion people lack access to improved sanitation which is more than 35% of the world's

population or 1 in 3 people.

Industrialization make some people rich. But it made many people poor and working class all the time. Some sustainable economies were disrupted by this industrialization by pollution and over exploitation. Spanish flu in 1918-1919 changed the business world too. Many small and big business lost and some new businesses emerged. Global coal production reduced by 20 percent. Companies such as Coca-cola boomed after this flu. There was no much discussion about the pollution and emissions during Spanish flu.

#### How Corona made environment cleaner?

During Corona, many people noticed the cleaning of the nature. BBC reported that in China, emissions fell 25% at the start of the year as people were instructed to stay at home, factories shuttered and coal use fell by 40% at China's six largest power plants since the last quarter of 2019. The proportion of days with "good quality air" was up 11.4% compared with the same time last year in 337 cities across China, according to its Ministry of Ecology and Environment. In Europe, satellite images show nitrogen dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>) emissions fading away over northern Italy. A similar story is playing out in across the world.

In Sri Lanka Central Environmental Authority claims Kelani river is more cleaner due to the non-operation of the factories. More than 7000 factories operate along the Kelani river with less than half hold an environmental license. In a survey CEJ conducted during Corona, 85% of the respondents perceive the environmental changes and impact caused by COVID-19 as moderate to high. Among them most people have noticed reduction of noise pollution, better air quality and regular clear blue skies and reduction of river pollution.

One can imagine the reduction of transport emissions once Sri Lanka's 7.5 million vehicle fleet is out of the streets and over 20,000 industries are not in operation for 2 months. But at least 1.4 million people work in these industries. We don't know how many of them would lose jobs from Corona lockdown. It seems millions of jobs will lose by the time of ending Corona around the world. In tourism sector alone, up to 75 million jobs are at immediate risk

due to the coronavirus pandemic, according to the World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC).

In April, Oil prices crashed due to Corona. More than 30 million US citizens filed unemployment benefits. US Senate passed a \$2 trillion coronavirus aid bill to help workers and businesses. Chinese economy also lost due to the impact of the production sector. World governments started claiming China to pay for the losses. Governments around the world have urged employees to work from home where possible. Shares in technology companies such as Zoom have shot up.

#### **Post COVID 19**

According to the medical experts it will take some time to regulate Corona. Some believe it will be endemic such as HIV/Aids. It's a big question how the world will move once the Corona is over.

Most probably every production sector will go back to the pre-corona mode. They will do everything to gain the losses during corona period. Industries will make more money exploiting natural resources and man power. More forest will be damaged to produce more food, more mining for energy and industrial material. People will forget Corona pandemic such as in the case of Spanish flu. There are 320,000 unknown viruses that infect mammals. Climate change, forest and wildlife destruction will result in more future pandemics.

More organized industrial and production sector giants will get ready to such future risks. Sooner more people will lose jobs due to automatization of the production cycles to face those future pandemics. It is possible they will continue to promote 5G technology to operate industries, farming, mining and many other sectors to reduce human jobs. Boom in the IT sector during Corona is a good motivation for using new technologies. Perhaps unemployment will be a major issue in post corona period. Except in the IT sector, it is hard to believe there will be new jobs. Tourism sector jobs will take longer time to recover.

I believe the drop in the fossil burning will not grow much due to availability of alternatives including solar power. Yet the nuclear power seems still in the rise. Although there is a resting time, Corona will not end over exploitation and pollution.

At the national level there will be more land grabbing as already seen even during the corona time in Sri Lanka or in the Amazon. There are some countries moving into the local production and consider about circular economy. At least for a short period local people will try to produce own food, but I don't expect this will happen in the long run. It will be hard to maintain local production with high production costs. Unless the supermarket giants fail seriously, there will be no gain in the local economy. They produce cheaper food and other items due to the overexploitation.

Corona lockdown shows how the inequity affect people differently. It showed how the poor and lower middle income families are vulnerable to environmental, health shocks. It proved that lack of local sustainable food and basic production can pressure the local population. It has also proved that big multinational food chains are not

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the solution for majority. This also proved that how the lack of social and economic security for majority can leads to discrimination.

#### **Transform the world to make it more livable and sustainable**

Corona is a moment to think how we can overcome these issues. It's time to make our future plans. We have already identified the importance of sustainable development goals which encompasses every sector. We have identified, how strong our health system, but how hard to manage it with few undisciplined people. We have learned that drug addiction is beyond a heath and social issue. We saw that how people easily adapt to the situation and even started growing own food.

Making village units sustainable is a way forward to face future pandemics. Building cities and urban centers will be a mistake in the future. If we are serious about water the industrial pollution should be moved outside the river banks. They should be moved to the highly regulated industrial zones. Ad-hoc industrial development will make us more vulnerable to the future shocks. Forest only can save humans from future virus pandemics and climate change. We should let the wildlife to stay in their

habitats as they balance the nature. They should not be destroyed for human settlements or food production. Abandoned agricultural fields can serve food production with new technology. Of course small home gardens is the best way to support the local economy. Although people stared farming there are no local seeds available. Promotion of local seeds and agroecology is a way forward for food production.

Corona proved that most products in the market are luxury items. It proved that people can easily survive without many of them. Stopping the production and importations of those unnecessary items is vital for the local sustainability and stop overconsumption and over exploitation.

Finally, Globally and locally we should address root causes of environmental degradation while respecting human rights and planetary limits. We have to respect nature unconditionally and restore natural ecosystems including local initiatives for transformation. Governments should support sustainable agriculture and peoples responses to healthy food systems leading. Governments also should support people responsive climate actions.



# **AIIB'S COVID FINANCING FOR INDIA COMES UNDER SCANNER**

SREEDHAR RAMAMURTHI, ENVIRONICS TRUST

All multilateral banks have certain policies and processes. Notwithstanding the growing pressure of the affected communities and civil society, these banks bring out documents essentially to satisfy themselves on paper. It is a make-believe world, that always states that the environmental and social implications have been carefully analysed, often at a whopping cost by an ex-patriate "specialist" and safeguards actually followed in lending. Subsequent reports, unless there is a big hue-and-cry by the affected communities, merely follow the criteria that all is well with the project and eventually the project has been successful.

The recent project document released by Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank on the COVID-19 Emergency Response and Health Systems Preparedness Project unmasks the Banks for its complete hypocrisy. The project aims to deliver a combination of emergency response and health system capacity building efforts consistent with the COVID-19 containment plan that was recently devel-

oped by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MOHFW), Government of India (GOI) with support from the World Health Organization (WHO) and partners. In addition to scaling up interventions to limit human-to-human transmission, interventions that strengthen health systems will be rolled out to improve the country's capacity to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic and allow it to be better prepared to respond to any future disease outbreaks.

When one looks into the details of the project, it claims that the US D \$ 1.5 Billion sought and granted under this loan would enable 70 percent of the districts in India to have a covid isolation facility and will have strengthened our long-term ability to deal with pandemics. Not only that, it would have also enhanced our medical research capabilities. AIIB claims it is a coordinated effort of the multilateral banks and as it has been its practice since the beginning to co-finance the project. The World Bank is the major financier bringing in a billion USD.

#### **Anachronic Financing that Unmasks all Claims**

The document released a couple of days ago, states that the project implementation period is from May 11th 2020 to 31st of December 2024. One would therefore assume that the project document would be available and there would be scope for analysis and feedback. However, the biggest give-away is that there are no conditions for disbursements and further there is a clause that allows for a huge "retro-active" financing. Up to forty percent of the fund could have been used from 1st of January to May 11th even before the project start date. If nearly half the money has been accounted for before the project started, what is then the use of all the unnecessary paper and the consultants writing on environmental and social safeguards and transparency in the financial processes.

What would have been the expenditure on which this forty percent would have been spent. The document states, (M) "major planned procurement includes goods (medical equipment; supplies and commodities; diagnostic reagents, including kits; and PPE including masks, gloves, etc.); services (development and dissemination of communication messages and materials); some small civil works (strengthening of hospitals and laboratories, etc.); and a few consultancy selections. It is anticipated that most of the goods are available in India, barring certain medical equipment, which are currently being imported and not available off the shelf."

## **We already are a witness to the saga of procuring unusable and highly inflated diagnostic kits which is now a matter of contention in the Supreme Court.**

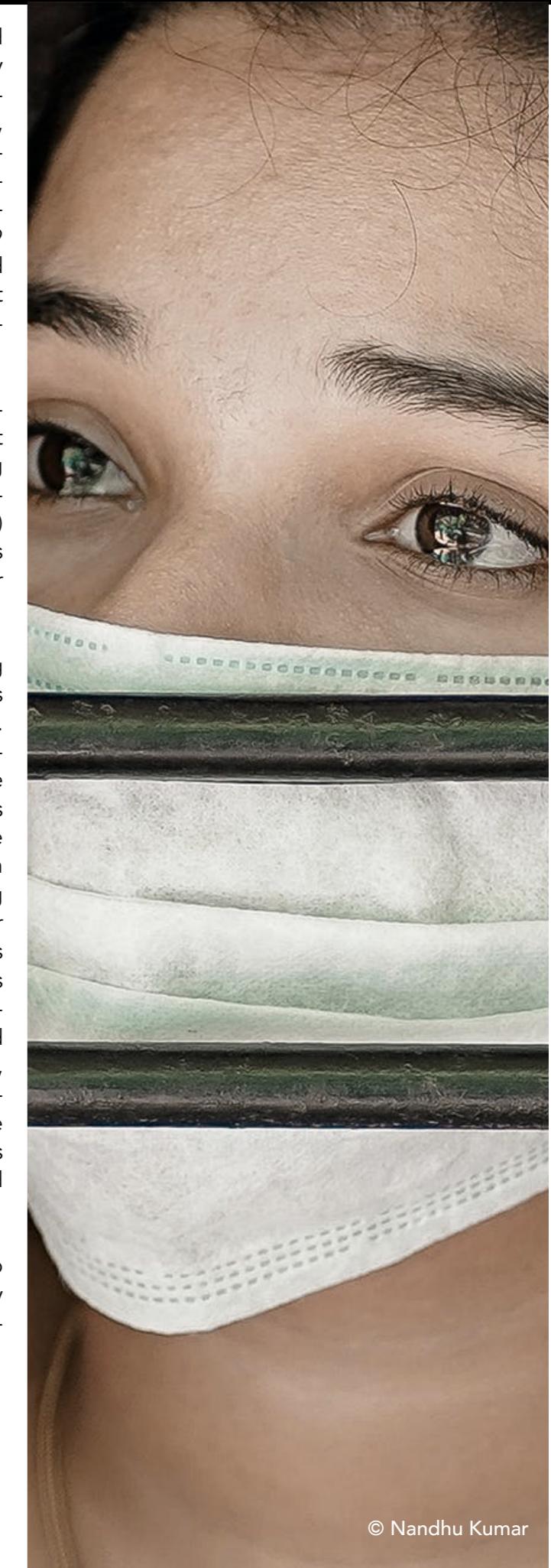
Since such project documents, as a religion, need to identify the beneficiaries, the document tamely states, "(G) given the nature of COVID-19, the primary project beneficiaries will be infected people, at-risk populations, medical and emergency personnel, service providers at medical and testing facilities (both public and private), and public and animal health agencies engaged in India's COVID-19 response. Staff of key technical departments and health departments will also benefit from the project as their capabilities increase through institutional capacity strengthening."

Holier-than-thou AIIB claims that its support will immediately enable the GOI scale up efforts to limit human-to-human transmission, including reducing local transmission of cases and containing the progress of the pandemic from phase III (cluster of cases) to phase IV (community transmission). One wonders what if any major action except for the lockdown for necessary to enable this.

We already are a witness to the saga of procuring unusable and highly inflated diagnostic kits which is now a matter of contention in the Supreme Court. We also know how some of the Gujarat based companies have been always in the limelight to procure orders in such circumstances. What takes the cake is the section titled governance and corruption in the document which aims to claim that it is holier than the World Bank – AIIB is committed to preventing fraud and corruption in the projects it finances. For this project, the WB's Anti-Corruption Guidelines shall apply, which are materially consistent with AIIB's Policy on Prohibited Practices (2016) (PPP). However, AIIB's PPP will apply in regard to the prohibited practices of "Misuse of Resources" and "Theft", which are not covered under the WB's Anti-Corruption Guidelines. AIIB reserves the right to undertake investigations in regard to the Prohibited Practices of "Misuse of Resources" and "Theft", not covered under the WB's Anti-Corruption Guidelines.

Now that the post-Paris Bank, which claims itself to be lean, green and clean has already has its money taken and spent, it begs the question why this hypocrisy?

\*\*\*First published in Impact News India.



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# WOMEN'S ACTIVISM IN THE TIME OF CLIMATE AND OTHER EMERGENCIES

DOROTHY GRACE GUERRERO, GLOBAL JUSTICE NOW

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We are facing a climate emergency, a possible economic recession, and now a global pandemic that will test the limits of our health systems and expose the short-sightedness of our governments and their skewed priorities. But an affirming message in the commemoration of International Women's Day earlier this month was the common recognition that women, despite our diversity, have common challenges that unite our movements and collectives.

If we've learnt anything from the climate emergency, it's that women are some of the most affected globally but their movements are some of the most effective. When it comes to fighting a global health crisis, we need to learn from these movements.

#### Women's movements and right-wing populism

We are just a few months into the year and there have already been devastating climate-related catastrophes in various parts of the world – the worst-ever bushfires in Australia, floods in Indonesia and Dubai, volcanic eruptions in Guatemala, Japan and the Philippines, melting of Himalayan glaciers, and storms in several countries. Due to continuing inequality, climate change impacts women more. At the same

time the world has also seen women playing lead roles in climate action. This year's International Women's Day celebrations centred on the climate emergency to show how women lead their communities in addressing grassroots impacts of climate change and their struggle against environmentally destructive mega-projects.

This year's biggest International Women's Day march was seen in Chile, where more than a million women protested across the country for women's rights and against state repression. Women and feminists have been on the frontlines of the protests in Chile, as they are on the frontlines of the climate justice movement. There were actions and events all over the world, some were peaceful, some met by heavy police force.

In September this year the global community will assess the progress made for women's rights during the 25th anniversary of the Beijing Platform for Action – the landmark global agenda that came out of the UN's Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. It the most comprehensive agenda for gender equality ever agreed. The assessment will feature

how women's voices shape decisions to address the climate emergency, conflict and the alarming rise of exclusionary politics, which all threaten future progress towards gender equality.

It is saddening though that many global movement initiatives from the left have weakened over the last decade. The gains from the World Social Forum, Occupy Wall Street, the Arab Spring, and the pink tide in Latin America that put in place reformist governments are now more and more being reversed by right-wing populist leaders' appropriation of the grievances and even language of the left. Neoliberalism, instead of collapsing has become entrenched and militarism has increased. The dispossessed and displaced communities in the global south gen-

erated the refugees and migrants who are trying to flee the wreckage to have a chance to rebuild their lives.

In the midst of the current crises how do we mobilise, organise and build movements to make sure that this time around, it is society that will be saved and not the system? How do we fight the normalisation of violence against migrants in India and southern Europe or against those who are simply questioning their governments' incapacity to deal with the coronavirus crisis? Putting women and feminist struggles at the centre of our response might be one part of the puzzle in meeting the crises we face with a connected struggle.

**Feminism as liberation struggle**  
The role of feminism in the current climate and health emergencies calls for new thinking and ways of organising. It also goes beyond challenging patriarchal power. As a liberation struggle, it is a part of the larger task of eradicating domination in all its forms: race, class, gender, sexual orientation, disability, religion, and so much more. Those who have long been thinking, writing about and building women's movements for systemic alternatives know from practice that it will be impossible to get rid of these dominations while the systems that produce them remain intact.

Most organised grassroots women do not call themselves feminists. In Asia and Africa, they are mostly socio-economic environ-



© Markus Spiske

mental activists. However, the thinking and discussions they produce enrich eco-feminism, which emphasises a systematic perspective. Regional feminist networks like WoMin in Africa see their work as a political project about organising women to challenge the power structure. Frontline anti-mining movements in the global south and eco-feminist movements have been arguing for decades for a transition to a post-extractivist model of development. Some also adhere to the rights of nature. The vision is of a post-extractivist, low carbon, equitable and eco-feminist society.

#### **Climate change is both an ecological and social crisis**

Climate change is both an ecological and social crisis. It is about humans' skewed relationship with nature and the relationship between humans. Capitalism is incompatible with a sustainable planet and feminism's crucial role in climate justice is grounded in the recognition that to 'free' women means deep, transformative change because of the way patriarchy and capitalism are intertwined.

The Environmental Justice Atlas has mapped around 3,000 environmental conflicts but that figure is just the tip of the iceberg. Even a quick read about those conflicts will make anyone see that the power of multinational corporations has been growing in the last few decades. But what is more astonishing to know is how the power of multinational resistance movements has also incrementally increased over the years. Many of these movements are not just about saving their own community or their resources. They also exist to change society at a very fundamental level. And many are women-led.

New coalitions of women are mobilising and building movements across class to make governments adopt feminist budgets, win policy demands with other groups to equalise care burdens by remunicipalisation of public resources and socialising them. The nanas are still at it and working against nuclear power or fracking.

In the Philippines, the focus of the month-long series of women's events, which connects gender and climate justice are on how to take back and expand political spaces. The diminished democratic space, spate of drug-related killings, targeting of women

leading the opposition against President Rodrigo Duterte and most importantly the rolling back of the hard-fought gains from decades-long work of ousting the Marcos dictatorship, all call for a new politics of transformation. Feminist ideas are at the heart of the discussions.

#### **Coronavirus is a women's issue**

Just in the last few weeks, many European countries have enforced a country-wide lockdown, with the UK finally doing so this week. Governments around the world are struggling to cope as people's anxiety heightens over the global pandemic. The virus has caused airlines and factories to shut down, affecting global supply chains. According to the International Energy Agency, world oil demand is expected to fall this year for the first time since 2009. Experts predict that the economic impacts could be far worse than the 2008 economic crisis. The widespread prediction of the world economy going into sudden recession gets increasingly real every day.

Although coronavirus impacts both men and women, there are specific impacts on women. According to the World Health Organisation, 70% of workers in the health and social sector are women. The closure of schools to control COVID-19 transmission in China, Hong Kong, Italy, South Korea, and beyond might have a differential effect on women, who provide most of the informal care within families, with the consequence of limiting their work and economic opportunities.

We are facing a difficult time ahead. Our movement needs to be resilient and come together to collectively fight the global emergencies we're experiencing. It will require political projects and organising of women to challenge the power structures that continue to push inequality on us all. Women's lives will be at the centre of the struggle and so must our feminism be.

This is an updated version of a speech given at the Women and the Climate Emergency discussion in Brighton on International Women's Day.

\*\*\*First published in [globaljustice.org.uk](http://globaljustice.org.uk).



# REBUILDING THE ECONOMY REQUIRES POLICY REBALANCING

RENE E. OFRENEO, FREEDOM FROM DEBT COALITION



**T**he pandemic is compounding an already multifaceted planetary crisis buffeted by environmental crisis, huge economic divides between the 99 percent and the 1 percent of society, and socio-political conflicts everywhere. Covid-19 has revealed a broken public health system in both developed and developing countries.

© Leung Cho Pan

The Covid-19 pandemic is giving countries around the world a golden opportunity to correct the social and economic "discontents" that aimless and unregulated globalization has generated—environmental degradation and ozone-busting GHG emissions, labor precarity and informality, overt and covert wars for resources and markets, and social and economic inequality that is a direct outcome of trickle-down neoliberal growth economics. These "discontents" are amply documented by scores of development economists led by Joseph Stiglitz, former Chief Economist of the World Bank, and Robert Reid, former US Labor Secretary.

Even the International Monetary Fund, seen by many CSOs as the world's devil incarnate, has been writing lately about globalization "discontents", describing them as "macro-critical" concerns that should guide the IMF in its lending operations. In a recent IMF dialogue with the CSOs, Chang

Yong Rhee, IMF Asia Director, told the CSOs that IMF today is not like its "IMF parent" of the 1980s nor of its "IMF grandparent" of the 1960s. But what is the IMF's alternative development policy in these pandemic times? More lending to bail out the big private corporations? More lending in support of big-ticket projects that ignore the urgent needs of the poor and the vulnerable? More lending that traps developing countries into Sisyphus-like debt-servicing situation?

But back to the pandemic, how should governments make their respective economies resilient and robust in these uncertain times? The answer of those pushing for the UN SDG agenda (zero hunger, zero poverty, etc. by 2030) is for UN member-states to intensify efforts to address in a coherent, integrated and sustained manner the five Ps of development: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership. Jeffrey Sachs, the chief ideologue of the UN's

SDG development framework, has been moving increasingly toward the left, berating America for its misplaced "exceptionalism" and criminal negativism toward climate change mitigation. Sachs, now aligned with Keynesian economics, is even conducting courses on "post-capitalist order," courses on how the world should get out of the neoliberal laissez faire development framework.

Can our own DOF and Neda, after citing Keynes's famous criticism on the penchant of some economists to focus on imaginary long-term growth, prepare to overhaul the existing neoliberal development framework based on the triple structural adjustment programs: trade and investment liberalization, deregulation of various areas of the economy, and privatization of government corporations, assets and services? Can they focus on the critical issues raised by the UN SDG program, which include the following questions: how to eliminate widespread poverty and





hunger, how to address the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable, how to assert the rights and dignity of all (especially of women and the disadvantaged sectors), how to heal and secure the planet, how to take decisive action on climate change, and how to promote peaceful and inclusive social arrangement? And can these questions be answered in the context of today's Covid-19 reality?

As it is, the pandemic is compounding an already multifaceted planetary crisis buffeted by environmental crisis, huge economic divides between the 99 percent and the 1 percent of society, and socio-political conflicts everywhere. Covid-19 has revealed a broken public health system in both developed and developing countries.

At the country level, the multi-sided planetary crisis is illustrated by what is happening in the Philippines: health-care crisis, surge in joblessness and hunger in society's laylayan, fragile environment, precarious employment and uncertain economic future amid a crumbling neoliberal economic order.

So what can be done? The quick answer: the policy-makers should consider the Covid-19 crisis as an opportunity to do some rebalancing in the development framework that the government has been adhering to. They include the following:

First, there is a need to rebuild the public sector's capacity to deliver the public services needed by the people, foremost among which are health care and social protection in these pandemic times. As we wrote in an earlier column, the Covid-19 pandemic has reaffirmed—in all continents—the central role of the State in emergency survival situations. Rebuilding the public sector capacity includes the building up of the public distribution system for the delivery of essential goods, such as relief materials for the displaced and vulnerable. It is time that we put a stop to the mindless obsession by some policy-makers on making privatization and foreign investment liberalization as the end-all and be-all of growth promotion.

Two, there is a need to shift government attention and spending away from big-ticket infra projects in favor of an alternative build-build-build infra development in support of poor communities (urban, rural, peri-urban, upland, coastal poor communities). The possible BBB projects for the poor are numerous, e.g., better housing projects for all, multipurpose community centers, fortification systems against disasters, community health centers, and so on. And the multiplier impact is enormous: stable and productive communities. But one necessary



proviso should be in place: full engagement of the poor as worker-builders of the BBB projects for the poor communities.

Third and relatedly, government should develop better mechanisms to extend social protection to all the poor and near poor. The common complaint in the last two months of ECQ and GCQ is that many have been excluded. The use by the DSWD of the 4P or CCT list of beneficiaries is patently exclusionary because the list has not been updated, migrant workers and families have not been registered in the different barangays they are temporarily residing, and political patronage is omnipresent in any system of listing of who will benefit and who will not. The solution: cover all the families in depressed communities sans the usual mean testing and time-exhausting verification by DSWD personnel. And don't forget, spending for social protection for the many, as correctly pointed out by the Keynesians, is a good and proven economic stimulus. It even becomes stronger as an stimulus if it is linked to productive job creation, no matter how temporary.

Fourth, there is a need to overhaul the architecture of Philippine integration in the global market. As pointed out in an earlier column, Factory Asia and the global value chains that some economic technocrats love to promote are being disrupted by the technology revolution, trade wars and now by the Covid-19 pandemic. No, the Philippines need not de-link or withdraw from the global market. But why put all our economic eggs in the export market where demand is on the decline? And why maintain a one-sided trade liberalization program when the trade data show that our trade deficits in industrial and agricultural products keep rising every year while industrial and agricultural jobs at home continue to plummet? Were it not for the remittances

of over 10 million OFWs, these trade deficits would have been unsustainable and would have led to a repeat of the crisis of the 1980s.

So it is high time that the trade policy regime based on false neo-liberal assumptions be overhauled or rebalanced. Such rebalancing should be accompanied by the revival of Philippine manufacturing that can be sustained by a huge domestic market of 110 million Filipinos. Why indeed can't the Philippines duplicate South Korea, which has succeeded in producing needed PPEs for their health workers and millions of test kits and face masks for their population in a relatively short time, thus enabling Korea to contain the virus spread more quickly?

Of course, trade policy reform should also be accompanied by reforms on the agricultural front. At the moment, there are controversial debates on whether it is timely for the Philippines to import once more around 3 million tons of rice when some studies indicate that production at home this year is enough. The DA has been mouthing the slogan "plant, plant, plant." But is it able to walk the talk? Is it succeeding in nudging our farming sector to become more productive and capable of meeting the food requirements of the nation? Is it prepared to junk the neoliberal agricultural deregulation policy, a policy that dates back to the 1980s? This policy has not delivered the food security promise propounded by the IMF-WB then.

Overall, Covid-19 times are times for reflection on what is the best way forward to the nation.

# HOW THAILAND CONTAINED COVID-19

WALDEN BELLO, FOCUS FROM THE GLOBAL SOUTH



**W**hen the novel coronavirus began its swift spread from China in mid-January, people in Thailand — the favorite destination of Chinese tourists — feared the worst. Thousands of Chinese visitors had come into Thailand in January, including some 7,000 people from Wuhan, then the epicenter of the viral outbreak.

In the following weeks, the country waited for the other shoe to drop. It didn't.

With the country decompressing and people returning to work under "new normal" conditions, a question many are asking is why the other shoe didn't drop. Why has Thailand performed so much better than other countries in containing the virus?

True, Taiwan and Vietnam have a better record

than Thailand, with the first recording 441 infections and seven deaths and the second 327 cases and no fatalities. But Thailand's record is nothing to sneeze at: 3,083 infections and 57 deaths, with a 96 percent recovery rate.

This becomes starkly evident when one compares the explosive rates of infections in the U.S., Europe, and Brazil. Germany is one of Europe's best performers, with its 83 million population not too far from Thailand's 70 million — yet Germany's 181,288 infections and 8,498 deaths are of another order altogether. And in Asia, if we go by the numbers, Thailand has done much better than Japan and South Korea, which are often written about as success stories.

An exhaustive study of why Thailand has managed to do better than most other big countries will probably not be available for some time to come. While waiting for that, let me take the risk of proposing an explanation stemming from my observations while stranded in Bangkok at the height of the pandemic, and from knowing something about a country I have followed over the years.

## "Soft Lockdown"

At the height of the pandemic in March and April, Thailand was on a partial or "soft" lockdown.

Public and private establishments were closed throughout the country except for hospitals, drug stores, supermarkets, takeout places, and other essential services. Wet markets were open and Bangkok's ubiquitous street food vendors continued to do brisk business. While inter-provincial bus trips and air travel were stopped, there were no restrictions on local mobility, except a curfew from 10 p.m. to 4 a.m. In Bangkok, buses, the light rail, and the subway continued to function.

A measure of disorganization attended this process, especially in the beginning. The sudden closure of businesses and factories in Bangkok, without attention to how people would survive, led to many leaving the capital in a hurry, resulting in the spread of COVID-19 cases beyond Bangkok. Also, there was a lack of national coordination, so travel became difficult across provinces. Some imposed local lockdowns so travelers could not enter without permis-

sion from local authorities.

In spite of these fumbles on the part of the political leadership, the public health authorities soon stabilized the situation. As in most other countries, public health authorities very early on discarded mass testing, saying they did not have the resources to conduct this. In its place, they put into effect an aggressive strategy of contact tracing, quarantining those testing positive, hospitalizing those with serious symptoms, and requiring international travelers arriving from "dangerous communicable disease areas" to self-isolate or, in some cases, be confined to government quarantine centers.

A critical role was played by village health volunteers (VHVs) in flattening the spread of COVID-19 at the community level. They monitored people's movement in and out of their villages, conducted home visits to check temperature, shared health information about COVID-19 and how to prevent it, recorded household health information, and reported their data to the provincial health office and then the central government afterward. There were over a million VHVs across the country, in addition to more than 15,000 public health volunteers in Bangkok.

## Thailand is not China

A popular explanation going around about why Asian countries have done better dealing with COVID-19 than the United States and Europe is that they have authoritarian governments that could quickly muster a centralized, unified response from above. The Thai case, with its military-dominated conservative government, appears to fit this stereotype, which is drawn mainly from China's response to the pandemic.

This view is superficial, indeed extremely so. For while the government did adopt an Emergency Decree, the battle against the pandemic was led by public health authorities deploying a strategy of persuading people to use face masks and hand sanitizers, observe social distancing, and stay at home. As noted above, much of this work was carried out at the grassroots level by hundreds of thousands of village health volunteers.

Polite visual and audio reminders were ubiquitous in

both public places and supermarkets. On television, COVID-19-related advice was pervasive, and one of the most watched spots was the daily 11 a.m. update of the Center for COVID-19 Situation Administration (CCSA) led by a medical doctor who laid out the numbers, offered assessments of the national and international situation, and used the opportunity to boost popular morale.

The current regime is a polarizing one. Whatever its intentions, it proved a smart decision for its military leaders to yield center stage to public health authorities with a thoroughly professional image. This was in contrast to the United States, where President Donald Trump consistently contradicted his medical experts, or the Philippines, where President Rodrigo Duterte has used police coercion and threats of shooting people instead of persuasion to achieve citizens' compliance.

Indeed, in the view of some observers, the public health authorities' response did not need the Emergency Decree, the main objective of which was, in their view, twofold: to unify a fractious ruling coalition and to contain the public criticism of the disorganization that marked the political leadership's confused response to the crisis in the beginning.

From most indications, the strategy of persuasion has been successful. Personal observation showed fairly widespread compliance with the one-to-two-meter social distancing rule, though, in the typical Thai fashion, people tried to make compliance as unobtrusive as possible to avoid hurting people's feelings. Buses and metro-rail and light rail coaches traveled at only 15-20 percent capacity, which meant people were staying at home. In light rail and subway coaches, I

never saw anyone seating on the designated empty seat separating passengers. Face mask use was universal.

#### **The Face Mask Question**

On the question of face masks, Thais did not wait for the public health authorities to tell them to wear them. They were smart to have ignored the early, foolish World Health Organization advisory discouraging people from wearing masks.

Indeed, even before the pandemic, they had already been using face masks in great numbers owing to Bangkok's high levels of air pollution, which had breached the critical limit several times in 2019. When fears of infection escalated in early January, mask wear rose to some 90 percent. Despite the WHO's ill-advised advisory, mask wear was about 99 percent by mid-March, according to my informal monitoring from riding the





subway and light rail system.

These observations have been confirmed by a recently released survey of global face mask use by a United Kingdom-based research firm, YouGov. Ninety-five percent of Thais currently wear face-masks in public, the highest of six ASEAN countries surveyed. This is in contrast to a 15 percent positive response in the U.K., 44 percent in France, and 48 percent in the U.S.

In February and March, dirty looks met large numbers of unmasked western tourists who were probably still following the ill-advised WHO directive to their governments. This had unfortunate consequences, with the controversial minister of health in early March blaming "dirty" Caucasian tourists for the pandemic, saying, "Ninety percent of Thais are wearing masks. However, none of the Caucasians are wearing masks." (Fortunately, this gentleman was not the public face of the public health system during the crisis.) However, since the WHO reversed its decision not to recommend face mask use in early April, rare is the westerner or farang who is seen without a face mask in public.

But the face mask controversy did underline one thing: that compliance with government advisories was either voluntary or secured mainly by communal pressure.

#### Hygiene and COVID-19

So what accounted for the extremely high degree of compliance to public health advisories?

My sense is that the campaign of persuasion was successful because it was built on a number of solid elements, one of them being personal hygiene. Thais are very hygienically conscious. Non-Thais quickly realize that one of the things that one never, ever does is to enter a house without taking off one's shoes. Most Thais make sure to have a change of clothes daily and to take at a minimum two showers a day — something I learned from personal experience, my late wife being Thai. Moreover, from my informal observation, these hygienic practices are not simply upper class or middle class practices, but extend to all social groups, including people in rural areas.

Culturally transmitted hygienic practices and communally enforced government advisories are not the whole story, however. What has been said so far may give the impression of a conformist society marked by a high degree of consensus.

In fact, Thailand is a turbulent society rent by social conflict.

Massive street protests marked the period from around 2004 to 2014, as populists and conservatives struggled for political control of the country. Today, a military-dominated, pro-royalist government rules, but conflict is not far from the surface.

This history of social conflict makes the high degree of consensus in the area of public health even more remarkable. Indeed, public health is one of the few non-politicized areas of social life, and public health authorities enjoy a degree of trust and confidence that other state authorities — and certainly high profile political leaders — do not have.

The consensus on public health was not always there. It arose from a number of public health campaigns, which were successful because they were not seen as being imposed from above but involved the energetic participation of civil society. The country's COVID-19 success was built on this record of cooperation between public health authorities and civil society that goes back 50 years.

When COVID-19 appeared on the scene, this relationship of trust kicked in, reconciling people to the personal, social, and economic sacrifices that would be required of them. Without this trust between civil society and the public health authorities, the country would not have seen the deployment of more than a million committed village health volunteers that played a key role in containing the spread of the virus.

#### Citizen-Supported Public Health Landmarks

There have been four landmarks in the country's history of cooperation between the public health authorities and civil society.

The first was a successful family planning campaign, perhaps the most successful in the world. While this was a government-led campaign, its success was

due to widespread civil society cooperation based on the public health system providing contraceptives to meet a widely felt need for smaller families to ward off poverty.

From 1970 to 2010, Thailand's population growth rate fell to an astonishing 0.6 percent, compared to 2.04 percent registered by the Philippines, another Southeast Asian country to which Thailand is often compared. Thailand actually had a bigger population in 1970 than the Philippines', 36.9 million to 35.9 million, but owing to successful family planning in Thailand and obstructive opposition to it in the Philippines from the hopelessly benighted male Catholic Church hierarchy, Thailand's population is currently at 69.6 million as of 2020, while the Philippines' has ballooned to 109.5 million.

The second landmark was Meechai Viravaidya's successful campaign to get Thai sex workers to wear condoms to prevent HIV-AIDS in the 1990s, the famous "100 percent condom campaign." Like the family planning campaign, this was not imposed from above. It depended on the voluntary participation of sex workers who were educated by grassroots activists and a high-profile media campaign on the consequences of not requiring their clients to wear condoms.

And like the family planning campaign, it was a huge success, with new HIV cases dropping from 150,000 in 1991 to less than 14,000 cases in 2008. HIV prevalence among sex workers working out of brothels in Bangkok dropped to 2.5 percent during that period. As Meechai jokingly told me in a 2011 interview, "Our sex workers know they are in the frontline of the war against AIDS and when they do battle, they put on their helmets. Our sex workers are very, very safe, though I am not recommending that you go out right now to find out."

The third public health-civil society campaign that had a lasting effect was the anti-littering drive in Bangkok led by Khunying Chodchoy Sophonpanich, a socialite turned activist. Known as the "Tawiset" or Magic Eyes campaign, it turned Bangkok into one of Asia's cleanest cities, and its ethos of taking responsibility not just for private space but for public space spread through the whole of Thailand. It also gained the reputation of being one of the few successful anti-littering campaigns internationally.

Again, this was not imposed from above, but involved activists mobilizing citizens, school children, business, and the media. Indeed, government took a back seat in this campaign. Though it took place more than 30 years ago, people still remember the jingle, "Tawiset, tawiset." When, years ago, I asked her the reason for the success of the campaign, Chodchoy answered, "Unlike other anti-littering campaigns, Magic Eyes didn't tell people what to do but appealed to their sense of self-respect and respect for their neighbors."

The fourth public health landmark was the country's universal health care coverage established by the populist government of Thaksin Shinawatra in the early 2000s, which provides quality and extremely affordable health care to 98 percent of the population, with funds drawn from the general income tax.

The Thai system is widely regarded as one of the most successful in the world, being credited with reducing infant mortality, decreasing sick days, and placing quality medical care within reach of the poor. True, there are long queues every day in public hospitals like Chulalongkorn University Hospital, but poor people are willing to wait, since the service delivered is qualitatively better than that provided in most private hospitals, say many analysts.

According to one person I interviewed, the universal health system "is probably the reason why Thaksin remains so popular among urban and rural poor, so that if truly free elections were allowed, his party would have a permanent majority."

Whether this observation is true or not, the fact of the matter is that the 18-year-old universal health-care program has become the cornerstone of that relationship of trust between the public health system and the people that came into play when COVID-19 came on the scene. "People were no longer turned off by the cost of medical assistance," one businesswoman told me. "They did not hesitate to seek the help of the doctors if they felt they were coming down with COVID-19."

To be sure, coercive measures have not been absent during the lockdown period, with some people arrested, indicted, or threatened with arrest under laws and directives that included the government's

Emergency Decree to deal with COVID-19. According to a recent Amnesty International report, three activists have been indicted for their staging peaceful protests, while several organizations marking the sixth anniversary of the May 2014 coup against Yingluck Shinawatra were reportedly harassed. The report also mentions the arrest and indictment of an artist who posted on Facebook that were no health checks at Bangkok's Suvarnabhumi Airport upon his arrival in March.

It is unlikely that these events made a contribution to the successful campaign against the pandemic. Indeed, with the widespread publicity they elicited, it is more likely that they detracted from the public health authorities' effort to build national unity against COVID-19.

#### **The Thai "Recipe"**

So what was the recipe for Thailand's success in containing Covid 19? It was not one of authoritarian politicians dictating from above and whipping people in line with coercive measures. To a large extent the political leadership was superfluous.

Culturally transmitted norms of personal hygiene were one ingredient. But what really made the difference was voluntary compliance of citizens and the voluntary service of hundreds of thousands of grassroots public health activists. All this built on a history of successful public health campaigns and institutions that were founded on cooperation between the public health authorities and civil society. The lesson of Thailand for the world is that a good public health system with popular legitimacy really makes a difference in times of crisis.



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