

ANNUAL REPORT

A YEAR OF UPHEAVAL



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The COVID-19 Pandemic

The spread of coronavirus and the ensuing government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic have caused drastic changes in the political, economic, social, cultural, and ecological landscapes across the countries and regions where Focus on the Global South (FOCUS) implements its work. The governments of Cambodia, India, Thailand, and the Philippines have implemented national, sub-national and local lockdowns, quarantine measures and travel restrictions with different degrees of severity and duration. Although the lockdown measures implemented in these countries were intended to contain the spread of coronavirus, they were imposed without being complemented by adequate economic and social safeguards, coherent emergency relief programs, and sound strategies for rehabilitation and recovery that addressed the needs of vulnerable population groups and sectors.

The pandemic and government responses to tackle it compounded and made visible the stark realities of long-standing and multi-generational social, economic, and political inequality in Asia. Class, social privilege, race, ethnicity, caste, gender, occupation, and age determine who are most vulnerable to the virus, and who suffer the worst impacts of the ‘pandemic package’ that has triggered the most immense socio-economic shock that the world has seen in decades. The most common response by Asian governments in the first few months of the pandemic was to impose lockdowns that severely restricted transport and travel; shut down industry and services (except those deemed essential); halted almost all livelihood and economic activities, and; closed local markets and informal vending that urban and rural poor depend on for income and food.

Despite rhetoric about support to vulnerable and marginalized groups, actual governmental support to workers, peasants, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples, rural women, urban poor and landless peoples has been meagre, insufficient and difficult to access because of systemic corruption, patronage and onerous bureaucratic procedures and requirements. In the guise of economic recovery, many governments have enacted laws and are aggressively proceeding economic plans that favour corporations and their own political interests, with little or no targeted support for local economic and food systems actors and working classes.

The Socio-economic Environment

In the midst of a global pandemic and despite strong peoples’ opposition, 15 Asia-Pacific nations signed the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership Agreement (RCEP), a trade and investment agreement skewed in favor of corporate interest that will only deepen pre-existing inequalities exacerbated by the pandemic and will further undermine peoples’ livelihoods. As domestic and foreign investments—with China being one of the largest sources of investment capital in South and Southeast Asia—in large infrastructure, energy, mega-cities, industrial agriculture, special economic zones (SEZs), manufacturing, real-estate development and tourism continue to increase, conflicts among local populations and investors over rights to land, water, and natural resources are intensifying even during the pandemic. In addition to resource rights conflicts, many such investments have negatively impacted local livelihoods, economies and working conditions.

In much of South and Southeast Asia, neoliberalism has proven to be a critical systemic problem, resulting in decades of systemic neglect of public goods and services integral to building robust public health, social welfare and food systems; social protection and justice; environmental regulations; public participation; and fundamental rights and civil liberties.

These, combined with the prioritization of global food chains, trade and investment over self-reliance have rendered much of the region's population vulnerable to food and economic shocks.

The economic downturn and aggravation of poverty, hunger and inequality resulting from the pandemic and governmental responses could not have been prevented even with government aid. The economic growth resulting from neoliberal policies that most countries have been implementing for decades is largely fragile, unsustainable, and inequitable. However, well targeted support to vulnerable populations could have ameliorated their hardships. Instead, governments chose to prioritize corporations and elite-owned businesses over workers, peasants, fisherfolk, rural women, and indigenous peoples. Although governments have bungled and continue to flounder in finding appropriate ways to address the complex economic fall-out of COVID-19, their appetites for exercising brute state power remain undiminished.

The Political Environment

Social and economic impacts have been compounded by political measures that subvert public participation, access to information, freedom of speech and association, and enable violence and criminalization of particular ethnicities, religions, and castes. Various governments in Asia including those of Cambodia, India, Thailand, Indonesia, Myanmar and the Philippines have taken advantage of the pandemic and peoples' immobility to consolidate political power and authoritarian rule, terrorize progressive groups, and further undermine human rights and fundamental freedoms.

Emergency powers invoked by governments and passed by parliaments—or that have bypassed parliaments altogether—allow ruling regimes to control all aspects of governance, administration, and security with no democratic oversight. While the fine print may vary across countries, these emergency powers share many dangerous commonalities: full control over financial allocations; power to authorize the use of deadly force through police and military; unlimited surveillance of telecommunications; control of conventional and social media (ostensibly to prevent fear and public unrest); restrictions on freedom of speech, movement, and assembly; unfettered powers to put in place any measures considered necessary in a state of emergency; suspension of constitutional rights, freedoms and due process; and the authority to determine the period of emergency.

Corrupt and authoritarian governments have continued to target anyone who dares to speak and “paint a bad image” of the government at the regional and international stage, including social media and other online platforms. Some community member representatives and progressive organizations who assert their rights have been tagged as communist-terrorists. More and more people have been imprisoned including youth activists, with others being forced to leave their homelands to avoid persecution. While land and resource grabbing have continued amid the pandemic, powerful people, business tycoons and the elite have enjoyed immunity from the law. All of these were already on the rise before COVID-19 hit and in the pandemic period, they are justified through the pretext of “protecting the public.”

For in-depth analyses and monitoring by Focus on COVID-19, please see:

<https://focusweb.org/covid-19-updates/>

<https://focusweb.org/covid-19-snapshots-from-asia/>

For more analysis on the socio-economic environment, please see:

<https://focusweb.org/covid-19-distorted-development-and-degrowth/>

For more analysis on the political environment, please see:

<https://focusweb.org/the-far-right-formidable-but-not-unbeatable/>

Adjustments in Strategy and Programme Implementation

FOCUS adopted flexible approaches and strategies in the implementation of activities during the COVID-19 pandemic. These strategies include using online platforms to initiate communication and sustain discussions and strategic planning with our allies, partners and networks, as well as engage in local, regional, and global campaigns and advocacies across FOCUS' thematic programmes. This flexibility allowed us to maintain a substantive, balanced spread of research, writing, campaigning, solidarity and support activities, from grassroots to international levels.

We were particularly proactive in our support for people's rights—urban, rural and across different sectors and constituencies—highlighting the inextricable links between rights, policies and social, economic and political trends at multiple levels during the COVID-19 pandemic. We monitored and documented how governments were using the emergency powers they assumed to weaken environmental and labour laws; push extractive and environmentally destructive projects; and persecute, harass, arrest and physically attack leaders of progressive social and student movements, human rights activists, lawyers, journalists, and anyone they considered a threat to their power.

With authoritarian states expanding their surveillance and flexing their repressive apparatus, one of the adjustments FOCUS made is to join collective discussions with our allies and partners, and examine the security implications of the measures and policies enacted by governments. We also initiated an organizational digital security training to better understand what digital platforms can be used and what technological adjustments can be made to protect our identities, the identities of the people we communicate with, and the messages we communicate in the digital space. FOCUS is considering the possibility of expanding these trainings to include other aspects of security and well-being, including physical and psychosocial in light of the continuing COVID-19 pandemic and deteriorating human rights situation.

Since March 2020, most of FOCUS' staff members across country programmes have been working from home because of lockdowns and quarantine protocols. We have not been able to conduct activities that require travel and physical meetings in most countries and we reorganized our work to maximise what we can do under these conditions. The travel restrictions and bans on mass gatherings that were particularly stringent during the onset of the lockdown and that remain in some regions and provinces have necessitated the utilization of online platforms for communication.

The lockdown and quarantine measures also prevented or limited us and our partner organizations and communities from implementing in-person activities such as conferences, popular education sessions, campaign planning, and mobilizations. This has affected many of our partners especially from grassroots communities, who had to focus on raising funds and organizing donation drives to meet their day-to-day needs due to the failure of governments to efficiently deliver much-needed public services. In response to this, FOCUS pooled COVID-19 response funds and re-allocated much of our travel budget, and provided these to small-scale farmers, peasants, artisanal fisherfolk, indigenous peoples, women, workers, and youth from different groups and communities. FOCUS also bridged grassroots groups to funder institutions so that they can build autonomous relationships and diversify their sources of funds.

Positive Impacts

FOCUS has been perceived as a trusted resource organization working to provide support and standing in solidarity with our local allies, communities and networks. We were able to achieve significant impacts in the following areas:

1. *Increased understanding and documentation of the impacts of COVID-19 on local communities and different sectors and constituencies in Asia:*

- **COVID-19 Research Study in Cambodia (co-published with Social Action for Community and Development - SACD and Cambodia Grassroots Cross-Sector Network - CGCN):** this report presents **critical issues faced by small-scale farmers and students** including but not limited to impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on their livelihoods and education. The research process resulted in building and strengthening the capacities of local communities, students, and FOCUS staff and allies who were involved in the questionnaire formulation, field survey, data analysis, report writing, and public launch. Farmers who joined the research study were able to present their findings during the public launch with audiences from civil society, academe, government and media.
- In the **Philippines**, an assessment of the **impacts of COVID-19** on grassroots partners was conducted during the onset of the lockdown. This was intended to provide a basis for allocating support to communities that were reeling from the impacts of the pandemic. The results of the assessment were also written into an article and shared with FOCUS' allies to popularize grassroots stories and experiences amid the pandemic. Another assessment was conducted with communities in December 2020 to assess the impacts not only of COVID-19 but also of the **typhoons** that hit the Philippines and the **government's intensifying authoritarian agenda**. The results of this assessment will be used as a guide for planning campaign activities in the coming year.
- From April to December 2020, FOCUS published a monthly **COVID-19 Bulletin** to highlight the stories and perspectives of grassroots communities amid the pandemic, analyze the impacts of lockdown measures and recovery programs on different sectors and peoples, monitor and expose the systemic attacks on democratic institutions, rights, and freedoms, and present alternative development paradigms including food sovereignty. The bulletin aimed to **inform the public** and **raise critical issues** on the COVID-19 situation across Asia and to provide snapshots of the different aspects of COVID-19 and **responses to it by governments, social movements, and regional-international institutions**. The bulletin includes articles, statements, webinars, videos,

and cultural performances which were updated periodically on the microsite:
<https://focusweb.org/covid-19-updates/>.

- FOCUS staff were part of the core international team that prepared the **civil society report on COVID-19 and food security** for the UN Committee on World Food Security (CFS). FOCUS staff wrote the Asia section of the report, and co-wrote and edited several other sections of the report. The full report is available at: <http://www.csm4cfs.org/csm-global-synthesis-report-covid-19/>. The Asia section of the report is also posted on the FOCUS website: <https://focusweb.org/covid-19-snapshots-from-asia/>
- FOCUS co-published two comprehensive **research papers** on the **nexus between COVID-19 and food security and global finance** respectively. These are available on the FOCUS website: <https://focusweb.org/publications/never-let-a-good-crisis-go-to-waste/> and <https://focusweb.org/publications/after-covid-19-can-we-tame-global-finance/>
- Because of FOCUS' continuing **monitoring and analysis of the pandemic and related issues/trends**, FOCUS staff were invited by organizations and social movements at multiple levels to share their analyses, contribute to collective strategy and campaign planning, and speak as advocates for food sovereignty, human rights, climate justice, global governance, public services, etc.



Shalmali Guttal from Focus on the Global South speaking on mobilizing resources to fight COVID-19 for Pandemic Pivot project

2. *Influencing public opinion on the need to rethink trade policies in the time of the pandemic:*

- **Engagements with Governments on Trade Issues and Campaign on RCEP**
 - FOCUS signed on to and supported statements calling on governments to stop trade negotiations in the time of COVID-19 pandemic through the peace clause in the WTO; and supported the proposal of India and South Africa for a waiver on TRIPS obligations.
 - FOCUS staff was invited to the government high-level meeting on Trade Impact Assessment (TIA) that was co-organised by the Ministry of Commerce (MoC) with ARISE Plus Cambodia. Trade negotiators from the MoC and other relevant

ministries, think tanks, UNIDO, economic research institutes, and representatives from the private sector were present in the meeting. During the event, the video “Say No to RCEP: The Peoples’ Voices” (<https://focusweb.org/video/no-to-rcep-the-peoples-voices/>) co-produced by FOCUS and SACD was screened twice. The opportunity to join the high-level meeting has enabled us to bring peoples’ voices and concerns to the government ministries’ representatives, specifically on the issue of RCEP. FOCUS has continued to raise peoples’ voices and amplify and highlight perspectives from the ground through various online platforms.

- FOCUS and other members of Trade Justice Pilipinas continued to engage the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) in the Philippines in the wake of the signing of RCEP and have put pressure on the government to conduct RCEP impact assessments on employment, agriculture, and public health.
- FOCUS has highlighted the issue of trade and human rights in connection with the EU’s Generalized System of Preferences Plus (GSP+) program: <https://forsea.co/duterte-has-forfeited-the-philippines-eu-trade-privileges/>
- Our media engagements on RCEP have highlighted the critical issues of lack of transparency and public participation, erosion of policy space, and negative impact on local economies that governments choose to leave out of their public pronouncements.



Video “Say No to RCEP: The Peoples’ Voices”, co-produced by Focus on the Global South and Social Action for Community and Development (SACD)

3. Publications on global economic governance, resisting corporate concentration, trade-investment, and implications of the US election results for Asia:

- FOCUS published and co-published a number of publications on these diverse topics, which are on the FOCUS website. The feedback FOCUS has received from social movements, unions, parliamentarians, civil society organizations, journalists and other readers indicate that these publications have been widely appreciated for presenting **insights and perspectives** that were not presented by other organizations, and influenced in readers’ views on the subjects.

For examples, please see:

<https://focusweb.org/publications/the-bretton-woods-twins-in-the-era-of-covid-19-time-for-an-exit-strategy-for-the-global-south/>

<https://focusweb.org/publications/rogue-capitalism-and-the-financialization-of-territories-and-nature/>

<https://focusweb.org/publications/rcep-vs-tpa-lessons-for-e-commerce-in-the-wto-hindi-version/>

<https://focusweb.org/publications/after-trump-what-the-global-south-can-expect-from-joe-biden/>

<https://focusweb.org/publications/corporate-concentration-in-agriculture-and-food/>

4. *A summary of Piketty's Capital and Ideology – bridging academe and activism:*

- In December 2020, FOCUS senior analyst Walden Bello prepared a summary of Thomas Piketty's book Capital and Ideology. The summary distills the **key ideas and data** in this important work, making it **accessible to activists, social movements and people outside academe**. The English language version can be found here: <https://focusweb.org/publications/reading-piketty-i-a-concise-and-comprehensive-summary-of-capital-and-ideology/>. The summary has been translated into Spanish, French, Italian, Thai and Chinese by volunteer translators. These can be found on the FOCUS website.

5. *Development of alternative policy proposals in Cambodia:*



Agroecology session at the Seed Festival, Siem Reap.

- FOCUS has been requested to be part of a **people's policy and alternative development process** with our trusted alliances and networks, which will take a two-year process to produce. A **farmer/peasant's policy** is expected to be developed by the end of 2021 and intended to shape national policy. To date, about 40 farmers/peasants

are already in the drafting group. Having gone through the conceptual discussions which include food sovereignty, food security and safety, as well as the role of women and men in agriculture productivity, the drafting group has strengthened its understanding of those concepts as well as the political dimensions that shape them.

- FOCUS has continued to use various approaches in implementing activities among which, the **participatory action research approach** has been key in building and strengthening peoples' power, collective leadership and mass movement. The **seed festival on "Our Traditional Seeds, our Heritage"** was co-organised/supported with various alliances, networks and communities. The event was led by local community in Siem Reap, while women farmers took the lead in the festival committee and in negotiating with local authorities, District Governor and representatives from the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishery (MAFF). Despite intimidation and harassment from the local authorities to disturb and stop the event, both the community leaders who hosted the event and those who joined from various provinces stood together and ensured that the festival was able to complete its programme. Community members brought different types of foods, seeds, non-timber forest products (NTFPs), dry fishes, herbal, and other made agricultural products to sell and share. Some farmers from other provinces expressed their wish to host this event next year in their home province.

6. *Critical analysis on the Duterte Presidency and the Implications of its neoliberal and authoritarian agenda (Dutertismo):*



Focus on the Global South's Statement on the passage of the Anti-Terrorism Law in the Philippines

- The Philippine team continued to produce **timely documentation and analysis in support of peoples; campaigns to defend, democracy and social justice.**
 - Covid-19 exposes twin crises of Neoliberalism and Authoritarianism in Philippines (May 2020): <https://focusweb.org/covid-19-exposes-twin-crises-of-neoliberalism-and-authoritarianism-in-philippines/>
 - From Lockdown to Crackdown (June 2020) Focus Statement on the Anti-Terror Bill: <https://focusweb.org/from-lockdown-to-crackdown-focus-on-the-global-south-statement-on-the-anti-terror-bill-in-the-philippines/>
 - Resist the Terror Law. Focus Statement on the signing of the Anti-Terror Law (July 2020): <https://focusweb.org/resist-terror-law/>
 - The Moribund Duterte Presidency (August 2020): <https://focusweb.org/the->

[moribund-duterte-presidency/](#)

7. Critical analysis of agriculture, food regime and pandemic impacts in India:

- As India reeled from the pandemic impacts, the Government enacted a series of far reaching neo-liberal reforms in agriculture, on which FOCUS quickly brought out a **series of publications**, highlighting various aspects of the new laws and the flawed pandemic response.
 - India Compromises Its WTO Strategy: A critical look at the 2020 agricultural market reforms: <https://focusweb.org/publications/india-compromises-its-wto-strategy/>
 - Interrogating the Food and Agriculture Subsidy Regime of the WTO: An Indian Perspective: <https://focusweb.org/publications/interrogating-the-food-and-agriculture-subsidy-regime-of-the-wto-an-indian-perspective/>
 - Farm workers during COVID: biggest casualty of neoliberal food systems: <https://focusweb.org/publications/farm-workers-during-covid-biggest-casualty-of-neoliberal-food-systems/>
 - Complete disruption: COVID-19 and agriculture in South Asia: <https://focusweb.org/publications/complete-disruption-covid-19-and-agriculture-in-south-asia/>
 - Kerala's Gendered Response to the Pandemic: <https://focusweb.org/publications/keralas-gendered-response-to-the-pandemic/>
 - India's new farm laws and underlying corporate bias: <https://focusweb.org/publications/indias-new-farms-laws-and-underlying-corporate-bias/>



Video from Focus India team in 2020 explaining why millions of Indian farmers have vowed to continue protesting until PM Modi's three neoliberal #farmbills are rescinded.

Limitations and Successes

Challenging work conditions have affected our capacity, including but not limited to restrictions in doing field work, participating in solidarity activities, organizing in-person events, relying extensively on digital technology, and several stressful political strictures.

Increasing authoritarianism, criminalisation of dissent and shrinking of civic and public spaces in the region even before the COVID-19 pandemic have made it more difficult for

FOCUS—and more so for our partners at the forefront of different struggles—to openly challenge repressive forces and corporate interests. Rights defenders, activists, and progressive peoples' organizations are facing greater violence and criminalization than before, as well as reversals of gains from past struggles. Another challenge we face is that important events and processes outpace the capacity of civil society and peoples' movements to respond effectively, and this is further exacerbated by the restrictions and limitations in the time of COVID-19.

In order to counter fake news and messages that promote religious, ethnic and gender prejudice, and narratives that justify destructive development and heavy-handed government responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, we need to reach broader audiences and ensure that the voices of FOCUS and partners are heard. However, in the current political and economic context, it is getting increasingly difficult to unite people from different sectors and constituencies around common progressive analyses, positions, and agendas. Setbacks include a) narratives of national cultural identities, nationalism and patriotism, and use of divide and rule strategies by right-wing forces; b) increased corporate power and proliferation of corporate-led governance, such as multi-stakeholderism and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR); c) the astounding capacity of capitalism and authoritarianism to adapt even in the face of an unprecedented crisis as well as their ever-evolving forms; d) the persistent systems of patronage that have been further entrenched due to the stronger need for government aid and that allow incompetent governments to continue wielding legitimacy; e) the evolution of digital technology that has been used more often to pander corporate and authoritarian interests; and f) peoples' daily lives have become harder and their livelihoods have become less sustainable due to a number of reasons including the COVID-19 pandemic, climate crisis, land grabbing, precarious work, economic insecurity, and deepening inequality.

In this era of COVID-19, charismatic politics, and right-wing and extreme authoritarian governments, there is an urgent need for the formulation of counternarratives that challenge the suppression of peoples' rights, exploitation of workers and small-scale food producers, and further enrichment of the wealthy in the name of development, national security and economic growth. Also, since the pandemic is far from over, and its full range of impacts need to be monitored regularly at multiple levels through coordinated, systemic approaches, with special attention to testimonies from populations whose voices are too often ignored in policy making, especially women.

The FOCUS COVID-19 Bulletin has allowed us to co-document, highlight, and popularize experiences, perspectives, visions, and voices from those most deeply affected by the above challenges to change the direction of policy-making and development, and to advance peoples' alternatives at multiple levels. Similarly, the publications outlined above have been effective in drawing attention to trends and events that could easily be eclipsed by the daily barrage of confusing and repetitive pandemic news, and shaping the views of our readers in a critical direction. The Bulletin also enhanced the capability of FOCUS as an organization and of FOCUS staff in formulating and implementing an effective communications and outreach strategy, expanding the reach and impact of FOCUS' campaigns, research, and knowledge products through various platforms that include traditional, conventional, and new forms of media. For instance, in addition to the bulletin, we ramped up the production of infographics and short videos in platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram.

Another set of activities that we consider important and that worked well are solidarity and mutual help activities with grassroots social movements, unions, workers, peasant and indigenous peoples' organizations, student's movements and rights advocates. These included financial and material support, as well as solidarity networking and building alliances.

FOCUS conducted a rapid impact assessment of the COVID-19 lockdown measures with partner organizations representing different sectors and peoples including women, workers, farmers, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples, students and the youth. Based on the results of this assessment, FOCUS distributed financial assistance and immediate economic relief and solidarity support including food, medicine, face masks, and grocery items to these organizations and they were able to organize community-led relief operations with the help of the funds provided.

The solidarity relief initiatives raised funds and other support for our social movement and grassroots partners and allies, including peasants, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples, workers, and the youth that have been hit very hard economically by the COVID-19 lockdowns and containment protocols. With the information and data about grassroots partners' situations and needs, we plan to raise more funds from external sources for grassroots solidarity support.

The restrictive and punitive lockdown measures implemented by governments and the remaining ban on mass gatherings, the severe restrictions on public transportation, and the depleted resources of partner communities after months of lockdown have all prompted FOCUS to postpone all in-person activities and to shift much of the work to online platforms. There have been a number of challenges in doing this, including the lack of access or familiarity with online communication platforms among communities and weak signals especially in remote areas. We have planned to organize post-lockdown discussions with grassroots organizations and campaign networks to revisit and recalibrate plans in light of the changed context but these continue to be difficult under the current circumstances.

FOCUS has been a co-organizer in webinars and online strategy meetings. We have participated, moderated, and/or initiated webinars and online discussions on COVID-19 related issues under the thematic areas to push policies towards progressive responses to the COVID emergency and related crises, push back right-wing and authoritarian policies, and influence the discourse towards alternatives.

We joined and/or were involved at different levels with emerging/newly formed international/regional networks/platforms such as Global Dialogue for Systemic Change, Progressive International, Global Network for the Right to Food and Nutrition and SoliREsp (Solidarity, Resistance, Hope). We have not left any national/international networks but have scaled down our involvement with some in light of changes in thematic priorities, staff resources, and strategic directions in response to the changed context and emerging critical issues.

