



ASIA: Reversing inequalities in power distribution to achieve SDG 16

Natasha Palansuriya, Minuri Perera and Thamindri Aluvihare

Centre for Poverty Analysis

Across the Asia region, COVID-19 has exposed unequal power distributions and their impact on the effective functioning of democratic institutions. This brief explores trends related to the independence of institutions (including legislative and judicial functions), accountability and corruption, public access to information, and data transparency. Pre-existing imbalances in power distribution have resulted in an increasing shift towards repressive and authoritarian governance, often under the pretext of pandemic management. The abuse of power and its impact on the protection of fundamental rights is apparent in the widespread shrinkage of democratic spaces. Finally, the brief analyses how vulnerable communities are being further disempowered during the pandemic, and it explores themes of economic justice, social protection and basic services, as well as the pandemic's impact on different population groups, such as undocumented persons, migrant workers and refugees, and the implications for women, children and LGBTQ+ persons. Policy recommendations highlight the importance of SDG 16 localization, the need to reinforce independent institutions including at global, regional and national levels to safeguard the democratic space, and the need for increased investment in strengthening democratic actors and institutions. It recognizes that, despite the challenges, the current context also provides an opportunity for collective action towards "Our Common Agenda", as outlined by the UN Secretary General, to reinforce the global social contract.

Introduction

Over the last several years, noteworthy progress has been made towards SDG 16 (peace, justice and inclusive institutions) in the Asia region on issues such as access to information, resilient institutions and an engaged citizenry. However, while SDG 16 is a foundational goal for the overall sustainable development agenda, achieving it in the region by the 2030 deadline remains a challenge, and COVID-19 has made the prospect of reaching this goal even more daunting. In the last year, Southeast Asia and South Asia have witnessed a decline in all the indicators under SDG 16 where data are available, while data availability itself remains a persistent and recurring barrier across the region (UNESCAP, 2021). Available data on the SDGs overall indicate that the region is on route to reach only nine out of 112 measurable indicators (UNESCAP, 2021), and nearly 40

per cent of the SDG targets cannot be measured due to the lack of data.

On the SDG 16 targets more specifically, available data indicate that the region is not on track. Faster progress in reducing violence and related deaths is essential in order to achieve SDG 16.1 by 2030. The indicators on human trafficking (SDG 16.2), justice for all (SDG 16.3) and effective institutions (SDG 16.6) show a negative trajectory that needs to be reversed to achieve these targets by 2030. And alongside SDG 5 (gender equality) and SDG 14 (life below water), SDG 16 has the poorest data availability, with fewer than one-third of its indicators being reported on by countries in the region (UNESCAP, 2021).

In Southeast Asia, there is a need to urgently reverse current trends on intentional homicide, unsentenced detainees and victims of human trafficking (UNESCAP, 2021). In South Asia, the past year alone has seen an increase in violence, including, for example, the military coup in Myanmar³ and

³ On 1 February 2021, Myanmar's military launched a coup following the country's elections, in which the National League for Democracy—headed by Aung San Suu Kyi, the de facto civilian leader since 2015—won by a landslide. The coup has returned the country to full military rule following a short span of quasi-democracy (Goldman, 2021).



violence related to the protests by farmers⁴ and students⁵ in India. Additionally, throughout the region, laws and policies are failing to address gender-based violence and violence against children and women. Since the outbreak of COVID-19 and the accompanying lockdown measures, reports from frontline workers indicate that all types of violence against women and girls, particularly family violence, have intensified, while access to life-saving services, as well as justice services, has been reduced (UNESCAP, 2021). Moreover, the issue of democratic backsliding is an increasingly potent challenge in the region, further undermining the pace towards achieving SDG 16.

Whilst the pandemic has stalled progress towards the achievement of SDG 16, it has also underscored the pertinence of governance principles: transparency, decentralization, accountability and inclusive institutions. While there is a continuing gap in terms of data availability for official reporting on SDG 16 indicators, this brief explores other data sources and the experiences of civil society actors that can help to identify overall trends in the region under the overarching theme of “power”. It also considers how the resultant dynamics have impacted the achievement of SDG 16.

The distribution of power and the way in which we organize society is at the core of governance and plays a critical role in shaping social relationships. While the conceptual understanding of power has become more nuanced over time, at its core is the understanding that it is the way in which “man” or a group of “men” realise their will in communal action, even against the resistance of others who are participating in the action (Weber, Henderson and Parsons, 2012). In relation to development, this definition translates into an understanding of how the dynamics of power concentration between various stakeholders assist or impede the achievement of development targets. As such, when analysing development goals through the lens of power, it becomes evident that inequalities in the power distribution within state structures, and between the state and its citizens, impact progress towards the achievement of these goals.

In this context, this policy brief discusses how pre-existing inequalities in power distribution within South and Southeast Asia have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and it will outline opportunities and recommendations to

address these imbalances for better policy-making in relation to SDG 16. The primary source of data for this brief was a series of virtual expert roundtables on SDG 16 emerging trends in the context of COVID-19 held in May 2021 together with online discussions on the SDG 16 Hub. The three main issues examined are:

1. The implications of unequal power distribution between state structures for the effective functioning of democratic institutions;
2. The abuse of power and the impact on fundamental rights; and
3. The further disempowerment of vulnerable communities due to the pandemic.

Emerging trends in Asia around SDG 16 since the pandemic

The unequal distribution of power is undermining the effective functioning of institutions

The unequal distribution of power within states in the region has several implications for the effective functioning of institutions and for responsive people-centred governance. The erosion of democratic institutions has facilitated a gradual shift towards repressive and authoritarian governance across the region. This is particularly revealing when looking at the following: 1) the independence of institutions (including the legislative and judicial arms of government); 2) accountability and corruption; and 3) public access to information (or data transparency).

Countries in the region have witnessed a democratic decline over the last few years, with the compromised independence of democratic institutions of foremost concern (Sahoo, 2021). At the beginning of the pandemic, some countries suspended parliamentary sittings as part of measures to address the COVID-19 pandemic. The closure of legislative bodies exacerbated concerns over the oversight of executive power and accountable and transparent governance. In many of the region’s countries, this was also accompanied by a weakened judicial sector that lacked

⁴ Farmers protested the new agricultural laws that reform the sale, pricing and storage of farm produce, which have protected Indian farmers from the free market for decades. The reforms outline rules for contract farming and allow private buyers to stockpile essential commodities for anticipated sales, which was previously allowed for government-authorized agencies only (Biswas, 2020).

⁵ Students in India protested after Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) in Delhi was attacked by a masked mob. The attack was preceded by a nationwide campaign led by JNU students against the citizenship law, which is widely seen as targeting Muslims (Dhillon, 2020).



independence. This meant that decisions on budgeting and the pandemic response were made without the usual checks-and-balances, raising concerns about transparency and accountability and increasing room for corruption.

In Sri Lanka, parliamentary sittings were not conducted for five months following the outbreak of the pandemic per an executive decision (Fonseka, 2021), while India, Malaysia and Pakistan halted the functions of their legislative arms (Kamala-Chirani, 2021; Jayasooriya, 2021; Afiq, 2021; Sahoo, 2021). In Malaysia and the Philippines, the executive further consolidated power by way of executive orders, especially with limited systems of checks-and-balances in place (Afiq, 2021; Joaquin and Biana, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2021a). In the absence of institutionalized platforms to raise concerns about pandemic response measures, legislators from opposition parties often lacked the opportunity to scrutinize stimulus packages or other responses to the pandemic. Without sufficient oversight, the risk of the abuse of power in the guise of maintaining stability has increased significantly (Nixon, 2020), and as the region rolls out plans for the procurement and distribution of vaccines, concerns pertaining to accountability, transparency and corruption have amplified (Bhargava, 2021).

As the region's countries adapted to online and virtual measures during the pandemic, they had an opportunity to make data and information more readily available and accessible to the public. However, information availability and dissemination appear instead to have become even more opaque (Acharya, 2021), despite the vital need for access to information on public financing and public budgeting, where limited resources have been reallocated for the purpose of the pandemic response (Wendling et al., 2020). Many countries in South Asia lie below the global average in terms of the transparency and accountability of how budgets are allocated and spent and how standard budget documents are disseminated (Open Budget Index, 2019; Acharya, 2021). With parliamentary proceedings deprioritized, and with the undermining of the rule of law and the independence of institutions, particularly the judiciary, both data transparency and public access to information have been further stifled (Fonseka, 2021).

The Asian region has already faced democratic regression over the past decade, with some countries gradually adopting more right-wing, authoritarian or "strong man" politics reminiscent of other parts of the world (Sahoo, 2021). Three key trends observed in this regard include: i) the

consolidation of power, ii) authoritarian governance and iii) militarization. For example, in Sri Lanka, constitutional amendments with lasting impacts on the functioning of democratic institutions and an expanded role for the military in civilian institutions are a concern (Ruwanpathirana, 2021). In Myanmar and the Philippines, there have been unprecedented attacks on trade unions and other civil society actors. In many cases, the measures put in place to respond to the pandemic are being co-opted to reinforce pre-existing authoritarian trends, with the military at the forefront of pandemic management (Lappin, 2021). Excessive use of force, unwarranted fines, restrictions on a disproportionate scale and the criminalization of non-adherence to pandemic regulations are tactics used in the region to suppress opposition and dissent. These laws are also often unequally applied, disproportionately penalizing poor and marginalized populations and benefiting those in power.

The abuse of power impacts the realization of fundamental rights

While the Asian region has been grappling with the issue of shrinking democratic spaces over the years, the pandemic has accelerated the pace. Democratic space is not merely in regression, but actively being closed (Fernando, 2021). Movement restrictions and limitations on assembly imposed due to the pandemic have curtailed the ability and space to protest and engage in public civil action. Where in-person gatherings have been limited, conversations and activism have moved to virtual spaces. While this transition circumvented some of the limitations imposed by the pandemic, it poses other challenges, such as creating more exclusion due to the digital divide or adding additional barriers to participation for persons with disabilities and other marginalized communities. This has resulted in fragmentation in the dissemination of and access to information, hindering the cohesiveness and collective action required on issues affecting a broad range of communities. These factors have amplified existing inequalities in power dynamics between differently abled populations as well as between those with and without access to information and to the Internet (SDG 16 Hub, 2021).

Civil society groups and experts in the region have raised significant concerns over how the pandemic is being used as a smokescreen, with freedom of speech being actively curtailed under the pretext of curbing mis/disinformation (Fernando, 2021). In many countries, following several years



of debate, governments have used the pandemic as an opportunity to assertively push for the criminalization of mis/disinformation (The Guardian, 2020). In Sri Lanka and Malaysia, serious ramifications are in place for people spreading mis/disinformation about the pandemic on social media platforms (Ganguly, 2021b; Ruwanpathirana, 2021; Article 19, 2021). However, without clear definitions of what constitutes mis/disinformation, this can be highly discretionary, and this step is ringing alarm bells on issues related to surveillance and the privacy of individuals participating in online discussions (Newswire, 2021).

In some countries in the region, such as Bangladesh and Indonesia, states are actively monitoring online social media platforms, and legal action has been brought against activists and civil society organizations (CSOs) who are demanding accountability and advocating on governance issues on these platforms (Civicus, 2021; Ganguly, 2021a). In others, states appear to be using strategies such as the “spiral of silence”⁶ and counterterrorism laws to reduce dissent and criticism (SDG 16 Hub, 2021). The use of tracking and surveillance techniques has been problematized for not adhering to privacy laws (Human Rights Watch, 2021b), and the use of these techniques by several states has affected journalists and human rights activists particularly hard. For example, anti-corruption activists in Indonesia have been subjected to cyberattacks and surveillance (Sukarsa, 2021), and journalists in Myanmar have been prosecuted for allegedly posting false information about the pandemic online (Reporters Without Borders, 2020; Article 19, 2020). The measures to curb freedom of expression on virtual spaces have exacerbated the pre-existing imbalance of power, further suppressing dissent and shrinking the democratic space, with a disproportionate impact on activists and interest groups working on social issues.

With weak democratic institutions and a lack of judicial independence across many countries in the region, there has also been a noticeable uptick in the rate of arrests (Wen, 2021; Human Rights Watch, 2021; The Wire, 2020), leading to overcrowded jails, adding to court backlogs, and disproportionately affecting the poor. For instance, in the Philippines, a public directive was issued under which refusing a vaccination could result in arrest (Cabato, 2021). People unable to post bail are detained in overcrowded prisons and face weeks in prison due to backlogs in processing cases

(Buan, 2021). These regulations appear to have amplified the existing inequalities in countries, especially since in practice these laws are being applied differentially depending on people’s access to power and their position in society (Santos, 2020).

Vulnerable communities further disempowered

The pandemic has led to the further disempowerment of vulnerable communities, by deepening poverty and exacerbating pre-existing social inequalities. The pandemic’s economic impact has pushed those living at the margins of poverty further down, revitalizing calls for revising the conceptual understanding of justice to include economic and social justice (Haagh, 2020). The pandemic has depressed economic growth rates in the region, affecting even the most robust economies. Pakistan, India and Sri Lanka were grappling with widening inequalities and debt commitments even prior to the pandemic, and they now face even more acute economic challenges. Pre-existing fiscal weaknesses such as low financing and the inadequate allocation of funds to health services have amplified the effects of COVID-19. For example, the 70% of Pakistan’s approximately 220 million population who live in rural areas and in poverty are being disproportionately affected by the pandemic (Kamala-Chirani, 2021). Disparities between public and private health-care facilities have widened. Those employed in the informal sector—especially women—have been adversely impacted due to a fall in disposable income, lack of savings and inadequate social protection. The reduction in income, coupled with the added burden of unpaid domestic and care work, are just some of the pandemic’s consequences that disproportionately affect women (The Asia Foundation, 2021).

As the pandemic escalated, the region’s health-care systems, which already lacked adequate resources and financial support, were rapidly inundated. Public health systems diverted all their resources towards the pandemic response and no longer have the capacity to be responsive to the population’s other needs. While certain countries in the region such as Malaysia handled the challenges of the first wave of the pandemic well, the subsequent waves tested countries’ readiness to face the situation (Walden, 2021). In others, governance challenges impacted the availability of medical services. In Myanmar, medics who have resisted

⁶ The “spiral of silence” theorizes that people’s willingness to express their opinions on controversial public issues is affected by their perception of whether their opinions are popular or unpopular (Noelle-Neumann, 1980).



the military government have been arrested and attacked, with others have been compelled into hiding despite the critical need for medical professionals during the pandemic (Gelineau and Milko, 2021; International Crisis Group, 2020; Lappin, 2021).

Further, inequity in global vaccine rollout has compounded these challenges and raised questions about the disparities in access to vaccines between states as well as the role of corporate interests impacting the distribution of vaccines globally (UN Economic and Social Council, 2021). Inequalities in the distribution of vaccines have also been manifested at a local level, where in some countries a limited number of vaccines were dispersed to the public in a way that favoured individuals with connections to those in power (Kazmin, 2021).

Undocumented persons, migrant workers and refugees are another key demographic that has been disproportionately affected by the pandemic (Jayasooriya, 2021). While these communities were subject to stigmatization and other forms of discrimination and marginalization prior to the pandemic, their lack of social protection has resulted in even greater deprivation of both income support and the provision of basic services during the pandemic. For instance, the migrant community in Malaysia, approximately 30% of whom are undocumented (Too, 2021), has been under duress due to the circumstances brought on by the pandemic. However, as Malaysia is not a signatory to the International Convention on Migrant Workers, migrants have little access to redress mechanisms (Jayasooriya, 2021). Furthermore, rising xenophobia against migrants has meant more intense stigmatization and discrimination, which has limited their access to vaccines, health-care services and birth registrations.

The pandemic period has also recorded an uptick in human rights abuses, with an especially negative impact on women, youth in the informal sector, persons with disabilities and people suffering from chronic illnesses. A distinct correlation is observed between pandemic-related lockdown measures and the burden of violence, including in particular: rising levels of gender-based violence; increasing crackdowns on protests; and mounting attacks against civilians by state actors in certain regions. Women, children and LGBTQ+ persons are also key among those disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. The marginalization and discrimination that these communities already suffered prior to the pandemic has been intensified, while access to support has been restricted (The Equity Initiative, 2020).

Women have been at the forefront of providing health-care services, and thus have been hit especially hard by the pandemic (Fernando, 2021). For example, women are often over-represented in the health and informal sectors and also often bear a disproportionate share of the burden of unpaid care. In addition, reported incidents of domestic violence have also increased during the pandemic, with little to no protective measures or access to services during the lockdowns (Kamala-Chirani, 2021; Sukarsa, 2021). In Sri Lanka, the police cited the redirection of limited public resources to pandemic management as the reason for turning away victims who sought help, raising alarms across the community and among activists (Thomas, 2021). This occurred in a context where the country was recording a rise in instances of domestic violence and the abuse of both women and children (UNFPA, 2020). Indonesia likewise reported a significant increase in violence against women and children (Sukarsa, 2021). Similarly, in Pakistan a study revealed that a fall in income during the COVID-19 lockdown increased partner violence (Munir et al., 2021), although it is not evident whether incidents of domestic violence and gender-based violence have increased or whether the reporting of incidents has become more robust during the pandemic (Zaman, 2021). Nevertheless, there is little doubt that the impact of pre-existing volatile conditions and inequalities vis-à-vis vulnerable communities have been reinforced and exacerbated due to the pandemic, with long-term consequences carried forward into the foreseeable future (Changyong and Svirydzenka, 2021).

Policy recommendations

The pandemic has exacerbated the pre-existing power imbalances in the region, adversely impacting the effective functioning of democratic institutions and fundamental rights, particularly in regard to vulnerable communities. Powerful stakeholders have used the pandemic as a means of consolidating more power, while vulnerable groups have been further marginalized due to unequal responses to the pandemic and shrinking access to services. In many of the region's countries, governments have sidelined the legislature and judiciary, a process that has been accompanied by an increase in violations of fundamental rights and the further marginalization of vulnerable communities. Consequently, progress on achieving peaceful, just and inclusive societies has been reversed in much of the region.



The following policy recommendations have been derived from the findings outlined above in this brief.

Strengthen independent commissions to protect fundamental rights and advocate for the rights of women and marginalized groups

The protection of independent oversight mechanisms is critical for achieving SDG 16. Specific indicators under SDG 16 focus on the protection of national human rights institutions (SDG 16.b.1), but also recognize the role of civil society, the media and human rights defenders in protecting fundamental rights (16.10.1). This includes enabling measures to protect whistle-blowers. Ensuring that the media remains independent can contribute to increasing transparency and accountability in the region. Independent commissions also have an important role to play to combat discrimination and advocate for addressing systematic changes to deal with concerns such as deepening gender inequality due to the pandemic or the further marginalization of poor and informal sector workers.

Reinforce the role of oversight institutions for checks on executive power

To prevent democratic backsliding, it is critical to protect the independence of institutions such as the judiciary and civil services, including the police, especially given trends in the region towards the politicization and militarization of independent actors. Linked to this is the need to support the continuation of oversight by legislative bodies to curb the over-reach of executive power in putting in place pandemic regulations that risk undermining fundamental rights. This can also be critical to stemming the increasing militarization taking place across the region. Addressing these factors can help to redress some of the imbalances in the distribution of power.

Protect digital civic space and promote access to information

In an age where information is power, the lack of information available to the public is disempowering citizens and reinforcing the pre-existing imbalances of power between state and citizen. With the pandemic came a shift globally to digital spaces, which should allow governments to become more transparent and provide greater access to information. This can include providing means of participating online in

policy-making decisions, sharing information on budgets, and transparency on procurement and other processes. At the same time, safeguards also need to be put in place in terms of data privacy and protection as well as to prevent the censorship and targeting of online activists. The protection of fundamental freedoms and space for dialogue and debate online must also be actively promoted. While mitigating the spread of misinformation and hate speech is necessary, oversight is needed to ensure that these concerns are not used to undermine freedom of expression.

Understand the risks and opportunities of large-scale digitalization

The COVID-19 pandemic has also presented more opportunities for engagement with CSOs and policy makers across the region, as virtual platforms have proliferated and become more accessible. Information and communication technologies can assist decision-making and political participation by bringing together citizens and representatives and improving levels of transparency, responsiveness and accountability. Potential risks, such as unequal access to technology, must be kept in mind in order not to exacerbate existing inequalities. In addition, governments can renew the social contract, reduce corruption and rebuild trust through the use of technology to promote access to information and to encourage participation in decision-making processes. However, the use of technology must be complemented by collective action so that access to information leads to measurable change.

Link SDG 16 with international human rights frameworks

A national commitment to SDG 16 as an instrument of accountability can be strengthened, both as a means of achieving sustainable development goals but also, as the pandemic has illustrated, to better respond to the significant negative impact on people's lives and livelihoods that an absence of effective governance can have. Aligning SDG 16 with international human rights commitments can be one way to reinforce accountability. This includes monitoring progress on SDG 16 as a means of holding governments accountable, including by aligning Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) with the Universal Periodic Review. Mainstreaming human rights into SDG 16 reporting can strengthen the process further, and this can also increase gender sensitivity and sharpen a focus on the rights of marginalized groups. Adopting a rights-based approach to SDG 16 can assist in



further scrutinizing the abuse of power and in finding new avenues for reinforcing accountability.

Establish a regional human rights mechanism

While many countries in the region have national human rights institutions that aim to ensure accountability for human rights violations and actively safeguard the space for other human rights defenders, the region does not have an independent regional human rights mechanism (the Association of Southeast Asian Nations [ASEAN] subregion has an inter-governmental human rights mechanism). There is a need for a robust regional mechanism that complements national-level independent human rights institutions. A regional mechanism could foster better regional cooperation and support the expansion of civic space and the protection of media freedom and human rights, while strongly advocating for leaving no one behind. Regional mechanisms such as ASEAN and the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) can also play a role in supporting intra-regional cooperation and encourage countries to prioritize support for the achievement of peace, justice and inclusion across the region. This can help to develop effective and inclusive governance, safeguard civic space and empower citizens and civil society.

Improve local ownership to help achieve SDG 16

Localizing SDG 16 by incorporating SDG 16 targets in strategic plans and/or national policy-making processes is necessary to renew national commitment and move the agenda forward. Local planning and the strengthening of local governance structures can be entry points for localization, with a focus on facilitating local ownership of goals, including SDG 16, and their inclusive implementation. A sense of local ownership can be fostered by raising public awareness regarding the SDGs overall and SDG 16 in particular. One way to do this is to develop a communication strategy in partnership with local civil society organizations, so as to empower citizens to contribute to the achievement of the goal.

Invest in data partnerships on SDG 16

Lack of data on SDG 16 indicators has consistently been a major issue for the region. While correlations have been made between a sustainable and resilient recovery from COVID-19 and the availability of data, in practice the pandemic has further diverted and subverted the region's ability to

collect reliable data (Afiq, 2021). Data partnerships between national statistical systems, youth organizations, civil society, local and regional governments, international organizations and others are necessary if the data gap is to be bridged. Disaggregated data (based on gender, disability, rural communities, indigenous populations, etc.) should be recognized and incorporated into Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs). Given the lack of data to measure the achievement of SDG 16, supporting subnational actors to collect and analyse data using more localized capacity through partnerships between the UN, local communities and CSOs can be effective. This would allow for more inclusive involvement of local communities in data collection processes, and more granular, grassroots data can be accessed, thus giving a more accurate representation of the ground situation on SDG 16. This data can then also be better used to inform local-level policy-making. In doing so, horizontal and vertical linkages between and within the region can also be improved.

Strengthen policy-making through partnering with civil society and building social movements

Local and national governments can be more effective by building partnerships with CSOs, who are often more connected with marginalized communities. By adopting a multi-stakeholder approach, governments can work together with local NGOs/CSOs in the development and implementation of policies. Building these partnerships is necessary to prevent the further closing of civic space in the region. Active collaboration and collective action among different CSOs are also necessary in political environments where there may be hostility to oppositional views. Promoting inclusive policy-making processes that involve marginalized communities in decision-making is not without controversy, especially as many of the region's countries are becoming increasingly polarized. However, it can be a significant step in redressing power imbalances.

Prioritize funding aimed at achieving SDG 16, especially at the local level

The lack of capacity of most governments in the region has challenged the reporting, reviewing and achievement of the SDGs. In order to boost the institutional capability of local governments and other local actors, the international community should prioritize funding towards decentralized and localized initiatives to support progress on SDG 16 as well as to ensure an effective pandemic recovery. Grassroots actors



are often on the frontline of pandemic response and recovery, and investing in their capacities to respond can have a significant impact on human welfare at the local level. Moreover, a coordinated approach to supporting SDG 16 can help maximize the impact of the resources allocated as well as facilitate learning among partners. Addressing the gap in resources promotes a level playing field for the realization of SDG 16 goals locally and internationally.

Facilitate cohesion between international and domestic agendas

Localizing efforts towards achieving SDG 16 will not be fruitful unless there is international cooperation. Multilateralism should be re-invigorated by strengthening the global social contract. To this end, it is imperative to facilitate cohesion between international and domestic mechanisms regarding SDG 16. Going forward, it is pivotal that SDG 16 and its corresponding targets and indicators are integrated into national development processes, fostering horizontal linkages at a national and regional level, while reiterating national commitments on sustainable development by 2030. The pandemic has presented an opportune moment to advance “our common agenda” and reinforce the global social contract. Seizing this opportunity to strengthen regional cooperation as well as international cooperation and multilateralism can advance the achievement of SDG 16 and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development overall.

Authors

Natasha Palansuriya is a Senior Research Professional working on the thematic areas of Social Cohesion and Reconciliation, and Diasporas and Development. She is currently completing her PhD, where her research focuses on the Sri Lankan Tamil diasporas’ transnational engagement in the transitional justice process of Sri Lanka. Natasha also has a Master’s in International Politics and Human Rights from City, University of London.

Thamindri Aluvihare is a Research Professional at the Centre for Poverty Analysis. She holds a Bachelor’s Degree in International Studies at Monash University and a Master’s Degree on Arts in International Relations from the University of Colombo. She has previously worked with local and international civil society organizations in Sri Lanka and in public service focusing in conflict-affected areas. She is currently exploring the nexus between digital media transformation and social cohesion at CEPA.

Minuri Perera is a Junior Research Professional at the Centre for Poverty Analysis. She holds a BSc Honours Degree in International Development from the University of London and a BA Honours Degree in Economics specialising in Trade and Industry from the University of Colombo. She is currently working under the Sustainable Development thematic at CEPA.



REFERENCES

- Acharya, N. (2021). *SDG 16 trends and emerging issues in the context of COVID-19*. South Asia Expert Roundtable. Panellist. SV, UNDP.
- Afiq, M. (2021). *SDG 16 trends and emerging issues in the context of COVID-19*. Southeast Asia Expert Roundtable. Panellist. SV, UNDP.
- Article 19 and the Protect Consortium (2020). *Briefing Paper: Freedom of Expression Concerns Related to Myanmar's Covid-19 Response*. <https://www.article19.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2020.08.31-COVID-19-briefing-paper-Myanmar.pdf>
- Article 19 (2021). *Malaysia: Emergency Fake News Ordinance has severe ramifications for freedom of expression* (23 Jun). <https://www.article19.org/resources/malaysia-fake-news-ordinance-severe-ramifications-freedom-expression/>
- Biswas, S. (2020). "What has brought India's farmers to the streets?". British Broadcasting Corporation (3 Dec). <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-55157574>
- Bhargava, V. (2021). *Engaging Civil Society Organizations to Enhance the Effectiveness of COVID-19 Response Programs in Asia and the Pacific*. ADB.
- Buan, L. (2021). *PH solution to pandemic arrest problems? Holding areas*. Rappler (1 Jun). <https://www.rappler.com/nation/holding-areas-philippines-solution-arrest-problems-covid-19-pandemic/>
- Cabato, R. (2021). *Philippines' Duterte threatens to arrest anyone refusing to get vaccinated* (22 Jun). https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/duterte-philippines-arrest-vaccine/2021/06/22/9ac3eed8-d337-11eb-b39f-05a2d776b1f4_story.html
- Changyong, R. and K. Svirydzhenka (2021). *Policy Advice to Asia in the COVID-19 Era*. International Monetary Fund.
- Civicus (2021). *Activists, Journalists continue to face reprisals as COVID-19 law exacerbates violations in Cambodia*. <https://monitor.civicus.org/updates/2021/06/24/activists-journalists-continue-face-reprisals-covid-19-law-exacerbates-violations-cambodia/>
- Dhillon, A. (2020). "Students protest across India after attack at top Delhi university". *The Guardian* (6 Jan). <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/06/students-injured-in-india-after-masked-attackers-raid-top-university>
- Fernando, P. (2021). *SDG 16 trends and emerging issues in the context of COVID-19*. Southeast Asia Expert Roundtable. Panellist. SV, UNDP.
- Fonseca, B. (2021). *SDG 16 trends and emerging issues in the context of COVID-19*. South Asia Expert Roundtable. Panellist. SV, UNDP.
- Ganguly, M. (2021a). *Limiting Free Speech Undermines the Fight Against Covid-19*. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/02/24/limiting-free-speech-undermines-fight-against-covid-19>
- Ganguly, M. (2021b). *Sri Lanka Uses Pandemic to Curtail Free Expression: Police Ordered to Arrest Critics in Military-Led COVID-19 Response*. Human Rights Watch. <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/03/sri-lanka-uses-pandemic-curtail-free-expression>
- Gelineau, K. and V. Milko. (2021). "In Myanmar, The Military and Police Declare War on Medics". AP News (6 Jul). <https://apnews.com/article/only-on-ap-myanmar-business-science-coronavirus-pandemic-3b4c3e6d711b5eac1209a2c8fd90b2b4>



- Goldman, R. (2021). "Myanmar's Coup and Violence, Explained". *The New York Times* (29 May). <https://www.nytimes.com/article/myanmar-news-protests-coup.html>
- Human Rights Watch (2021a). *Malaysia: Dangerous Backsliding on Rights: Free Speech, Migrants Threatened, Police Unaccountable* (13 Jan). <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/13/malaysia-dangerous-backsliding-rights>
- Human Rights Watch (2021b). *India: Spyware Use Violates Supreme Court Privacy Ruling* (26 Aug). <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/08/26/india-spyware-use-violates-supreme-court-privacy-ruling>
- Haagh, L. (2020). "Rethinking Democratic Theories of Justice in the Economy after COVID-19". *Democratic Theory*, 7(2), pp.110-123.
- International Crisis Group (2020). *Conflict, Health Cooperation and COVID-19 in Myanmar*. <https://www.crisisgroup.org/asia/south-east-asia/myanmar/b161-conflict-health-cooperation-and-covid-19-myanmar>
- Jayasooriya, D. (2021). *SDG 16 trends and emerging issues in the context of COVID-19*. Southeast Asia Expert Roundtable. Panellist. SV, UNDP.
- Joaquin, J.J.B. and H.T. Biana (2021). "Philippine crimes of dissent: Free speech in the time of COVID-19". *Crime, Media, Culture*, 17(1), 37-41.
- Kamala-Chirani, F. (2021). *SDG 16 trends and emerging issues in the context of COVID-19*. South Asia Expert Roundtable. Panellist. SV, UNDP.
- Kazmin, A. (2021). "India's Covid vaccine rollout favours the wealthy and tech-savvy". *Financial Times*. <https://www.ft.com/content/538bc0a3-d3e0-45ef-8f19-1d14b1365f9f>
- Lappin, K. (2021). *SDG 16 trends and emerging issues in the context of COVID-19*. Southeast Asia Expert Roundtable. Panellist. SV, UNDP.
- Munir, M. M., Munir, M. H. and U. Rubaca (2021). "The Shadow Pandemic: Violence against Women in Pakistan during COVID-19 Lockdown". *Journal of International Women's Studies*, 22(5), 229-248.
- Newswire (2021). *Forwarding & sharing fake news: Notice from the Police* (7 Jun). <https://www.newswire.lk/2021/06/07/forwarding-sharing-fake-news-notice-from-the-police/>
- Nixon, S. (2020). *Can Malaysia's stimulus package revive the economy in the absence of reform?* (5 Mar). <https://www.eastasi-forum.org/2020/03/05/malaysias-myriad-reform-challenges-await-action-2/>
- Noelle-Neumann, E. (1980). *Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion, Our Social Skin*. Piper, Zurich/Munich.
- Open Budget Index (2019). *Open Budget Survey 2019: Budget Transparency Scores*. https://www.internationalbudget.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/2019_Ranking_EN.pdf
- Reporters Without Borders (2020). *Myanmar journalist jailed for two years for reporting Covid-19 death* (22 May). <https://rsf.org/en/news/myanmar-journalist-jailed-two-years-reporting-covid-19-death>
- Reporters Without Borders (2021a). *World Press Freedom Index*. <https://rsf.org/en/ranking/2021>
- Reporters Without Borders (2021b). *RSF's 2021 "Press freedom predators" gallery – old tyrants, two women and a European*. <https://rsf.org/en/news/rsfs-2021-press-freedom-predators-gallery-old-tyrants-two-women-and-european>
- Robins, S. (2020). *Coronavirus Indonesia: People caught without facemasks forced to dig graves and get into coffins*. Sky News [online]. <https://news.sky.com/story/coronavirus-indonesia-people-caught-without-facemasks-forced-to-dig-graves-and-get-into-coffins-12099172>



- Ruwanpathirana, T. (2021). *SDG 16 trends and emerging issues in the context of COVID-19*. South Asia Expert Roundtable. Panellist. SV, UNDP.
- Santos, A. (2020). "Poverty punished as Philippines gets tough in virus pandemic". Al Jazeera (13 Apr). <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/4/13/poverty-punished-as-philippines-gets-tough-in-virus-pandemic>
- Sahoo, N. (2021). *SDG 16 trends and emerging issues in the context of COVID-19*. South Asia Expert Roundtable. Panellist. SV, UNDP.
- SDG 16 Hub (2021). *E-discussions On SDG16 Trends and Emerging Issues in The Context of Covid19*. SV, UNDP.
- Sukarsa, T. (2021). *SDG 16 trends and emerging issues in the context of COVID-19*. Southeast Asia Expert Roundtable. Panellist. SV, UNDP.
- The Asia Foundation (2021). *COVID-19 and the New Normal for Women in the Economy in South Asia*. South Asia Economic Policy Research. <https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Covid-19-The-New-Normal-for-Women-in-the-Economy-in-South-Asia.pdf>
- The Equity Initiative (2020). *Vignettes of Equity: A Glimpse into COVID-19 in Southeast Asia*. <http://www.equityinitiative.org/news/vignettes-of-equity-a-glimpse-into-covid-19-in-southeast-asia/>
- The Guardian* (2020). *Covid used as pretext to curtail civil rights around the world, finds report* (09 Dec). <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2020/dec/09/covid-used-as-pretext-to-curtail-civil-rights-around-the-world-finds-report>
- The Wire (2020). *Now, Pinjra Tod Activist Natasha Narwal Booked Under UAPA* (30 May). <https://thewire.in/government/delhi-riots-natasha-narwal-uapa-pinjra-tod>
- Thomas, K. (2021). *Domestic Abuse Survivors Turned Away by Police* (1 Jun). <https://roar.media/english/life/current-affairs/domestic-abuse-survivors-turned-away-by-police>
- Too, T. (2021). *SDG 16 trends and emerging issues in the context of COVID-19*. Southeast Asia Expert Roundtable. Panellist. SV, UNDP.
- UN (2021). *Our Common Agenda – Report of the Secretary-General*. https://www.un.org/en/content/common-agenda-report/assets/pdf/Common_Agenda_Report_English.pdf
- UN Economic and Social Council (2021). *Unequal Vaccine Distribution Self-Defeating, World Health Organization Chief Tells Economic and Social Council's Special Ministerial Meeting*. Press Release. <https://www.un.org/press/en/2021/ecosoc7039.doc.htm>
- UNESCAP (2021). *Asia and the Pacific: SDG Progress Report 2021*. New York: United Nations Publication.
- UNFPA (2020). *Bringing the shadow pandemic to light*. <https://srilanka.unfpa.org/en/news/bringing-shadow-pandemic-light>
- Walden, M. (2021). *Malaysia, once praised by the WHO as "united" against COVID, has gone back into lockdown*. ABC News (14 Jan). <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2021-01-14/malaysia-covid-19-outbreak-state-of-emergency-case-numbers/13036038>
- Weber, M., Henderson, A.M. and T. Parsons (2012). *Max Weber: the theory of social and economic organization*. Mansfield Centre, Ct: Martino Publishing.
- Wen, J. (2020). *COVID-19 Hiding Human Rights Violations in Southeast Asia*. Human Rights Pulse Blog. <https://www.humanrightspulse.com/mastercontentblog/covid-19-hiding-human-rights-violations-in-southeast-asia>



Wendling, C., Alonso, V., Saxena, S., Tang, V. and C. Verdugo (2020). "Keeping the Receipts: Transparency, Accountability, and Legitimacy in Emergency Responses". *IMF Special Series on Fiscal Policies to Respond to COVID-19*, Fiscal Affairs Department, Washington DC.

Zaman, S. (2021). *SDG 16 trends and emerging issues in the context of COVID-19*. South Asia Expert Roundtable. Panellist. SV, UNDP.
