

Adapting and responding to the pandemic: civic spaces in Southeast Asia

by Nicola Nixon

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People keeping distance before entering the public market in Muntinlupa City, Philippines

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Civil society organisations (CSOs) count among the unsung heroes of COVID-19 pandemic response efforts in Southeast Asia. In the early months of the pandemic, CSOs across the region responded swiftly to calls for help, providing food, clean water, healthcare, essential supplies, and resources to vulnerable communities that were at risk of being underserved or overlooked by government efforts.

CSOs such as YASMIB in Indonesia, the [Isaan Land Reform Network](#) in Thailand, or the Young Feminists Collective in the Philippines, concentrated their efforts at the immediate needs of local communities. [LAPAR](#) in Makassar, Indonesia, and [PACOS](#) in Sabah, Malaysia, moved swiftly to establish coordination mechanisms within civil society and with governments to provide essential food items and masks to those with least access.

Other CSOs, such as Malaysia's Centre for Human Rights and Community Security and the [Women's Organisations Network](#) in Myanmar, focused on getting information to isolated and marginalised communities, including specific constituencies, such as displaced migrant workers. Other CSOs, such as [National Rural Women's Coalition](#) in the Philippines, provided information to local governments on the plight of isolated rural communities so as to inform policies that could address the implications of the pandemic for the most vulnerable. Women's groups everywhere intensified their efforts, particularly for women and girls experiencing or at risk of violence, as domestic violence rates began to climb as the stresses of lockdown and economic hardship intensified.

These kinds of efforts have repeated themselves across Southeast Asia in recent months. For decades, Southeast Asian civil society has filled gaps in local governance by providing basic services to the poorest and most marginalised communities. Focusing on health, food, and information needs, CSOs throughout the region have been working since the first outbreak to help minimise the

pandemic's impact. In many cases, CSOs responded to the crisis faster, more nimbly, and more effectively than governments.

In March and early April 2020, researchers from [The Asia Foundation's offices in Southeast Asia interviewed 47 CSOs about their responses to the crisis and the challenges they faced as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic](#). The research covered Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Thailand, and Timor-Leste.

The health and economic crises caused by COVID-19 have created many hurdles for CSOs, especially for those operating in areas with low or no internet connectivity. In the face of existing and novel difficulties, many CSOs have managed to be tremendously helpful during COVID-19 lockdowns, serving both in the background and on the frontlines, delivering healthcare services, critical information, essential supplies, and education.

Often the first jobs lost because of COVID-19 were among low-wage, self-employed, informal, or migrant workers. Bereft of income, the newly unemployed have received vital sustenance from CSO emergency response initiatives, such as food delivery, fundraising and information. CSOs have often acted as valuable intermediaries between vulnerable communities and local governments, particularly for populations who find engaging with authorities threatening.

As we are seeing globally, [working women frequently lost their jobs during the lockdowns](#), since many are lower earners, informal workers, or expected to take care of children unable to attend school. Dominant patriarchal norms and values in many Southeast Asian countries affect women's ability to voice their opinions and exercise financial independence, access to information, and other rights and freedoms.

In the face of myriad constraints, many CSOs doubled down in their determination to reach vulnerable groups, responding to critical needs by providing resources and advocacy. Many of these efforts have had to be creatively engineered to fit the realities of social distancing. For example, to assist the elderly and persons with disabilities, an Indonesian CSO provided online health consultations in partnership with local health practitioners.

CSOs are also holding governments to account for their responses to the crisis. Some CSOs, for example, have continued to raise concerns over the accuracy of official pandemic data in Indonesia, Timor-Leste, and Myanmar, where few COVID-19 cases have been reported; they are engaged in dialogue with authorities on the importance of testing and maintaining accuracy of official numbers.

Holding governments responsible for the fair treatment of their citizens during the pandemic also involves making sure that officials do not ignore human rights violations amid COVID-19 responses. Many countries have granted their governments emergency powers to counter the damage threatened by the pandemic. For example, a ministerial decree in Thailand allows its government to screen media reports for inaccurate information, with journalists facing up to five years in prison for spreading what the government determines to be false information. The Philippines, too, established severe penalties for spreading false information about the pandemic, and anyone who does so could face heavy fines or up to two months in jail. Many CSOs have raised concerns that governments will take advantage of these emergency powers to silence critics, remove freedoms, and increase control not only now but in the longer term.

Moreover, CSOs that focus on human rights work have been especially hard-hit as engagement in – and support for – human rights advocacy has taken a backseat to more pressing health and economic concerns.

As we enter the tenth month of the pandemic, it is clearly far from over. CSOs and the vulnerable communities they serve need sustained support from donors in order to continue their work and help communities avoid the broader ravages of the pandemic, particularly as poverty and inequality are set to rise. In many cases, social and economic lockdowns have greatly reduced CSO operational capacity, leading to cancelled events, reduced salaries and decreased services. These effects, in turn, have highlighted the necessity of donor flexibility during this time. In order to keep responding to the needs of Southeast Asia's most vulnerable populations, CSOs will need support to cover the added costs of new and adapted activities, including the shift to online work.

Furthermore, the COVID-19 pandemic has shone a light on the crucial role civic spaces play in representing peoples' voices, distributing reliable information to isolated or offline communities, and holding governments to standards of equitable social change and economic growth. Yet despite this role, in recent years, with democratic backsliding in parts of the region and with reduced external funding, civic spaces have been increasingly difficult to sustain.

CSOs are striving to represent citizens' interests and provide populations with resources during this time of crisis. Southeast Asia's CSOs and civic spaces are proving to be crucial components in a whole-of-society response to a global pandemic. While they are ideally placed to play their important role in weaving together the threads of social cohesion in a post-pandemic world, whether they have the opportunity to do so – and whether civic spaces will continue to close, contort, be refreshed or re-open – remains to be seen.

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Read the full report [here](#). The blog is part of the [#COVID-19 and Asia](#) series.

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