

## **ASEC PARTNERS & COVID-19 CRISIS**

**By Datuk Dr Denison Jayasooria**

ASEC hosted a Zoom discussion on Saturday April 4, 2020 where 16 members from 11 Asian countries participated. It was a fruitful time of sharing from country experiences on what is happening at the grassroots, the impact of COVID-19 and the resilience of local communities in Asia.

### **Acts of solidarity**

We heard story after story of how at the grassroots people are assisting each other in a spirit of solidarity. Most of the organisations are working towards supporting vulnerable families on the ground. This we heard of from Ms Diordre Moraes of LEADS Sri Lanka where they are providing provision to affected families. In Thailand, the rural farmers are sharing their village produce with city folks. Likewise, Mr Kumar Loganathan of ASSEFA, South India shared of how their agricultural producers as well as dairy milk producers continue to supply the food needed by other especially in the cities. While milk sales are down they have to innovate towards converting them into powder at their cooperative milk processing plant.

Mr Kon Onn Sein from Malaysian Community Foundation shared that the indigenous organic farms are better insulated due to the distance from the urban centres. His project in Malaysia continue to produce vegetables for sale in the urban locations through consumer networks. Mr Rajan Samuel and Sam Peter of Habitat India saw their grassroots work in the villages and urban areas enabling them to address the critical issues with the support of the private sector. Mr JM Niswi of Sarvodaya Society highlighted how they are directly working closely with government through their National Taskforce in addressing critical COVID-19 concerns.

### **Vulnerability of sections of society**

Dr Jagdish Kumar of COMMACT India raised the issues faced by domestic migrant workers who were on the move. In India about a million migrant workers are on the move but a majority were unable to reach their rural villages before the lock down. They are now stranded and vulnerable at this time of COVID-19 lock down. Ms Poonsap Tulaphan of Homenet Thailand raised the issues facing street vendors and the informal sector in the city of Bangkok during this lock down period. As they do not have social security and their inability to undertake their micro business has created much hardships and they as an organisation are advocating greater government support. As the city of Bangkok is dependent on tourist, they are all badly affected. Ms Kit Pau of Hong Kong Institute for Harmony & Sustainability, raised about the increasing unemployment in the city and its social impact.

Others like Esther Ding from Baray village in Cambodia mentioned that although COVID-19 is not a major threat in the villages however as there are no tourist and visitors to their homestay and café in the village, the local economy is being affected. Mr Sunil Chitrakar of Fair Trade, Nepal highlighted the lack of tourist as impacting the economy negatively and the sale of the produce of the grassroots people is also affected. Dr Nethalie Verceles of the Philippines highlighted the gender dimension of the crises and the potential rise of domestic violence during the lock up period.

## **Capacity of CSO/NGOs**

Some of the CSO leaders shared of the scarcity of medical testing kits, a point raised by Abdul Awal of the Noakhali Rural Development Society, Bangladesh. On the issues pertaining to the welfare for their 600 over staff during this crisis period, Dr Eri Trinurini of Bina Swadaya, Indonesia highlighted this matter. She also noted that the fasting month coming will have an impact as Indonesia is the country with the largest Muslim population in the world. Most of the organisations shared how they were short of funds to address the emergency needs

## **Post COVID-19 & building community solidarity & resilience**

The call is to strengthen grassroots solidarity in order for local community to be more resilient in time such as this. Dr Ben Quinones of ASEC Philippines noted that community kitchens would be a good way to restore community solidarity and the close link between the rural and the urban. Another suggestion made was for home gardens and also urban farming as a way of ensuring food security. Mr Shigeru Tanaka of PARC, Japan highlighted the advocacy role of Japanese CSOs to ensure a portion of Japanese development aid continues to be channelled through CSOs

## **A strengthened ASEC during the Lock down**

This lock down period has provided the need for Asian partners to work closely. Therefore ASEC has strengthen its outreach to 14 countries with a leadership team of 26 people. Asia is large continent with 53 countries including countries like China and India with large population. However the Asian SSE leaders are determined to strengthen the regional role noting that in the post COVID-19 rebuilding of communities, social solidarity economy is a need strategy to address the issues of vulnerability, resilience and cohesion in our societies. ASEC will be working with RPESS intercontinental partners in advocacy and capability building in the post COVID-19 rebuilding period.

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