

SOCIAL SCIENCE AND COVID-19



The
Southeast
Asia
Response



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SOCIAL SCIENCE AND COVID-19

THE SOUTHEAST ASIA RESPONSE

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Foreword

The outbreak of COVID-19 in Southeast Asia, as in the rest of the world, has exposed the interaction of biological and socioeconomic processes; the implications of health and socioeconomic inequity on well-being; and the structural ramifications of public health and healthcare governance. Despite its biological origins, understanding the pandemic, and controlling and reducing its human costs, requires a dynamic and granular knowledge of social, economic, cultural and political processes. Social sciences – and arguably the humanities as a whole – and the knowledge social scientists produce, with their critical engagement with how our societies work, are fundamental ingredients in any effort to discuss or find actionable measures that are applicable to real-world conditions.

This may not be a new idea, but it's one that's often overlooked. Prussian physician, Rudolf Virchow, while studying a typhoid outbreak in central Europe, stated as far back as 1848 that disease spreads 'in the cracks of society'¹ and that 'medicine is a social science'.² More recently, in

the context of the HIV-AIDS epidemic at the end of the last century, institutional responses clearly embraced the notion that epidemics were tightly intertwined with social and cultural phenomena, not just an intractable medical issue.

What Can We Say About COVID-19, Two Years into a Global Pandemic?

The Global Development Network (GDN) and the Asia Research Centre (ARC UI) at Universitas Indonesia joined together to mobilize a group of social scientists in 11 countries in South and Southeast Asia: Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, The Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Timor Leste and Vietnam. We asked this group to answer a number of common questions related to the mobilization of social scientists and social science knowledge in national COVID-19 responses.

The 12 chapters (a regional overview and 11 country notes) that follow, are the result of this rapid, cross-country effort. The aim is to stir debate on the role national and regional social research can and should play in responding to the

1. See the insightful discussion by Ed Yong on this: <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2021/09/america-prepared-next-pandemic/620238/>

2. Virchow's work has been described as one of the "neglected classics of social medicine". <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/pdf/10.1111/1467-9566.ep10778374>

ongoing COVID-19 crisis, but also in crises we can reasonably expect to come.

The issues discussed here relate to:

- The inclusion of social scientists in scientific commissions/ad hoc advisory bodies at different levels of government, and their influence within and outside them.
- The emergence of research funding opportunities for COVID-19 research in the social sciences, from national and international sources.
- Research policy interactions (international, national and local) at different levels (planning, implementation and evaluation).
- Researcher-led initiatives set up by social scientists in support of COVID-19 responses.
- Emerging research agendas on social sciences and COVID-19.

While the authors of the compendium discuss how social scientists have mobilized, they also throw light on how they have contributed to illuminating overlooked aspects of the current crisis, in an official or voluntary capacity, answering the question: *what has been the contribution of social sciences and social scientists to COVID-19 responses?*

Social scientists have a special relationship with the notion of 'the public', not only in questioning its definition and importance. Through their social research work, they 'are, do and make' the public too.³ This reflection should form part of the broader debate on how to place knowledge and collaboration at the centre of systemic efforts to build more resilient societies. COVID-19 is both a crisis and a wake-up call to revive this discussion.

This initiative was possible thanks to the programmatic and financial support from the Knowledge for Democracy Myanmar Initiative at the International Development Research Centre (IDRC), Canada. The project is also part of GDN's global 'Doing Research' initiative – an ambitious program to generate systematic comparative evidence on the state of social research capacity in the 'global South'.

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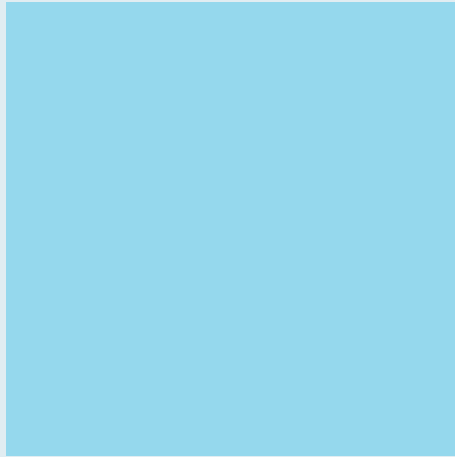
3. Mark Carrigan and Fatsis Lambros. *The Public and Their Platforms: Public Sociology in an Era of Social Media*. Policy Press, 2021. Page 8

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Southeast Asia



The role of social sciences in COVID-19 responses in Asia

Highlights

1. There is a lack of presence of social scientists in national responses to COVID-19 in Asia.
2. National responses are largely state-driven, with variations in local-level implementation; they often view the pandemic as a security and medical issue, overlooking its socio-cultural dimensions.
3. When social scientists are involved in policy responses, their work is generally technocratic in nature, with a preference for generalization and modelling over qualitative and participatory social analysis.
4. COVID-19 research is predominantly funded by national governments, with a bias toward natural sciences, while foreign funding shows a greater degree of support for social sciences.
5. Outside of official structures, social sciences play a critical role in exposing the social dimensions of health and in researching inequalities and vulnerabilities that have been exacerbated by the effects of the pandemic.
6. Alternative discourses among social scientists are widely captured by mass and social media, helping to inform public discourse and, in some cases, influence policymaking.

COVID-19 forces us in Asia, as in the rest of the world, to come to terms with the structural shortcomings in our environmental, economic and health systems. The pandemic has brought old vulnerabilities to the surface and deepened existing fractures, while triggering new challenges. Now, more than ever, is the time for social scientists to contribute to much-needed multi-dimensional approaches and help define a better shared future for the 21st century. Yet the experiences of the region, as presented in this Compendium, compel us to reiterate the urgency of including social science insights in formulating a comprehensive and effective response to the pandemic and its long-term impacts – as well as for future crises we will face together.

The Compendium summarizes the findings of a rapid assessment conducted by the Global

Development Network and the Asia Research Centre, Universitas Indonesia, with support from the Knowledge for Democracy Myanmar Initiative at the International Development Research Centre, Canada. The four-month regional effort aims to shed light on the role of social sciences and scientists in and for COVID-19 responses in a number of Southeast and South Asian countries (Bangladesh, Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Vietnam and Timor Leste). Leading social scientists in the selected countries studied the mobilization of social sciences during the pandemic in their respective settings. Through a combination of literature reviews and interviews with key stakeholders, they examined four main aspects: the formal inclusion of social science knowledge and scientists in COVID-19 response mechanisms; funding for social research in regards to the pandemic; research-policy interactions; and current and emerging initiatives led by social scientists in the region. The objective is to share experiences among social scientists in Asia and beyond, align common concerns and consider relevant actions.

Mainland Southeast Asia was the first region outside of China to report COVID-19 transmission. Remarkably, however, COVID-19 did not spread as rapidly and fatally here as in the highly-impacted continents of Europe and the Americas. With the exception of Indonesia and the Philippines, and to a certain extent Malaysia, the region as a whole had a relatively low prevalence. It was only in 2021, against expectations, that

Southeast Asia turned into a global epicenter, with cases growing rapidly and peaking during the months of July and August – to the point that Indonesia had the highest mortality in the world, and countries that had previously been spared, such as Vietnam, were fully engulfed by the pandemic. The reasons for this regional timeline, as well as some of the variations among countries, range from socio-cultural and economic factors to geographic and genetic characteristics. Government responses and the degree to which a ‘whole-of-government’ and inclusive approach has been employed, also played an important part. As the authors show, the way each country has calibrated short-term containment measures with longer-term economic and political concerns, combined with the specific epidemiological features, has produced a variety of situations across countries and over time. Political contexts also have a strong influence on shaping the nature and effectiveness of COVID-19 responses. In the most extreme case, in Myanmar, the coup d’état in February 2021 and its aftermath severely undermined the COVID-19 response.

In spite of significant contextual differences, our research found that governments in the region have opted for a top-down and partial approach. In spite of it being a multi-dimensional crisis, the pandemic is being treated merely as a medical and security issue. When national commissions have been established to control the pandemic, they have been dominated by bureaucratic personnel and in a number of countries, including Cambodia and Thailand, by military personnel.

Scientists, when present, consisted of medical specialists and macro-economists, with no demand for sociologists, anthropologists and humanities experts. Laos is an example of the significant contribution of economic institutions – particularly the National Institute for Economic Research (under the Lao Academy of Social Economics Sciences) – in developing financial interventions to support the economy and affected sectors. In the limited instances when (other types of) social scientists are involved in government programs, it is generally for the management of large data sets and statistical information, with preference given to research that promises ‘generalizability’. In some countries, such as Indonesia, collaborations with scientists were mainly at lower administrative levels, with local governments experimenting with interdisciplinary evidence-based responses.

The overall scarcity of social scientists in the COVID-19 pandemic differs from past national health interventions, such as during the HIV epidemic in Thailand or for the uptake of family planning, immunization and oral rehydration therapy in Bangladesh. It also implies a failure by policymakers to recognize the social dimensions of health: to be effective, efforts to prevent COVID-19, including the use of masks and social distancing, requires behavioural change and an understanding of the different socioeconomic and cultural contexts that enable people to comply (or not) with containment measures – all specialties of the social sciences. Likewise, insights on how people perceive vaccines and the

quality and risks associated with them are crucial to an effective delivery of mass vaccination programs.

The response to COVID-19 highlights the broader lack of appreciation among contemporary governments for the potential contribution of social sciences to society. This is reflected in the bias toward the ‘hard sciences’ in research and educational budgets and the dismantling of humanities and social science institutions. From analysis of COVID-19 research funding and reviews of published research in both English and local languages, it appears that investments, unsurprisingly, have been geared toward medical sciences and biomedical engineering. This raises questions, however, about the far smaller level of support for public health and economics, and the minimal interest in social research. In part, this is because social sciences are perceived to be of little economic value, but also, as in the case of Cambodia, institutional actors are often wary of critical and independent research findings. Input from extra-institutional actors (researchers and research organizations) is often seen as a form of hostile criticism rather than constructive support. When social science research is funded, it is mainly commissioned and technocratic in nature. The case of Malaysia also shows that COVID-19 research grants favor social scientists who can quickly repurpose their research or are already in multidisciplinary groups.

In low-resource countries, where foreign donors play a dominant role, we see a greater variety of social research, especially on social

protection responses and on the inequitable ways COVID-19 and containment measures affect the poor and disadvantaged. More generally, corporate, bilateral and international donor funding that comes through universities, think tanks and CSOs helps to widen informal spaces in which social scientists collaborate with non-government actors – as well as government counterparts sympathizing with public intellectual movements – providing alternatives to official discourses and interventions. The case study of the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies shows how external funding (local and international) was crucial in enabling the Center to fulfill its multiple roles during the pandemic, which ranged from involvement in government policymaking to helping marginalized communities survive.

In spite of the limitations, social scientists try to affect policy decisions through informal or pre-established institutional channels – although their degree of influence depends largely on their proximity to those in positions of power. Some also collaborate with CSOs to highlight the overlooked sides of the pandemic in public forums and media. Scientists from more critical schools of thought are often engaged in social movements with non-government activists and other stakeholders. Together, they strive to ensure governments are accountable in their policies and for providing adequate health and social services to those most affected by the pandemic. The issues raised include: transparency and accuracy of official data; appropriateness and timeliness

of containment measures; securitization of the COVID-19 response and the invasiveness of new apps and technologies; the inadequacy of social provision measures for informal workers and marginalized communities, especially the urban poor, migrants and refugees; the lack of disaggregated data and a gender-sensitive approach; educational concerns for children of poor households; mental health issues; and mismanagement in vaccine procurement and distribution. The findings, shared by the media and on online platforms, have sparked dialog and encouraged new discourses among the public; in some countries, this has helped to influence government decisions and resulted in policy revisions.

Social scientists have also worked with NGOs and community organizations, contributing to community initiatives and relief, as well as self-help efforts. Examples of such partnerships have been documented in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand, including for programs that provide local food and aid, and improve employment opportunities. These initiatives have proven effective and responsive. However, they are often in response to a lack of access to basic services that should ideally be provided by the state. Once more they point to the lack of government interest in the social aspects of the pandemic and the subsequent failure to provide adequate social protection, particularly to the most vulnerable.

Paradoxically, it would seem that for social scientists, being on the fringes has allowed

them to be more responsive and adaptable in highlighting the plight of those marginalized by the pandemic. Their exclusion from government processes has, in a sense, enabled them to have more of an impact in public arenas. However, working outside of institutional frameworks implies that containment measures have not benefited from contextual insights that are essential to better understand and address the spread of the pandemic. Systemic failures in enabling safer behavior continue to be ignored; individuals are blamed for their non-compliant behavior, with no effort to understand the constraints to behavior change. Moreover, broader social inequalities and their root causes remain overlooked, and are not mainstreamed into society-wide approaches.

As we start to talk about living with COVID-19 and post-pandemic recovery, it is imperative for social scientists to challenge the structures and overcome the political barriers that prevent a more integrated approach – one that views the pandemic as more than just a health crisis.

This is also pertinent to other multi-dimensional crises that we face, most notably the climate emergency. In examining the power imbalances within the sciences, as well as between social scientists and the policy community, we can unpack the connections and disconnections between social sciences and COVID-19 policy response in Southeast Asia. We can then advocate for a much-needed integrated framework to tackle the pandemic – one that takes into account the human and contextual factors that affect people’s ability to cope with catastrophes. The COVID-19 pandemic is a defining moment for the social order and for those who study it. Only by enhancing the visibility and credibility of existing research and expanding the space for greater involvement in policy formulation and implementation, will we ensure that the social sciences can fully contribute to halting the pandemic and to reshaping our common future in a more sustainable and just manner.

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Bangladesh



Social Science and COVID-19: Bangladesh Response

Highlights

1. There has been no national demand for social science research in Bangladesh and, in many cases, social scientists have not been included in the pandemic response.
2. There are limited funding opportunities for social science research in Bangladesh. Most government funds are directed toward medical research; as such, most social science research funding comes from regional and international donors.
3. There is limited interaction between researchers and policymakers – except when policymakers are required to refute findings from research outputs.
4. Despite not being formally invited to share their recommendations, many social scientists continued to undertake research and offer policy recommendations through their widely disseminated online activities, including media launches, webinars, online platforms and online dialogs.
5. Emerging research agendas focus on understanding and addressing the needs of vulnerable communities impacted by the pandemic, such as vulnerable women, refugees and school-going children.
6. There is a need for an integrated framework to tackle the pandemic that can only be achieved through a multi-sector approach that includes social scientists in response and decision-making at the highest levels.

Background

Since 8 March 2020, when Bangladesh reported its first confirmed case of COVID-19, the number of infections in the country has grown significantly. As of September 2021, there have been upwards of 1.52 million cases and 26,684 known COVID-related deaths.¹ However, the statistics for deaths and infected

1. As of 8 September 2021; retrieved from COVID-19 Dashboard – the Center for Systems Science and Engineering (CSSE) at Johns Hopkins University (JHU).

cases in Bangladesh do not capture the reality on the ground because of inadequate testing and tracking. A survey in two slums in Dhaka and one in Chittagong found that 71% and 55% of the participants respectively tested positive for COVID-19 antibodies, indicating that they had most likely been infected with a mild case of the virus at some point (Dhaka Tribune, 2021). For the 2019-2020 fiscal year, Bangladesh had one of the lowest budget allocations for the health sector (only 4.9% of the total budget) in South Asia (NBR, 2019; CPD, 2019) and the second-lowest doctor-to-patient ratio (UNDP, 2020). The surge in caseloads has overburdened the country's under-resourced health systems, despite the government and private sector responses to the crisis (UNDP, 2020; Anwar et al, 2020).

In this country note, we identify and explore the role and contribution of social scientists in the COVID-19 response. We look at the different enablers and barriers to providing inputs and insights for the COVID-19 response, as well as emerging funding opportunities, changes in engagement with social scientists (if any), and initiatives by and emerging research agendas for the social sciences at national level and in the future.

Methodology

Bangladesh's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has not been well-documented (Chowdhury & Misha, 2020). For this country note, we had to rely on journal articles, recommendations published by social scientists,

reports, blogs and newspaper articles on the issue. As this country note explains, social scientists have not had a strong influence on Bangladesh's response to the pandemic and, as such, it was difficult to find relevant citeable information. Much of the discussion presented here comes from the James P Grant School of Public Health, BRAC University (bracjpgsph.org/), informed by the author's (Sabina F. Rashid) role as a medical anthropologist during the pandemic. The pandemic is still unfolding in the country. As such, information presented here is, in many ways, limited by the social and professional networks and experiences of the researchers, any gray and published literature, including reports from different departments and institutes under BRAC University, and the Bangladesh Health Watch citizens' platform established in 2006 (bangladeshhealthwatch.org) – a platform dedicated to improving the health system through evidence-based research and policy advocacy.

The Role of Social Scientists in COVID-19 Responses

The Inclusion of Social Scientists in Scientific Commissions/ad hoc Advisory Bodies

The response to the COVID-19 pandemic in Bangladesh has been largely biomedical and clinician-led in terms of the strategic approach in the initial phase. As the cases in Bangladesh started to rise in March 2020, the government began developing the National Preparedness

and Response Plan for COVID-19, based on WHO guidelines. A predominantly clinician-led taskforce was formed to take decisions relating to COVID-19.

The absence of social scientists in the response has been noticeable, particularly given that the inputs of social scientists and other stakeholders have been sought in other government interventions (Chowdhury & Rasheed, 2020) such as for family planning (Munshi & Myaux, 2006), immunization (Jamil, Bhuiyan, Streatfield & Chakrabarty, 1999), and the uptake of oral rehydration therapy (Cash, 2021), among others. In fact, these interventions in the 1980s and 1990s were incredibly inclusive, engaging the community at a variety of levels, in partnership with researchers, NGOs and other key stakeholders in the country. As such, it is surprising to note the lack of engagement or the failure to seek out recommendations from outside of government as the pandemic unfolded in March 2020. It could be argued that the sudden nature of the pandemic and the lack of global direction and uncertainty as it unfolded across countries was an important factor.

The National Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19 details the formation of different national- and local-level committees to address

the pandemic. However, these committees seem to lack the inclusion of different community-level stakeholders (Chowdhury & Rasheed, 2020). Upon reviewing the National Preparedness and Response Plan for COVID-19, there appears to be no known social scientists or economists on any of these committees (Chowdhury & Rasheed, 2020).

The Emergence of Research Funding Opportunities for COVID-19 Research in the Social Sciences, from National and International Sources

Bangladesh – namely, the Social Science Research Council (SSRC)² – is part of the Association of Asian Social Science Research Councils.³ The Council funds research on a variety of topics; its most recent call for proposals (2022-2023 cycle) included ‘COVID-19 Health Systems’ and ‘Economic Impacts of COVID-19’.⁴ However, the Council is not as visible as it should be, and the total amount of funds available for interested researchers is unclear. The most recent available figures on the SSRC’s website⁵ seem to indicate a budget of approximately 12.5 million BDT (equivalent to 145,000 USD) allocated for research. It remains to be seen whether the SSRC will produce research related to the pandemic in the current or future cycles.

2. <https://ssrc.portal.gov.bd/>

3. <https://aassrec.org/>

4. SSRC call for proposals _bn (plandiv.gov.bd)

5. SSRC Budget _bn (portal.gov.bd)

Despite the existence of the SSRC, funding opportunities for social science in Bangladesh are extremely limited. Most government funds for research are directed toward medical research rather than the social sciences. For example, the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare – particularly, the Medical Education and Family Welfare Division – issued a call for research (TBS Report, 2021) but the majority of the research areas were for clinical and medical studies (epidemiology, new treatments, genetics and experimental/translational medicine, biomedical engineering, non-communicable diseases, etc.). While none of the topics – with the exception of research on endemics and pandemics – cited COVID-19 specifically, the implication was that priority would be given to COVID-19 research. Though the research topics seemed primarily biomedical, there is an argument that the studies on endemic/pandemic outbreaks, innovative medical education and/or the health delivery system could allow for a social science lens.

Research policy interactions (international, national and local) at different levels (planning, implementation and evaluation)

While there is engagement on a policy level with economists and clinicians, this is not the case for social science practitioners. As mentioned earlier, the two national committees for COVID-19 do not include any economists or social scientists

(Chowdhury & Rasheed, 2020). This means there is limited interaction between researchers and policymakers. While researchers have hosted a number of dissemination meetings and policy dialogs – for example, through Bangladesh Health Watch – there is limited uptake and engagement from the policy level, except when policymakers are required to refute the findings from research outputs (Bangladesh Health Watch, 2020).⁶

However, several institutions have played an important role in generating and sharing evidence on COVID-19. While there is no concrete proof that the research had a direct impact on policy, the findings did spark dialog and discourse across the country. These wider conversations – and the continuous reporting in newspapers on the state of COVID-19 and its impact across the country – undoubtedly impacted government decisions and policies around COVID-19.

Researcher-led Initiatives in Support of COVID-19 Responses

Despite not being formally invited to share their recommendations, many different researchers, including social scientists, continued to undertake research and offer policy recommendations through their widely disseminated online activities, including through media launches, webinars, and online platforms and dialogs. At

6. <https://bangladeshhealthwatch.org>

BRAC James P Grant School of Public Health,⁷ we began undertaking rapid assessments and surveys of marginalized groups and communities. For example, during the pandemic, the School completed 16 studies, with a further 29 ongoing, including rapid and qualitative surveys that focus on the socioeconomic and health conditions of vulnerable groups in the country, to assess the impacts of lockdown measures on diverse communities (<https://covid-bracjpgsph.org/>). The research focuses on six main areas⁸ – based around different centers within the School – such as gender, health and urban equity, universal health care, non-communicable diseases, implementation science, and the humanitarian crisis. The BRAC Institute for Governance and Development,⁹ led by an economist, focused more on the governance and economic repercussions of the pandemic; while the Centre for Peace and Justice, another multi-disciplinary academic institute at the University, led by a barrister, focused on the Rohingya refugee camps.

Emerging Research Agenda on Social Sciences and COVID-19

Social scientists are committed to exploring and understanding the various socioeconomic implications of the pandemic. With these new

emerging areas of research,¹⁰ we expect that social scientists will seek out funding and spaces to ensure sufficient and in-depth exploration of these topics, which include the following:

- Socioeconomic aspects (livelihoods vs. risk of COVID-19): a more holistic approach to understanding debt and its impact on peoples' lives, gender dynamics, social and economic networks, and emotional distress.
- The impacts of COVID-19 on the most vulnerable populations in Bangladesh (urban poor, ethnic minorities, sexual minorities, etc): their experiences of deepening poverty, discrimination and exclusion, and the social, economic and political impact on their lives, including on health and wellbeing.
- The impacts of COVID-19 on Rohingya refugees: the diverse risks, vulnerabilities, coping strategies and challenges among this heterogenous population.
- The impact of the nearly two-year-long education shutdown and its adverse effects on school-going children, adolescents and their families.
- The impacts of the pandemic on the lives of migrant workers: the risks, vulnerabilities, coping strategies and challenges, and the impacts on social relationships and families.

7. <https://covid-bracjpgsph.org/>

8. <https://bracjpgsph.org/centres.php>

9. <https://bigd.bracu.ac.bd/studies/covid-19/>

10. This list is not exhaustive.

- The gendered impact of COVID-19: the risks, vulnerabilities, coping strategies and challenges among all genders.
- Vaccine hesitancy and appropriate communication messages: research on sociocultural, religious and other barriers (i.e., restricted mobility, lack of access to the Internet, lack of information, inability to register) to address fears, rumors and other challenges related to vaccine uptake among diverse, disadvantaged populations.

Conclusion

The response to the COVID-19 outbreak has been largely clinical and biomedical, with extensive national packages rolled out. However, there have been irregularities reported in the distribution of relief, food and cash materials. There has been, thus far, no national demand for social science research and, in many cases, social scientists have not been included in the pandemic response. Unfortunately, this translates to policies that lack an inclusive and nuanced lens – and a failure to address the impact on diverse vulnerable communities and populations who need support. There is a need for an integrated framework to tackle the pandemic that can only be achieved through a multi-sector approach and the inclusion of social scientists in response and decision-making at the highest levels.

Brief Bios of the Authors

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Cambodia



Social Science Research and COVID-19 Responses in Cambodia

Highlights

1. No social scientists have been appointed to the COVID-19 commission, which is dominated by senior government officials with military experience.
2. Local research initiatives and funding opportunities are not well established in Cambodia; consequently, the limited number of social science researchers or research institutions have to look overseas for donors.
3. Given the socio-political environment in Cambodia – known as ‘hegemonic authoritarianism’ – the institutional actors (power holders) consider the critical research findings of extra-institutional actors (researchers and research organizations) as an intrusion on their authority rather than a form of constructive support.
4. The political economy and political control of social science research in Cambodia have restricted researcher-led initiatives, either by individual social scientists or organizations, in support of COVID-19 responses.
5. The emerging research agenda for social science research tends to focus on the impacts of COVID-19 and the roles of digital communication and technology during the pandemic, rather than the COVID-19 response.
6. The relationship between social science research and COVID-19 response in Cambodia is characterized by the extent to which the social science research environment and academic freedom are influenced, or even restricted, by those in power.

Background

As COVID-19 spread to Cambodia in early 2020, many media outlets began to cover the potential trajectory of the pandemic and the impacts on the country. Few research projects were initiated to look at how the government responded to the pandemic and its impacts until the number of infected people started to increase and the government began imposing restrictions on movement and lockdowns in March 2020 and April 2021 respectively. The

adverse impacts of lockdown restrictions on the economy, food supply chains, poor communities, garment industries (as supply chain were severely disrupted), education and the ability to repay loans were widely reported by commentators, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and local and international media outlets. Local and international NGOs, research institutions, think tanks and bilateral agencies commissioned research initiatives on the impacts of COVID-19, with the aim of informing the COVID-19 response and policymaking. This paper seeks to understand how social scientists, in particular, contributed to the COVID-19 response, and the factors that enabled and hindered their contribution.

Methodology

Based on a review of relevant documents, media reports and interviews with key experts, this paper analyses: i) the role that social science research and scientists played in national commissions for COVID-19 response; ii) the emergence of research funding during the COVID-19 pandemic; iii) how social science influences policymaking; iv) researcher-led initiatives in Cambodia; and, (v) emerging research agendas for the social sciences and COVID-19. While there are many types of research related to COVID-19, this paper looks at academic and evidence-based policy research

that employs social research methods that seek to inform and influence COVID-19 responses.

The Role of Social Scientists in COVID-19 Responses

The Inclusion of Social Scientists in Scientific Commissions/ad hoc Advisory Bodies

Several sub-committees were established by the government to tackle and contain the COVID-19 pandemic. The supreme commission, namely the national committee for COVID-19 response, is chaired by the Prime Minister and supported by deputy prime ministers and the ministers of interior and defense. No social scientists have been appointed to the commission, which is dominated by senior government officials with military experience. However, scientists and medical doctors working in the public health sector have been appointed, given their primary roles in infectious diseases. Many public health academics and policy researchers with a social science background complained that:

There is no systematic response. It is a military response; where there is a foe... we fight... the government response is inconsistent and ineffective... there are national guidelines... but the interpretation of the guidelines is difficult to understand...¹

1. Academic public health researcher (virtual, 10 July 2021)

The impacts of the responses and measures to contain or prevent the spread of COVID-19, including lockdowns, have not been well studied or have had limited input from scientific studies. Some social researchers acknowledged that the response or guidelines produced by the national committee of COVID-19 response might have been adapted from lessons learned from other countries and from World Health Organization (WHO) guidelines, which have incorporated social expertise.² The Director of WHO has acknowledged the vital contribution of the opinions and expertise of interdisciplinary scientists in fighting and responding to the COVID-19 outbreak: “This outbreak is a test of solidarity – political, financial and scientific... to fight a common enemy that does not respect borders.... Research is an integral part of the outbreak response.”³ While global-level organizations recognize the importance of interdisciplinary expertise, including social science, the inclusion of scientific opinion and research is highly contextual, and far from apparent in countries with an authoritarian leadership, as in China where social science struggles to influence policymaking (Hu and Sidel, 2020).

The emergence of research funding opportunities for COVID research in the social sciences, from national and international sources

Both academic and applied research funding in Cambodia is largely driven by foreign donors or regional partners who seek collaboration, more often than not, with individual academic researchers/consultants; a few have also partnered with local academic institutions and organizations. Based on the interviews for this research note, I categorize research funding opportunities as small, medium (between US\$50,000 to less than a million) and large grants (mostly provided by international research institutions and NGOs). As public and private university systems in Cambodia have not set up a system for receiving small- or medium-scale research funding, many foreign researchers collaborate with local researchers using individual contracts, whereby local researchers are employed as collaborative consultants or co-investigators and are paid directly by the foreign institutions. In other instances, individual researchers have received grants and fellowships, mostly small ones around US\$10,000-\$50,000 per grant award, from foreign institutions to carry out research in the country.

The Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport recently launched a new funding scheme, the ‘Research Creativity and Innovation Fund’ (RCI Fund). Researchers from both private and public education institutions can apply for financial support of between \$500 and \$380,000 per

2. Public health researcher (virtual, 03 July 2021)

3. WHO Director-General Dr Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus: <https://www.who.int/news/item/12-02-2020-world-experts-and-funders-set-priorities-for-covid-19-research>

grant to carry out research on digital innovations for the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution', applied agricultural research, and 21st Century pedagogy. These themes also seek to support research on education and COVID-19 responses.⁴

Research Policy Interactions (International, National and Local) at Different Levels (Planning, Implementation and Evaluation)

In this study, the interaction between social science research and policymaking is characterized by institutional and extra-institutional processes. Through these two channels, social science research has sought to influence and inform policymaking for COVID-19 response in Cambodia. However, the effectiveness of these channels is contingent upon the relationship between social scientists and policymakers.

While extra-institutional processes provide a means of interacting with policymakers, including the COVID-19 response commissions, their effectiveness is limited due to the exclusionary nature of the political system. Exclusivity is a tactic of the 'pluralistic hybrid regime', whereby civil society and multiple parties exist in name only. Those who dominate

the hybrid system allow, but limit, the participation of non-partisan actors. Many of the researchers and organizations interviewed for this research note confirmed that officials and policymakers officially and publicly refute research findings that are critical of the government.⁵ Officials often cite the limitations of the research, particularly in terms of sampling, methods and the lack of collaboration with officials, as the basis for their rejection. For instance, academic research widely cited in media outlets claimed that a coronavirus similar to COVID-19 (with a 90% match) was found in horseshoe bats in Cambodia (Lacroix et al., 2017). On the basis of methodological issues, the government immediately rejected the findings – although, informally, they acknowledge the results of the research. Whether or not research findings are incorporated in government policy is often difficult to determine.

However, research conducted jointly by UN organizations and the government tends to gain more leverage than informal institutional policy influences. A United Nations Development Programme assessment of the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable and poor communities, for example, resulted in targeted cash distribution programs, mostly in rural areas.⁶

4. Announcement of the MoEYS funding initiative can be found on the Ministry's Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/moeys.gov.kh/photos/pcb.3918086188217966/3918085634884688/> (Retrieved on 30 August 2020)

5. Interview with a director of a research NGO (virtual, 20 August 2020).

6. More information on cash distribution to support the most vulnerable people is available here: <https://www.kh.undp.org/content/cambodia/en/home/stories/2021/lifeline-for-vulnerable-cambodians-as-poverty-doubles-during-cov.html> (retrieved on 20 July 2021).

Researcher-led Initiatives in Support of COVID-19 Responses

Research initiatives that investigate the preparedness and responses of the government and the prevention of infectious disease are not openly encouraged.⁷ COVID-19 has unveiled many weaknesses and institutional concerns, especially in the public health and socioeconomic protection systems of the ruling government party, and research on these issues would further undermine the system's legitimacy. The government does not see this research as constructive and has limited research initiatives on COVID-19 responses led by foreign academic researchers/institutions that seek to partner with local research institutions, including the National Institute of Public Health.

Despite the political and research environment, a consortium of research institutions was established among local and international not-for-profit research organizations to receive funding for research into the impact of COVID-19, with the aim of informing and dialoging with policymakers. Policy Pulse,⁸ an initiative of The Asia Foundation, aims to improve the public's understanding of important policy reforms in Cambodia through high-quality research.

Funded by Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, this initiative calls for expressions of interest from research think tanks, NGOs and academic research institutes. Grants awarded to these institutes and think tanks have been used to research many issues, of which COVID-19 has been one of the key themes.

Emerging Research Agenda on Social Sciences and COVID-19

As the space for civil society and academic freedom has shrunk as the ruling regime leans further toward hegemonic authoritarianism, social researchers and research organizations have tended to focus more on the impacts of COVID-19, seeking to stimulate evidence-based policy recommendations, shying away from examining how the commissions respond to COVID-19 and the use of vaccinations. In addition, we observe the emergence of research on digital communication and its impacts on users, both adults and children, during the pandemic. Similar to the aftermath of the Avian influenza (H5N1) epidemic, future research agendas will include research on the repercussions of COVID-19 responses, vaccinations, and post-remediation and resilience from a health-social science perspective.

7. Interview with an academic public health researcher (virtual, 10 July 2021)

8. <https://policypulse.org>

Conclusion

The relationship between social science research and COVID-19 response in Cambodia is characterized by the means and extent to which the social science research environment and academic freedom are influenced or even restricted by institutional actors (power holders). Social science researchers from public and private universities, NGOs and research institutions are considered extra-institutional actors. They use informal or extra-institutional channels such as informal dissemination workshops, media outlets and public awareness initiatives as a means of informing and shaping policymaking – both in general and more specifically in relation to COVID-19 response policies. Institutional actors consider social science research as a form of policy and institutional liberalization that could, ultimately, undermine the leadership – or the ‘hegemonic authoritarianism’ – of those in power. The response to COVID-19 is shaped by non-social

scientific research, and research funding initiatives and agendas are minimal, or even discouraged. The social science research agenda is limited to the socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 and the roles of digital technology during the pandemic rather than an assessment of COVID-19 responses. Local funding is rare, and the ability to secure overseas research funding lags far behind that of neighboring countries.

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Indonesia



Social Sciences and the Pandemic in Indonesia

Highlights

1. The number of social science experts involved in scientific commissions and technocratic policymaking is miniscule compared to those from the hard sciences.
2. Funding that emerged during the pandemic was obtained from two major sources: the Indonesian government's state budget, and bilateral and international cooperation.
3. The power dynamics within and between the central and local governments influence the use of evidence by local governments in managing the pandemic.
4. Social science researcher-led initiatives during the pandemic emerged through community self-help groups and the role of the Indonesian diaspora.
5. The emerging research agendas in the social sciences focus on national economic recovery and the potential for building the capacity

of Indonesian researchers through international collaboration.

6. The pandemic has worsened social inequalities, which have been exacerbated by the inclusion of technocrats and the exclusion of critical social scientists within policymaking.

Background

Currently, Indonesia is grappling with the rise in confirmed COVID-19 cases. It has the highest number of infections in the Asian region together with one of the lowest testing rates (France 24, 2021). Global reports indicate that the Indonesian government was slow to respond to COVID-19 (Varagur, 2020), both in comparison to other countries in the region and in the world more generally. In this country note, we examine the inclusion (and exclusion) of social scientist; emerging funding opportunities; the relationship between (national and select local) government and social scientists; researcher-led initiatives; and new social research agendas that arose during the pandemic.

Methodology

We conducted in-depth interviews with key actors that were influential during the pandemic (government, CSOs and academics) and a document review to understand the particular role of social sciences and the relationship between the state and society.

The Role of Social Scientists in COVID-19 Responses

The Inclusion of Social Scientists in Scientific Commissions/ad hoc Advisory Bodies

Based on the involvement of social scientists in COVID-19 policy response, we identify two broad categories of social science orientation: technocratic and critical. We identify and categorize this based on the way their relationship with policymakers developed and evolved, as well as the manner in which they voiced their recommendations.

Firstly, technocratically-oriented social scientists have direct access to policymakers. They typically worked with state agencies in dealing with the pandemic, either as members of expert teams or by leading research commissioned by state agencies. Two state agencies in particular play an important role in

providing social science recommendations to the government: the COVID-19 Task Force and the newly disbanded Ministry of Research and Technology/National Agency of Research and Innovation (*Kemenristek/BRIN*). For the Task Force, scientists from various disciplines – including the social sciences – are recruited by the state as part of the expert team (*Tim Ahli*). Importantly, of the 81 experts, more than half were sourced from Universitas Indonesia. The Task Force is dominated by life science practitioners and medical experts, with only nine social scientists.

Secondly, most social scientists that are critical of government policies are excluded from bureaucratic channels, and articulate their criticism through opinion pieces, national media interviews, webinars and social media (particularly Twitter, Instagram and Facebook) as well as messenger platforms (particularly WhatsApp, Signal and Telegram). This group of scholars are more scattered and tend to operate individually or within loose networks.

The Emergence of Research Funding Opportunities for COVID Research in the Social Sciences, from National and International Sources

Several types of funding emerged during the pandemic in Indonesia: funding sourced from the state budget, and from bilateral and international

1. The Expert Team includes a number of social science experts: five economists, two legal scholars and two psychologists (COVID-19 Indonesia, 2020).

cooperation. While such initiatives might be abundant, they are scattered and difficult to map in a systematic way for the purpose of a rapid assessment. We focus on annual research grants from the state budget, organized under the Ministry of Education and Culture; and the Indonesian Endowment Fund for Education (*Lembaga Pengelola Dana Pendidikan – LPDP*) organized under the Ministry of Finance.

In April 2020, LPDP issued a call for proposals from the hard and soft sciences to respond to COVID-19, to the amount of IDR 2 to 6 billion (approximately USD 140,000 to 415,000) per proposal. The call was organized by the Indonesian Science Fund (*Dana Ilmu Pengetahuan Indonesia—DIPI*), an independent body under the Indonesian Science Academy (AIPI), which, through a partnership between Australia's Department for Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) and the Indonesia National Agency for Development (BAPPENAS), is mandated to ensure peer review mechanisms are in place. Despite the fact that several social science proposals received higher scores from the scientific panel (DIPI, 2021), lower-scored engineering proposals went on to receive the grant (DIPI, 2021).

The second type of funding comes from matching schemes between the Government of Indonesia and other countries as well as through regional cooperation. Some notable examples are the Partnership for Australia-Indonesia Research (PAIR), organized by the Australia-Indonesia Centre (PAIR, 2021), which provides small rapid research funding to assist Indonesian policymaking by exploring the pandemic's effects on health, connectivity and economic recovery, with special attention to vulnerable groups; and the European Union-backed EURAXESS initiative, a global network of national coordination bodies and higher education and non-university research institutions. EURAXESS organized a 'Special COVID-19 Call for Project Grants with Asia' (SERI), which includes the social sciences and the humanities (EURAXESS, 2020). Another such scheme is the Australia-ASEAN Council Grants (DFAT, 2021), which focuses on the arts, language and culture.

Research policy interactions (international, national and local) at different levels (planning, implementation and evaluation)

At the local level, however, the relationship between social scientists and policymakers varies significantly between localities. We found these variations throughout our interviews

2. We recommend further research that snowballs sources and funding more systematically.
3. PAIR's partners are Universitas Airlangga, Universitas Gadjah Mada, Universitas Hasanuddin, Universitas Indonesia, Institut Teknologi Bandung, Institut Pertanian Bogor, Institut Teknologi Surabaya, University of Melbourne, Monash University, University of Queensland and University of Western Australia. Its policy partners are DFAT Australia, RISTEK/BRIN, the government of Sulawesi, and the Ministry of Transportation, Indonesia. They also include impact partners: the Knowledge Sector Initiative, Open Learning and the Conversation.
4. The selection of these local governments was based on our Java-centric interviews. We encourage more academics to study other regions in Indonesia, especially in the east of the country. That said, we see Java as the epicentre of the country's pandemic.

and document review – as exemplified by the different approaches taken by DKI Jakarta and West Java local governments. In March 2020, tension arose between the central and provincial government of DKI Jakarta over the authority to declare a lockdown. DKI Jakarta governor, Anies Baswedan, enacted a series of provincial lockdown policies such as closing down schools, enforcing work from home for public and private sector employees, and social restrictions in his jurisdiction. However, this was rejected by the central government, which preferred to implement large-scale social restrictions rather than lockdowns (Putri R. D., 2020; Wareza, 2020). Baswedan's initiative was criticized by public officials from the central government – notably, Arlaingga Hartarto, the head of the Committee for COVID-19 Response and National Economic Recovery (*Komite Penanganan COVID-19 dan Pemulihan Ekonomi Nasional*), who claimed the policy was an overreaction and would negatively impact the economy. The

President himself declared that the central government would refuse to introduce lockdowns and, in the interests of the economy, prohibited local governments from implementing such a policy – although some local governments implemented local lockdowns within their jurisdictions (Ihsanuddin, 2020).

Local governments who used scientific evidence for policymaking received praise from institutions and individual social scientists. The West Java provincial government, for instance, was seen as responsive and innovative in the way it used scientific approaches in formulating policies (Tempo.co, 2020; Pamungkas, 2021). Other regions and municipalities such as Bogor, West Java and Surabaya were also enthusiastic in promoting the engagement of scientists. Decisions were often based on findings from surveys – an approach that differed greatly from that of the central government, which was often hindered by complex bureaucracy (Sulfikar Amir, personal interview, 12 June 2021).

5. Law Number 6/2018 on Health Quarantine provides the legal basis for dealing with the pandemic. This regulation sets out the shared responsibilities and resources between central and local governments (Article Number 4 and Number 6), where the decision to implement health quarantines rests with the central government (Article Number 5, Verse 1). The central government can also demand the involvement of local governments in the implementation of lockdowns (Article Number 5, Verse 2). With this legal standing, the power and authority to implement health quarantines is in the hands of the central government.
6. The authors encourage more research to understand how the relationship between regional policymakers and social scientists played out during the pandemic – our limited study was unable to examine all 548 local governments in Indonesia – particularly why some local governments worked closely with the scientific community (including social scientists) and adopted scientific recommendations as the baseline for policymaking, while others failed to do so.
7. In Central Java, regencies/municipalities (mayors/ regents) refused to conduct comprehensive testing so they could claim their territories as COVID-19 'safe-zones', while the Provincial Governor, Ganjar Pranowo, demanded that regents and mayors in his province increase the amount of testing (Thenu, 2020). Moreover, in East Java, Governor Khofifah Indar Parawansa argued with the Mayor of Surabaya, Tri Rismaharini, over the use of PCR ambulances in the province (Wibowo, 2020; Putri B. U., 2020).
8. Research-led initiatives primarily come from the field of life science, medicine and technology. An example of this type of initiative is the research on GeNose, which was developed by researchers from Universitas Gadjah Mada. GeNose is a type of test used to detect COVID-19 through breath analysis by sensing Volatile Organic Compounds (VOC) (Ika, 2020). Another researcher-led initiative during the pandemic was the development of the Red and White vaccine (referring to the national flag–Vaksin Merah Putih) created by the Eijkman Institute, in collaboration with several public universities, the state enterprise, Biofarma, and the central government (Yuniartha, 2021).

Researcher-led Initiatives in Support of COVID-19 Responses

Based on empirical evidence, social science researcher-led initiatives during the pandemic emerged through community self-help groups and the role of the Indonesian diaspora. We examine two cases, the Yogyakarta-based collective, SONJO (*Sambatan Jogja*, loosely translated as “friendly gathering in a cozy atmosphere” [Wardhana, 2020]), and initiatives led by Indonesian social scientists based in Singapore through ‘LaporCOVID-19’, an independent data initiative.

During the pandemic, local communities in Yogyakarta joined together in solidarity through the SONJO online movement. The movement, which is based on collective values and community care, was initiated by a small group of economic lecturers from Universitas Gadjah Mada. It has expanded from a single WhatsApp group into seven spin-offs, which discuss multiple topics related to COVID-19 (e.g. rapid testing kits, swab sampling chambers, special programs for people with disabilities, assistance for small businesses, and education, among others); as well as through Facebook, Instagram and Twitter – supported by Google Sheets and a dedicated website (SONJO, 2020). SONJO provides a range of assistance, from supporting local entrepreneurs and farmers whose businesses were impacted by the pandemic, to helping business owners in the hospitality sector (hotels, restaurants, cafes) adjust to working from home (Wardhana, 2020). It regularly hosts webinars open to the public.

The second type of researcher-led initiative is exemplified by the role of Sulfikar Amir, a renowned member of Indonesia’s scientific diaspora (Diaspora.id, 2018). Amir tactically links his research work at the Social Resilience Lab (based at Singapore’s Nanyang Technological University (NTU)) with the activism of LaporCOVID-19. He has been widely cited by national media outlets such as Kompas, the Jakarta Post and Tempo (Fachriansyah, 2020; Harsono, 2020; Prireza, 2020; Salman, 2020), many of which are influential among policymakers. Many media reports directly cite the surveys carried out by LaporCOVID-19 and the Social Resilience Lab, NTU.

The academic contributions of these researcher-led initiatives were effective because they worked outside the instruments of the state. SONJO is a community-based initiative, and relies heavily on the voluntary support of academics and activists. They receive no funding from any political parties, and do not aspire to do so (Rimawan Pradiptyo, personal interview, 21 June 2021). Meanwhile, Amir’s research receives funding from NTU, as part of his decades-long research in disaster sociology.

Emerging Research Agenda on Social Sciences and COVID-19

During the pandemic, we found a set of emerging – albeit somewhat limited – social science research agendas. One important characteristic is the focus on economic recovery. This agenda, we believe, has emerged under the prevailing neoliberal agenda in which the

state is increasingly withdrawn from providing services, including education (Harvey, 2005). This responsibility is taken up by the private sector, while individuals are responsible for generating employment and ensuring their own livelihoods through entrepreneurialism – including in rural areas (Bateman, 2012). We describe these emerging research agendas and their supporting resources broadly, and problematize the social inequalities reproduced by the neoliberal developmentalist agenda. This can be seen in the types of research that is prioritized and the outsourcing of expertise through the Indonesian diaspora.

Conclusion

In this country note, we explain how social scientists are marginalized in policymaking and, when they are included, they are predominantly technocratically-oriented; how the prevailing neoliberal conditions shape emerging funding, researcher-led initiatives and research agendas; and how the political dynamics between social sciences and policymaking at various levels are geared toward pro-/anti-science narratives. Under these conditions, we think that marginal groups (i.e., particular racial, class, religious and ethnic groups) are further disregarded as policymakers prefer generalizable, one-size-fits-all models. Critically-oriented social scientists, instead, ally with particular factions within the public, and work from the fringes. Their inputs, while scientifically-based, are often dismissed by high-level policymakers – who predominantly come from

military and business backgrounds – and district-level public officials – whose work is hindered by bureaucratic barriers and budget limitations. Through this country note, our empirical analysis shows that the pandemic has worsened social inequalities, which have been further exacerbated by the exclusion of social scientists within policymaking.

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Laos



Mobilization of Social Sciences in COVID-19 Responses in Laos

Highlights

1. **The COVID-19 pandemic teams formed by the Prime Minister comprised of social scientists, researchers and policymakers from various government sectors.**
 2. **COVID-19 related projects undertaken by various research institutes received funding from the government, international partner institutes and external aid.**
 3. **Policy recommendations provided by social scientists have led to the development of ten policies and nine measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.**
 4. **Social scientists in research institutes play an essential role in conducting COVID-19 related projects, providing evidence-based policy recommendations and training to provincial-level personnel and the private sector.**
 5. **Emerging social science research agendas and projects on and around COVID-19 depend on the interests of funders and the government's five-year plan for 2021 to 2025.**
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Background

In early 2020, during the first wave of COVID-19, Laos avoided a significant health crisis. It had a relatively low reported number of infected people: 49 cases from March 2020 to March 2021. These cases mainly involved visitors from overseas who were required to quarantine for 14 days. In response to the economic downturn induced by the pandemic, the government introduced several measures to promote economic activities – for instance, Lao Airlines started to promote package tours and other products to boost revenue. The Vientiane–Vangvieng expressway was officially opened to enhance road transportation and the tourism industry.

There was a new COVID-19 cluster after the Lao New Year in April 2021. The Lao Prime Minister introduced the second lockdown mandate (15/PM - 2021) on 21 April 2021. The lockdown policy aimed to reinforce measures to control, contain and implement comprehensive action in response to the second wave of COVID-19 (LaoCovid19, 2021).

The Lao government recognizes the vital role of social scientists, notably the Lao Academy of Social and Economic Sciences, which consists of multiple research institutes. Almost all ministries have their own research institutes that conduct policy-based research on a variety of topics. After the outbreak of COVID-19, the Prime Minister set up an advisory team, composed of social scientists from various sectors, to provide policy recommendations in response to the pandemic.

Methodology

The research team relied on desk reviews and in-depth interviews with key informants, including researchers (at ministerial-level research institutes and universities) and policymakers. This research note focuses on the Institute for Industry and Commerce (IIC) – previously known as the Economic Research Institute for Industry and Trade (under the Ministry of Industry and Commerce). It operates in a context similar to other ministerial-level research institutes, in terms of access to international funders and partnerships/collaborations with international/regional institutes – and therefore serves as a useful case study.

There are several limitations to this study. Firstly, since the COVID-19 situation continues to evolve rapidly over time, it is difficult to retrieve up-to-date information on the government's agenda and policies. Moreover, some information is confidential; in particular, there is no information on the actual funding provided by the government in response to the COVID-19 outbreak.

The Role of Social Scientists in COVID-19 Responses

The Inclusion of Social Scientists in Scientific Commissions/ad hoc Advisory Bodies

The number of new COVID-19 cases increased dramatically from 58 on 28 April 2021 to 1,859 on 21 June (LaoCovid19, 2021; Laogovt, 2021). After the second wave of COVID-19, the Prime Minister appointed teams comprised of social scientists, researchers and policymakers from various government sectors, namely: the Prime Minister's Office, the Ministry of Planning and Investment, the Ministry of Technology and Communications, EDL Generation Public Company, the Ministry of Finance, the National Institute for Economic Research (under the Lao Academy of Social and Economic Sciences), the Bank of Laos, and the Administrative Office of the Party Central Committee. In particular, the Prime Minister's aides conducted and publicized research on "The Economic Impact of the Second COVID-19 Outbreak in Laos", led by Dr. Phanhpakit Onphanhdala, a lecturer at the Faculty of Economics and Business Administration, National University of Laos. In addition, the Ministry of Planning and Investment collaborated with development partners to conduct various high-impact social science studies to provide guidelines and references for policymakers.

The Emergence of Research Funding Opportunities for COVID Research in the Social Sciences, from National and International Sources

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, ministerial and national-level research institutes received research funding from the government to compile policy briefs and publish local journals. These journals are primarily available in the local language and are not available online. It is rumored that the Lao government aims to allocate 2% of its GDP for policy-based research. However, it is not possible to estimate the value of annual funding available. Public research institutes can also access research funding provided by external aid, international partner institutes, and international and regional cooperation.

Under the Ministry of Industry and Commerce, the notable international funders for IIC are the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation Special Fund (sponsored by the government of China), the CLMV Cooperation Project, AHKFTA–ECOTECH (the ASEAN–Hong Kong, China Free Trade Agreement – Economic and Technical Cooperation Work Program), ASEAN–Republic of Korea and partner research institutes such as the Mekong Institute, the Cambodia Development Resource Institute, the Institute of World Economics and Politics of the Chinese Academy of Social Science, Michigan State University, IBI Global insights, the Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, the Vietnam Academic of Social Science, and the Japan External Trade Organization, among others. These partner

research institutes are not direct funders, but they receive financial resources from international funders and then invite IIC to work as a research partner.

Research Policy Interactions (International, National and Local) at Different Levels (Planning, Implementation and Evaluation)

The government, the private sector and development partners play a crucial role in implementing policy-based research. Some researchers employ structured questionnaires for data collection and quantitative analysis, whereas others use in-depth interviews to gather information from key informants. However, some studies use secondary data and desk reviews as their main sources of information – for instance, to estimate the impact of COVID-19 on children, adolescents and women and on socioeconomic and human resource development in Lao PDR. The Centre for Development Policy Research (CDR), Ministry of Planning and Investment (MPI) uses a two-stage simulation model to assess the impact of COVID-19 on specific socioeconomic indicators. LIS (the Lao PDR Socioeconomic Indicator Survey, 2017-2018) and MICS (Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey, 2017) were used in the analytical process. The outcomes of these studies have been used to develop policy recommendations at different levels. Many of the studies conducted by CDR-MPI have provided policy recommendations for the national government, regional governments and development partners. With input from

Table 1: Policies and measures with input from social scientists for the COVID-19 response in Laos

Policies in response to COVID-19	Measures in response to COVID-19
1. Three-month personal and micro-business income tax exemption (April, May and June 2020) for those with an income less than LAK 5 million (\$500/ month)	1. Adjustment of GDP and economic growth
2. Customs and tax exemptions for the import of tools and materials used for the prevention of COVID-19	2. Ensure efficient economic measures
3. Postpone income tax for businesses in tourism sectors (for three months)	3. Efficient revenue collection for business sectors not affected by COVID-19
4. Postpone the 2019 financial report for business sectors	4. Ensure efficient and productive government spending, especially for the government's mega-projects
5. Postpone road tax payments	5. Support growth in SME sectors
6. Postpone and lower water and electricity fees	6. Support the domestic tourism industry
7. Lower reserve requirements for private banks	7. Monitor and provide special assistance for the Lao labor force outside the country
8. Special rate loan	8. Provide financial support for the labor force through social security schemes
9. Postpone debt payment schedules	9. Develop policies to assist Lao Airlines during the pandemic
10. Special loan for SMEs	

Source: LaoGovt (2020)

social scientists, ten policies and nine measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have been developed – see Table 1.

Researcher-led Initiatives in Support of COVID-19 Responses

As mentioned earlier, almost all ministries have their own research institutes that specialize

in the areas that they are responsible for. For instance, IIC (under the MOIC) has conducted/ is in the process of conducting multiple studies to provide possible policy recommendations for ministerial-level policymakers. Research topics directly and indirectly related to the COVID-19 outbreak include the production capacity of local industrial sectors during lockdown, the

impact of the Lao National Single Window¹ on economic operators, the development of e-commerce for small enterprises, the accessibility to financial resources for small and medium enterprises during the pandemic, and the difficulties facing Lao garment exporters. In addition, IIC is also responsible for training activities, with the primary aim of enhancing the capacity of provincial-level personnel and the private sector. After the first outbreak of COVID-19, a modular training course on enhancing trade competitiveness for goods and services and supply chain adjustments in the post-pandemic world was organized with support from the Mekong Institute and the Lancang–Mekong Cooperation Special Fund.

The Ministry of Planning and Investment has also published a series of social science studies in collaboration with international organizations and development partners such as the European Union, the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, the Economic Policy Research Institute, the United Nation Population Fund (UNFPA) and the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), among other.

Emerging Research Agenda on Social Sciences and COVID-19

There is no clear emerging agenda on and around COVID-19 within the social sciences. Social science research depends on the interests

of funders and the government's five-year plan, which could change according to the evolution of COVID-19 in Laos. However, for government funding, the research agenda must be closely aligned with the 11th National Congress of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party (2021-2025). The National Congress recommends that policymakers and the social sciences focus on the following issues:

- Ensuring poverty reduction and reducing the gap between the rich and poor in urban and rural areas;
- Providing equal access to quality education and health services in remote areas;
- Developing policy responses to economic vulnerability by lowering dependency on natural resources, and improving income distribution and production capacity;
- Reducing financial vulnerability, public debt, revenue collection and leakage;
- Addressing currency vulnerability, deficits in the balance of payment, high inflation, informal exchange rates and informal loans;
- Developing labor (unemployment) and socioeconomic policy in response to COVID-19;
- Improving the management of public resources, and facilitating trade and investment;
- Developing human resources in specialized areas and vocational and technical training related to the ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution’ and the ‘new normal’ post-COVID-19.

1. A web platform dedicated to simplifying foreign trade formalities

Among international funders, Lancang–Mekong Cooperation (LMC) is one of the main sponsors of social science research projects. This regional cooperation comprises six countries: the People’s Republic of China, Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Vietnam. According to the LMC’s joint statement on enhancing sustainable development cooperation, all six members plan to utilize the fund for public health research in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The cooperation also emphasizes the promotion of economic growth models that are innovation-driven and environmentally friendly, to build back greener and better after COVID-19.

Conclusion

Social scientists play an important role in providing policy recommendations for policymakers in Laos. The majority of ministries have their own research institutes and research units. In terms of research funding, government institutes receive funding both from the government and international donors. The outcomes of the studies by government research institutes, development partners and academic sectors have played a significant role in publicizing research related to the Covid-19 pandemic in Laos, and providing policy

recommendations for policymakers. However, there is no clear emerging research agenda on and around COVID-19 within the social sciences. Social sciences research projects depend on the interests of funders and the government’s five-year plan for 2021 to 2025.

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Social Science and COVID-19: Malaysia's Response

Highlights

1. The level of influence of social scientists in high-level advisory and policymaking processes depends on their proximity to the seat of power.
2. COVID-19 research grants favor researchers who can quickly repurpose their existing research and/or those who are already part of a multidisciplinary research group.
3. Social scientists in official think tanks not only provide research findings and recommendations to policymakers, but also act as sounding boards for policymakers to test the efficacy of their policies.
4. Social scientists prefer to work directly with NGO activists on the ground, a more effective and faster way of reaching out to communities.
5. Social scientists are finding more opportunities to collaborate with other researchers, either within Malaysia or internationally, to tackle the long-term impacts of the pandemic.
6. The government needs to enlist the help of social scientists as they have their ears on the ground and can offer advice on the best way to implement policies.

Background

At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-March 2020, the Malaysian government placed the responsibility for formulating and coordinating the country's responses under the National Security Council (*Majlis Keselamatan Negara*, MKN).¹ MKN is chaired by the Prime Minister and comprises cabinet ministers and heads of critical agencies. Since the pandemic is a major public health crisis, the early responses were primarily driven by science practitioners such as doctors and scientists, along with government

1. Rafidah Mat Ruzki and Ahmad Suhael Adnan, "COVID-19: Majlis Keselamatan Negara ambil alih pengurusan," *Berita Harian*, 16 March 2020: <https://www.bharian.com.my/berita/nasional/2020/03/665908/covid-19-majlis-keselamatan-negara-ambil-alih-pengurusan> (accessed on 15 July 2021).

economists reacting to the economic fallout from the harsh measures used to contain the spread of the pandemic. This research note seeks to answer the following questions: To what extent does the government include social scientists in policymaking processes? In which areas of policy can social scientists play a more substantive role? What resources are available to them? What other avenues of participation are open for social scientists when the government sidelines their contribution?

Methodology

This research note examines areas where social scientists can play a meaningful role in the policymaking process. These include vaccination campaigns, combating misinformation, the provision of mental health services, and outreach to marginalized communities such as indigenous people, refugees, migrant workers and stateless people, among others. One particular informant interviewed for this research note (a native Sabahan) has conducted extensive research on stateless and migrant communities in the state of Sabah (part of Malaysian Borneo). Sabah's unique relationship with the federal government in peninsular Malaysia makes for an interesting comparative case study. The choice of areas of focus is informed by interviews with six academics and think tank analysts who have been directly or indirectly involved in the government's COVID-19 responses. This research note is also informed by a review of official documents found on government websites and in news reports.

The Role of Social Scientists in COVID-19 Responses

The Inclusion of Social Scientists in Scientific Commissions/ad hoc Advisory Bodies

A scan of government websites and the media shows no clear evidence that social scientists have been included in high-level ad hoc advisory bodies or scientific commissions. However, the lack of social scientists in high-level advisory and policymaking processes does not mean that their inputs are completely ignored by the government. Social scientists can still play an instrumental role in influencing policymaking, both at the state and federal level, when it comes to COVID-19 responses. The degree of influence, of course, depends on social scientists' proximity to the seat of power, as exemplified by the composition of the *Panel Ahli Pemikir Perpaduan* (Expert Panel on Unity), whose main role is to advise the Ministry of National Unity (MNU) on its policymaking and implementation – although it is difficult to quantify its impact due to the dearth of information and lack of transparency.

Social scientists based in government-sponsored think tanks also enjoy direct access to policymakers. Harris Zainul, a senior analyst with the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS), a federal government-sponsored think tank, shares his experience of working closely with policymakers during the pandemic on his areas of research, notably public misinformation or the 'infodemic'. Harris Zainul maintains an

active communication channel between ISIS and officials from the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (MOSTI) and the Prime Minister's Office (PMO). The government, in turn, solicits the latest findings on numerous pandemic-related issues from ISIS – the infodemic in Harris' case – while ISIS analysts regularly provide the federal government with policy briefs as a way of sharing their findings and analyses.² This relationship has become even more intertwined during the pandemic due to the urgency of the situation. The close relationship comes as no surprise as ISIS receives nearly half of its budget from federal allocations. Nevertheless, it is hard to quantify the extent of its influence on policies since the federal government also solicits inputs from other stakeholders.³

The Emergence of Research Funding Opportunities for COVID-19 Research in the Social Sciences, from National and International Sources

At the onset of the pandemic, numerous public universities and the Malaysian government, through the Ministry of Higher Education (MOHE)

and MOSTI, quickly announced the availability of research grants specifically for COVID-19.

In early April 2020, MOHE opened applications for the 'Post COVID-19 Special Research Grant Scheme' (*Skim Geran Penyelidikan Khas Pasca COVID-19*). The grant's scope broadly covers twenty critical areas including the economy, public health, national security, education, the environment, local governments and food security, among others. It is available to all researchers in public and private universities but the application window was only opened for two weeks between 15 and 30 April 2020. Successful grant recipients need to receive research ethics approval from their respective universities before they can commence their research.⁴ MOSTI grants, meanwhile, are exclusively directed towards science, technology and innovation, mainly for research and development. There is no mention of social sciences in MOSTI's grant application guidelines.⁵

In addition to federal government grants, many public universities also provide COVID-19 research grants from their own financial reserves. These grants are only available to researchers

2. ISIS's Policy Papers and Briefs on COVID19: <https://www.isis.org.my/covid-19/> (accessed on 17 July 2021).

3. However, according to Harris, the federal government has taken up one recommendation proposed by ISIS during the current national lockdown: the implementation of a phase-based system for the country's progress towards normalcy, a system that was first proposed by one of ISIS' policy briefs. (Interview via Microsoft Teams with Harris Zainul, 23 July 2021).

4. Garis Panduan Skim Geran Penyelidikan Khas Pasca COVID-19, Jabatan Pendidikan Tinggi, Kementerian Pendidikan Tinggi: <http://www.research.usm.my/forms/COVID/GARIS%20PANDUAN%20GERAN%20KHAS%20PASCA%20COVID%2019.pdf> See also Saadiyah Ismail, "COVID-19: KPT tawar geran khas penyelidikan bidang kritikal," *Berita Harian*, 12 April 2020: <https://www.berita.com.my/berita/nasional/2020/04/676186/covid-19-kpt-tawar-geran-khas-penyelidikan-bidang-kritikal> (accessed on 16 July 2021).

5. eDana 2.0 Fund Management System: <https://edana.mosti.gov.my/> (accessed on 16 July 2021).

who work at the university in question, either as a permanent or a contracted member of staff. For example, the National University of Malaysia (*Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, UKM*), through its Faculty of Medicine, provides a COVID-19 grant (Geran COVID-19 Fakulti Perubatan, UKM). The grant covers not only the sciences, but also welcomes research on social sciences, arts, applied arts, natural and cultural heritage, and communication.

Research Policy Interactions (International, National and Local) at Different Levels (Planning, Implementation and Evaluation)

Social scientists in official think tanks not only provide research findings and recommendations to policymakers, but also act as sounding boards for policymakers to test the efficacy of their policies. In short, for federal- and state-funded think tanks it is 'business-as-usual' when it comes to sharing their research findings with their main funding source. The only difference is the speed with which they have to produce these policy briefs due to the rapidly evolving nature of the pandemic and the need to respond with alacrity. Many of their recommendations have made it into implementable policies such as those on containing the 'infodemic' on social media and putting in place a phase-based system during the lockdown – as recommended by ISIS.

Most social scientists, especially those who are based in academia, do not enjoy the privileges that come with proximity to the seat of power and are forced to act proactively, passing their research findings directly to relevant ministry officials in the hope that they will be incorporated in government policies. Some find more success engaging with policy implementors on the ground – such as Dr. Rusalina, the Universiti Malaya (UM) anthropologist, who found receptive officials at the local *Orang Asli*⁶ hospital who were willing to collaborate with her. Even engagement with government officials does not necessarily translate into the successful implementation of policies; instead, it is often more effective and productive to collaborate with NGO activists who are already deeply embedded in target communities.

Researcher-led Initiatives in Support of COVID-19 Responses

In assisting with the pandemic relief effort, some academics prefer to work with NGO activists at the grassroots level. Dr. Rusalina, for example, decided to work directly with Orang Asli representatives and NGO activists to develop posters in various *Orang Asli languages* on pandemic standard operating procedures and later on the vaccination program. These academics tend to be activists themselves, so they are already part of NGO networks on the

6. The term 'orang asli' refers to Malaysia's original inhabitants - i.e., 'native' or 'indigenous' communities.

ground. The aid they provide reaches the target communities faster and is fully transparent, without the kind of leakages typically seen in government-led public relief efforts. The downside is that these NGOs work with limited resources, raised predominantly through crowdfunding. Their scarce resources have to be stretched thinly and widely in order to benefit as many people as possible.⁷

Academics also contribute their expertise in other ways such as counselling services and public webinars that help to raise awareness of mental health issues and ways to cope with them. For instance, social work lecturers at the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in Penang volunteer their expertise to counsel students and staff who are struggling with mental health issues as a result of the pandemic. They take turns to set up one-to-one online and Whatsapp counselling sessions. Psychologists at USM also volunteered their expertise in a series of mental health-related webinars that are open to the public.

Emerging Research Agenda on Social Sciences and COVID-19

Researchers interviewed for this report agreed that, in one form or another, the pandemic has reshaped their research agenda for the foreseeable future. Psychologist, Dr. Suzana

Awang Bono, will continue with her research on the effects of the pandemic on mental health, especially in the long run, and also help the government to better prepare for future pandemics through the findings of her vaccine hesitancy research.⁸ Dr. Rusalina Idrus, the UM anthropologist, will continue focusing on the long-term impacts of the pandemic on women and children, particularly in relation to education, unemployment, domestic violence and career mobility, which she believes requires a serious study.⁹

An increase in collaborative multidisciplinary research is another outcome of the pandemic as researchers find that many COVID-19 related issues cannot be comprehensively studied through a single disciplinary or sub-disciplinary lens. According to Yeong Pey Jung, a senior analyst at the Penang Institute, "...the pandemic has shown that widespread cooperation is needed to tackle and battle its effects, particularly in generating more rigorous research that can lead to optimal outcomes and implementable policy responses".¹⁰

Conclusion

This research note offers a few takeaway points on the role of social scientists in efforts to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic in Malaysia.

7. A. Tayeb and H.H. Por (2021). "Xenophobia and Covid-19 Aid to Refugee and Migrant Communities in Penang." *Contemporary Southeast Asia* (April), 77-82.

8. Phone interview with Dr. Suzana Awang Bono, 16 July 2021.

9. Phone interview with Dr. Rusalina Idrus, 24 July 2021.

10. Interview via email with Yeong Pey Jung, 22 July 2021.

First, proximity to the seat of power determines the role of social scientists, as in the case of analysts at the federal- and state-funded think tanks. Second, there are grants available for COVID-19 research but they tend to favor researchers who can quickly repurpose their existing research or those who are already part of a multidisciplinary research group. Third, many social scientists prefer to work directly with NGO activists on the ground, which is often a more effective and faster way to reach out to communities. Fourth, there are more opportunities for social scientists to collaborate with other researchers, either within Malaysia or internationally. The nature of the pandemic means that the impacts cannot be examined comprehensively through a single disciplinary or sub-disciplinary lens. In addition, the shift to online working means that researchers have greater access to online

platforms and can work across borders and time zones. Fifth, the government needs to enlist the help of social scientists since they have their ears on the ground and can offer advice on the best way to implement policies from the top, particularly when there is a deep-seated distrust of the government among particular communities.

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Mobilization of Social Sciences in COVID-19 Responses in Myanmar

Highlights

1. Participation in government-sponsored COVID-19 committees is strictly limited to ministerial personnel; these committees lack any outside experts, let alone social scientists.
2. To contribute their findings, expert opinions and advocate with government institutions for better COVID-19 responses, independent social science researchers and outside experts mobilize their own research studies with funding from international donors.
3. International think tanks and research-oriented organizations collaborate extensively with local organizations to engage local audiences in shaping policy discourses on the ground.
4. More research needs to be carried out and published to counter the 'infodemic'/ misinformation about COVID-19 vaccines and vaccine hesitancy.
5. Integrating social science in Myanmar's COVID-19 response remains a distant reality.

Background

Professor Mary Callahan of the University of Washington, a well-known expert on Myanmar, recently ran an opinion piece titled "Everyone is dying", in which she referred to a public health specialist who "expects that the population will be decimated by at least 10-15 million by the time Covid is done with Myanmar."¹ According to Worldometers, Myanmar has the second lowest rate of testing among ASEAN countries;²

1. Mary P. Callahan (2021). 'Everyone is dying': Myanmar on the brink of decimation. Asia Times. Retrieved from <https://asiatimes.com/2021/07/everyone-is-dying-myanmar-on-the-brink-of-decimation/>. Last accessed on 8 August 2021.

2. According to Worldometers, Laos has the lowest testing rate but it also has the lowest death rate at 8 deaths per 1 million population. Retrieved from <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>. Last accessed on 10 August 2021.

accurate counts of cases and deaths are impossible. However, recent mortality rates have been hotly contested and there have been reports in the media and among civil society of under-reported cases. Therefore, Myanmar's COVID-19 situation may be a lot more serious than the health statistics suggest, as some ASEAN leaders have recently warned.³ In order to facilitate an effective channel for ASEAN to help Myanmar, a multidisciplinary analysis of the scope of the COVID-19 pandemic, correctly recognizing the underlying political dynamics and socioeconomic structures, is urgently required.

Methodology

This Myanmar country note has been compiled by the Centre for Economic and Social Development, an independent think tank. The author conducted a critical review of documents to generate the information presented in this note.

The Role of Social Scientists in COVID-19 Responses

The Inclusion of Social Scientists in Scientific Commissions/ad hoc Advisory Bodies

When it came to mobilizing COVID-19 responses, Myanmar was fairly swift in forming the National-Level Central Committee on Prevention,

Control and Treatment of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19), with State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi as its chair – as early as 13 March 2020. The committee comprises 15 cabinet ministers and 15 representatives from all 15 subnational governments (state and regional governments), with the ministers for health and international cooperation acting as secretaries of the committee. At the working level, the Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Health and Sports (MOHS) heads the committee, highlighting the health authorities' leading role in the committee's tasks. The key mandates outlined for the committee all relate to public health measures such as epidemiological surveillance, points-of-entry inspection, case management, awareness-raising and medical procurement. Two sub-committees and public health taskforces were established two weeks later to focus on two additional areas:

- control and emergency response led by Vice President 1, with cabinet members representing security sectors (defence, border areas and home affairs) as well as population mobility (immigration, migration and resettlement);
- economic relief led by the Ministry of Investment and Foreign Economic Relations, together with deputy ministers from other economic line ministries.

3. Former Thai foreign minister Kobsak Chutikul emphasized that "the situation percolating in Myanmar is like a tsunami wave coming to overtake the ASEAN region." Cited in Jakarta Post. "International efforts 'urgent' to avoid Myanmar becoming global COVID-19 epicenter." Retrieved from <https://www.thejakartapost.com/seasia/2021/08/03/international-efforts-urgent-to-avoid-myanmar-becoming-global-covid-19-epicenter.html>. Last accessed on 10 August 2021. The international community came together in supporting the role of the ASEAN Envoy in July 2021 to resolve the crisis in Myanmar; humanitarian action was one of the top issues on its agenda.

At the technical level, former public health officials and retired doctors were invited to form an advisory group to support the MOHS. Participation in all of these government-sponsored committees is strictly limited to cabinet ministers and senior ministerial officials; as such, there is a lack of any outside experts, let alone social scientists, to support or contribute to national COVID-19 responses. This has been the case throughout the pandemic, both under the democratically elected National League for Democracy government and the military junta. In March 2021, the State Administrative Council formally announced a similar committee and sub-committees consisting of the same ministerial personnel, even though the country's socioeconomic conditions had worsened significantly after the first year of the pandemic.

The Emergence of Research Funding Opportunities for COVID Research in the Social Sciences, from National and International Sources

To contribute their findings and expert opinions, outside experts and independent social science researchers mobilized their own research studies with funding from international donors. They also started advocating with government institutions for better responses. One notable platform was organized by the Institute for Strategy and Policy, which published a series of COVID-19-related features and research data from various contributors with social science research backgrounds, including former ministers,

economists, public health specialists, human rights scholars, civil society leaders and religious figures.

Meanwhile, two economic think tanks have been active in compiling data and using evidence to support their advocacy efforts: 1) the Centre for Economic and Social Studies, a policy think tank, used print and social media to highlight the plight of marginal groups such as workers, farmers and migrants, and their need for social protection during the pandemic; 2) Inya Economics, a think tank set up by graduates of the Yangon Institute of Economics, encouraged young researchers to utilize their data and research to inform the public. Both think tanks have received generous funding from North American-based foundations and international organizations to conduct independent research on COVID-19-related socioeconomic conditions. Although most of these research organizations have continued their research operations since the military coup, they have been limited by their reliance on large surveys and government data, and the political sensitivity of the issues under consideration.

Research Policy Interactions (International, National and Local) at Different Levels (Planning, Implementation and Evaluation)

Many of the studies by multilateral development institutions and international NGOs provide extensive information on the impact of COVID-19 on populations in Myanmar. Rather than identifying the underlying drivers of post-COVID-19 challenges – many of which are not

caused by COVID-19 itself – these studies are oriented toward humanitarian assistance delivery and economic relief. As such, although many of these studies include large-panel data on a wide range of social science subjects, there is very little engagement with local audiences on shaping policy discourses on the ground. Perhaps, a better alternative is offered by some international think tanks and research-oriented organizations that have collaborated extensively with local organizations.

One such example is the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), which produced over two dozen research publications throughout 2020 on a broad range of socioeconomic issues, from migration to the macro-economic impacts of COVID-19. IFPRI received support from the United States Agency for International Development, the Livelihoods and Food Security Fund (LIFT Fund) and, more importantly, from local research partners.⁴ IFPRI's reports touched not only on the short-term effects of COVID-19 but also the complex amalgamation of long-standing deficits in socioeconomic policies in Myanmar, compounded by ill-advised policies on lockdowns and restrictions, highlighting the need for 'build-back-better' policies in the post-COVID-19 economy.

Although central government institutions have access to the research and publications of international institutions, there is very little external

support for subnational institutions for handling COVID-19 responses. Myanmar had been on the path toward decentralization and a more federal political system since 2011, but the COVID-19 crisis has inadvertently led to the recentralization of government planning and resource mobilization mechanisms, resulting in the marginalization of local actors. Highlighting the deep fragmentation along ethnic lines, The Asia Foundation (TAF) has warned that the diverse needs and experiences of various ethnic groups are not being incorporated in the government's public health discourse.⁵ Advocating for localized approaches toward COVID-19 programming, TAF advised donors against being drawn into state-centric approaches.

Researcher-led Initiatives in Support of COVID-19 Responses

In the absence of political and policy discussions, some research organizations and social science researchers came forward with evidence and policy advice for effective and well-targeted economic support for citizens. The International Growth Centre, for example, conducted an assessment of policy options targeted to communities and households, and an analysis of pro-poor economic interventions, such as in-kind assistance, cash transfers and employment schemes.⁶ Local media was used to put forward

4. Further information about IFPRI can be found at <https://myanmar.ifpri.info/>. Last accessed on 30 August 2021.

5. The Asia Foundation (2020). COVID-19 and Conflict in Myanmar: Briefing Paper Series No. 1. Retrieved from https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Covid-19-and-Conflict-in-Myanmar-Brief_En.pdf. Last accessed on 30 August 2021.

6. Emanuele Brancati et al. (2020). Coping with COVID-19: Protecting Lives, Employment, and Incomes in Myanmar. International Growth Centre. Retrieved from: <https://www.theigc.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/Brancati-et-al-2020-Report.pdf>

the view – based on international lessons learned on humanitarian assistance – that cash-based assistance is more cost-efficient and less labor-intensive than food distribution, making it a better strategy for halting the spread of the virus.⁷

Emerging Research Agenda on Social Sciences and COVID-19

Due to the country's international isolation following the recent coup, the military government will have to rely on the work of local researchers going forward, rather than that of international consultants. However, this risks undermining the reputation of local researchers among international and domestic activists who oppose any form of work with the military government, even if it is for the public good and non-political issues such as COVID-19 control.

Recently, several observers and online critics ridiculed the research conducted by the Department of Medical Research on the use of traditional medicine for COVID-19 prevention and treatment.⁸ Vaccination has been another controversial issue, with both scientific and social science researchers unable to successfully counter the 'infodemic' of false and misleading information about COVID-19 vaccines,

particularly on Facebook.⁹ The misinformation and disinformation about vaccines are amplified by the anti-government and anti-China attitudes among activist groups on Facebook as the country rolls its vaccination program with Sinovac and Sinopharm vaccines from China – similar to many neighboring economies in Southeast Asia. As yet, no scientific or evidence-based research has been published to disprove the assertions made by 'anti-vaxxers' on Myanmar's social media platforms.

Conclusion

There has been minimal use of social science research in shaping policymaking processes in Myanmar, even at the height of political reforms and during the democratic era before the military takeover in 2021. In the absence of policy uptake in recent months, social science research has become marginalized, with COVID-19 statistics and human rights stories grabbing the headlines. Furthermore, the emerging public discourse has become highly contentious, largely driven by opinions and attitudes that ignore social science research. The suspension of aid programs has also meant that social science researchers have lost their largest audience – the donor community.

7. Zaw Oo (2020). Turning Good Intentions into Better Outcomes. Myanmar Times. Retrieved from: <https://www.mmtimes.com/news/turning-good-intentions-better-outcomes.html>

8. Irrawaddy (2021). Myanmar Junta Targets Local COVID-19 Vaccine Production this Year. Retrieved from: <https://www.irrawaddy.com/news/burma/myanmar-junta-targets-local-covid-19-vaccine-production-this-year.html>

9. Moe Myint (2020). Myanmar Grappling with Infodemic: Covid Hoaxes Mutate As Pandemic Drags On. Bangkok Post. Retrieved from: <https://www.bangkokpost.com/opinion/opinion/2041187/myanmar-grappling-with-infodemic>

Such circumstances have made social science research a dangerous career for many academics.

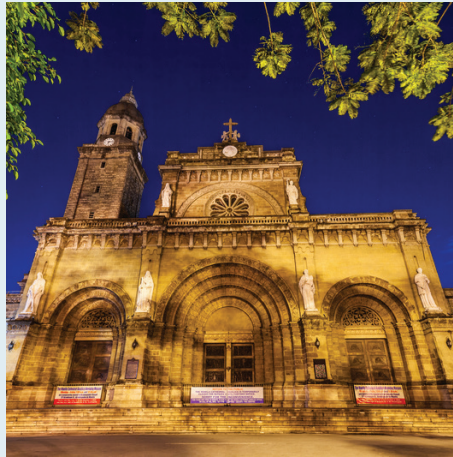
Brief Bio of the Author

Dr. Zaw Oo is Executive Director of the Centre for Economic and Social Development, an independent think-tank dedicated to inclusive development in Myanmar. Previously, he was the Presidential Economic Advisor from 2012-2016, serving as a principal advisor on finance, industry, commerce and labor issues.

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The Philippines



The Role of Social Sciences in COVID-19 Responses in the Philippines: A Case Study of the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS)¹

Highlights

1. The role of UP CIDS social scientists during the pandemic ranges from involvement in government policymaking to helping marginalized communities.
 2. The Assessment, Curriculum and Technology Research Program (ACTRP) is at the forefront of the Department of Education's efforts to develop solutions to educational problems brought forth by the COVID-19 crisis.
 3. 63.05% of UP CIDS's budget was generated externally – i.e., outside of the annual funds provided by the University of the Philippines (UP) – and 36.95% was generated by UP.
 4. UP CIDS' existing networks, established before the pandemic, facilitated collaboration and knowledge sharing with government agencies, the private sector, academia and civil society in addressing the challenges posed by the pandemic.
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1. The author is the Executive Director of UP CIDS. The data in this concept note generally draws from the UP CIDS mid-year and year-end reports.

Background

This concept note on the 'Role of Social Sciences in COVID-19 Responses in the Philippines' will focus on the experience of the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS). Established in 1985, UP CIDS is the research policy unit of the University of the Philippines System.² The University of the Philippines (UP), which is the premier national state university in the country, has close links with government agencies in regards to policymaking. This paper will, therefore, look at how the social sciences, through UP, have been harnessed to this end. Asides from being the policy unit of the UP System, UP CIDS also provides a gamut of programs that cover various aspects of the pandemic that have impacted on the lives of the Filipino population. This paper describes the experiences of UP CIDS to illustrate how the social sciences are/were mobilized during the pandemic to provide important and relevant insights during this crucial period. More importantly, it also seeks to demonstrate how the social sciences can play a greater role in addressing the issues and challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology

In terms of the methodology, this paper relies mainly on UP CIDS Mid-Year and Year-End reports

from 2020 onwards. This includes COVID-19 related documents from its 12 programs as well as UP CIDS primary documents.

The Role of Social Scientists in COVID-19 Responses

The Inclusion of Social Scientists in Scientific Commissions/ad hoc Advisory Bodies

When Manila went into lockdown on 16 March 2020, the UP CIDS research programs needed to assess the feasibility of various components of their respective research agendas for 2020: (a) existing activities and projects that need to be postponed or cancelled; (b) those that may be linked with the COVID-19 emergency; and (c) new activities and projects that directly involve and address COVID-19 and its effects. These were all taken into consideration by early April.³ Of the 12 UP CIDS programs, five were directly linked with scientific commissions or ad hoc advisory bodies (government agencies): 1) the Program on Health and Systems Development (PHSD); 2) the Program on Escaping the Middle-Income Trap – Chains for Change (EMIT); 3) the Data Science for Public Policy Program (DSPPP); 4) the Assessment, Curriculum, Technology and Research Program (ACTRP); and the Education Research Program (ERP).

2. The UP System has eight constituent units.

3. UP CIDS Mid-Year Report, January to June 2020, p. 36.

The main focus of the Program on Health and Systems Development (PHSD) is to develop innovative solutions for health systems in the country, with a focus on primary care, and to monitor the impact of health system reform in urban/corporate, rural and remote settings under its flagship project on Philippine Primary Care Studies (PPCS).⁴ Unlike the other UP CIDS programs, which are comprised of social scientists, the PHSD is headed by medical doctors who are also faculty members of the UP College of Medicine. PHSD is, therefore, the 'odd-one-out' among the UP CIDS programs as it is not generally social science-based.

The Assessment, Curriculum and Technology Research Program (ACTRP) is at the forefront of the Department of Education's efforts to develop solutions to educational problems brought forth by the COVID-19 crisis. ACTRP's mandate is to advise and inform the Philippine education system through curriculum teaching and assessment research, based on empirical studies of curriculum innovation and implementation.⁵ As students were no longer able to have face-to-face interactions with their teachers, there was a sudden shift to online learning and teaching modules. Unlike other UP CIDS programs, ACTRP's mandate is determined by the Assessment Research Center (ARC), University of Melbourne (UoM). This is

because 100% of ACTRP's funding comes from the ARC UoM through the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and its partner institution, the University of the Philippines.

The Emergence of Research Funding Opportunities for COVID Research in the Social Sciences, from National and International Sources

The existence of established social science-based research programs funded by the University enabled UPS CIDS to pivot toward the pressing issues and concerns of the pandemic. The challenge, in this case, was that much of the funding for UP CIDS programs was earmarked for fieldwork in the Philippines, which was no longer possible due to the government's COVID-19 travel restrictions. This actually led to the cancellation of UP CIDS programs that required data-collection and research validation from the field. UP CIDS funding is covered by government rules as it is public money. These restrictions also posed challenges for face-to-face interviews with stakeholders. In this area, among others, external funding was helpful in that it was not covered by government restrictions on travel, enabling PHSD as well as ISP program personnel to visit communities in the provinces. For 2020, the year of the pandemic, 63.05% of UP CIDS' total

4. The PPCS is a series of quasi-experimental pilot studies in representative settings in the Philippines: corporate, rural and geographically isolated disadvantaged areas. The PHSD will also conduct studies, surveys and data mining on health system enhancements and outcome measures such as patient satisfaction, knowledge and quality of primary care, financial risk protection, and administrative efficiency. <https://cids.up.edu.ph/programhealth-systems-development/>. Accessed August 29, 2021.

5. UP CIDS Year-End Report, July to December 2020.

budget was generated externally – i.e., outside of the annual funds allocated by the University of the Philippines (UP) – and 36.95% was generated by UP.¹⁶

Research Policy interactions (International, National and Local) at Different Levels (Planning, Implementation and Evaluation)

An important element for UP CIDS, besides from pursuing research and COVID-19 related activities, is networking with government agencies, the private sector, academia and civil society to address the challenges posed by the pandemic. UP CIDS was able to use its existing institutional reach, established before the pandemic, to pursue its COVID-19 studies. From January to June 2021, UP CIDS programs collaborated with 82 public institutions (28 local government units, 55 UP units, and 1 public non-UP institution) and 77 private institutions (41 local private institutions, 35 international organizations and 1 private education institution). UP CIDS linkages and reach included numerous public institutions (27 local government units, 2 embassies, 61 government agencies, 54 public educational institutions and 7 student organizations); 188 private institutions (121 civil society organizations, 27 corporate business entities, 1 foundation and 39 educational institutions); and 66 international organizations.⁶

UP CIDS has tapped as well as shared and/or collaborated with a wide range of partners in its pandemic research, including: the executive branch – i.e., the Office of the Vice President – and government agencies such as the Commission on Higher Education; the Department of Education Bureau of Learning and Development and Bureau of Curriculum Development; the Department of Trade and Industry Board of Investments and Bureau of Small and Medium Enterprises; the Department of Agriculture; the Department of Information and Communication Technology; the Department of Foreign Affairs; the Department of Science and Technology; the Land Bank of the Philippines; the Department of Health; the Philippine Health and Insurance Corporation; and the Department of Science and Technology–Philippine Council for Health Research and Development. UP CIDS research was formally disseminated to local governments and communities in Piddig, Ilocos Norte province (EMIT) as well as in Samal, Bataan and Bulusan, Sorsogon province (PHSD). Embassies also partnered with UP CIDS programs for funding and dissemination of COVID-19 research outputs including the Embassy of the Netherlands (EMIT). As for international agencies, these included UNESCO Paris, UNCTAD and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Conclusion

The UP CIDS experience, shows the important role that the social sciences play in COVID-19

6. UP CIDS Mid-Year Report, January to June 2021, p. 92.

responses in the Philippines. The particular sectors it focused on include education, data science, development (the economy and health), governance, strategic studies, Islamic issues and concerns, and alternatives to western perspectives on the pandemic. As detailed in this concept note, the studies they conducted provided inputs to the executive and legislative branches of government, international organizations, academic institutions, the private sector (e.g., micro, small and medium-sized industries), NGOs, civil society and grassroots communities, among others.

Despite all these COVID-10 research activities, there are important concerns for the sustainability of UP CIDS programs given that their funding depends on the priorities of the UP administration and its officials. UP CIDS has a fixed budget for a permanent staff of eight who provide administrative, finance, research and library support for the UP CIDS programs. The budget, however, is not assured, which means that the future sustainability of its programs is not guaranteed. This same is true for the UP CIDS programs such as ACTRP and PHSD that generally rely on external funding. It is also undoubtedly still the case that the social sciences are less well funded than the hard sciences. The external

funding for PHSD, for example, is more than the total amount of UP funding for all its programs. The UP CIDS experience demonstrates the relevance of the social sciences during the pandemic and illustrates the urgent need for further funding. This ranges from assisting government agencies with policymaking to helping marginalized communities in this time of crisis.

Brief Bio of the Author

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She is co-author of 'Marxism in the Philippines: Continuing Engagements' (2010, Anvil Press); and author of 'Localizing and Transnationalizing Contentious Politics: Global Civil Society Movements in the Philippines' (2009, Lexington Press); and 'Philippine Politics and the Marcos Technocrats: The emergence and evolution of a power elite' (2019, Ateneo de Manila University Press).

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4. University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) Mid-Year Report, January to June 2021. Document.

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Singapore



Mobilization of Social Sciences in COVID-19 Responses in Singapore

Highlights

1. **There is a lack of high-profile presence of social scientists at the forefront of Singapore's national response to COVID-19.**
 2. **Social science research funding opportunities for COVID-19 in Singapore predominantly come from national sources.**
 3. **Singapore adopts a 'whole-of-government' approach to crisis management, involving key ministries and agencies in developing and implementing nationwide policies.**
 4. **Local research institutions pivoted to the national push for developing stronger intelligence on the evolution of the pandemic.**
 5. **Emerging research agendas go beyond national responses to include understanding of experiential aspects of the pandemic in the region.**
 6. **As the COVID-19 crisis continues to evolve, social science has a critical role in researching the vulnerabilities and inequities laid bare by the pandemic.**
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Background

During the rapid evolution of the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of science and scientists has come to the fore, especially in connection with fields such as virology, infectious diseases, epidemiology and vaccinology, as well as medicine more generally. But 'science' and 'medicine' do not operate in a social vacuum, and the injunction 'follow the science' is subject to extra-scientific dynamics related to social relations, politics, economics and culture. It is to the social sciences that we must turn for a more holistic understanding of the course and consequences of the pandemic – which are manifested differently across the world. This, therefore, is the aim of the present 'country note': to provide a basic – although not exhaustive – documentation of 'social science' responses to the pandemic in Singapore, an island-city-nation-state located in Southeast Asia, with a multi-ethnic population of approximately 5.7 million, including 1.64 million non-residents. In so doing, we focus on the role of social scientists in conducting COVID-19-related research.

Methodology

In the main, we conducted a broad environmental scan of the available literature and news sources, with a focus on social science responses to the COVID-19 crisis as it unfolded in Singapore. We identified the relevant public agencies, higher education institutions and research bodies, with a view to collecting information on their new initiatives from early 2020 to early September 2021. These initiatives included government policy directives and communications, although we paid special attention to research grant calls and research proposals that involved social science knowledge and expertise. In addition to the academic articles and reports that materialized from these initiatives, we also looked at social science responses that were not engendered by either government initiatives or institutional grant calls. These included social science-related commentaries that did not necessarily result from funded projects and that were articulated by researchers and those active in civil society in a variety of online media.

The Role of Social Scientists in COVID-19 Responses

The Inclusion of Social Scientists in Scientific Commissions/ad hoc Advisory Bodies

The national response to COVID-19 in Singapore has been led by the Multi-Ministry Taskforce (MTF), which was set up by the Singapore government in

early 2020 to coordinate the whole-of-government efforts to combat this outbreak, even before the first confirmed imported case occurred in the country. From the documentation of key government initiatives, it appears that there is a relative lack of visible and high-profile presence of social scientists at the forefront of Singapore's COVID-19 MTF. This could be because the various ministries were leveraging their respective research departments. The new initiatives revolve around the design and implementation of policies and processes for COVID-19 support responses, driving transformation in the pursuit of 'sustainable growth and cohesive social development' amid the impact of COVID-19.¹ Four cross-sector groups under the Singapore Together Alliance for Action 'will develop and deliver socioeconomic solutions on work-life harmony, corporate giving and digital inclusion, as part of Singapore's push to emerge stronger from the COVID-19 crisis'.² Key areas of engagement with the public from various sectors include: support for disadvantaged youths, vulnerable families and low-wage workers, mental health support for young people, digital readiness and digital access for the needy, strengthening of digital literacy, and creation of new jobs and opportunities.

The Emergence of Research Funding Opportunities for COVID Research in the Social Sciences, from National and International Sources

The bulk of our data on the emergence of social science research funding opportunities

in and on Singapore come from national sources. With the advent of the COVID-19 crisis, the leaders of research institutions and their researchers, including those working in public health and the social sciences, quickly pivoted to the national push for developing stronger intelligence on the virus and its effects, not least for the sake of supporting national COVID-19 crisis management. A key player in the national ecosystem is the National Medical Research Council, which has supported social science research through the Singapore Population Health Improvement Centre Grant. Researchers at the Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, National University of Singapore (NUS), for example, have tapped into this special grant scheme for projects such as: 'Revealing regional disparities in the transmission potential of SARS-CoV-2 from interventions in Southeast Asia'; 'Lessons learnt from easing COVID-19 restrictions: an analysis of countries and regions in Asia Pacific and Europe'; and 'Estimating direct and spill-over impacts of political elections on COVID-19 transmission using synthetic control methods'.³ Note, however, that NUS researchers also receive funds from other sources. For example, the research project, 'Association between wellbeing and compliance with COVID-19 preventive measures by healthcare professionals: A cross-sectional study', was funded jointly by NUS COVID-19 Research Seed Funding and Lloyd's Register Foundation Institute for the Public Understanding of Risk.⁴ Higher education institutes such as the Duke-NUS Medical School and the Nanyang Technological

University Institute of Science and Technology for Humanity (NISTH) also stimulate new research in response to the COVID-19 crisis. This is illustrated by Duke-NUS's focus on practical issues such as the effectiveness of public health interventions; and NISTH's focus on interdisciplinary collaborative projects and feasibility studies that lead to larger-scale academic-industry-government collaboration. These were aimed at the assessment and adoption of technological interventions to help mitigate the consequences of COVID-19.

Another example of the use of an institution's own funding for social-scientific research related to COVID-19 is found in the work of the Institute of Policy Studies (IPS) based at NUS. Using survey methodology, the IPS arrived at three major conclusions, as indicated by the titles of newspaper reports on its study (26 April 2021): 'Singapore has adapted well to COVID-19, with societal trust playing a key role'; 'Greater confidence in Singapore job market over course of COVID-19 pandemic year'; and '67% of Singaporeans willing to take COVID-19 vaccine, 20% neutral; younger ones more likely to be concerned'.⁵ In the same vein, the Institute for Adult Learning (Singapore) conducted its COVID-19 Educator Survey in response to the increase in remote working and learning, making the observation that the 'pandemic presents a unique opportunity for the HE [Higher Education] TAE [Training and Adult Education] sectors to leapfrog the present and transform their paradigms for learning delivery through

accelerated adoption of digital technologies (i.e. digital transformation or digitalization), which will inevitably develop into a new, permanent state for online learning, teaching and assessment (LTA): A ‘digital resettlement’.⁶

Internationally, the US based Social Science Research Council (SSRC) has, to date, ‘awarded 62 COVID-19 Rapid-Response Grants for projects from across the social sciences and related fields that address the social, economic, cultural, psychological and political impact of COVID-19 in the United States and globally’.⁷ We note that SSRC has an international focus with strong interests in Asia, Latin America and Africa. Its Rapid-Response Grants scheme has attracted grant applications from researchers working on Asia or based in Singapore, as seen in the following projects: ‘Wellbeing in a Time of Social Distancing: Indonesian Domestic Workers in Singapore and Hong Kong’ and ‘Deferred Departures, Unhappy Returns: Pandemic and the Labor-Exporting Nation – COVID-19 and the Social Sciences’.⁸

Research Policy Interactions (International, National and Local) at Different Levels (Planning, Implementation and Evaluation)

In this section, we will highlight a major Singaporean case study of research-policy interactions consciously dedicated to COVID-19 response planning, implementation and evaluation involving social scientists. This has been led by Singapore’s key agency for managing infectious

diseases, the National Centre for Infectious Diseases (NCID), in partnership with Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health at NUS and the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University (NTU), as announced on 21 May 2020.⁹ This partnership focused on the role of socio-behavioral factors in managing COVID-19, with the following specific steps that will both aid and shape the formulation, implementation and evaluation of policies:

- Engage communities in building community resilience against SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19.
- Relay key findings of SOCRATEs, a community survey study, which demonstrates that trust in government communications directly impacts the adoption of socially responsible behaviors.
- Show that the proliferation of fake news on social media (a dominant source of information) requires misconceptions among the public to be addressed promptly.
- Highlight that health-seeking behaviors need to be improved to ensure that this complements Singapore’s capacity to test people for COVID-19.

The socio-behavioral studies in the NCID-NUS-NTU partnership ‘look into how people interpret the multitude of online and digital information around the pandemic, what they choose to do with this information, and whether this behavior can be influenced in a positive manner’.¹⁰ The study argues that identifying ‘how the public perceives and behaves during an outbreak and

afterwards is a critical component of designing effective prevention strategies, allowing for better community engagement, and building greater resilience.’ Furthermore, the insights from these socio-behavioral studies will “help shape the communication strategies of the authorities with respect to the COVID-19 outbreak, in order to reduce misconception and misinterpretation by the public’ (Professor Teo Yik Ying, Dean, Saw Swee Hock School of Public Health, NUS).¹¹

One study conducted by NTU’s Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information also looked into the influence of mainstream and social media on the communication of Covid-19 information and its impact on public perceptions and responses to the outbreak.¹² This also informs public responses implemented by health authorities; the insights are provided as feedback to the Ministry of Health, augmenting findings from the NCID’s cohort-based study, which was conducted ‘to assess the population’s knowledge, risk perception, and behavior during the COVID-19 outbreak’.¹³

Researcher-led Initiatives in Support of COVID-19 Responses

A significant number of researcher-led initiatives have not been instigated by either government-related agencies (which hold research funding) or academic researchers (who have access to research funding and publish in strictly academic channels like journals). Instead, new lines of research have come from social science researchers who share their thinking

and research via other channels such as social media. These researchers also tend to be more consciously aware of the unequal impact of the pandemic and the effects on vulnerable groups in the population; many are active participants in civil society (although not necessarily as key activists). Several also have wider interests, highlighting issues that may not be considered in the extant literature. One such example is the independent platform, the ‘Academic SG’ group (<https://www.academia.sg/>). The platform brings together both academic work and public discussion, and has built a widening network of social science researchers working on Singapore. Following the surge of infections in workers’ dormitories, commentaries began to spontaneously appear on its portal – for example, ‘Managing the coronavirus crisis: drawing the right lessons’ (14 April 2020).¹⁴ On 1 May 2020, the leaders of Academia SG also organized a webinar, ‘Beyond the pandemic: what we have learned and have still to learn’, featuring a roundtable of Singaporean social scientists, which drew more than 2,000 participants.¹⁵

Emerging Research Agenda on Social Sciences and COVID-19

Although the pandemic is a global crisis, the research focus has been on national responses, predicated on the protection of national interests – preventing the worst outcomes for national populations, which risk challenging the effectiveness and therefore the legitimacy of elected governments. This is not surprising

given that the world is organized along the lines of nation-states with territorial boundaries that are policed – only to be challenged by a capricious virus that does not respect political borders. In this case, though, we think that it is important to look beyond the nation-state in an interdependent world and, closer to home, in a geographical region such as Southeast Asia, which overlaps with the geopolitical grouping of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). An early attempt at a comparative study (published in 2021) is found in the article, ‘Responses to COVID-19 in Southeast Asia’. The study covered four ASEAN countries, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore and Vietnam, and assessed policy responses by the respective governments, covering aspects such as disease control, leadership and governance, economic and social support for affected sectors, public communications, healthcare systems, technology, and international relations.¹⁶

Beyond policy and structural analysis, there is also a need to collect material on the experiential aspects of the pandemic in the region. We highlight here the project, ‘Archiving Social Experiences of COVID-19: Diverse Stories, Memories & Methods from Southeast Asia and Beyond’, organized by the NUS Asia Research Institute in partnership with more than a dozen collaborators across ASEAN countries. Two main areas of the project are: ‘an oral history archive of interviews with essential workers, the elderly, COVID-19 positive cases and minorities from every country of ASEAN’; and ‘a visual repository of

lockdown images and social distancing signage from across the region’. The project explores the social impact of COVID-19 more extensively across Southeast Asian countries.

Conclusion

It can be argued that social science expertise did play a role in the ‘whole-of-government’ crisis management, with the involvement of research departments in the relevant ministries (for example, in the areas of healthcare, manpower, finance, social welfare and education). As for the actual contributions of social scientists, many responded to grant calls and were involved in research projects that supported the national crisis management, drawing from social science expertise in fields such as public health, mental health, crisis communications and social cohesion. Their role, however, was not as visible and direct as that of the scientists in fields such as infectious diseases and epidemiology or that of the doctors, healthcare workers, and the whole range of frontline workers. The role of the State remains crucial, but it will be critical for social scientists as conscientious citizens and responsible researchers to ensure that the vulnerabilities and inequities that the coronavirus pandemic has laid bare and exacerbated remain firmly on the post-COVID social agenda.

Brief Bios of the Authors

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Thailand



The Role of Social Sciences in COVID-19 Responses in Thailand

Highlights

1. Thailand's political and economic drivers have contributed to a 'securitization' and top-down approach to the pandemic.
2. The Centre for COVID Situation Administration is largely staffed by bureaucrats and security officials, with only a handful of social scientists.
3. The pandemic is seen merely as a medical and security issue; policymakers have therefore failed to include meaningful social science contributions as part of the solution.
4. COVID-19 research is characterized by a preference for hard science and quantitative methods. When social science research is funded, it is mainly technocratic in nature.
5. In spite of their marginal position in official structures, social scientists contribute to the response to the pandemic through other roles, including collaborating with CSOs and highlighting overlooked aspects of the pandemic in forums and the media.
6. Social scientists have contributed to four interlinked areas of public debate: 1) the 'securitization' of the COVID-19 response; 2) the lack of a holistic approach to control the pandemic; 3) the inadequacies of the social protection response; and 4) vaccination concerns in the last wave of the pandemic.
7. More research needs to be conducted on the social dimensions of COVID-19; addressing the growing inequity in society, including the stratified and gendered impacts of COVID-19; and on the experiential aspects of the pandemic.

Background

In Thailand, the pandemic started early, with the first confirmed case of COVID-19 outside of China in January 2020. Hastily introduced lockdown measures caused an exodus of internal and cross-border migrants, increasing the risk of spreading the disease in the country and abroad, but eventually the outbreak was contained. Local and international experts attributed the success

to public acceptance of masks – used also to prevent haze pollution in the cold months – a strong primary health care system with effective community health volunteers, and stringent rules for visitors from abroad, among other factors (Chongsuvivatwong, 2020; Sanguansat, 2020). A few commentators, however, worried that there was too much of a focus on foreigners as ‘spreaders’ of the virus and that the data presented were not accurate and did not tell the whole story (Yanjinda, 2020). Critics, including social scientists, also argued that the ‘draconian’ measures imposed were not always justified by epidemiological data, had political connotations and disproportionately impacted the economy, while the use of proactive testing and tracing as a public health preventive measure was neglected (see Boonlert, 2021; Marome & Shaw, 2021).

An extended period of supposedly zero ‘local transmission’ eventually ended in early 2021. A failure to procure vaccines and promptly implement restrictions on entertainment venues and improve conditions in crowded settings expedited the spreading of the Delta variant. The population was taken aghast when Thailand turned into a ‘red’ high-risk zone and demanded explanations. There are also calls for greater accountability around the shortcomings of social protection measures in shielding the most vulnerable from the disproportionate impacts of

the pandemic. The purpose of this country note is to better understand how far social dimensions of the pandemic have been addressed in the national response and to what extent social science and scientists have played a role in this.

Methodology

The research findings presented in this note are mainly derived from a literature review of media and academic articles on COVID-19 in Thailand, with a close examination of Thai and English sources from the field of social sciences and the arts and humanities. We studied the Thai Journals Online (ThaiJO),¹ Thailand’s central electronic journal database system, which contains articles from Thai academic journals in all fields of studies, and searched Google Scholars for internationally published articles in Thailand by both Thai and non-Thai authors. Interviews with 15 key informants, mainly academics from leading universities and think tanks, with a few from government as well as from NGOs, provided important insights into the interactions between social research and public policy and engagement.² We also talked informally with various colleagues from institutions we are connected with and people in our networks. Due to COVID-19 restrictions, it was time-consuming to identify willing respondents and interviews had to be

1. <https://www.tci-thaijo.org>

2. As requested by some of the informants, we refrain from naming them in this report.

conducted online. As the authors are also involved in research on social protection during the pandemic, direct observations of the current research environment are included in this analysis.

The Role of Social Scientists in COVID-19 Responses

The Inclusion of Social Scientists in Scientific Commissions/ad hoc Advisory Bodies

Since the beginning of the pandemic in Thailand in March 2020, it has been clear that the Thai government “regards the outbreak of COVID-19 as a non-traditional security threat that requires extraordinary measures — or, in a word, ‘securitization’” (Ganjanakhundee 2020, p. 1). A special operating structure, the Centre for COVID-19 Situation Administration (CCSA), was established under the leadership of the Prime Minister and staffed with bureaucrats and security officials, including the permanent secretaries of concerned ministries, the secretary-general of the National Security Council and the commander-in-chief of the Royal Thai Armed Forces (MFA 2020). Two advisory boards, the Medical Advisory Board (MAB) and the Recovery Advisory Board (RAB), composed of medical and macro-economic specialists respectively, support the CCSA.

Notwithstanding the multi-level structure and extended advisory grouping, policy decisions and formulations are highly centralized with no accountability to governing bodies or the public. Tensions have also been observed between central and local governments, with bureaucratic red-tape and inconsistencies across administrative levels.

Very few of the members of the CSSA and its sub-agencies are scientists and, with the exception of some economists, there are no social scientists. Medical specialists are members of the MAB and macro-economists of the RAB, and as part of their role they provide medical and macro-economic data to support CSSA processes. Social scientists, mainly public policy specialists, can be found in ad hoc advisory groups, particularly in the Advisory Sub-committee on Economics and Social Policy. Of the 13 Sub-committee’s members, two are representatives of the National Office of Economic and Social Development Bureau and serve as the secretariat, three are medical doctors and the remaining eight are public policy specialists (3) and economists (5) – there are no sociologists, anthropologists or representatives from the humanities.³

These days, social scientists employed in government programs are assigned with two main tasks: namely, contributing to official documents and publications to promote government policies, and efforts to integrate and manage large data

3. (คำสั่งแต่งตั้ง) - 21/2563 เล่ม ๑๓๗ ตอนพิเศษ ๑๐๒ง ราชกิจจานุเบกษา ๑ พฤษภาคม ๒๕๖๓ <https://spm.taigov.go.th/FILEROOM/spm-thaigov/DRAWER015/GENERAL/DATA0000/00000187.PDF>

sets for medical (e.g., vaccinations) and social protection programs, including the health care register. These data sets, however, contain many inaccuracies – largely because much of the data has to be entered manually (with the potential for human error) and is compiled from different departments and therefore does not always match – complicating the management and targeting of programs.

This limited analytical involvement of social scientists differs greatly from the handling of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in the 1990s and thereafter, when they were recognized for their expertise in behavioral aspects of the disease and its social dimensions. However, in the positioning of social science vis-à-vis other disciplines in Thailand today, government bodies tend to show scant appreciation for social disciplines, seeing them as unproductive in terms of economic value, and often dismiss social scientists as critics who are unsupportive of State policies.

The Emergence of Research Funding Opportunities for COVID Research in the Social Sciences, from National and International Sources

Public research funds that universities receive for fundamental research from the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation as well as those granted by the National Research Fund (NRC), the main public research grantor,

are strongly skewed toward hard science and technologies. It is still not clear what role the newly conceived Thailand Academy of Social Sciences, Humanities and Arts will play in this national policy and strategy framework, but the institutional vision is clearly to direct these disciplines toward national development in order to “facilitate the exploitation of this knowledge to create economic and social value and provide solutions to national challenges” (NXPO, 2020).

COVID-19 research is similarly characterized by applied research questions with a preference for hard science and quantitative methods, particularly when government-funded. Exact amounts are difficult to trace, but from a review of the NRC-funded research, we can assume that the largest portion of resources has been allocated for developing medical or technological innovations, equipment and supplies to contain the spread of infection. The same bias is visible in the latest NRC call for research proposals for innovations in managing and addressing COVID-19 for the 2022 fiscal year. Of the six key areas identified, four are for medical and public health research (genome research and epidemiology, best practice for patients, medical innovations and tools, vaccines), one for the management of the COVID-19 situation, and one for research for lessening the impact of COVID 19 on the economy, society and education (NRCT).⁴

4. Call for research announcement by the NRCT - <https://nriis.go.th/NewsEventDetail.aspx?nid=9474>

Research Policy Interactions (International, National and Local) at Different Levels (Planning, Implementation and Evaluation)

The top-down decision-making process has produced three kinds of policies. The largest category deals with COVID-19 as a threat and security issue; the second deals with the macro-economic impact of COVID-19 to ensure stability; and the third, much smaller set, both in terms of number and value, focuses on the social protection of vulnerable groups. A review of these policies shows a severe lack of integration of knowledge and data from social science perspectives, such as information on mobility, human geography, urban city planning, social networking and human behavior, even where these exist outside of government structures. Such knowledge could have contributed to proactive policy designs and approaches to, among other things, predicting new clusters, designing customized policies, improving access to testing, screening and treatment, and identifying vulnerabilities and social protection needs, thus improving the COVID-19 response.

In general, the production of evidence for the COVID-19 response has been bureaucratically-driven, with medical and macro-economic quantitative data used to justify and sustain political choices, in what Boossabong and Chamchong (2020) call “politics of numbers embedded in policy narratives”. Since the pandemic is seen as merely a medical and security issue, policymakers have not felt

compelled to draw upon social disciplines for analytical purposes, encourage collaborations across multiple disciplines or include the crucial knowledge that social science provides as part of the solution. As a result, policies and programs have overlooked and/or dismissed the social and cultural dimensions of the pandemic and neglected the vulnerabilities that social scientists outside of government structures have tried hard to highlight. With its narrow focus, the COVID-19 response “does not interact well with the social domain as it is missing the social, contextual and experiential constructions of policy problems and solutions” (Boossabong and Chamchong, 2020, Abstract). Likewise, there is no interest in how to ‘build back better’ in a more environmentally or socially sustainable way (Marome & Shaw, 2020). Yet, as one of the respondents stressed, “We cannot go back to the old normal; we need a paradigm shift leading to more sustainable, inclusive solutions with an ecosystem approach”.

As formal mechanisms for direct interaction with policy formulation processes are not available to social scientists – except for the above-mentioned advisory committees – research findings are shared through informal interactions and online channels. Social scientists who we interviewed held the view that they had to look for alternative means of engaging in framing the COVID-19 response. Some collaborate with CSOs in evidence-based advocacy and in supplying data needed for community programs, while others have worked in unison with activists and media personalities to raise their concerns.

As one respondent explained: “What social scientists can do right now is to rely on the media, mainstream and alternative, to publicize their findings and voice their opinion regarding the pandemic and rely on the thus informed public to create social pressures to influence policies”.

Researcher-led Initiatives in Support of COVID-19 Responses

A review of the literature on COVID-19 in ThaiJo and Google Scholar, unsurprisingly, shows a predominance of medical and medical-technology-related topics and, to a lesser extent, public health issues. The relatively smaller body of research on the economic, social and educational impact of COVID-19 tends to be applied research that uses quantitative methodologies. Among social research funded by NRC, there is a significant interest in education, particularly issues related to skills and technologies for e-teaching and e-communication in schools and beyond; labor and employment issues; the recovery of the tourism industry; and the expansion of the ‘gig’ economy.

The most influential policy research think-tank in the country, the Thailand Development Research Institute (TDRI), has conducted a wide range of COVID-19-related policy research, which is shared widely on its website and through webinars, publications and social media. The expertise of TDRI researchers is mainly in economics, but in addition to macro processes, they also pay attention to the impacts on the poor and other disadvantaged groups, mainly informal

workers and migrants, but also the chronically ill, people with disabilities, the homeless, prisoners and ethnic communities.

Interestingly, not much research has been carried out from a health-social science perspective, including medical sociology and medical anthropology. This reflects the general weakness of this field of studies, notwithstanding the capacity built in the 1990s with the support of US foundations and the significant contributions made during the HIV epidemic. Demographic studies are somewhat more prominent, giving attention to COVID-19 in relation to migration and in the context of aging. Migration, in particular, is widely researched by national universities and international bodies, with discussion of the factors that put migrants in a vulnerable position as well as analyses of the impact of the pandemic and containment measures on migratory patterns (SEI, 2021).

The production of this type of knowledge is technocratic in nature, as it is geared toward the perceived needs of policymakers – even if, as mentioned above, formal mechanisms to feed insights into policymaking processes are, in this case, limited.

Emerging Research Agenda on Social Sciences and COVID-19

There is a smaller stream of social science research with the broader scope of raising awareness of the social and human dimensions of the pandemic and highlighting human rights concerns. Some researchers have also taken

critical positions in four interlinked areas of debate: 1) the 'securitization' of the COVID-19 response; 2) the lack of a holistic approach to control the pandemic; 3) the inadequacies of the social protection response; and 4) vaccination concerns in the last wave of the pandemic.

A major theme touched upon, but deserving greater and continued attention, is the inequitable way in which COVID-19 and containment measures affect the poor and disadvantaged groups, and the growing inequity in society. Issues relating to xenophobia, stigma, double-standards and discrimination have been raised and are being further researched. While there have been calls to pay greater attention to women, the gendered impacts of the pandemic remain poorly studied and sex-segregated data are still lacking. CSOs and the social scientists working with them, have highlighted the specific vulnerability of sex workers and non-binary persons and their lack of social support, but research remains scant (Laikram & Pathak, 2021; Janyam et al., 2021; Tantirattanakulchai and Hounnaklang, 2021).

Attention to the human and experiential aspects of the pandemic is also limited, with some studies on the role of religion, particularly (but not only) Buddhism, and of the arts in coping with the pandemic. Some interesting efforts are underway at the Princess Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre. The COVID-19 Archive collects photographs from the public on the pandemic, although this visual material is yet to be analyzed. There is a series entitled 'Lockdown Stories', a collection of photo essays on people's

experiences during lockdown, and 'Hope Cluster', a series on people's fears and hopes during the pandemic.

Conclusion

In this country note, we have examined the COVID-19 emergency response structure and the policies produced, to date. We argue that the limited government attention to social concerns relates to the scant appreciation of government officials for social disciplines, as reflected in the marginal role of social scientists in official commissions and advisory bodies. Outside of bureaucratic structures, however, social science research fulfills multiple functions. Overall, the technocratic COVID-19-specific social research agenda covers a multitude of policy relevant issues related to the social and educational dimensions of COVID-19. Critical research further highlights the overlooked human and social sides of the pandemic and serves as evidence for the need to discuss policy decisions in public debates and in the media. In this way, aspects of the crisis that might otherwise have been ignored, are brought into the public consciousness, thus opening room for advocating for more humanistic, rights-based and equitable COVID-19 approaches.

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Timor-Leste



The Relationship Between State and Society in Responses to COVID-19 from the Perspective of the Social Sciences in Timor-Leste

Highlights

1. The establishment of the Centre for Integrated Crisis Management (CICM) is an innovative means of dealing with the current health crisis.
 2. There is a lack of involvement of social scientists and research in the CICM to provide evidence for policy decisions, particularly in dealing with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.
 3. The main funding source for COVID-19-related research is external funding from Canada.
 4. Universities have not made funding available for research during the pandemic nor have university academics been active in seeking to participate in research on issues related to COVID-19.
 5. The civil society sector is more active, primarily in advocacy-based research, in responding to the impacts of the pandemic.
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Background

Timor-Leste is a small island country located between Indonesia, the most populous country in Southeast Asia, and the Australian continent. It has a population of about 1.3 million people, with just over 200,000 people living in the capital, Dili, located on the northern coast of the country. Situated in a valley, Dili is vulnerable to flooding during the rainy season. In March 2020, four hours of continuous rainfall caused extensive flooding, destroying settlements and claiming the lives of numerous people (UN, 15.04.2021). A year later, between 2-4 April 2021, three consecutive days of heavy rainfall across most parts of the country destroyed settlements, particularly in the capital, causing landslides and killing at least 20 people.

The country shares a land border with Indonesian West Timor. Indonesia was badly affected by the pandemic, posing a risk of community transmission of COVID-19

in bordering communities. A nationwide lockdown was imposed to limit the movement of people along the border. On learning about the rapid spread of COVID-19 in neighboring Indonesia, many people rushed to the mountains. Students left their schools and returned, either voluntarily or with assistance, to their home villages and have not returned since.

Methodology

The purpose of this country note is to document the events around the COVID-19 pandemic in Timor-Leste, and the role of social science, particularly the importance of the relationship between the state and society in addressing the impacts of the pandemic. The study interviewed nine academics, nine civil society organizations, three government officials, one medical doctor and one parliamentarian from the ruling Fretilin party. In addition, we also posted key questions on Facebook, conducted an online survey and had informal discussions with people who had contracted COVID-19 and been placed in isolation centers. The authors own personal observations and, more importantly, personal experience of conducting alternative research during the pandemic are also an integral part of the research. In fact, on 5 August 2021, the author was tested positive for Covid-19 and underwent mandatory home confinement for 14 days.

The Role of Social Scientists in COVID-19 Responses

The Inclusion of Social Scientists in Scientific Commissions/ad hoc Advisory Bodies

On 1 March 2020, the World Health Organizations publicly declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. Almost immediately, the Timor-Leste Government established a working group known as the Centre for Integrated Crisis Management (*Centro Integrado Gestao da Crise -CIGC*). The name seems to suggest that it derives from the Finnish experience of addressing emergency situations. According to a Finnish National Defence Force document, “the integrated approach links up different EU instruments and actors in a coordinated way, including diplomatic engagement, Common Security and Defence Policy missions and operations, justice and home affairs, development cooperation and humanitarian assistance” (FCECCM, August 2021). This implies that the Finnish Government has adopted a defence strategy in responding to a conventional security crisis situation. The apparent adoption of this integrated Finnish crisis intervention model seems to have worked quite well in responding to the dramatic spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in Timor-Leste.

The CIGC appears to consist predominantly of three sources of expertise. First, are the health experts, whose role is seen as overlapping with that of the Ministry of Health. Second, there are

two active generals, Brigadier General Miranda Aluk des Cartes, and Brigadier General Pedro Klamar Fuik. General Aluk remains the Director of the CIGC. Their inclusion has helped to facilitate community mobilization, with support from the Policia Nacional de Timor-Leste. The last component is made up of consultants. The former Rector of the Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosae (UNTL), Doctor Aurelio Cristovao Guterrres, the only one with expertise in crisis management, appears to be the leading figure – his name was mentioned numerous times in interviews.

The involvement of a crisis management expert with a social science background – based on the adoption of the CIGC model of crisis intervention – might also suggest that the CIGC would take on a consultancy role, and not merely a military one. It is vital to note, however, that the civilian element of the Finnish crisis management model has a strong research component, to train and develop expertise in the field. It might, therefore, have been logical to involve the UNTL to encourage research and publications, both for policy and scientific endeavors. The state university, however, has taken a passive role in research on COVID-19, for which it has been subject to criticism. Various government documents, including press releases and the Prime Minister's interventions during the establishment of the CIGC, instead suggest that the focus has been more on the operational aspects of the emergency intervention – for example, discussions about health measures, security aspects of the intervention such as closing land borders, restricting movements, and

disseminating COVID-19 test results among the public.

The Emergence of Research Funding Opportunities for COVID Research in the Social Sciences, from National and International Sources

The main funding source for COVID-19 related research seems to be external funding from Canada. At least two research projects that the author is aware of are funded by IDRC Canada: a research project being carried out by the University of Dhaka in Bangladesh, which involves academics from UNTL, on gender and inclusive pedagogies during the pandemic; and this study on the relationship between state and society from a social science perspective, co-implemented by Universitas Indonesia and the Global Development Network, Delhi. With the exception of the Instituto Nacional da Ciencia e Tecnologia (INST), there is no funding from university sources for research on the impact of the pandemic. Even informants from the National Parliament of Timor-Leste admitted they have no funding allocated for research on the pandemic.

Research Policy Interactions (International, National and Local) at Different Levels (Planning, Implementation and Evaluation)

It appears that the civil society sector is more active in advocacy-based research such as 'rapid assessments' in response to the impacts of the

pandemic. Of the nine representatives from NGOs that were interviewed, at least four have conducted rapid assessments on the impact of lockdowns on education, and food production and hunger – with some discussions among stakeholders from the Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry on the latter. The Secretariat of FONGTIL, a forum for local, national and international NGOs in Timor-Leste, conducted a rapid survey on hunger, which showed that people were more concerned about reductions in production than hunger. Many complain about the reduction in income since a state of emergency was imposed.

The INST is the only institution that has made available academics to develop research on the impacts of COVID-19. However, the research findings are yet to be revealed. On 28 July 2021, an online seminar was conducted by the Rectorate of UNTL on the ‘Impact of gender and inclusive pedagogies on students’ participation in secondary school during the pandemic and beyond’. This is part of a five-year research project involving countries such as Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Timor-Leste and Vietnam (Oliveira Geiza, 28.07.2021). Each country has a team leader, connected to the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. The project has received \$65,000 in funding from IDRC Canada, for collaborative research with the University of Dhaka.

Researcher-led Initiatives in Support of COVID-19 Responses

Academics involved in social activism are conscious of the problems created by the

pandemic, but lack the institutional support to do anything about it. When a state emergency was declared in late March 2020, a group of activists, in the name of a new social movement called ‘Rehabilitacao Agroecologia Nacional’ (RENAL), posted regular messages on Facebook: “no charity, but food for work”. They posted pictures of themselves building terraces alongside youth and students wearing masks in Namalai, a remote village in the mountainous region south of Dili. The village has a population of some 500 inhabitants, and a mix of indigenous people and settlers from Lolein and Mombae speaking communities. RENAL made short videos and compiled a selection of photos, which were then shown to communities and presented in seminars. When the rainy season began, their activities were discontinued. The following year, in February 2021, a state of emergency was once again declared and the group restarted their agroecological campaign in the same village. By co-incidence, the bad weather of 2-4 April 2021 that destroyed settlements in the Namalai valley, which connects the Namalai region and the capital, provided them with a real agro-ecological crisis. The group began a larger research campaign with junior student researchers. About 20 students got involved in the self-funded project. They posted regularly updates on Facebook on ‘Promoting agroecology and biodiversity in combating COVID-19 pandemic’. They have been articulating a theory of change as part of the process to re-construct a ‘sustainable community’ in the region

of Tutiar. It is an endogenous process, with no external funding. While limited, it is helping to engender profound social change. For the past five months, the assistant researchers' dormitory has been turned into an alternative venue for environmental education for children and the surrounding community. They have presented their preliminary findings to a small conference entitled "Reflections on the relationship between Ecology, Covid-19 and Humanity," with a larger conference planned for the end of 2021.

Emerging Research Agenda on Social Sciences and COVID-19

There are plenty of emerging research agendas. First, the impacts of the lockdown on schooling at all levels. Schools have been closed for at least a year now. Although the government recently attempted to open up schools again, on 17 August 2021 it announced a further delay in reopening primary schools until 31 August 2021. Digital education is an area of social science that now provides an alternative means of schooling. Bilal Au rang Zeb Durrani, the UNICEF Representative in Timor-Leste, acknowledged that school closures during the pandemic in Timor-Leste have disrupted learning for 400,000 students, with 48,000 dropping out of school (Tatoli, 7 June 2021). UNICEF, together with the Timor-Leste Ministry of Education have therefore launched an online study program to support student learning at home (Tatoli 7 June 2021).

A second area of research that is particularly interesting relates to the fact that countries with

a strong state seem to be performing better in responding to COVID-19; Cuba, Singapore and China have fared much better than neo-liberal states such as Italy, Spain and the United States of America. It is obviously a subject worthy of study – one that could draw out some interesting lessons, supporting the idea that a strong state remains a valid model today.

Conclusion

The relationship between state and society is, in many ways, very dynamic and critical, but with little input from social scientists in the form of social research during the pandemic. Academics tend to appear only in articles and interviews conducted by the mainstream media, not in the form of academic and policy-oriented research. There is a notable lack of in-country funding for social research and publications, and universities themselves have shown little interest in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The state has adopted a number of robust interventions in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and civil society organizations and communities have contributed enormously to the implementation of state preventive solutions such as the adoption of soft technologies in the health service, the closure of national borders, vaccine campaigns, and the mandatory home confinement strategy. The establishment of the Centre for Integrated Crisis Management is an innovative means of dealing with the current health crisis; however, there is a lack of involvement of social scientists and research in providing evidence for

policy decisions, particularly for dealing with the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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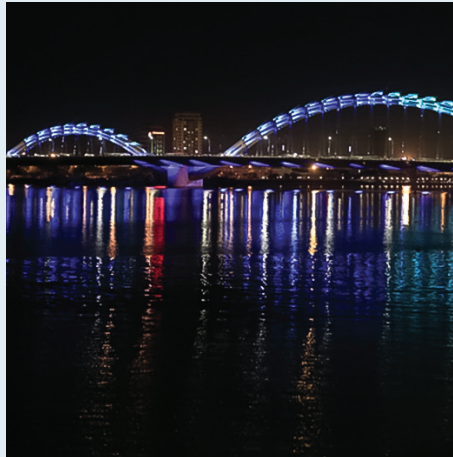
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Vietnam



Mobilization of Social Sciences in COVID-19 Responses in Vietnam

Highlights

1. Social scientists were not included in the commissions established during the first three COVID-19 waves; however, later on, they were engaged during the fourth wave as the pandemic continued to pose a significant threat to the community.
2. International funding plays a major role in facilitating a range of rapid and large-scale impact studies, while national funding is limited and targets smaller-scale studies.
3. International organizations play a vital advisory role in policymaking, thanks to the results from their large-scale studies, which have offered significant insights into the impact of the pandemic.
4. Systematically organized researcher-led initiatives have been few and far between; most studies and projects have sprung up sporadically, with researchers mobilizing their existing networks and resources to collect data.
5. Emerging research agendas focus on the impact of COVID-19 on the national economy and policy responses including government preparedness, communication, citizens' perceptions and social distancing.
6. Responses to COVID-19 should not be restricted to natural and life sciences, but should instead embrace the role of social sciences in informing social policies and individual as well as collective behavior in response to the pandemic.

Background

Bordering China, Vietnam was among the first countries to be affected by COVID-19 in 2020. The first three waves were quickly brought under control due to the government's strict measures and prompt actions, an effective public health system and the high level of public compliance. As of the early months of 2021, Vietnam was still held up as the gold standard for its COVID-19 response efforts. However, the earlier successes

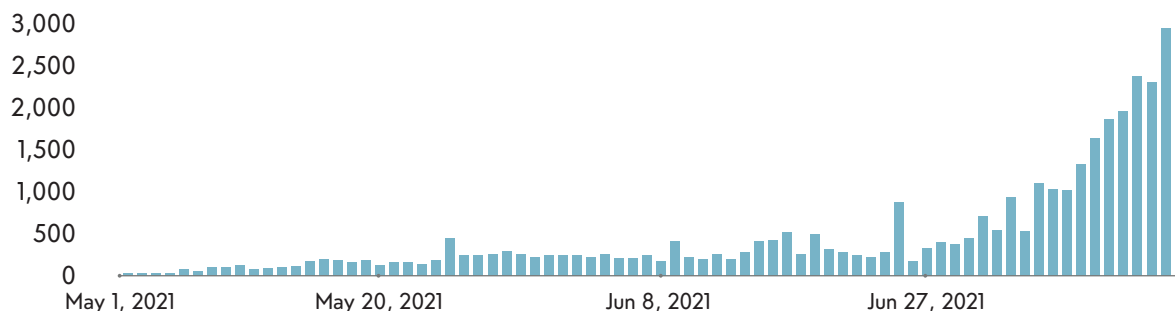
are being threatened with the ongoing fourth wave, which is larger, more complicated and prolonged.

Most worrying is the recent surge in the number of cases across the country (see Panel A, Figure 1). At the time of writing, the fourth coronavirus wave is raging in Vietnam, with the total number of reported cases exceeding 100,000 in July and increasing to over 600,000 in

early September 2021, an almost sixfold increase in two months. This is by far the worst outbreak of the virus in Vietnam. From mid-July, daily new cases continued to increase to almost 5,000 by the end of the month, reaching a peak of over 17,000 cases a day (on 27 August 2021) before plateauing out at around 10,000-11,000 cases per day. The sudden increase in infectious cases has, without doubt, overburdened the medical system.

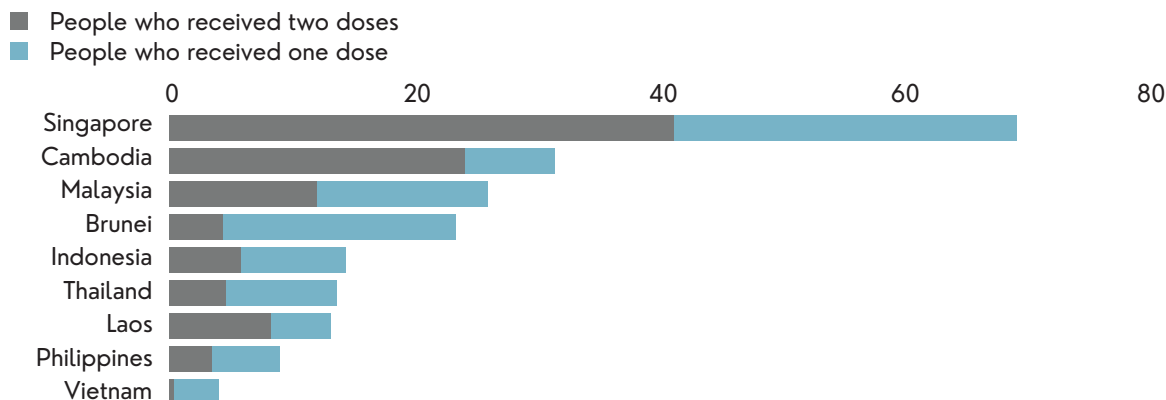
Figure 1: COVID – 19 update and vaccination in Vietnam

COVID – 19 new cases in Vietnam



Panel A: Number of cases

ASEAN vaccinations by country (in percent)



Panel B: Vaccination

Source: Our World in Data, as of July 14

Policy responses to recent outbreaks have so far been unsystematic, both in terms of their design and implementation. In this working paper, we aim to shed light on the role social scientists play in informing COVID-19 policy responses in Vietnam, with a view to contributing to a better understanding of the interaction between social sciences and policymaking, especially during the pandemic.

Methodology

The research for this note was conducted while the pandemic continues to unfold in Vietnam. This creates both opportunities and challenges. We therefore adopted a mixed research methodology approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative techniques. In particular, we rely on publicly available and aggregate data from international and government sources to keep track of the development of COVID-19 and related social science research outputs. For the qualitative analysis, we rely on observational and informal discussions as these are the only feasible methods under lockdown conditions. The paper also utilizes a positivist research framework that emphasizes the causal relationships between ‘variables’ under study. We close our paper by drawing some conclusions.

The Role of Social Scientists in COVID-19 Responses

The Inclusion of Social Scientists in Scientific Commissions/ad hoc Advisory Bodies

During the first three waves, the government acted promptly in establishing a National Steering Committee on COVID-19 Prevention (Decision 170, dated 20 January 2020 by the Prime Minister).¹ The Committee was chaired by one of the Deputy Prime Ministers and its members included government officials (at vice-minister level), some of whom have an academic non-medical background. The role of social scientists was fairly limited at this level as priority was given to (i) the containment and prevention of COVID-19, and (ii) understanding the virus, of which there was limited knowledge at the time.²

As the situation began to change during the fourth wave, especially with rigid social distancing and lockdown measures being imposed for a long period of time on a large population, it gave rise to many socioeconomic questions that call for the participation of social scientists. The government has publicly called for input from researchers (not just

1. https://moh.gov.vn/web/dich-benh/phong-chong-dich-COVID-19/-/asset_publisher/lcrTD0LmHj0u/content/quyet-inh-so-170-q-ttg-cua-thu-tuong-chinh-phu-ve-viec-thanh-lap-ban-chi-ao-quoc-gia-phong-chong-dich-benh-viem-uong-ho-hap-cap-do-chung-moi-cua-vi-ru?
2. When the fourth COVID wave hit Vietnam in May 2021, a new National Steering Committee was established under Decision 438/QĐ-TTg, dated 25 August 2021. The fact that, this time, the Committee is chaired by the Prime Minister and that members of the Committee are at ministerial level, reflects the severity of the Delta variant and the priority, once again, given to containment and prevention. See here for roles of different ministries: (<https://vtv.vn/chinh-tri/chinh-phu-ban-hanh-nghi-quyet-ve-phong-chong-dich-COVID-19-20210721080655125.htm>). While the Vietnam Academy of Science and Technology is given specific tasks, the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences is not mentioned.

social scientists)³ and has been able to enlist a number of social scientists, mostly economists, both within the country and abroad, some of whom served on the economic advisory board of the previous Prime Minister.⁴ An interesting development is the official establishment of a COVID-19 prevention advisory board by the Ho Chi Minh City government in July 2021. This eight-member board is led by an economics lecturer at Fulbright University and consists largely of social scientists (with expertise in public policy and law).⁵

The Emergence of Research Funding Opportunities for COVID Research in the Social Sciences, from National and International Sources

International Funding

In an attempt to understand the impacts of COVID-19 in Vietnam, the World Bank has initiated a project to conduct a large-scale survey of both households and firms. This flagship project is funded by the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the World Bank Trust Fund for Statistical Capacity Building. The first component of the project is the 'Business Pulse Survey', which is designed to monitor the impacts of COVID-19 on the business activities of Vietnamese firms and their adjustment strategies. The second component is designed to collect data on the social and economic effects of the pandemic on Vietnamese households, especially the most vulnerable populations.

In a similar vein, the International Labour Organization has teamed up with the Research Center for Employment Relations in Vietnam to explore the impacts of COVID-19 as well as the adjustment efforts of businesses and workers. The United Nation Development Program (UNDP) and UN Women have collaborated with the Center for Analysis and Forecast (under the Vietnam Academy of Social Sciences) to conduct an assessment of vulnerable households, including households of ethnic minorities, migrants and informal workers, as well as micro, small and medium enterprises. Likewise, a research team from Hanoi University of Public Health has conducted a rapid assessment of the social and economic impacts of COVID-19 on children and families in Vietnam, under the UNICEF support scheme for the Vietnamese government in response to the pandemic.

Aside from the newly-funded research opportunities mentioned above, international organizations are also taking advantage of existing projects to incorporate additional research elements to examine the impact of the pandemic. For instance, the Vietnam Chamber of Commerce and Industry (VCCI) and the World Bank has jointly investigated the impacts of COVID-19 on the production and businesses activities of over 10,000 firms. This collaborative effort was made possible by incorporating the research into the annual monitoring survey for the Provincial Competitiveness Index, with

support from the United States Agency for International Development. To date, it is the largest survey VCCI has undertaken. Another example of this form of funding is the rapid assessment of socioeconomic impacts of COVID-19 on people with disabilities in Vietnam. This research is conducted under the framework of two ongoing projects coordinated by UNDP: the Vietnam Provincial Governance and Public Administration Performance Index and the Korea-Vietnam Mine Action Project (KV-MAP). This method of studying the impact of COVID-19 can leverage existing networks of survey respondents, and the coordination and management structures of established projects. Moreover, research findings can be disseminated more rapidly thanks to the popularity of these established projects and the prominence of the international organizations that supervise and fund them.

National Funding

National funding for COVID-19-related social studies exists, though it is more limited. Independent researchers in Vietnam have taken advantage of annual funding for basic research in social sciences and humanities from the National Foundation of Science and Technology (NAFOSTED). Two recent COVID-19-related studies have received grants from NAFOSTED: one focuses on the adoption of e-commerce by small- and medium-sized Vietnamese enterprises during the pandemic; the other examines the

'propaganda win' for the Vietnamese government for its early COVID-19 success.

The most generous and prominent funding comes from the Vingroup Innovation Fund, a private philanthropy belonging to the largest conglomerate in Vietnam. In 2020, this funding supported three research projects, two of which focus on vaccine development and an epidemiological study of the pandemic. The third project, which received 4 billion Viet Nam Dong, is undertaken by a research team from the Institute for Preventive Medicine and Public Health. The research team has conducted multiple studies on human behavior in the face of the pandemic and on government responses, in an effort to develop a preventive framework for future pandemics. Overall, the project has resulted in 11 publications in international peer-reviewed journals such as Safety Science, Frontiers in Public Health, and Annals of Global Health, featuring studies of the health and economic vulnerabilities of workers in industrial zones during the pandemic, the pandemic-induced employment crisis, economic wellbeing and the quality of life during the pandemic.

Research Policy Interactions (International, National and Local) at Different Levels (Planning, Implementation and Evaluation)

Since the outbreak of COVID-19, international organizations have initiated numerous large-scale surveys and impact assessments, providing assistance, supervision and resources for

Vietnamese researchers. The findings from these impact assessments have offered significant insights into the impact of the pandemic, providing a basis for policymaking. Notably, the findings are often disseminated through policy forums, workshops and conferences jointly hosted by research institutes and funding organizations, and attended by government agencies and interdisciplinary experts including social researchers. These types of events are the most visible interaction between social scientists and policymakers, creating a platform for presenting and discussing recent findings and insights from relevant impact assessments and studies.

Researcher-led Initiatives in Support of COVID-19 Responses

Few initiatives by social researchers to support the government's responses to COVID-19 have been organized systematically. Instead, most studies and projects have sprung up sporadically, with researchers mobilizing their existing networks and resources to collect data. One notable exception is the project undertaken by a research team from the Institute for Preventive Medicine and Public Health, which, in 2020, successfully applied for a grant from the Vingroup Innovation Fund. This project explores different facets of the pandemic – for instance, the adverse influence on health and livelihoods of industrial workers; the impacts on labor markets; citizens' responses to social distancing practices or lockdown orders; the effects of exposure to fake news; and policy analysis.

Emerging Research Agenda on Social Sciences and COVID-19

In line with the government's objectives, social researchers have shown interest in researching economic issues during the pandemic. In our literature search, over one third of 80 social science studies (as of July 2021) focus on the pandemic's impact on the national economy, industry sectors such as tourism, finance and marketing, and supply chains. Others focused on education, the environment, international relations, law and regulations, and psychology in the new context of COVID-19. Another emerging stream of research is COVID-19-related policy analysis centering on government preparedness and policy communication.

Conclusion

There is an important role for social researchers and scientists to play during the pandemic, as exemplified in our study. The government of Vietnam has made great efforts in amassing and publishing data on COVID cases, which it should be commended for. While this represents significant progress and has proven very helpful in monitoring the pandemic across the whole country as well as in individual provinces, the lack of real-time, disaggregated, reliable and transparent data has hampered efforts to identify and target poor households for fiscal and social support (Vu et al., 2021). This, in turn, has limited Vietnam's ability to disburse large-scale measures in areas that need them most and use national resources more efficiently. The lack of

data availability and sharing has also limited the active participation of researchers and experts in public policy discussions and consultations. While there is evidence that prominent economists, epidemiologists, health researchers and social scientists have been consulted by government agencies through mechanisms such as advisory groups, given the gravity of the current wave of the pandemic there is a need to promote the participation of the wider academic community.

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