Regional Jitsi Meeting on Covid-19 Situation  

Participants:

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Key Outcomes of the discussion

**Updates:** More infections, including health care professionals and public officers – Confusing information according to the sources – Government prioritizes the big business / doesn’t reach the people at the bottom – Increase of domestic quarrels/violence – Increase of debt ratio at very high interest – Dependency / cycle of never ending debt of gratitude – Feeling of powerlessness / Depression – Need of sharing among neighbors

**Needed adjustments in our respective programs:** Uncertainty – Fear – No volunteers – Visits to the communities, to listen, to exchange, to decide together – To encourage continuous protection from the Covid – Gathering information – Communicating publicly about the new “unacceptable” – Using online video-conferences – Go with little projects inspired by the people – Looking for “Post-Covid efforts” grants
Update in the countries

Bangladesh

The situation is getting worse, total of infected people is more than 40,000 people. Per day more than 2,000 people are getting infected. Next month should be very bad. Most of doctors and nurses are affected because they are not getting enough protective equipment. Police officers are also very much affected because they work in the streets.

May 31st, Government says it would release some freedom again for limited hours, emergency work, shopping, medicine. It should be limited transportation facilities for next 15 days. Then they will make decision if they will keep it on or off.

Philippines

Department of health is saying that the infected are 15,000 already but scientists are saying that number is higher. By May 31, experts say that it would be too premature to consider that many people would be left out at the same time and exposed at the disease. We are in a state of confusion because the government is saying one thing, but the experts say another.

In some places, people can’t go around although some other places are already in green and orange zone, they can resume business and go out but still with limitations. Public transportation isn’t yet available.

Taiwan

Everything normal

China

According to the news, most of cases are under control. But most of elementary schools are still closed. Students are not studying. People are worrying about economy because China became a very strong country. Only nursing homes restarted welcoming elderlies. For some organizations helping children or women or young people, their programs are still postponed. The situation is still not stable.

Casa Ricci organization has programs to serve in some leprosy centers. In the beginning of the Covid crisis the government worried a lot about the leprosy people. Finally they are very safe because they already live far from other people.

Thailand

Life is almost back to normal. Public transportation were never interrupted, just more limited. There is regulation for social distancing, but we are free of our moves. Schools should reopen on 1st of July.

What we observe or hear at community level? How do people cope with situation?
What do they try to do for their family? For their community? How do they support each other?

Bangladesh

BRAC organization (Building Resources Across Communities) collected data among 5,000 poor households. Poverty level which is usually 20%, climb to 40% due to Covid. And more people will be under poverty level. Income level has reduced 70% in slums and poor areas. Urban areas are more affected than rural where people have still some agriculture production.

Government already distributed cash (money) among 5 millions households, 10 days ago and has also some food programs. But many people are not getting what government is distributing. (For the whole area where some Mati staff are living, just one woman was on the published list of people to get government money. But most of the people in the area are day laborers who can’t work nor earn anything.)

It has been found that 52% of people are borrowing from others. 14% people are getting support from the government, 5% get support from NGOs. Some people spent their savings. If the situation continues for another 2 or 3 months, they won’t be able to borrow anymore. How many days will it be possible to support them with cash and food?
In Mymensingh communities:
People who work usually at house level, as servant and in delivery system are begging really!
Poor women are staying at home because government said no one can go outside. But staying at home with no food is very hard. They try to get help from others, rich people or NGOs, but sometimes to no avail.
When the child says “Give me some food” and it’s not possible, it is difficult for all the mothers who are poor. They can’t go outside for any work and if they do go, it’s not good for their health. Relief donations consist only in 5 or 7 days food, and after that? Nobody keeps contact with them to know about how they are surviving, what they need, if they have some food left.
Domestic violence suddenly increased. If there is no food in the house, the wife knows that the husband can’t do anything. But when she sees the children cannot eat, she keeps asking for food and other family expenses, which make husbands angry suddenly, and they start quarreling.
They are borrowing money from others with high interests. And some people got involved in crime.
One big problem now is that people are in depression. People are having much quarreling in the family, but also, they are suffocating with each other, because, they don’t have food, don’t have money to pay rent for the house, they don’t have job to have that money. Some people who have money are also facing this depression situation.
In the Bihari* camp in Mymensingh, they have only 1 bathroom for 100 people and they share one room for 10 persons. It’s not possible to maintain social distance for them and they have no other option.
*Bihari are minority people originally from Pakistan who couldn’t go back to Pakistan after Bangladesh got independent

Philippines
The government is prioritizing those involved in big business. But small vendors are not allowed to go out. Tricycle drivers can’t go out in many areas and jeepneys can’t operate as well1.
A community member told: “During the lockdown we are forgotten and all the more we are at the mercy of the people who can help us”. They are exposed to local politicians such as barangay2 officers. They are pushed to the limit and forced asking these people for help. And so it becomes a cycle of never ending debt of gratitude. They have no say in it, it’s in the culture: “In time of crisis I was able to help you, so now I need your help in return.” It’s the same cycle all over again.
The needs are changing as the pandemic is extending. For example, if supports are mostly rice and canned food, families will have to look for other things, like milk or supplies for the babies. When they receive relief goods, people try to ration themselves to make it last longer. In large communities, the support from government or other NGOs is not for everyone. The government launched the SAP (Social Amelioration Program) who should provide 8,000 Php/ family. But up to now, not all communities could apply, and where they applied, it’s still on appeal.
In North Cemetery, people are only allowed to go out one time of the day, to buy the necessities. If they need something later, they have to ask someone to do it for them. Some people who used to have jobs have no news yet from their employers. Or those jobs are no longer open to them.
In a relocation site (RS) outside Manila, a mother explains: “My youngest child and me are here and my husband is stranded in Manila. He is not able to send money to us because he is a construction worker and construction was put to a stop. So we have reached a point where I have to ask for rice to my neighbors.”
Another mother from RS expressed: “Sometimes I just think like ending it all because I don’t know what to do anymore, I have no other options…” But then people say: “There are my children!” It’s about having no control of their life.

1 Cheap public transportation
2 Barangay: smallest government unit in the Philippines
Thailand
In the community, a grandmother explained that they had to rely a lot on food distributions because their sources of income were cut. The community is small, some families get scholarships from foundations, some don’t have, so they are not in link with help providers. The grandmother said: “Actually, when we receive something we share it, because we prefer everybody to be happy than keeping everything for ourselves.” The rest of the time they rely on “mama” (cheap instant noodles).

Government policies to help the people don’t benefit everyone. Thai Government has been making water and electricity for free, when you have a low consumption. In this community, people being on a private land are not documented as residents so they can’t connect to the national system provider. They take electricity from a private owner who charges them according to his will. They didn’t see any cut in their bills in this period.

Needed adjustments in our programs for the near future?

Philippines
Difficult to think of the future, when we cannot know what will happen tomorrow.

We have to consider how to approach communities in the coming months, especially if quarantine continues. Gathering of people and groups might be limited.

Everything will really change as almost all our activities are done with volunteers. In the immediate future, it will not be possible to invite many volunteers. Some people are still scared, they have fear, anxiety if its about to go around in communities.

We want first to visit communities and ask people how they are doing: at least not anymore online, but trying to visit them at home, individually or in small groups.

In the communities, people are still waiting for what will happen and they don’t know yet what is thought for them. They are under great uncertainty regarding work in the future. We can ask them what they think, what their concerns are if Covid is continuing, and maybe, we can decide after that.

We can encourage them to continue protective behavior such as washing hands, wearing a mask when going out, taking care of distances. And among things we talked about in our team, encouraging them to create their own face shield to use when they go out.

Media are always talking about “new normal”, but what is new normal? Who decides what is the new normal? Some people can’t keep social distance because they are poor and more exposed to everything. It’s not something that civil society is seeing for the first time and maybe we can make them think that this kind of poverty isn’t acceptable anymore.

We could gather information and start tackling public opinion to denounce the difference between being poor and not when it comes to a situation such as the pandemic we are living today.

We also came to realize that people have been dependent on others for survival, for a long time. The more people are living in the city, they are not self sufficient, they will not plant their own food. Maybe in the future, we can get along with other demands or suggestions, to ask the government to support people become more self sufficient.

In the Philippines, there is a big controversy about going back to school or not. Maybe people will be given the choice. This means that children who have access to internet and computers are going to do home schooling, but children who don’t have internet will either be exposed to Covid or not get education at all. Lack of internet and computer is very important today and we must think about it.
Bangladesh

The initial plan for dissemination workshops related to the research on Hidden Dimensions of Poverty had to be modified. We planned 3 Zoom sessions online, inviting 5 to 6 professors from different districts of Bangladesh and Dr Khan will moderate the sessions. So we want to experience if we can make these dissemination sessions online possible or not.

About MATI other programs, 3 people of the staff are regularly going to the communities to know what they need and suffer, collecting all information. They have protections EPE, always wear them and are very active. Some people still work from home. From May 31st we will go back to office, we will see how to do.

May 31st, government might reopen transportation system. It should be limited, but in reality government won’t have control on this transport system. The main problem will be keeping the social distance. Many people might get infected next month.

Last week, cyclone Ampan hit the south part of Bangladesh and some places have been fully destroyed. Ampan and Covid are making life more difficult in this part of Bangladesh.

Next month will be very crucial time for Bangladeshi people because there is need to supply food and cash among 70 million people.

Thailand

For the moment we cannot do activities in big groups with the children. When we go to the community, we try to sit with 2 or 3 people together and we discuss and collect information. Teenage girls told us about the fact that boys became so much addicted with online games during the lockdown. Of course, there was already some addiction before, but now, they are more aware of it. They told us that we have to do something so that the boys can get a bit rid of their cellphone as it’s not good for them. Our approach is small groups by small groups. And small projects for small actions.

What we have noticed is that there are some grant proposals for so called “Post Covid efforts”. Probably we have to be attentive at catching some opportunities which would help implementing some of the ideas that families have.

Taiwan

Families we know are scattered in different areas. In Taiwan, we don’t have ATD office and don’t have full-time volunteers. Some friends are in touch with some families in person, by telephone or Line.

The day after tomorrow, we are going to have an outing with families and ATD friends in Taipei, going to a mountain nearby. This activity happens because many families felt so lonely: even if life is normal, government advised to just stay home and don’t go out. So we staid home already for a few months. The ATD families came up with the wish to have an outing. So we say that this activity is organized by the families.