COVID-19 research: Social Science in outbreak response thematic area

*From rhetoric to reality: placing communities at the centre*

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Social Science in outbreak response thematic area

How research in this area has contributed to pandemic control

- strengthen public health and clinical response
- mitigate the uneven impact of COVID-19 on different social groups
- develop and advance methods, infrastructure and research capacity

Better evidence
- Novel methods
- Policy pathways
- Equitable solutions
Mitigate the uneven impact of COVID-19 on different social groups

- **Covid will push 49 million into extreme poverty due to pandemic** (World Bank, 2020)
- Middle East & North Africa extreme poverty doubled between 2015-2018 (conflicts)....will worsen
- New poor will be concentrated in countries that are already struggling with high poverty rates, but middle-income countries also significantly affected.

- Almost half of projected new poor (23 million) will be in Sub-Saharan Africa, with an additional 16 million in South Asia

- Projections of 10 million new extremely poor in fragile and conflict affected economies

- Many different ‘levels’ of being left behind globally – e.g., some entire countries affected
  - Women (rising GBVs), refugees and IDPs (internally displaced people), informal settlements, remote rural populations, undocumented migrants, migrant workers, elderly, informal workers, people living with disabilities, adolescents (school closures), LGBT communities...
Mitigate the uneven impact of COVID-19 on different social groups

- Despite its biological origins, understanding the pandemic, and controlling and reducing its human costs, requires a dynamic and in-depth knowledge of social, economic, cultural and political processes.

- COVID-19 research has been primarily characterized by applied research questions with a preference for hard science and quantitative methods, clinical trials etc.

- Science’ and ‘medicine’ do not operate in a social vacuum – need a holistic understanding of the course and consequences of the pandemic – CRITICAL ROLE OF SOCIAL SCIENCE

- Find actionable measures that are applicable to real-world conditions/contexts.
- Social drivers of vulnerability and risks during pandemic and its impacts on different populations/communities across and within countries.
- For e.g., context of the HIV-AIDS epidemic, institutional responses clearly embraced the notion that epidemics were tightly intertwined with social and cultural phenomena, not just a medical issue.
- Draw on cases from Bangladesh, Laos, Philippines, Vietnam, Singapore to illustrate...

Strengthen public health and clinical response
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Source: adapted from UNDP “What does it mean to leave no one behind?” (2018)
Mitigate the uneven impact of COVID-19 on different social groups

**CASE STUDY: BANGLADESH**

- **Millions affected:** fears of hunger, no income – Lockdown & Clinicians Taskforce
  biomedical response: reliance on economists, surveys

- Social science researchers informed – media, Civil society, NGOs (Brac), govt informally, others)

  i.e., Evidence: **Community vulnerability Assessments (Sonar-Global - HS, Arise – settlements)**
  JPGSPH: 44 studies) – revealed social, economic Impacts, food consumption, mental health, stigma and fears around covid, lack of trust, vaccines uptake etc

- **History of PH successes (ORS, FP, TB – community engagement, working across sectors**

- **End of 2021 – govt formed a coalition, i.e., CHWs**
Mitigate the uneven impact of COVID-19 on different social groups: Case Studies

**LAOS**: The COVID-19 pandemic teams formed by the PM comprised of social scientists, researchers and policymakers from various government sectors.

- Role of social scientists – led to development of 10 policies and 9 measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
- Lao Academy of Social and Economic Sciences - consisted of multiple research institutes. Specific social and economic impacts and evidence provided for tailor made policies: SMEs, tourism, loans for affected labour force, and training to provincial-level personnel and the private sector.

**PHILIPPINES** - University of the Philippines (UP), - LEVERAGED existing networks, to facilitate collaboration and knowledge sharing with government agencies, the private sector, academia and civil society in addressing challenges.

- Education, data science, development (the economy and health), governance, strategic studies. Islamic issues and concerns, and alternatives to western perspectives on the pandemic.

Mitigate the uneven impact of COVID-19 on different social groups

- **VIETNAM**: Social scientists were engaged during the 4th wave: rigid social distancing and lockdown measures resulted in many socioeconomic questions, called for the participation of social scientists.


- 8-member board, largely of social scientists (with expertise in public policy and law).

- Social economic impacts, research including on people with disabilities in Vietnam, Multiple studies on human behavior in the face of the pandemic and on government responses – to develop a preventive framework for future pandemics

  **Some examples: Singapore, Bangladesh**

- **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.

- **Civil Society platform – Bangladesh Health Watch** – connected to govt, and shared evidence to media outlets pushed for accountability

New and advanced methods, infrastructure and research capacity


- **What counts as evidence?** Recognition of the powerful impacts of social science research to inform and provide evidence,

- Moving away from ‘generalizability’ and invisibility and or homogenizing the ‘poor’ – opportunities to draw on innovative methods (i.e., longitudinal ethnography, rapid assessments, VA, photo narratives, CBPR methods)

- **IMPERATIVE:** nuanced and realistic assessments of how those who are most vulnerable are affected by epidemics

- Multidisciplinary and Interdisciplinary approaches important & Transdisciplinary approaches require- new integrated research models that benefit from disciplinary strengths but deconstruct the disciplinary silos. Greater investments required across sectors, institutional structures and specialisms, hierarchical value systems and resource allocation (Sciortino and Saini, 2020)

- **Sharing and learning from each other, Investing in capacities, institutions, resources CRITICAL**
Lessons learned: Southeast Asia response

- Inclusion of social scientists in scientific commissions/ad hoc advisory bodies at different levels of government, and their influence within and outside them is important.

- 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.

- Reflections should inform 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.

Lessons learned: working with communities (not simply as objects of interventions)

*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.*

Social sciences are key to providing evidence on the social, economic, political, psychological and cultural determinants of health and societal resilience, within and across nations

- Social sciences have a key role to play not only in ‘normal’ times, but also during crises. **RECOGNISE the urgency of social scientists’ contribution as part of a comprehensive narrative and effective response to this pandemic**

**Community engagement, community-led solutions critical for future policies and programs**

**Heterogenous, diverse, intersectional lens important (macro, micro)**

- Addressing social drivers of vulnerability and risks for diverse populations in specific social contexts, build agency of these groups while promoting social transformative change and sustain future strategies and approaches.
- Paradigm shift required - adjustments to data evidence, value of data and **THIS WILL SHAPE BETTER RESPONSES FOR THE FUTURE**


Towards a comprehensive narrative and response to COVID-19 in Southeast Asia, R. Sciortino and F. Saini, 2020, Social Sciences & Humanities Open, Volume 2, Issue 1, 2020, 100058


Thankyou