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Title:

Navigating the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic in Asia: State measures, grassroots responses and implications for recovery

Date:

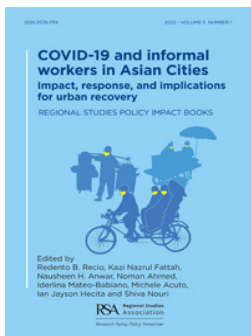
2023-01-01

Citation:

Recio, R. B., Fattah, K. N., Anwar, N. H., Ahmed, N., Mateo-Babiano, I., Acuto, M., Hecita, I. J. & Nouri, S. (2023). Navigating the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic in Asia: State measures, grassroots responses and implications for recovery. Recio, R (Ed.). Fattah, K (Ed.). Anwar, N (Ed.). Ahmed, N (Ed.). Mateo-Babiano, I (Ed.). Acuto, M (Ed.). Hecita, IJ (Ed.). Nouri, S (Ed.). Covid 19 and Informal Workers in Asian Cities Impact Response and Implications for Urban Recovery, (1st), pp.19-29. Routledge.

Persistent Link:

<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/333961>



Regional Studies Policy Impact Books

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: <https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rpim20>

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To cite this article: Redento B. Recio, Kazi Nazrul Fattah, Nausheen H. Anwar, Noman Ahmed, Iderlina Mateo-Babiano, Michele Acuto, Ian Jayson Hecita & Shiva Nouri (2023) 1. Navigating the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic in Asia: state measures, grassroots responses and implications for recovery, *Regional Studies Policy Impact Books*, 5:1, 19-29, DOI: 10.1080/2578711X.2023.2196210

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/2578711X.2023.2196210>



Published online: 15 Jun 2023.



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1. Navigating the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic in Asia: state measures, grassroots responses and implications for recovery

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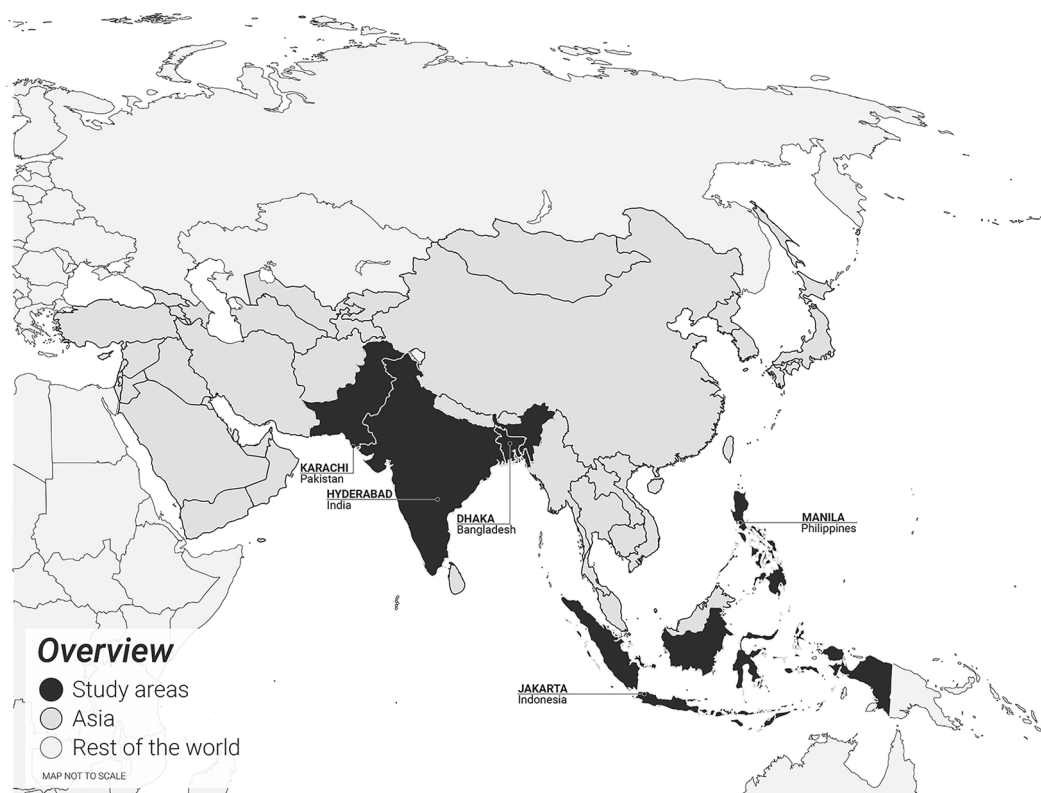
Keywords: COVID-19 impact; informal workers; government policies; citizen responses



1.1 INTRODUCTION

As COVID-19 took hold across borders in 2020 and 2021, more than 1.6 billion informal workers were estimated by the United Nations to have been impacted by mobility restrictions and other “lockdown” measures to tackle the coronavirus pandemic.¹ In the Global South, the pandemic has severely affected the sprawling megacities in Southeast and South Asia that have in the past few decades been driving urbanisation at vertiginous rates, and where there is a very high concentration of informal workers. The *Tackling a Global Pandemic in Asian Megacities* project and this book more specifically, examine how these responses to the pandemic impact informal workers in five Asian megacities: Dhaka (Bangladesh), Hyderabad (India), Karachi (Pakistan), Jakarta (Jakarta) and Manila (Philippines) (Figure 1.1). Gathering voices and experiences from across these subregions and a cast of diverse worldviews on Southern urbanism, the chapters engage with issues surrounding state measures to manage the COVID-19 crisis, unpacking their gaps and lessons learned in addressing the needs of informal workers. They also shed light on grassroots solidarity practices that have cushioned the devastating effects

Figure 1.1 Case study cities in Asia



Source: Map developed by Audrey Lopez

of the crisis. The book ends with a discussion of the implications of identified state measures and citizen-led responses for (post-)pandemic planning and urban governance in Asian cities in an age of recovery.

Tackling a Global Pandemic in Asian Megacities has been a regional collaboration linking six institutions centred in the Asia-Pacific region. Researchers from the University of Melbourne's Informal Urbanism Research Hub and Melbourne Centre for Cities coordinated the regular international dialogues with their Asian collaborators, namely: the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) (Dhaka, Bangladesh); the Karachi Urban Lab (Pakistan); the Hyderabad Urban Lab (India); the DLSU-Jesse M. Robredo Institute of Governance (Manila, Philippines); and the Rujak Centre for Urban Studies (Jakarta, Indonesia). The findings in each chapter have emerged from a series of city-level interviews and dialogues with major stakeholders such as informal workers, civil society representatives and government officials. The collaborating researchers then juxtaposed the empirical evidence with some key conceptual threads based on a review of scholarly papers, national and regional policy documents, media articles and reports by multilateral organisations and development non-governmental organisations (NGOs). A series of virtual (regional) write-shops and inter-city review processes served as a mutual learning and feedback forum for the research collaborators. This joint exercise also helped determine the key conceptual handles and empirical threads that characterise various state interventions and grassroots responses across the five Asian metropolises.

1.2 UNDERSTANDING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND URBAN INFORMAL WORK

Over the last two years, scholars have chronicled how the still-ongoing COVID-19 crisis has exposed urban inequities, compounded by pre-pandemic institutional arrangements and social relations.² Amid the inadequate state support to cushion the health and welfare impacts, the crisis decimated the livelihoods of urban informal workers in many Asian cities.³ Several studies have also revealed various mutual-aid practices, citizen-led coping mechanisms as well as forms of state engagement during the pandemic.⁴ This indicates that while the crisis has profoundly affected informal workers around the globe and severely disrupted economies, there have also been hopeful narratives about how communities coped with the crisis through grassroots collective action, inter-class solidarity networks and infrastructures of care.

This Policy Expo Book presents and examines the emerging and enduring issues that adversely affected the workplaces and living conditions of informal workers in the cities we have studied. It encompasses the institutional, political and economic processes as well as informal practices undertaken in response to the pervasive (and still ongoing) state of the COVID-19 crisis. In order to unpack the shared problems as well as the context-specific pandemic issues,

we draw on key ideas from four intersecting strands: *disaster justice*, *informality*, *intersectionality* and *care lens*. While there is no space here to comprehensively touch on the conceptual roots and trajectories of these constructs, we discuss below how we deploy each of them in this book.

The literature on disaster justice captures how the pre-pandemic inequitable institutional arrangements and social relations have shaped the uneven impacts of COVID-19 on different populations and social groups.⁵ It urges us to broaden our gaze beyond the immediate impacts of COVID-19 and analyse its historically rooted dimensions as well as its implications for (re)imagining our future urban relations. Examining complex urban relations requires paying attention to issues of urban informality particularly because over 50% of the labour force in the urban global South relies on the informal economy. Studies of various modes of urban informality foreground three things: (1) the persistent precarious conditions of informal workers; (2) the enduring grassroots agency; and (3) the constant interplay of formal measures and informal mechanisms in response to crisis situations.⁶ Issues surrounding informality involve gendered relations and other layers of power asymmetry. This condition demands another lens that interrogates such problematic entanglements. Rooted in feminist writings, the notion of intersectionality attends to multiple causes of vulnerability — race, gender, ethnicity, class and age⁷ — which further entrench the overlapping layers of inequality and marginalisation. Complementing this emphasis on multiple causes of vulnerability is a ‘care’ framework. A care lens draws attention to our shared vulnerabilities, but also uneven capacities to deal with the pandemic impacts.⁸ It amplifies the need to integrate non-human stakeholders (plants, animals, housing system) in designing and planning recovery strategies in the post-pandemic future. These four interrelated constructs have been deployed in the individual city chapters, albeit to varying degrees, to explain the complex state measures, institutional arrangements, non-government initiatives and grassroots practices aimed at navigating the health and socio-economic dimensions of the COVID-19 crisis.

1.3 SURVIVING THE CRISIS: IMMEDIATE IMPACTS AND STATE MEASURES

Urban informal workers play a significant but unappreciated role in the city. The empirical insights in all five cities reveal that informal workers endured the following issues during the height of the pandemic: a high exposure to the virus, loss of livelihoods, mobility restriction, inadequate state support and exclusion from state aid. While mobility restriction was a critical concern, many informal workers hardly remained locked down as they had to provide services to those who could work from home.⁹ The informal workers’ exclusion from state support stems from several factors: non-registration or non-recognition, dated databases, erroneous targeting and cumbersome requirements. These issues existed even during the pre-pandemic

period, particularly burdening informal and migrant workers. Arguably, these labourers are part of marginalised populations who had been taken for granted even when times were good.¹⁰

The lack of social protection measures has been observed in Karachi, Hyderabad, Jakarta and Manila. While the virus was wreaking health and economic havoc, informal workers in Hyderabad and Manila experienced harassment by state authorities; some of them even got arrested for trying to go out onto the streets to earn a living. Also, many urban poor communities in Karachi and Manila had to struggle against the eviction of informal settlements. In Jakarta, many street hawkers had to relocate their vending spaces to sites where rent is more affordable.

With respect to state measures, evidence from these metropolises indicates critical gaps in pandemic governance, characterised by inadequate welfare assistance, exclusionary public health-risk mitigation, irregularities in aid distribution, and highly centralised and authoritarian measures. The state policies enforced in these cities can be categorised in three clusters. First, containment and closure policies, which pertain to measures about school closures and mobility restrictions. Second, economic policies aimed at providing income support to citizens or at getting some foreign aid. A final set of policies refers to health system measures such as the COVID-19 testing regime, emergency investments in healthcare and vaccination policies.

In the Philippines and Indonesia, the national pandemic policy responses have been crafted through task forces headed by military personnel, and in countries such as Pakistan, policy implementation has relied upon extensive civil–military collaboration. In India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, the governments’ budgets were allocated to support low-income families, but it was unclear how the scheme benefited urban informal workers. There has been a consensus that the various state schemes to support the poor have not been enough to address the long-term impacts of the pandemic.

In all five metropolises, local governments’ ad-hoc interventions were initially effective in mitigating the “physical risk”. In the long run, however, the ad-hoc approaches proved to be unresponsive to the needs of the poor and unsustainable to tackle the welfare dimensions and other socio-economic impacts of the crisis due to the uneven capacities and limited resources of the local governments. There were also tensions in pandemic governance between national and local governments. In the Philippines, for instance, disagreements arose between national government agencies and local authorities due to unclear guidelines on aid distribution.

1.4 NON-STATE CRISIS INTERVENTIONS

Existing research on disaster and crisis responses highlight the critical role played by civic groups, particularly where state resources are stretched, governance systems are weak and

often unable to provide assistance equitably among all affected groups.¹¹ In the five megacities, state measures were complemented and/or supplemented by initiatives undertaken by non-government organisations and community associations led by women and young volunteers. These solidarity and mutual-aid practices — for example, relief distribution, community pantries and urban gardening — were effective in mitigating the pandemic's impacts, but their integration into post-pandemic recovery strategies remains to be seen. Beyond extending direct assistance to low-income families, some development non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also exerted significant efforts to make government institutions accountable by showing the gaps in crisis response and making “invisible” groups visible.

Religious groups also shaped how the COVID-19 crisis unfolded and was dealt with in the cities under study. While it is important to acknowledge how they provided relief measures to many urban poor, religious gatherings such as annual rituals and celebrations drew large crowds who flouted COVID mobility and spatial distancing rules. In Pakistan, Bangladesh and the Philippines, some religious leaders promoted COVID denialism, peddling disinformation about the virus and its causes.

Several common threads emerge from the city chapters. Notably, populist momentums underpinned by brute force interventions to securitise the virus, for instance in the Philippines, resulted in widespread human rights violations and bolstered the involvement of the police and military. Across these countries, centralised forms of command and control or special agencies were established to coordinate policy responses and to create a database that tracked the spread of the virus. The Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) and National Task Force (NTF) in the Philippines and the National Command and Operation Center (NCOC) in Pakistan are some examples of “hybrid” forms that were co-chaired by military generals and senior public health officials. These interventions accelerated the uptake of digital transformation in urban health and more generally in urban management, but with underpinning inequalities in dealing with issues of protracted hunger and healthcare crisis for the poor and marginalised populations.

Another common thread across these countries was the layering of lockdown measures that ranged from curfews (Hyderabad), national lockdowns, stringent enhanced community quarantine (Manila) and large-scale social restrictions (Jakarta) to smaller scale interventions such as micro-smart lockdowns (Karachi), area-wise (Dhaka), to micro-enforcement of community activity (Jakarta) at a later phase to contain the spread of the virus in specified “hotspots” or red zones of the city. Such interventions not only proved to be disastrous for informal workers, but also led to panic and anxiety, especially among migrant workers (Hyderabad) who could not return to their homes due to restrictions on their movement and the closing of state borders. However, informal workers such as street vendors also relied on various coping mechanisms (Jakarta) to mitigate the impacts of a declining turnover of trade; for instance, some switched to selling online to attract a wider range of customers, and others adjusted the types of goods sold with items that were much needed during the pandemic

The ad hoc implementation of COVID-19 policies led to the surfacing of unequal impacts on informal workers in the five cities. Most pronounced are their loss of livelihoods, limited access to basic needs including food and healthcare access, and displacement. The pandemic further amplified the intersectional disadvantage experienced by the urban poor, women and migrant workers. A lack of coherent guidelines, a heavily centralised response and the absence of a well-coordinated implementation of COVID-19 measures across different scales failed to protect the most vulnerable, particularly informal workers, from the unintended consequences resulting from the very measures that should have protected them. In contrast, stories of resilience emerged — diversity of informal workers' creative response to livelihood disruptions, the emergence of civil society-led care collectives — confirm that ground-up responses and practices are more effective in responding to the needs of the informal workers in the context of the pandemic.

1.5 IMPLICATIONS FOR PANDEMIC RECOVERY

Results of various multi-stakeholder dialogues, interviews with informal worker groups and country-based pandemic policy reviews have revealed a range of lessons that can inform post-pandemic recovery strategies across South and Southeast Asian regions. First, it is vital to revisit pre-pandemic institutional arrangements and rigid state policies that fail to respond to the constantly evolving needs of millions of urban informal workers. There is a need to unpack how urban informal work has been defined or framed in pre-pandemic policies. This can help determine what existing government policies or programmes need to be revised, repealed or enhanced.

Beyond the fundamental health crisis, the COVID-19 crisis has revealed and deepened existing inequalities for urban informal workers, exposing inadequacies in employment, shelter and social welfare services. In Hyderabad, for instance, the lack of comprehensive social security measures resulted in the phenomenon of massive “reverse migration”, which occurred when thousands of migrant workers lost their livelihoods in urban areas and were forced to return to their rural villages. A similar phenomenon also took place in Dhaka where a large number of informal workers (rickshaw pullers, street vendors, domestic workers) defied the government's travel ban and rushed back to their rural homes. This response was not due to the fear of the disease — rather, the fear of not being able to survive without work in Dhaka. Thus, a second recommendation is an enactment and/or effective enforcement of pro-poor social protection systems that address the vulnerabilities and uneven capacities of informal labourers to recover from the crisis.

Third, post-pandemic recovery plans should recognise and integrate the critical role of non-state players — civic associations, grassroots networks and religious groups — into designing inclusive strategies. State institutional support for informal workers' associations is needed to

enhance self-help initiatives and sustain mutual-aid groups. Crafting a strategic NGO–public partnership as an alternative to a private–public partnership — which often excludes civic groups and people’s organisations — is also a crucial step for advancing solidarity-based practices in urban and national development.

Another enduring issue that has been amplified by the pandemic is the absence of robust databases about the numbers and needs of urban informal workers. The distribution of aid in the cities examined here was marred by irregularities that were partly caused by inaccurate estimates of the volumes of informal and migrant workers. In Manila and Dhaka, for instance, thousands of informal labourers and entrepreneurs were not registered in any government records, making them ineligible for state financial aid. Many of these daily wage earners, such as street vendors or rickshaw pullers, work in plain sight, yet they are often statistically invisible and are “off the map”. This condition demands a policy intervention that integrates into local development plans a database and analysis of the changing volumes of informal workers, including their welfare needs, working conditions and collective aspirations. Addressing their statistical and spatial invisibility will enable both national and local governments to develop responsive crisis interventions and inclusive pandemic recovery strategies.

In the conversations with informal workers (street vendors, home-based traders and transport drivers), it is clear how they relied on emerging information and communications technology applications (ICT apps) to sustain their economic agency. Citizen-led voluntary initiatives also relied on social media platforms (e.g., Facebook) to mobilise assistance and other resources from various sectors of society. These empirical insights amplify the need for state programmes that enhance the role of ICT in responding to the needs and activities of informal workers.

This policy book documents how informal communities already possess a high level of local organisation when responding to the pandemic.¹² In this regard, this volume recommends the deployment of a grounded, informal workers’ needs-based approach in pandemic response and recovery strategy. This entails a holistic appraisal of the needs of informal workers, their immediate families and socio-economic networks, which can inform a coordinated effort in providing better support for their lives and livelihoods.

A final proposal of this policy book is the adoption of an intersectional approach at the policy level to design a legislative framework that incorporates gender, geography, class, race, ethnicity, age, and ability at the centre of risk and disaster management practices.

1.6 STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

After this introductory chapter, this book has six further chapters. While each city chapter has a specific thematic focus, the rich empirical discussion explains how pandemic policies

were framed and enforced in the five cities, how marginalised populations experienced and navigated the impacts of COVID-19 and state measures, and what policy insights might inform post-pandemic recovery strategies that attend to the work and welfare needs of urban informal workers.

In chapter 2, Nausheen Anwar, Duaa Sohail and Noman Ahmed discuss the impact of COVID-19 and lockdown measures on informal workers in Karachi (Pakistan). Employing a gender and intersectional lens, the authors underscore the complex and nuanced consequences of the pandemic, as these overlap with other kinds of crises, such as evictions, climate risks and gender violence. This chapter explains the role NGOs and welfare organisations played in providing food and rations. Its conclusion amplifies the need for policy intervention that can generate a reliable and accurate database of informal workers, which can shape a more inclusive relief distribution system and ensure that women's needs are adequately addressed during and beyond the crisis period.

In chapter 3, Chavali Phanisri Soumya, Anant Maringanti and Aalok Khandekar unpack the existing social welfare measures in Hyderabad (India). They identify the gaps in social security schemes and the possible way forward to reform the social security provision to informal workers. Using a disaster justice lens, the authors present how the pre-COVID-19 vulnerabilities of informal workers compounded the uneven impacts of the pandemic on their working conditions and welfare needs. The chapter ends with a clarion call for both Telangana State officials and the India central government to introduce a new social welfare regime that recognises the granularities and dynamism in the working and living conditions of informal workers.

Chapter 4 discusses the measures taken by the government and non-government entities in Dhaka (Bangladesh) during the pandemic. Shamael Ahmed and Mehnaz Rabbani touch on how different communities in Dhaka, despite their heterogeneity and inequality, came together to tackle the pandemic. As centrally controlled state initiatives proved ineffective, the government encouraged and supported local initiatives that included a more successful community-led lockdown enforcement in Korail neighbourhood, which is Dhaka's biggest informal settlement. The chapter shows some policy gaps in responding to the COVID-19 crisis. A particular gap worth noting here is the government's inability to adopt flexible mechanisms that allow the urban poor to leave homes and pursue livelihood activities, a key factor in the successful citizen-enforced community lockdown in Korail.

In chapter 5, Jayson Ian Hecita, Ador Torneo, Danica Panelo and Kimberly Miranda narrate how four local governments in Metro Manila (the Philippines) — Caloocan, Manila, Pasig and Quezon City — operated in an environment of securitised pandemic response. Analysing pertinent national laws, local policies, civil society practices and policy studies about the health crisis, they examine how the pre-pandemic policy settings and institutional issues enabled the

securitisation of pandemic governance in the Philippines. Their work summarises the effects of the securitised pandemic response on the informal workers and how civil society organisations and “communities of care” pushed back against these harsh policies and provided alternative practices for the pandemic response.

The final city-chapter chronicles the impacts of COVID-19 social restriction policies on three street-vending locations in Jakarta (Indonesia). Vidya Tanny and Elisa Sutanudjaja reveal how the location of informal vending practices and the varying degrees of informality affect the nature of enforcement mechanisms and the uneven impacts of Indonesia’s restriction policies on street vendors. This condition significantly affected their ability to sustain daily income and meet their welfare needs during the COVID-19 pandemic. The chapter ends with policy recommendations, highlighting the importance of secure workplaces for street vendors as a key agenda in Jakarta’s post-COVID recovery strategies.

The book ends with a concluding chapter summarising the key issues experienced by urban informal workers in the five case cities, further rearticulating the major policy recommendations from all chapters.

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- 11 Recio et al. (2021), see Reference 4.
- 12 Wilkinson (2020), see Reference 3.