Human Security and the Practices of Empowerment in East Asia Research Project

Working Reports

August 2021

COMPILATION OF WORKING REPORTS

OVERVIEW

The current JICA Ogata Research Institute research project "Human Security and Practices of Empowerment in East Asia," preceding the studies on human security norms and practices in the region, attempts to gain a comprehensive understanding of the human security concept by analyzing the empowerment of marginalized groups and vulnerable communities facing various and complex human security threats. Concurrent with the implementation of this project, the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic stands as a significant marker of the value of rethinking the human security approach. In the light of the current COVID-19 pandemic we cannot ignore the worsening downside risks to all identified fields of human security. This project acknowledges these shifts and changes in the threats that women, children, the elderly, refugees, and other vulnerable people, confront.

This project is being conducted at two levels to make timely contributions and systematically present human security's combined protection and empowerment framework within the present limitations brought by the pandemic. Level 1 encompasses the country-level analysis of the virus's impact, including the "protection" strategies that are the expected principal means of responding to this crisis. This analysis leads to Level 2, which focuses on vulnerable group/population-specific analyses by exploring the observable levels of "empowerment" in each case study. Through the guidance of the project advisors, the eight participating researchers present these *Working Reports* as the interim results of this research project. These are mainly based on the Level 1 analysis of eight crucial and interconnected human security issues.

The narrative of the past year was circumscribed by the myriad challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. These were characterized by overlapping and cascading complex insecurities impacting people disproportionately and indiscriminately. While the pandemic inarguably heightened people's insecurities, it also exposed how marginalized and vulnerable communities had been coping with diverse pre-pandemic challenges. For example, some countries had experienced public health challenges, scarcity in food supplies, stagnant economies, aging societies, gender disparities, and even displacements induced by conflict and natural hazards, way before COVID-19. Hence, it is fair to say that the onset of the pandemic only reinforced the inequalities that vulnerable groups and communities confront every day.

This project anticipates understanding the varied developments of empowerment among vulnerable and marginalized communities as they prevail over their pre-pandemic insecurities and those arising from the current complex emergency. Nonetheless, it is necessary to address first the following points: *security of whom, security from what,* and *security by what means.* Only then can durable solutions through sustainable protection strategies and opportunities for empowerment be understood and realized.

This compilation comprises eight working reports on health security, food security, gender, economic security, aging society, environment, forced migration, and peace and justice observed from 5 East Asian countries, Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam, and Japan. While the experiences of these countries do not represent the totality of the crisis in the region, they provide rich analyses of the multiple and overlapping challenges and difficulties that vulnerable groups and communities experience.

During this COVID-19 pandemic, human insecurities have been directly translated to the cascading threats of poverty and food insecurity. In Vietnam, many of the urban poor in its economic hub, Ho Chi Minh City, are impacted by the lockdown restrictions that have hampered their spatial mobility to conduct work. As a parallel reality experienced by many countries, COVID-19 has also posed severe consequences for food insecurity in vulnerable groups in Indonesia, particularly those displaced by conflict and the disaster-affected populations of Central Sulawesi and East Nusa Tenggara Provinces.

Even more so, the three diverse yet interrelated case studies of the Philippines present multiple human insecurities within a particular geography. Each case study demonstrated the state's response to COVID-19 and showed the complex issues experienced by different vulnerable groups and communities. Health security issues perpetuate the related issues of the access and provision of sexual and reproductive health services during the pandemic and the systemic challenge of the undervalued feminized health system and social welfare service delivery at all times. This theme is supported by the case study on gender that looks at the salience of networking in operationalizing empowerment by advancing the *Women, Peace, and Security* agendas in that country. Equally important is the case study examining the paradigm shift in the Mindanao peace process and how it impacted the internally displaced persons in Marawi City and neighboring areas.

Other timely and relevant human security issues during this pandemic include environmental impact, aging, and displacement. One of the case studies in these reports tackles the impact of the increased amount of plastic waste from PPE on the <u>environment</u> and livelihoods of people living in the vicinity of the Citarum River in Indonesia. Another study shows how the aggravated social inequality among poor and <u>older people</u> in Thailand is marginalized by the state-centric socio-economic recovery program and the digitalization of pandemic aid. Finally, another case study looks at how COVID-19 has re-emphasized the various insecurities of diverse and vulnerable groups, including displaced people confronting the dual problems of <u>disaster displacement</u> and the pandemic, even in a developed country like Japan.

As an interim result of this research project, these Working Reports present the various human insecurities of East Asia's vulnerable /marginalized groups and communities. They emphasize the indiscriminate impact of COVID-19 that compounds the existing vulnerabilities of those experiencing poverty, conflict, displacement, and even the lives of the health care frontliners. The COVID-19 pandemic has also exposed the acute inequalities in the loss of opportunities and limited access to resources, including food and even technology. At this stage of the project, the role of the state in each case study is salient, with differing accounts of how state have provided protection or otherwise exacerbated people's insecurities. While some countries are finding success, others are still struggling to navigate a clear and practical plan to mitigate the spread of the virus with its recurrent surges and lead their communities to a post-pandemic recovery.

This project also shows how human security research thrives despite the pandemic's logistical and other real-time impacts. It reveals the consideration of alternative research methodologies, such as combining desk reviews with remote data gathering, and the optimization of new and emerging research tools.

From here on, the participating researchers will continue to develop their case studies, adapting the progress of their Working Reports to capture the necessary details in understanding empowerment practices against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic.

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August 2021

Human Security and Practices of Empowerment in East Asia
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