

EMERGING HUMANITARIAN ISSUES BRIEF: SOUTHEAST ASIA

February 2021

INTRODUCTION

Significant progress in localisation in Southeast Asia has raised questions about the relationship between local and international actors and national governments, the role of regional actors in humanitarian access and assistance, and the power inequalities that persist in the sector. These questions are being asked in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and as some Southeast Asian countries are moving in to middle income status with disproportionate levels of government, military, civil society, and private sector presence.

This briefing note captures some of the trends and emerging issues for humanitarian action in Southeast Asia, and identifies where more evidence is needed to help the sector deliver appropriate and effective assistance. It has a particular focus on Indonesia, Myanmar and the Philippines. The brief was developed to inform the 2021–24 phase of Humanitarian Advisory Group's [Humanitarian Horizons](#) research program by Pamela Combinido, a researcher based in the Philippines. The process included document review and consultations with representatives of humanitarian actors (7 national actors, 6 regional actors, 3 international actors), between September and October 2020.

AT A GLANCE - MAJOR INCIDENTS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA (2015-20)

PHILIPPINES



Typhoon Goni (2020)

1,612,000+ people affected^a

32+ fatalities^a



Typhoon Mangkhut (2018)

890,000+ people affected^b

65 fatalities^b

VIETNAM



Flooding (2020)

5,000,000+ people affected^c

105 fatalities^c



Flooding and landslides (2019)

20,000 people affected^d

3 fatalities^d

INDONESIA



Sulawesi earthquake and tsunami (2018)

42,000 people affected^e

1,200 fatalities^e



Lombok earthquake (2018)

270,000+ people affected^f

279 fatalities^f

COVID-19

Cases and fatalities across Southeast Asia as of Jan 2021^g



2,020,951 total cases



44,409 total fatalities



- <https://reliefweb.int/report/philippines/philippines-su-per-typhoon-goni-rolly-and-typhoon-vamco-ulysses-humanitarian-needs>
- https://www.acaps.org/search?search_query=Philippines
- <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-10-21/five-million-hit-by-catastrophic-floods-in-vietnam,-cambodia/12796996>
- <https://reliefweb.int/disaster/ff-2019-000068-vnm>
- <https://www.worldvision.org/disaster-relief-news-stories/2018-indonesia-earthquake-facts>
- https://www.acaps.org/search?search_query=Indonesia
- 91-DICOV, An interactive visualization of the exponential spread of COVID-19

Photo by Steffen B on Unsplash



ONGOING HUMANITARIAN CHALLENGES

The COVID-19 pandemic

Some Southeast Asian countries are among the 20 countries with the highest COVID-19 case counts, with Indonesia and the Philippines recording the highest numbers of cases and fatalities in the region.¹ Governments have adopted various strategies to contain the novel coronavirus, including lockdown measures, travel bans and mass testing.² The socioeconomic impacts have been overwhelming for many people, and emergency cash assistance and fiscal policies have been implemented to mitigate them.³

Humanitarian actors are concerned not only about the direct health impact of the pandemic, but how it amplifies pre-existing challenges such as high poverty rates, disaster vulnerability, and susceptibility to conflict.⁴ There are concerns that the depletion of government resources will weaken responses to future emergencies.⁵ They also raise concerns for the safety of humanitarian front-liners, who expose themselves and communities to risk of infection.⁶

“What I am really fearing is that if there’s an L3⁷ disaster in the region at this time when we haven’t recovered from COVID, especially the traditional funding agencies – Europe or US – are very much affected by COVID – What does that mean for us? Are we ready for that?”⁸

Against this backdrop, as well as economic losses due to natural disasters in the region, UN agencies and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are prioritising the development and implementation of inclusive social protection systems. The ASEAN Guidelines on Disaster Responsive Social Protection to Increase Resilience propose a regional roadmap to “risk informed and shock-responsive social protection”.⁹ Social protection programs are envisioned to mitigate disaster risks, provide a financial cushion for disaster-affected households, and reduce the resources needed for humanitarian response.

1 ASEAN Briefing (December 2020): [COVID-19 Vaccine Rolls Out in ASEAN and Asia](#)

2 Muhammad Ashraf Fauzi and Norazha Paiman (August 2020): [COVID-19 pandemic in Southeast Asia: Intervention and mitigation efforts](#). Asian Education and Development Studies.

3 ASEAN Policy Brief (April 2020): [Economic impact of COVID-19 outbreak on ASEAN](#)

4 Interviews 2, 6, 11

5 Interviews 2, 6, 8

6 Interview 4

7 System-wide Level 3 (L3) Responses: are activated in the most complex and challenging humanitarian emergencies, when the highest level of mobilization is required across the humanitarian system.

8 Interview 6

9 Allan Dow (November 2020): [UN Agencies among partners supporting ASEAN moves to strengthen social protection systems for inclusive and resilient COVID-19 response and recovery](#)

Hydrometeorological hazards

Southeast Asian countries are anticipating the impacts of a moderate La Niña phase that will likely persist until March 2021, including flooding and storm surges. Rain has already triggered flash floods and landslides in parts of Indonesia, Cambodia, southern Laos and central-eastern Thailand, the Philippines and Vietnam.¹⁰ More recently, multiple typhoons have hit the Philippines in quick succession and are straining the disaster response system and already depleted resources¹¹.

Conversely, drought was a major concern during the first half of 2020. It has primarily affected Vietnam, Laos, Thailand, and Cambodia, countries experiencing the drying of rivers within the Mekong basin and beyond. The drought reduced agricultural and fisheries production as well as power and water supply, affecting the livelihoods and food security of millions of vulnerable communities.¹²

The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia (UN ESCAP) and ASEAN recently published the 2020 update of their plan Ready for the Dry Years: Building Resilience to Drought in South-East Asia. It outlines strategies to build drought resilience in the region, raising concerns that without proper attention “droughts can create a fertile ground for conflict” over access to resources and land.¹³

Conflict-driven displacement

The region faces protracted and renewed displacements, primarily due to armed conflicts between non-state actors and communal clashes. Some 600,000 stateless Rohingya people (including 130,000 confined to camps) live within Myanmar, and a further 860,000 have fled to Bangladesh.¹⁴ Their situation has received international media attention, yet a solution remains out of sight. Sporadic clashes have occurred in other parts of Myanmar, and renewed conflict between the Myanmar military and Shan State Army has resulted in further displacement. The situation in the area remains tense, restricting humanitarian access and precluding an immediate return of the displaced population.¹⁵ The context within Myanmar has been further complicated by the recent military coup close monitoring will be needed to see how this exacerbates humanitarian needs and impacts vulnerable people.¹⁶

There are also small to medium-scale displacements in the southern part of the Philippines. Figures from the Philippine Protection Cluster Displacement Dashboard reports that as of 30 June 2020, 351,647 people (75,567 families) were displaced across Mindanao.¹⁷ Described as an “emergency within an emergency” by the World Health Organization (WHO), many vulnerable families have been forced to flee from their homes to avoid armed conflict, with the precarity of their situation heightened by COVID-19.

10 ECHO (October 2020): [Indonesia – Floods](#); UNOCHA (October 2020): [Cambodia - Floods](#); UNOCHA (October 2020): [Lao PDR - Floods and landslides](#); ECHO (October 2020): [Philippines – Flash floods](#); UNOCHA (September 2020): [Viet Nam - Floods and landslides](#)

11 Aljazeera (November 2020): [Super Typhoon Goni batters Philippines, kills at least 10](#)

12 UNESCAP (2020): [Ready for the dry years: Building resilience to drought in Southeast Asia](#)

13 UNESCAP (2020): [Ready for the dry years: Building resilience to drought in Southeast Asia](#)

14 UNOCHA (January 2021): [Myanmar Humanitarian Needs Overview 2021](#)

15 Interview 3

16 Oliver Lough and John Bryant (2020): [With Myanmar’s military back in full control, Rohingya refugees need long-term solutions](#)

17 UNHCR, Protection Cluster (June 2020) [Philippines: Mindanao Displacement Dashboard, June 2020 - Issue No. 70](#)

RISING TRENDS AND ISSUES

State-led localisation

Building on longstanding experience and capacity in disaster response, most countries in Southeast Asia are mainstreaming a localised approach to humanitarian action. With this comes the pushback against the common “boots on the ground” mentality of international actors¹⁸ and the desire for a substantial decline in their roles. This is not to say that localisation in the region is new: local actors have always been in place and are usually the first responders to a crisis. However, there is increasing momentum to overcome the barriers and power inequalities preventing local actors from driving humanitarian action in their own localities. To support this trend, further study of nuanced and context-specific understandings of localisation is needed.

One key context has been the role of strong states in Southeast Asia. Localisation in the region has been reinforced by governments' reluctance to accept international assistance and instead highlight and facilitate a nationally and locally led response. Although this is nothing new, with countries like Indonesia trailblazing in this respect,¹⁹ more and more Southeast Asian countries are likely to follow suit. Not requesting international assistance may become governments' “new measure of success in the future”.²⁰

Among the factors contributing to greater localisation is recognition of the knowledge, confidence and investments in disaster response capacities built over the years

and the idea that accepting international assistance may hinder its advance.²¹ Another factor is the perception that international assistance is more a liability than an asset,²² drawn from experiences following the Indonesian tsunami in 2004 and Typhoon Haiyan in 2013. International aid can also present complications for countries that do not want outside actors attempting to influence controversial domestic policies. For example, during the Marawi conflict, President Rodrigo Duterte declared that the Philippines would only accept assistance from donors whose aid had no strings attached, rejecting conditions that tied human rights and rule of law to financing agreements.

“With the increasing roles of military and government-led responses, we’re also seeing shrinking space for NGOs and CBO²³s, and so the answer might be delineating or a clearer defined role as to what it is that humanitarian actors can bring to the table that governments and military actors can’t and simply are not in a position to do.”²⁴

Our research found mixed reactions to this trend among staff of international and regional organisations. Some are supportive, encouraging humanitarian actors to recognise

18 Interview 2

19 HAG, Pujiono Centre (March 2019): [Charting the new norm? Local leadership in the first 100 days of the Sulawesi earthquake response](#)

20 Rajaratnam School of International Studies (June 2020): [Humanitarian Futures in the post-COVID-19 World](#)

21 Rajaratnam School of International Studies (June 2020): [Humanitarian Futures in the post-COVID-19 World](#)

22 Rajaratnam School of International Studies (June 2020): [Humanitarian Futures in the post-COVID-19 World](#)

23 Community Based Organisation

24 Interview 14

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the affected state as the primary responder in emergencies, and to respect decisions to limit international assistance or set priorities and conditions.²⁵ Others caution that there is a risk that the localisation agenda is used to reinforce assertions of sovereignty and non-interference, leading to concern about protection issues and the possibility of some sectors of society,

such as migrants, being marginalised in government-led responses.²⁶ There is also evidence of international NGOs (which may have longstanding presence in the region) seeking registration as national organisations, raising questions about potentially perverse or unintended consequences of localisation on paper or through bureaucratic forms.

The role of regional actors

Currently there are multiple regional actors in Southeast Asia, including the ASEAN Coordinating Centre for Humanitarian Assistance on disaster management (AHA Centre) and the Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific of the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA). In the past, these regional actors were an interface between international and national stakeholders and facilitated humanitarian access. Some regional actors have also shown leadership and coordination in humanitarian assistance and disaster management.

“[Regional actors] have huge potential to be a game changer in the scenario today. They have leverages with governments; in the case of CSO²⁷s, they have a potential to connect CSOs if they can let go of traditional perceptions to only work with the government; they need to see diversity of CSOs as a strength rather than a threat.”²⁸

More thinking is needed on how regional actors can add value to locally led responses and their roles in relation to localisation, for example, in monitoring progress or identifying barriers, gaps and solutions. Some of the opportunities here include providing support to local organisations to assess needs or conduct comparative analysis across the region to understand emerging trends.

Unequal power among diverse actors

Central to the localisation debate is how to resolve power inequalities between local and international actors as part of overcoming the barriers that prevent local actors from taking on leadership roles in the sector. Local NGOs expressed the need for greater transparency in funding, quality partnership, respect and real investment in their capacities.²⁹ As seen in previous emergency responses to disasters

and even COVID-19, local NGOs have large roles but receive insufficient resources. Local NGOs lament that finance and decision-making on resources for humanitarian action are largely in the hands of bigger humanitarian actors.³⁰ They argue that due diligence processes remain one-way, rather than a productive two-way conversation between international and national partner organisations.³¹

25 Interviews 2, 11, 16

26 Interviews 6, 9, 16

27 Civil Society Organisations

28 Interview 8

29 Interviews 1, 4, 9, 14

30 Interviews 4, 9, 14

31 Interview 14

“We need a balance to look where the localisation is heading. There is always space for everyone ... Localisation is about transforming the relationship because there is still and there will always be a role for different actors. The issue of localisation is both a transfer of power which does not necessarily leave INGOs³² powerless, but a transformation of relationships.”³³

Against the backdrop of even scarcer global humanitarian funding in the wake of COVID-19 and the emergence of new actors, resource mobilisation strategies will likely require change. The COVID-19 response in Southeast Asia is an illustration of successful engagement with the private sectors. Supply chains were disrupted, and local businesses adapted. This raises questions about how resources can be

mobilised from local enterprises or businesses or local religious groups to ensure that global shocks or disruptions like a global pandemic do not leave local organisations without. There are also questions regarding China's emergence as a donor in the region. How does China make its funding decisions, for whom is their assistance intended and why, and what is its impact?³⁴

Beyond refining response and funding mechanisms, there is interest in revisiting how the foundations and origins of humanitarian action have been constructed. With the idea of humanitarian action assumed to be a very Western concept, there needs to be a deeper examination of humanitarian principles, such as how solidarity and neutrality play out in the region.³⁵ By recognising diverse approaches and cultures, can we create a more inclusive humanitarian ethics? For example, many global conversations are centred on neutrality, while in the region, who has humanitarian access is more relevant.³⁶

PRESSING DATA DEFICITS

Adaptation and anticipation

Natural hazards are a common feature of Southeast Asia, but climate change is already increasing their frequency and intensity. More information is needed on the advantages and disadvantages of climate change adaptation programs and how they can be integrated with existing disaster risk reduction and management programs. Humanitarian actors are also concerned about how climate change might affect funding, because donor countries are themselves experiencing climate-derived risks and economic setbacks due to COVID-19.³⁷

“If we as humanitarians are not dealing with climate change then we're not even in the playing field.”³⁸

Across the humanitarian sector, there is recognition of the need to invest in anticipatory humanitarian action. Scientific advances have led to better and more accurate forecasting. These tools and the evidence they produce can be used to accurately estimate needs related to, for example, cyclones, heat waves, cold waves, mudflows (referred to as lahars), and landslides in vulnerable areas when high volumes of

³² International non-governmental organisations

³³ Interview 1

³⁴ Interviews 7, 13

³⁵ Interview 7

³⁶ Interview 7

³⁷ Interviews 1, 6

³⁸ Interview 10

rain are expected. How to interpret and act on this information requires additional data on adaptation, as indicated above.³⁹

There are also questions about the ability to anticipate other risks: can humanitarian actors predict conflict? There is a need to invest in

understanding the humanitarian-development-peace nexus and provide concrete evidence about how it materialises in practice. These three areas have been siloed in the past, but humanitarian actors are looking at how to integrate them in programming.⁴⁰

Knowledge management and transfer

Over the past decade or more, a committed group of leaders in emergency response and humanitarian action has helped to drive progress in the Southeast Asian region. Despite the strength of this community, institutional memory is lacking; memories and experience are held by individuals.⁴¹

As key individuals approach retirement, a way to capture and share their accumulated

knowledge must be found. This is important so that the experience gained in the last 10 years of responding to disasters and negotiating access to conflict settings is not lost. This cyclical challenge needs to be addressed to make the system resilient in the longer term.

39 Interviews 1, 11
40 Interviews 4, 9, 14, 15
41 Interviews 7

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RESEARCH FOR TRANSFORMATIVE CHANGE

The findings in this brief will inform the design and implementation of HAG's Humanitarian Horizons research program in 2021–24. The Australian Government's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade funded the first two phases of Humanitarian Horizons. The program elevates the expertise and commitment of HAG and our research partners to make a unique contribution to the humanitarian sector in Asia and the Pacific.

The third phase will increase the program's emphasis on research that enables concrete steps towards improving humanitarian responses. By analysing how change happens in the humanitarian sector, by learning from models elsewhere, and by creating user-friendly frameworks and approaches, Humanitarian Horizons aims to generate evidence-based research and build momentum for transformative change.