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SOCIAL SCIENCE MISSING FROM ASIA'S COVID-19 RESPONSE

Policy-makers should engage more closely with social scientists to understand the socio-economic, cultural and political contexts behind the behaviours we need to change in response to global crises.

A region-wide assessment has found that opportunities were missed to involve social scientists in national COVID-19 response strategies in Southern and South-east Asia. The report, "The Role of Social Sciences in COVID-19 responses in Asia", was a collaboration between the Global Development Network and the Asia Research Centre at Universitas Indonesia, with support from the International Development Research Centre, Canada.

"COVID-19 containment measures in Asia have not benefited from understanding the contexts of how the pandemic is spreading," says Inaya Rakhmani, director of Universitas Indonesia's Asia Research

Centre. "Individuals have been blamed for not modifying their behaviours without understanding what is behind their reluctance. Social science research plays a critical role in providing insights into human behaviour."

A team of researchers examined how social science was mobilized in 11 Asian countries as part of national COVID-19 response strategies. They conducted literature reviews and interviews with various stakeholders to determine the extent of involvement of social scientists in decision-making mechanisms, how pandemic-related social science research was funded, and to evaluate current and

emerging initiatives led by social scientists in the region.

The researchers found that governments often viewed the pandemic as a medical and security issue, overlooking its socio-cultural dimensions. Bureaucratic and sometimes military personnel dominated many national pandemic commissions, with scientist involvement largely restricted to the fields of medicine and macro-economics. Social scientist involvement, on the other hand, was minimal, limited to managing large datasets and statistical information, and was mainly at lower administrative levels.

"Opportunities were missed to design

effective, context-specific COVID-19 response policies," says Francesco Obino, head of programs at the Global Development Network. "Countries often emulated each other, for example by implementing lockdowns, without giving enough consideration to the impacts on different groups in their societies, such as women, schoolchildren, daily wagers, migrants and people with disabilities. The knowledge and capacities to understand those impacts exist, but were only marginally mobilised by COVID-19 taskforces."

"Policymakers in Asia are not recognizing some of the social dimensions of health," adds cultural anthropologist Rosalia Scior-

tino of Thailand's Mahidol University. "For example, social science research can reveal the socio-economic and cultural contexts that impact compliance to mask-wearing and social distancing measures and perceptions about vaccines. If we understand the contexts, we can design more successful context-specific strategies."

Despite the missing connection with policy-makers, Asia's social scientists were able to spark public discussions by communicating their findings through the media. These discussions sometimes impacted government decision-making. Social scientists also partnered with non-governmental organizations to use

their research to improve work availability during the pandemic in countries like Malaysia, the Philippines and Thailand. The field also benefited from corporate and international funding despite a comparative lack of national investment in social science research related to the pandemic.

"Social scientists must break down the barriers standing in the way of a more integrated involvement in multi-dimensional crises, such as the COVID-19 pandemic and climate change," says Sciortino. "We need to enhance the visibility of what we do to ensure that social sciences fully contribute to reshaping our common future in a more sustainable and just manner."

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