



Consultative Workshop

Report on

“The Role of Parliaments in Promoting Inclusive and Sustainable Responses to Health Emergencies: Case Studies on Effectiveness and Impediments in National COVID-19 Responses”



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1. Introduction

Addressing the COVID-19 pandemic requires a regional response from all stakeholders. Therefore, the Commission on Public Health, Social Works, Veterans, Youth Rehabilitation, Labour, Vocational Training and Women Affairs of the National Assembly of Cambodia (Commission 8) and the Parliamentary Centre of Asia (PCAsia), with support from the ASEAN Inter-parliamentary Assembly (AIPA) Secretariat, organised a consultative workshop among AIPA Member Parliaments and representatives from civil society. The goal was to compare experiences and exchange views to support the fight against COVID-19 and similar emergencies. In particular a focus was on the role of Parliaments to promote best policies and actions to further address underlying impediments such as any instances of corruption, including through strengthened partnership between parliaments and civil society. This consultative workshop organized in Siem Reap, Cambodia from 10-11 August 2022, was attended by 41 participants (20 women and 21 men), face-to-face or virtually, including 10 MPs (Cambodia, Indonesia, Lao PDR, Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand and Viet Nam) including a number of young parliamentarians, two representatives of the Cambodian government (Board of Governors of Siem Reap province and Cambodian Ministry of Health), three Members of the AIPA Secretariat (including the Deputy Secretary General), four representatives of international organisations (including a representative of the World Health Organization (WHO) and other partners such as EWMI and UNODC).

The objective of this workshop was to:

- 1) facilitate the regional exchange of ideas and good practices in addressing health emergencies by comparing the various ASEAN approaches to promoting the health of all citizens with transparency and accountability during COVID-19, including the positive impacts of corruption prevention measures and
- 2) encourage constructive engagement on issues between Parliaments and civil society.

2. Opening remarks

The event began with opening remarks from H.E. Mr PIN Prakad, Vice Governor of Siem Reap province, Mr KIM YEAT Dararith, Executive Director of PCAsia, Dr Li Ailan, WHO Representative in Cambodia and Honourable Mrs LORK Kheng, Chairwoman of Commission 8 of the National Assembly of Cambodia. All the speakers highlighted that good preparedness is essential for an effective emergency response. In this framework, COVID-19 - which has magnified inequity, health, and socioeconomic disparities, disproportionately impacting marginalised and vulnerable people - should be regarded as a window of opportunity to transform health systems and build resilient communities so that ASEAN Member States and AIPA Member Parliaments will be better prepared for future health threats.

The power of parliamentarians in protecting people's health is instrumental to adopt a multisectoral and multidisciplinary approach that ensures inclusiveness and accessibility to information, vaccines and treatment, and also to provide needed support to the whole of government and constituents, in particular those on the frontlines (national and sub-national

governments, doctors, nurses and all citizens including migrant workers and those working in informal sectors particularly impacted by lockdown measures). In this regard, the role of CSOs should not be forgotten as they can complement the efforts of governments and parliaments, providing information and support to help address the needs of those who are most affected by the pandemic. In short, these opening remarks demonstrated a shared commitment to protecting public safety and well-being during health emergencies, and to principles of good governance and effectiveness through parliamentary action.

3. Panel Discussions

3.1 Overview of format

During the three panel discussions, a cooperative and comparative approach was used to review the actions that Parliaments in the region have taken in response to the COVID-19 pandemic in the support of the policies and actions of the Executive branches, and how CSOs can contribute to the effort. First, the participating AIPA Member Parliaments explored and considered how best to play their constitutional roles to help protect and secure the health of all citizens, in particular during times of emergency. This was followed by CSOs, who presented in a neutral, balanced, and constructive way the information they had collected from a variety of different actors, with analysis that can be of use to Members of Parliament, so that they are further equipped to make the best decisions possible in their representative, legislative and oversight roles for the benefit of all constituents. To help structure comparisons of the diverse approaches taken in ASEAN Member States, the CSO presentations utilised a common methodology comparing: Participation, Link to human rights obligations (the right to health), Accountability, Non-discrimination and equality, Empowerment and capacity development, and Transparency (P.L.A.N.E.T.).

3.2 Panel Discussion 1

The first panel discussion was dedicated to “the Role of the Cambodian and Lao Parliaments in Promoting Inclusive and Sustainable Responses to Health Emergencies: Case Studies on Effectiveness and Impediments in National COVID-19 Responses”.

3.2.1 Presented content

In their presentations, the Honourable Dr SOS Mousine, Member of the Commission on Public Health, Social Works, Veterans, Youth Rehabilitation, Labour, Vocational Training and Women Affairs, National Assembly (Cambodia) and the Honourable Mr Phonessane Vilaymeng, Member of Parliament and Vice President of the Lao Federation of Trade Unions, National Assembly (Lao PDR) exemplified the important role that ASEAN Member Parliaments played in supporting their citizens in response to problems resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic.

In Cambodia for example, the National Assembly unanimously adopted the Draft Law on the State of Emergency proposed by the Royal Government of Cambodia (RGC), which was also approved by the Senate. This new legislation contained several measures regarding restrictions on movement and assembly in order to protect the health of the people from

COVID-19. The sustained management of COVID-19 has allowed the country to reopen and remain open, resuming full socio-economic activities in all areas so that the Cambodian economy has recovered in 2021 with a positive growth rate of about 3% after suffering a severe impact in 2020.

Having temporarily given more power to the executive, Parliaments also undertook checks and balances on such health emergency programmes to oversee their effectiveness, for example in the case of Lao PDR where the National Assembly established a task force to work closely with the National Taskforce Committee for COVID-19 Prevention and Control in order to ensure, monitor and evaluate for effective and efficient implementation of the government's programmes to deal with the crisis.

In her presentation, H.E. Dr OR Vandine, Secretary of State, Ministry of Health (Cambodia), highlighted that leadership is important to build trust with people, especially for emergency issues. This trust is necessary to establish community responsibility, where risk communication is also important. Therefore, the government needs to give a clear message up front. Strategy, level of participation, how leadership works, and how to mobilise resources from society are also important, so a whole-of-society approach is necessary.

For Mr IM Sothy, Executive Director, Youth Council of Cambodia (Cambodia), COVID 19 has demonstrated the extent to which pandemics impact the society and public fear. Lessons show that simple communication is necessary to build trust and reduce the fear of society, and this points to the important roles of mass media, which is the success story of Cambodia.

Finally, Mrs Phongsy PANYANOUVONG, Program Coordinator-Gender and Inclusion, Oxfam, Lao PDR, explained that sometimes managing a pandemic also depends on population size, but one thing that has been learnt is that no matter how big or small a country is, if we do not do enough, people still die and viruses will spread everywhere. She also highlighted that communities need to participate, otherwise, even the best strategies will fail.

3.2.2 Main points from discussion

The participants from Lao PDR highlighted the instrumental role parliamentarians can play in information dissemination in order to ensure that citizens do not fall into a cycle of panic and neglect, which can lead to catastrophic health, social and economic consequences. In this area, the MP from Cambodia interacted with constituents to address various challenges, to support the policies, strategies and actions of the Royal Government, and to respond to the emergent needs of citizens, especially vulnerable people including migrants and garment factory workers, by disseminating information, educating people on risks, health and administrative mechanisms and informing local people about how to protect themselves from COVID-19 in accordance with the guidelines of the WHO.

One of the consensus areas from Panel Discussion 1 was that Parliaments have an important role to raise the safety and security needs of individuals, families, and vulnerable members of society as a whole (health for all, leaving no one behind, as stated in the United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda 2020-2030). Cambodia has set some examples: 70% of the population in Cambodia was vaccinated by September 2021, meeting the WHO's target eight

months ahead of schedule. In addition, health care workers and vulnerable people have been prioritized for vaccination. At the same time, malaria incidences reached a new low, and maternal and child mortality rates continued to decrease despite the pandemic.

3.2.3 Areas of debate and consensus

The first lesson learnt from Panel Discussion 1 is that to fight against COVID-19 effectively requires strong, proactive leadership using a whole-of-government, whole-of-society response, combined with international solidarity, government accountability and cooperation with a multitude of stakeholders. The fact that governments acknowledged the health threat early, took decisions based on evidence and coordinated preparedness and responses across sectors, pooling resources whenever possible, like the case of Cambodia's "blooming flower strategy" that raised funds from generous people and the private sector for purchasing vaccines, is a good lesson learnt for AIPA Member States. This is a case in point demonstrating how successful efforts to respond to the pandemic cannot happen without the strong participation of community networks, civil society groups and citizens. Participation is a crucial aspect of good governance. As put by H.E Dr OR Vandine, Secretary of State, Ministry of Health in Cambodia, participation means that we must "together be responsible for stopping the spread of COVID-19".

3.3 Panel Discussion 2

The second panel discussion was dedicated to "the Role of the Indonesian and Malaysian Parliaments in Promoting Inclusive and Sustainable Responses to Health Emergencies: Case Studies on Effectiveness and Impediments in National COVID-19 Responses".

3.3.1 Presented content

As shown in the presentations from Honourable Ms Vanda Sarundajang, Member of Parliament, Commission on Education, Youth, Sport, Tourism, Arts and Cultural Affairs, House of Representatives (Indonesia) (online) and Honourable Dr Kelvin Lee Wuen YII, Member of Parliament (Constituency of Bandar Kuching), Chairman of the Parliament Special Selected Committee (Health, Science, and Innovation), House of Representatives (Malaysia), several parliaments needed to take innovative measures to enable continued functioning, for instance, switching to digital technology which raised a number of issues related to the legal basis for remote working, security and authentication. The Indonesian and Malaysian Parliaments needed to modify their laws and procedures to allow for remote working.

Mr Iwan NUDIN, Executive Director, Lokataru (Indonesia) stressed that public engagement is important during the pandemic. That is why the authorities need to learn how to engage in a transparent manner to build trust with citizens, so CSOs can support MPs to engage citizen in the process. In this perspective, institutions need to function in the interest of the public, so the trust will come automatically.

Ms Cynthia GABRIEL, Founding Director, The C4 Centre (Malaysia), underlined the ASEAN Comprehensive Recovery Framework which suggests there is a need for a long-lasting

transparent data network on health sector responses in which all ASEAN Member States and AIPA Member Parliaments can collaborate to face pandemics.

3.3.2 Main points from discussion

An important aspect raised during Panel Discussion 2 was the use of technology: many ASEAN Member States agreed that it is important for the governments to apply robust testing strategies and contact tracing systems to detect, verify and trace viruses and this was enhanced through the use of innovative technologies. Examples include the case of Malaysia, which developed multiple apps to enable contact tracing and provide citizens with COVID-19 updates, advisories, self-health assessments and ways to make clinic/vaccination appointments.

Applying good governance through the use of transparency and accountability mechanisms is another important strategy applied during the pandemic throughout the implementation of health emergency programmes. For example, the Indonesian Parliament approved an emergency rule to allow the government to spend at least USD 25 million on COVID-19 response efforts (May 12, 2020).

Controlling COVID-19 most effectively requires governments to provide transparent information to the public, which includes information on budget expenditure and service delivery. To this end, parliamentarians can work to support corruption prevention measures and explore ways to engage citizens in transparent ways in order to build their trust. In this regard, CSOs noted that “emergency status should not sacrifice public participation in the process of policy development, implementation and monitoring” especially since the lack of public participation and monitoring can lead to reduced trust among citizens and increased risks of corruption.

3.3.3 Areas of debate and consensus

The second panel discussion showed that during the pandemic and recovery periods building trust with citizens through public engagement is important. Here civil society organizations can play a role in reaching out to different groups and communicating their findings to parliaments in a constructive manner.

The necessity of promoting an equitable health system (in particular by avoiding paid COVID-19 vaccine boosters) and building a comprehensive national health care system were also underlined, made all the more necessary due to a decrease in social welfare and economic income resulting from COVID-19). In Malaysia for example, preliminary results of the “Intended research regarding COVID-19 responses: achievements, good governance, impediments and corruption prevention measures in promoting the health of all citizens” suggest that policymakers should plan appropriately to counter the challenges of an aging population and that many policies catered only to short-term problems and could not be sustained throughout the recovery period. Hence there is an importance in anchoring the action of parliamentarians in the long term to develop a sustainable and effective vision to

the benefits of the country and the people, more focused on the inputs from CSOs while also collaborating with regional and international partners.

3.4 Panel Discussion 3

The third panel discussion was dedicated to “the Role of the Philippines, Thai and Vietnamese Parliaments in Promoting Inclusive and Sustainable Responses to Health Emergencies: Case Studies on Effectiveness and Impediments in National COVID-19 Responses”.

3.4.1 Presented content

The presentations of the third and final panel were delivered by Dr Luis Jose BAUTISTA, Medical Director, House of Representatives (Philippines), Honourable Mr Jetn SIRATHRANONT, Chairman of the Committee on Public Health, Senate (Thailand) (online), Honourable Ms Pechdau TOHMEENA, Vice Chairwoman of the Committee on Public Health, House of Representatives (Thailand) (online) and Honourable Mr DINH Ngoc Quy, Standing Member, Social Affairs Committee, National Assembly (Viet Nam).

In order to quickly respond to government requests, parliaments demonstrated that they were aware of the need for governments to obtain funding for the expedited implementation of health emergency initiatives. For instance, the Philippines' two houses of Parliament approved a budget of P4.5 trillion (USD 805 billion) which included P72.5 billion (USD 1.3 billion) for the procurement of COVID-19 vaccinations. In January 2022, the House of Representatives of the Philippines adopted a measure granting mandatory continuing benefits to public, private, and village health workers during the pandemic and other future public health emergencies.

Additionally, MPs have a role to play in promoting inclusive and sustainable responses to health emergencies and in promoting policies that help the country recover from the economic crisis and move towards a sustainable and resilient economy. For example, emergency economic measures were put in place in order to protect the incomes of those whose livelihoods had been impacted by the pandemic. The National Assembly of Thailand approved three Emergency Decrees to lessen the effects of the COVID-19 crisis by stabilizing the financial system, reviving the economy, and enabling appropriate authorities to grant special allowance to persons impacted by the pandemic. The Parliament established ad hoc committees (across political parties) to oversee government operations and budget implementation to ensure access to vaccines and mitigate the social, health and economic impacts.

Afterwards, Ms Rvengrawee PICHAIKUL, Director, the Gender, and Development Research Institute (Thailand) (online) and Ms Hoa VU NGOC, Communications and Social Mobilization Manager, the Center for Supporting Community Development Initiatives (Viet Nam) presented their intended research regarding COVID-19 responses: achievements, good governance, impediments, and corruption prevention measures in promoting the health of all citizens: Experiences of Thailand and Viet Nam. Among other things, they highlighted the importance to promote a comprehensive and gender-responsive pandemic recovery as the impacts of the pandemic are gender-sensitive and disproportionately affect the most

disadvantage populations (single mothers, younger children, low-income families, patients already suffering from other serious diseases such as tuberculosis or HIV). The Centre for Supporting Community Development Initiatives in Viet Nam also reported significantly higher numbers of death due to non-COVID-19 diseases during the pandemic.

3.4.2 Main points from discussion

From the discussion, we learnt that there are various policies and strategies adopted by ASEAN Member States to respond to the virus, ranging from health strategic preparedness, response and action plans, public expenditure, emergency economic measures, to social protection policies. These government policies and strategies also kept developing over time in response to the evolving virus situation. Effective and timely COVID-19 responses with equity in delivery of public services during health emergencies need to be backed by appropriate policies. Here, the MP from Viet Nam highlighted the role of the Parliamentary Committee on Social Affairs to fill gaps in the laws and to monitor and supervise the implementation of the key resolutions and budget-making, including through a hearing session with the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Social Affairs.

3.4.3 Areas of debate and consensus

As stated by the delegate from the House of Representatives of the Philippines, the Honourable Mr Ciriaco GATO Jr., “Without the Parliament, the Executive Branch will have a difficult time in the face of extreme need and calamity. Without laws to address emergency situations, emergency powers cannot be exercised.” However, the discussion also showed that parliamentarians faced constraints during the crisis in performing their constitutional functions, and therefore in maintaining the constitutional balance of powers and, specifically, the accountability of government to the people. Reflecting upon this, strengthening the capacity of sub-national and local administrations, emphasising their leadership and innovative solutions, and increasing their ability to control the pandemic at the local level to promote social protection systems and build trust with citizens can also serve to support the achievements of ASEAN Member States.

3.4.4 Proposal for a Consolidated Health Response Network

Panel Discussion 3 concluded with notable remarks from the MPs from Malaysia and Viet Nam, which stressed that global problems require global solutions, and that understanding the impacts of pandemics and responses to them can be done better together, including through productive cooperation with CSOs. The MPs from Malaysia with support from the MP from Vietnam therefore proposed a recommendation whereby the AIPA Secretariat and PCAsia will propose a draft framework for ASEAN countries to form a Consolidated Health Response Network between parliamentarians and CSOs promoting transparent data and knowledge sharing regarding health emergency preparedness and responses, to work together on issues related to the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 (such as Long COVID) as well as future health emergencies.

Referring to the recommendation from the Malaysian and Vietnamese MPs and related comments from the MPs and participants from Cambodia, Indonesia, Laos, the Philippines,

and Thailand during the Panel Discussions, PCAsia Executive Director Mr KIM YEAT Dararith stated that PCAsia in cooperation with AIPA would be honoured to work to propose a framework for the consideration of AIPA Member Parliaments for a Consolidated Health Response Network based on the principles of transparency and accountability, and the bringing together of parliamentarians and Civil Society Organisations.

4. Closing Remarks

Finally, the Honourable Mr KHOENG Noupheap, Member of the Commission on Public Health, Social Works, Veterans, Youth Rehabilitation, Labour, Vocational Training and Women Affairs of the National Assembly of Cambodia and Mr Mario Pandu Dewono, Deputy Secretary General of AIPA, delivered the closing remarks of the regional consultative workshop on “The Role of Parliaments in Promoting Inclusive and Sustainable Responses to Health Emergencies: Case Studies on Effectiveness and Impediments in National COVID-19 Responses”. They stressed the importance of building partnerships among AIPA Member Parliaments and with civil society, in particular during health emergencies. Both emphasised the opportunity offered by the workshop to discuss the common concerns on the topic of the COVID-19 pandemic and in comparing the roles that AIPA Member Parliaments have played during the response and recovery, specifically to discuss how AIPA Member Parliaments can further play their representative, legislative and oversight roles contributing to improved outcomes for all citizens going forward. Through the exchange of experiences on the implementation of strategic policies with good governance, transparency, accountability and corruption prevention measures during public health emergency responses, this consultative workshop contributed to help ASEAN Parliamentarians to increase preparedness in addressing these shared challenges for the future.



In reference to the recommendation put forth by the Honourable Members from Malaysia and Viet Nam, in his remarks the AIPA Deputy Secretary General recommended that PCAsia in cooperation with AIPA could offer a proposed framework for a Consolidated Health Response Network for consideration during the 2022 AIPA General Assembly.

5. Conclusion, challenges and next steps

Among the outcomes was a united acknowledgement of the importance of the roles of parliaments in ensuring people’s access to credible information and in countering mis- and disinformation, particularly over social media related to COVID-19 responses and vaccination campaigns. Also recognised was the importance of parliamentary field missions to learn more about the circumstances surrounding COVID-19 and the difficulties encountered by citizens,

and to get information at the grassroots level and to identify public complaints, including the side effects of public policy.



More generally, evidence showed that during the COVID-19 crisis, Parliaments played critical roles in performing their three functions in support of emergency responses. Among the challenges, according to the views of Civil Society, there is a need for Parliaments to pay further attention to their oversight role during pandemics and emergencies, especially on

procurement and distribution of medical supplies, vaccines, and testing kits because those areas are vulnerable to corruption. Among the tools that Parliaments can utilise during health emergency responses and recoveries are evidence-based and transparent budgeting and more focused engagement with citizens to better trace results and shortcomings. Other useful mechanisms are those that provide comprehensive, reliable, and timely information in all circumstances, including the dissemination of measures and policies on COVID-19 to the people, and that encourage their participation in assessing community health preparedness, impacts on their livelihood and their ability to access the benefits of various policies during the crisis and recovery.

Based on the fruitful discussions held during the workshop, next steps can include pursuit of methods for further parliamentary engagement in the preparation and response to health emergencies in cooperation with relevant stakeholders, including fulfilment of the resolution put forth during the workshop to propose a draft resolution for the formation of a Consolidated Health Response Network for consideration during the AIPA General Assembly in November of 2022.