

## COVID-19 in South and South East Asia

### *Accelerating or decelerating Sustainable Development?*

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#### Abstract

*COVID-19 has been a major challenge to global governance, highlighting the necessity for stepping up innovative governance. Beginning in 2020, governments have been trying to adjust in dealing with the massive challenges of COVID-19, implying that attention has been diverted from attaining the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to handling the pandemic. COVID-19 poses a genuine threat to economic progress, food safety, health, and educational parity in developing countries. The article examines the pandemic's impact on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals through a comparative lens of Bangladesh and the Philippines.*

**Keywords:** COVID-19, SDG, Development, Poverty, South and South East Asia.

#### Introduction

The governments in South and South East Asia have made efforts in incorporating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) into their national development programmes (Teoh & Kwan, 2017; Allen et al., 2016). Seventeen (17) goals have been identified under the SDG (Figure 1). There is no doubt that SDGs will have substantial implications for national development planning, and the global megatrends will have an impact on the SDG objectives. The impact of COVID-19 on the public health systems impedes the ability to meet SDG-3 (good health and well-being) (Khalid, 2021). When a country's demographics shift, the elderly may become more reliant on the social safety nets, putting further strain on SDG 1 (no poverty). Regardless of the country, SDG-2 is affected by population increase, rising food demands, and the consequences of climate change (zero hunger).

Because of the pandemic, the digital divide has become clear to us all and that the lack of access to education (Ullah et al., 2021) has become obvious, which implies that SDG 4 is jeopardised (quality education) (Khalid, 2021). According to the United Nations (UN) (2020), 44 million more people will be living in extreme poverty by 2030 as a result of the epidemic, and it is possible that the epidemic might cause 251 million people to fall into extreme poverty, raising the total to one billion by 2030. This implies that achieving SDG-1 might be far from possible.

The global communities have been hurt by the shutdowns imposed by many of the world's governments in their bid to curtail COVID-19's transmission, and these moves have the potential to push the hard-hit communities back into poverty (Paul,

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2021). After overcoming the pandemic crisis, it could grow to be a deep-rooted human crisis, disrupting the state's progress and the SDGs. Constant Gross Domestic Product (GDP) growth has not given rise to decreasing income inequality. Once restrictions were loosened, compelled by a decline in COVID-19 cases, the government of Bangladesh has needed to assess the critical issues, including the pandemic's influence on the vulnerable segment of society and the condition of SDGs implementation (Shammi et al., 2021). Financial crises are known to adversely impact the weak section of the society, and the current situation stemming from the pandemic is no exception. All walks of life feel the impact of the lockdown and the pandemic, but most notably by the poor. On the upside, there have been some achievements in the health sector, even though it has been a challenge to provide widespread health coverage. The pandemic has shown fundamental global governance flaws and highlights the world's grave insecurity today (UN, 2020). It reveals that there has been an under-investment in people's health and well-being, and an over-exploitation of the earth's natural resources (WHO, 2015).

According to Abidoye, Felix, Kapto, and Patterson (2021), by 2030, the pandemic might result in 41 to 169 million people living in extreme poverty in countries with low and medium human development, including 20 to 83 million women and girls. According to a 'COVID Baseline' scenario, between 626 and 753 million people in low and medium human development countries will be living in extreme poverty, with 24 to 86 million of those coming from counties identified as low-human development. By 2030, COVID-19 may have increased the number of malnourished individuals in these nations by 12.8 million above a "No COVID" future. By 2030, the number of malnourished children is predicted to climb by 1.6 million to 57.5 million and to 60.5 million under a "High Damage" scenario (Abidoye et al., 2021).

In this article, I look at how COVID-19 could affect the SDGs in three different ways and how the pandemic could affect extreme poverty in the years to come. For comparison, I have chosen two near-identical economies: Bangladesh and the Philippines from South and South East Asia, respectively. The paper is based on secondary literature, including books, journal articles, newspapers and websites of reputable organisations.

### **SDG: A Conceptual Focus**

Sustainable development meets present needs without endangering future generations' ability to satisfy their own needs (United Nations, 1987). Sustainable development is established on three pillars: economic, social, and environmental (Ahmed, 2021). Achieving long-term sustainability integrates financial, environmental, and social goals across sectors, areas, and generations (Elliott, 2013; Emas, 2015). The United Nations developed the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), also known as the Global Goals, in 2015 as a universal call to action to eradicate poverty, safeguard the planet, and ensure that by 2030, all people enjoy peace and prosperity (UN, 2020). The SDGs comprise 17 interconnected global goals that serve as a "roadmap to a more egalitarian and sustainable future for all (Hák et al., 2016), recognizing that activities in one area affect outcomes in

others and that development can strike a balance between social, economic, and environmental preservation (Omer & Noguchi, 2020). In short, SDG is a global framework for ending poverty, protecting the environment, and ensuring prosperity.

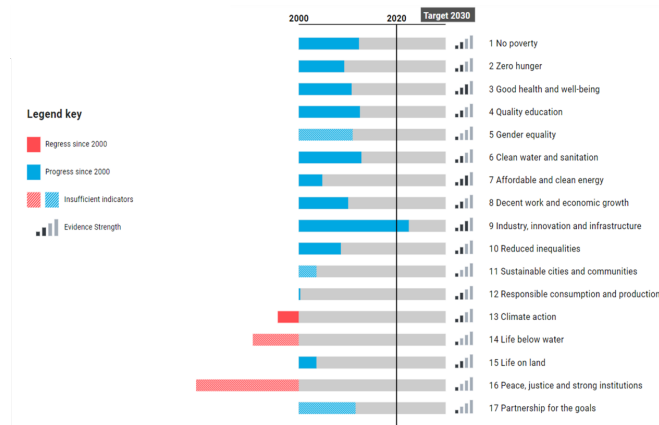


Figure 1 SDGs. Source: Khalid, 2021

The term "development" has acquired a plethora of connotations (Ahmed, 2019; Mensah, 2019). Todaro and Smith (2006) define advancement as a term with a broad connotation that covers fundamental changes in social norms, attitudes, institutions, and

economic development, reduced inequality, and poverty reduction. Stoddart (2011) defines sustainability as the efficient and equitable allocation of resources through generations, as well as the operation of socio-economic systems within the restrictions of an ecosystem. The concept was organised around the phrase "sustainable development." Just as the two concepts that make up the example of sustainability, "sustainable" and "development," have been defined in a variety of ways, so has the notion of sustainable development itself, thus resulting in a multiplicity of definitions (Mensah, 2019; Mohieldin, 2017). Sustainable development is not a goal in and of itself but a benchmark by which our leaders and we can measure ourselves in order to guarantee that no stone is left unturned in the pursuit of real, sustainable development (Khalid, 2021).

### The pandemic, SDGs and South and Southeast Asia

Pandemics, in reality, do not discriminate between countries based on their military might, health capability, or financial strength. The United States of America is one of the best examples of an economic giant that possesses enviable military strength and world-class healthcare infrastructure, but which has been adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic (Ullah & Ferdous, 2022). However, financial strength and sound public governance are contingent on any country making a post-pandemic recovery. Nevertheless, there will be certain segments of the society that will feel more of the burden of the recovery process, notably the unemployed, the disabled, the elderly, and the migrant communities.

South East Asia is a heterogeneous region (Acharya, 1999) in terms of culture, ethnicity, economy, governance, politics, and religious belief. Singapore is the most advanced country, with Malaysia and Thailand following close behind. However,

other countries in the region are catching up, placing heavy emphasis on development even if, in reality, they cannot afford to massively invest in this field. Cambodia, Laos, Indonesia and Vietnam have identified agriculture as a priority in their rural development plans (Ullah & Kumpoh, 2018). South Asia is a more or less homogenous region in terms of economy, politics, culture and religious belief. Nevertheless, despite the homogeneity, the onslaught of the pandemic has affected the countries in the region in different ways. For example, whilst its robust economy means India has the financial capacity to handle the COVID-19 mayhem, the country's huge population size proved to be a stumbling block in their efficacy in handling the pandemic. On the other hand, Bhutan has a limited monetary capacity, but its small population size enables it to efficiently contain the virus.

Of course, different countries have chosen different measures to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic and reduce its effects on health, education, and socioeconomic disadvantages for vulnerable populations and enterprises (Sakamoto et al., 2020). The severe outbreak of COVID-19 has struck South Asian countries. More than half of the world's new illnesses originate in the region, which has a population of more than 2 billion people. As many as three new cases are being reported every second (UNICEF, 2021). As a result, death rates are also rising. The virus kills three individuals a minute in the area. According to UNICEF (2021), scarcity of oxygen and other life-saving medical supplies has put hospitals on the verge of collapse, and frail healthcare systems are on the brink of collapse. In the worst-hit places, the virus is wiping out entire families. The health systems in India, Nepal, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Bhutan, Afghanistan and the Maldives are feeling the strain of an epidemic of unprecedented speed.

**Table 1. COVID-19 cases in South Asia 2021 (October 2021)**

Countries	Confirmed cases	Active cases	Recoveries	Deaths	Total tests	Tests per million population
India	31,440,483	405,131	30,613,938	421,414	459,164,121	329,278
Bangladesh	1,083,922	76,026	914,343	17,465	7,186,365	43,189
Pakistan	1,011,708	59,899	928,722	23,087	15,766,473	69,933
Nepal	818,035	7,636	798,916	11,483	4,530,686	161,259
Afghanistan	145,008	44,852	93,641	6,515	693,751	17,405
Maldives	12,384	927	11,405	45	150,743	277,260
Sri Lanka	135,796	28,371	108,802	892	3,017,567	138,401
Bhutan	378	21	357	1	173,785	224,401

Source: Ullah et al., 2020; UN, 2021

The COVID-19 outbreak that is presently ravaging Southeast Asia is one of the worst on record. In the initial year, South East Asia was largely immune to COVID-19, and the countries performed admirably. Caseloads in Singapore,

Thailand, Vietnam, and even underdeveloped Myanmar were rather low despite the large epidemics in Indonesia and the Philippines. The leaders of Thailand and Vietnam implemented exceptional regulations on mask use, contact tracking, border closure, and quarantine (Kurlantzick, 2021). Since COVID-19 was initially managed through border closures and other centrally controlled measures while also avoiding public outrage by prohibiting large gatherings, the threat has shifted with the more contagious Delta and then Omicron variant and increased vaccine availability. As a result of the absence of oxygen, therapy, and immunizations, COVID-19 patients are dying at home in Myanmar. Compared to other countries, Malaysia has the largest number of COVID-19 cases per capita in the world per day. Thailand records over 11,000 new cases every day (Kurlantzick, 2021).

**Table 2. COVID-19 cases in South East Asia 2021 (November 2021)**

Country	Cases	Deaths	Percent Fully Vaccinated	Cases per Million
World	263,070,422	5,220,373	44.0	33,727
China	111,353	4,849	77.2	77
USA	48,577,181	780,443	59.1	146,758
Indonesia	4,256,687	143,840	35.2	15,883
Philippines	2,833,038	48,712	34.7	27,007
Vietnam	1,252,590	25,448	53.3	13,111
Thailand	2,120,758	20,814	59.2	30,558
Myanmar	522,825	19,111	19.6	9,796
Malaysia	2,632,782	30,425	81.4	84,384
Cambodia	120,160	2,944	83.4	7,505
Laos	75,163	178	42.1	10,206
Singapore	264,725	718	89.3	47,171
Timor Leste	19,823	122	32.2	14,795
Brunei	15,111	97	80.5	35,256

Source: CSIS, 2021

In the context of SDGs, a lack of governmental competency and fiscal commitment could hinder South Asia's ability to accomplish the SDG's goals. A slowing of the region's macroeconomic growth necessitates an increase in social investment and better public-goods delivery networks (Asadullah et al., 2020). In the previous two decades, South Asian countries have made substantial progress in terms of human development. In the areas of food security, primary school enrolment, gender balance in primary and secondary education, newborn and under-five mortality ratio, vaccination coverage, and alleviating poverty, most of the South Asian countries performed poorly. This is despite the claims of Bangladesh, Nepal, and Sri Lanka (Gani et al., 2021) to have met the majority of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (Mahmud et al., 2013).

The SEA region is making moderate progress toward the SDGs, with the exception of Goal 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), which is

surprising considering the region's consistent GDP growth over the last decades (UN, 2020). The region has made significant progress toward Goals 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 10, and 17 since 2000, but it could have progressed more quickly than it has. Before the arrival of COVID-19 in 2020, it was evident that the progress made on the 2030 Agenda was achieved in a timely manner.

### **Bangladesh and the Philippines**

Bangladesh and the Philippines responded differently to and dealt with the pandemic, and hence the extent of influence on achieving the SDGs is expected to vary.

Bangladesh: The COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating impact on Bangladesh (GoB, 2020b) primarily because of poor governance and misinformation (Ullah et al., 2021). GDP growth stagnated, and poverty levels grew, remittances declined, millions of jobs vanished, in addition to the detrimental effects on the health system. The reduced female labour participation rate, education losses, and banking sector vulnerabilities may all have long-term economic effects (World Bank, 2021). Moreover, it has impacted the economy on both the supply and demand sides in Bangladesh (Islam & Hussain, 2021).

Bangladesh is dedicated to achieving sustainable development goals (Ahmed, 2021). The SDGs require a substantial amount of money to implement. Traditional financial sources are insufficient to achieve the SDGs. Now the pressing question is how Bangladesh will achieve the SDGs despite the fact that the economic downturn in Bangladesh is ensuing. Localizing SDGs under existing development goals via non-governmental and local government groups has proven challenging (Islam, 2020).

There are numerous linkages between Bangladesh's issues and its potential that the government takes into account when attempting to meet SDG 1. Inequality escalates poverty and inhibits economic growth in the country (GoB, 2020a). Though it is claimed that poverty has steadily decreased over time, from 31.5 percent to 24.3 percent, as measured by the percentage of the population living in poverty. Social safety net operations may be the best ones to work in reducing poverty during COVID-19 (Paul, 2021). When it comes to monitoring the progress toward its goals, SDG 3 has the most up-to-date metrics. One of the biggest challenges of COVID-19 implementation is coordinating efforts across several ministries and development partners (GoB, 2020b).

There has been a complete shutdown of all public and private educational institutions, from elementary schools to universities, since March 17, 2020. This implies that the pandemic would severely impact goal 4 (quality education). More and more people are remaining at home because of the effects of COVID-19, which implies that the SDG-4 is another target that has had a detrimental impact.

The country's largest export sector is ready-made garments (RMG), and women make up the majority of the workforce. The RMG factories were shut down during the coronavirus's early phase (Paul, 2021). As a result, the impact on growth may be felt shortly. Bangladesh is ranked 50<sup>th</sup> out of 153 nations in the World Gender Gap Report (GoB, 2020a), implying that Bangladesh lags behind in terms of attaining the SDG-5. Economic involvement and opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment have all made significant advances toward gender equality in many nations. However, gender parity fell since 2006, according to the World Economic Forum (WEF) (Sili, 2018). This means that the global gender gap can be closed in 100 years. Access to economic resources and opportunities for women is still one of the most significant gender inequalities. Pay equality, seniority, and workforce participation are all indicators of gender parity in economics. It will take another 217 years to close the gender gap due to a wide range of obstacles to women's economic empowerment (Sili, 2018).

The Philippines: With regard to its national development goals and the 2030 Agenda (17 SDGs), the Philippines government sees the UN as a close ally. The Philippine Development Plan enshrines three important factors: Prosperity, the Planet, and Peace in the long-term vision (UN, 2020). However, in the Philippines, like elsewhere in the world, the COVID-19 pandemic has significantly reversed development gains, created new hurdles, and worsened existing vulnerabilities, providing unique challenges in preventing the virus's transmission and coping with its socioeconomic consequences.

The pandemic continues to weaken the economy of the Philippines and hence the ability to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as more people fall into poverty (Simeon, 2021). The year 2020 was intended to be the start of a decade-long campaign to accelerate SDG attainment, but the pandemic has derailed that plan. As a result, the Philippines was ranked 99<sup>th</sup> out of 166 countries, with a score of 65.5 on the Sustainable Development Goals index (Simeon, 2021). Although progress has been made in a number of areas of the SDGs, major challenges remain in five areas: hunger, good health, well-being, innovation, and inequality. Hunger and health, and education were two areas where the region's growth came to a halt (Simeon, 2021; World Bank, 2020a).

Before the outbreak, the macroeconomic metrics of the Philippines' socioeconomic progress were sound. Lockdowns in the second half of 2020 reduced GDP by 16.9 percent, while unemployment rose to 17.7 percent (World Bank, 2020b). Even if economic forces were strong before the epidemic, the government actively promoted economic growth by increasing public spending, primarily in the form of transfer payments, as well as accommodating monetary and other legislative constraints. Joblessness and homelessness are still widespread, despite an uptick in the labour market. And as a result, poverty reduction has been slowed down by the recent economic crisis and income losses (World Bank, 2020b). Poverty levels are projected to rise in the near future as a result of lower consumer spending, higher government expenditures, and an overall economic recovery situation. In the Philippines, the COVID-19 outbreak has required decades of operational adaptations

because of the country's strong foundations. In 2022, the GDP is expected to grow by more than 7% (Asian Development Bank, 2021). In the run-up to the 2022 general elections, boosting economic activity may contribute to economic growth.

Various measures have been taken to minimize the economic impact of COVID-19. Since its inception, it has worked closely with the WHO. First, in SEA, the government instituted a national community quarantine. A health response package of 35.8 billion pesos (\$0.7 billion) has been created, including social assistance, aid for small businesses, disadvantaged farmers, and local governments (World Bank, 2020c). However, personal protective equipment (PPE) supplies have been rapidly depleted due to rising awareness of the dangers. Health care workers caring for patients who are not infected with COVID-19 have an adverse effect on their performance and increase their chance of infection (Asian Development Bank, 2020).

COVID-19 had a significant impact on low-income individuals and enterprises. Thus, the government focused on social welfare and health. The budget deficit reached its highest level in nearly a decade. The base effect will begin to play a larger role in early 2020 as a result of the massive recession in 2020 and 2021 (World Bank, 2020b). Vaccines are only effective if enough individuals receive them. State governments are working together to ensure that everyone, especially the poorest and most vulnerable, has access to health care while simultaneously ensuring that no province is left behind. The Philippines has reiterated its support for the WHO's call for universal immunization access. The continued support for global programmes focused on ensuring universal access to vaccines is a top commitment (UN, 2021).

## Discussions

COVID-19 posed a significant challenge for both countries in achieving the SDGs and demonstrating the importance of accumulating funds to prepare for disasters. Despite the fact that the outbreak is a serious impediment, it has presented a critical opportunity for governments to incorporate SDGs into their contingency plans. Additionally, the epidemic has worsened a number of other issues, including a lack of access to education, insufficient access to safe drinking water and sanitation, and a lack of food security.

After COVID-19, it will be necessary to review progress toward attaining the Sustainable Development Goals for long-term growth, resource conservation, and climate change mitigation (Asian Development Bank, 2021a). On the other hand, the recovery process may accelerate if the leaderships in Bangladesh and the Philippines collaborate and revisit the 17 SDGs, focusing their attention and resources on fixing the situation. COVID-19 has the potential to rapidly sweep throughout Bangladesh and the Philippines, potentially outpacing government interventions. The expansion of the community quarantine resulted in increased unemployment and lower wages. As a result, poverty is likely to worsen significantly for people already at risk in both countries. The epidemic affects everyone, regardless of gender identification.

Women may be disproportionately affected, but this is because women are more likely to be the primary caregivers for sick people, putting them at risk of viral infection. This may result in them becoming more vulnerable to gender-based violence. Technical shortcomings impair the capacity of the government machinery to respond appropriately to the COVID-19 pandemic (Asian Development Bank, 2020). Economic recovery could be enhanced by adopting proper policies and fast action (World Bank, 2021). The accumulated economic disadvantages disproportionately affect young girls and women, who earn less, save less, engage in dangerous professions, and are more likely to be poor as a result of the COVID-19 restrictions. Despite the limits presented by the current scenario, nations are nevertheless attempting to achieve the SDGs. Financial and technological help, as well as capacity-building assistance, are required due to resource scarcity.

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