

COVID-19 and Humanity

Lessons learned from Indigenous communities in Asia



Epidemics are not new to Indigenous communities in Asia. So many communities have responded spontaneously to the spread of COVID-19 through customary practices and methods. We have also combined innovative ideas and methods. These are logical responses because we have little options i.e. clinics and hospitals are far away, and even after hours of travel, most of the nearest medical facilities do not have the required equipment to treat COVID-19.

This shows that **we are self-governing and are one of the most organized communities** who are prepared to take voluntary initiatives. We can draw many lessons from this.

In this update, we will share some of the important and useful lessons learned to continue to improve our coping mechanism.





Lessons learned

Information and communication

There are three main problems that AIPP has received from the communities in Asia:

- First, there is an overwhelming flow of both useful and half-truth information. **Misinformation has caused negative consequences such as anxiety and resorting to extreme measures** by some communities.
- Second, many Indigenous communities in remote areas are either not able to access or download information because of no or low internet connectivity.
- Third, information is not available in languages understandable to several communities.

Lessons learned:

- It is important to identify and verify reliable information and not **blindly trust every information you receive**. The most reliable sources of information on COVID-19 are public health bodies like the National Health Service, the World Health Organization and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in the USA. If you are not familiar with verification of information, reach out to your reliable local networks to help you before sharing it with others.
- Some organizations have **established Response and Communication Networks** at the local level to provide reliable information and to reach out to those in remote areas. For example, in the Philippines, Lingkod Katribu COVID-19 Response has been established for information outreach and for mobilizing relief support to Indigenous communities. Another example is the joint venture in Thailand initiated by AIPP, Indigenous Media Network, Chiang Mai University and others (both for regional and national level) for a similar purpose.

Establishing such networks have resulted in:

- Improving **effective communication among communities with greater reliability**.
- **Resource mobilization for relief support** such as food, hygiene kits and other needs.
- **Pooling of expertise** to provide trainings to community volunteers/workers (with multiplier effect) on health care and leveling the curve of COVID-19.
- **Raising or amplifying the voice of Indigenous communities** that are facing multiple challenges and issues such as racism and measles outbreak.



Lessons learned



Mro community in CHT, Bangladesh.

Village lockdowns

Indigenous Peoples have established response and coping mechanisms to epidemics based on Indigenous Knowledge and customary practices. Often, the purpose of village lockdowns and social distancing i.e. staying at home without hard labor involves the following:

- Ensure the survival of our community.
- Protect outsiders who may want to visit.
- Shut off bad spirits.
- Restore normalcy i.e. restoring the health of the community or of the land.

However, **these coping mechanisms are proving to be extremely challenging because of the multi-fold issues that Indigenous Peoples are facing in the new context**, such as:

- Threat from extractive industry, climate change, displacement and outbreak of other diseases.
- Armed conflict and militarization.
- Poverty and huge number of daily wage earners in urban areas are running out of food.
- Increasing threat posed by spike in racism.
- No medical facilities and means to deal with COVID-19 cases in the community.

The situation is challenging, but **it is important for us not to react in a fearful way so that our measures are humane and responsive** to the new challenges.

“When rituals or spiritual ceremonies are performed to enforce village lockdowns, it is not to invoke fear but to call forth our spiritual conviction and courage for social cooperation in facing the unknown. It is also performed on different occasions for resting of the land or community recuperation, etc. It is for healing and saving life”, said Gam A. Shimray, Secretary General, AIPP.

Just like our ancestors did, **it is time for reflection and take stock of the situation and assess:**

- Who among the community are stranded outside and how to help them?
- How to take care of people who are sick or may have contacted COVID-19?
- Is there enough food for all and for how long can the food stock last?
- What preparation needs to be done if the situation is prolonged?



Lessons learned



Community workers and volunteers getting trained on mask making and hand sanitizer at AIPP. Photo: AIPP.

Lessons learned from community initiatives

Some of the issues faced by Indigenous communities in a situation of country-wide and community lockdowns are:

- Many community members who are **daily wage earners have run out of food and are stranded on their way** while trying to return home, including those displaced by armed conflict.
- Many **students are stranded in cities** unable to return home and **have run out of food**.
- Many **community members have returned home but some are stranded because they have been prevented from entering their villages**.
- Some communities have blocked highways and main roads passing through their villages because of paranoia caused by misinformation, which has interrupted supply of essential and emergency related travels.

Since we are talking about our own community members, **it is our topmost responsibility to reach out to help them** in the spirit of our ancestors. **“It is during the period...that one often hears the term kasiyanna meaning “all will be well” ...to the community, problems are reflections of imbalance in the world”**, said Minnie Degawan from Conservation International. Such times are challenging, but it can also bring out the best in us and make us stronger and stand in unity!

Some lessons that we can learn from community initiatives to improve our responses are below.

- Monitoring visitors:** Some communities have allowed visitors on urgent mission to their villages with prior permissions. Community volunteers maintain visitors' register book and all visitors must sign in and out at the village gate. Water and soap are provided for all visitors who must wash up before entering the village and all dos and don'ts are briefed.



Registration at the entry point of Kamjong village, Ukhrul, India.

Mokokchung, a small town in the state of Nagaland, inhabited by the Ao Nagas, **is showing the way in India in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic** despite lack of facilities and equipments and inadequate resources. **Customary institutions, CSOs, churches and government administrations have come together and forged partnership to battle against COVID-19**. Several task forces have been set-up to take care and minimized the hardship of its citizens. Infectious disease hospitals have been prepared to take care of COVID-19 patients and quarantine returnees. An app has also been developed for home delivery of medicines and for tracking home quarantined patients. Further, volunteers are ensuring the: prevention of food hoarding, regular distribution of food to daily wage earners and families in need, and production of masks and hand sanitizers in large-scale for the community.



Mokokchung town

Lessons learned

b) **Village lockdown and self-isolation:** Some communities have effectively dealt with the issue of community lockdown and self-isolation of community members returning from cities, including mobilization of support for the community. **Example of some positive steps the Huay-E-Khang community (Thailand) has taken are as follows:**

- **Trained a team of community volunteers on COVID-19** to spread awareness and for overall care and responsibility regarding returnees and visitors.
- **Identify areas for self-isolation or quarantine for returnees** and manage the hygiene of the area and provide instructions to the individuals on health care and community rules.
- **Provide support and essentials**, along with the families and relatives of those in self-isolation.
- **Conduct regular health check** of those in self-isolation.

The photo below demonstrate the **community measures in operation at Huay-E-Khang** led by the COVID-19 Volunteer's team.



c) **Humanitarian action by IPs and supporters:** How effectively and quickly we can organize our response depends on our experiences. It is important to learn from those who are more experienced. For example, Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines are quite experienced in humanitarian response when affected by natural disasters because of their experiences in facing natural disasters frequently. They have formed the Serve the People Brigade – Disaster Response Network (STPB) and they are carrying out community support activities such as:

- Distribution of food relief and vitamin C in the Cordillera region.
- Produce and distribute protective equipment to health workers in partnership with the Philippines Nurses Association-Bagguio-Benguet Chapter.
- Mobilizing support and relief and awareness raising.



Food distribution in the Philippines. Photo: CPA.



Konyak Baptist Youth Dimapur and Konyak Students' Union, Dimapur, Nagaland, India distributing food to the homeless.

Indigenous volunteers in Nagaland and in the cities of India are also providing relief support to Indigenous Peoples and non-Indigenous communities even though they are facing threat from racism.

Lessons learned

d) Sustainability: With national emergency declared and lockdown enforced in several villages, food insecurity is becoming the immediate concern and worry. This makes us realize that **communities with capacity for self-sufficiency are more resilient and better placed to extend help** to others in need.

“In such times, we must not forget to share our food and reach out to extend our humanity to those in need; and treat those in self-quarantine with dignity and compassion”, said Pati Joni, a well known and respected Indigenous elder.

The situation has brought out the best in many of our communities coming forward voluntarily to help others. It is necessary that **all Indigenous communities emulate such spirits of solidarity and humanity to survive together**. With the formation of the **Response and Communication Network on COVID-19** comprising AIPP (Asia Indigenous Peoples Pact), IMN (Indigenous Media Network), NIPT (Network of Indigenous Peoples in Thailand), CESD (Center for Ethnic Studies and Development), Inter Mountain and Peoples Education and Culture in Thailand Association (IMPECT), IPF (Indigenous Peoples' Foundation for Education and Environment) contributions from communities, NGOs and CSOs are increasing in Thailand.

The photos below explain some of these inspiring initiatives by community volunteers and others.

Spreading positivity and hope! Collecting contributions



Volunteers at NIPT & IMPECT Office



Chefs from Thailand contributing food and fire-fighting equipment



Food collection at NIPT & IMPECT Office



Volunteers at NIPT & IMPECT Office



Women from Huay-E-Khang contributing rice

Lessons learned

The issue of food insecurity also brought forth the need to reflect on long term solutions. **Communities that are managing their lands and resources well are less worried with the lockdown situation because they think their lands will provide them enough food.** Some of communities, such as Nong Tao, Hin Lad Nai, Mae Jok and Huay-E-Khang (that the COVID-19 team of AIPP, IMN, CESD, NIPT, IPF and IMPECT interacted with), are not worried of prologued lockdown in terms of food security. Their well-managed systems of land and natural resources is giving them their survival capability confidence.

“If you plant 30 species of edible plants and food crops, you will survive throughout the year. If you learn to apply this wisdom and knowledge, you will have your life survival kit”, affirmed Pati Joni, the renowned Karen philosopher.

Some communities in Thailand are already discussing and spreading awareness on how to improve self-sufficiency so that other communities will learn and emulate the sustainable lifestyle of those successful communities!

Spreading positivity and hope! Distributing food & other items



Food distribution



Mask making training



Food distribution



Bean sprout making training for consumption



Contributing food to health workers



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