

Special Focus

The Role of the Social Sciences in COVID-19 Responses in Southeast Asia: An Introduction

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What does the future of Southeast Asian societies after the COVID-19 pandemic look like for social scientists working in the region? It is clear that the practices of academic work—specifically the kinds that problematize power and side with those on the margins of society—have become increasingly complex as the pandemic has caused socio-economic inequalities to surface and deepened the precariousness of societies that are already grappling with unbalanced ecological, economic and social development. The urgent need to link health to other dimensions of society and unpack social inclusion and exclusion in COVID-19 responses has emerged as a key concern in social science discussions, and the articles in this Special Focus ground that discussion in the experiences of social scientists working on policymaking and with communities in Southeast Asia.

The authors of this Special Focus and social scientists of various orientations in other regions (Burawoy 2021; Connell 2020; Lupton and Willis 2021) highlight these complex implications and advocate structural changes during the crisis and after. Yet, they may not be dominant in the competition for attention and resources: by and large, the medical sciences and macroeconomics dominate policy discourses, while the social sciences and humanities in general are marginalized in spite of their potential to contribute to a better

understanding of the pandemic and to developing better ways of addressing its impacts (Sciortino and Saini 2020).

This Special Focus aims to conceptualize social science practices as characterized by Burawoy (2005), distinguishing social sciences from the natural sciences as well as the humanities in the use of both instrumental and reflexive knowledge. The production and use of knowledge to achieve a goal (i.e., instrumental) and to provide various forms of powerful knowledge for the public (i.e., reflexive) may pose a variety of opportunities for policy interventions. We apply Burawoy's approach to the context of the pandemic in selected countries of Southeast Asia.

The articles presented here have been further developed and deepened from an eleven-country study titled "Social Science and COVID-19: A Southeast Asia Response", conducted by the Global Development Network (GDN) and the Asia Research Centre at Universitas Indonesia (ARC UI), together with teams of social scientists from the respective Southeast Asia countries (Fussy, Obino and Rakhmani 2022). Engaging in this research project is, in itself, a kind of social knowledge intervention for the authors involved—in ways that Burawoy might categorize as public social sciences. While GDN's and ARC UI's research focused on the main hindrances and enabling factors in the use of the social sciences in COVID-19 policy responses, this Special Focus investigates more deeply the relationship between social scientists and state power in Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore. To do this, it asks several basic questions:

- What kind of presence do social scientists have in national and local responses to COVID-19 in Southeast Asia?
- What are the implications of the state-driven responses that treat the pandemic as a security and medical issue while downplaying its sociocultural dimensions?
- What kinds of social sciences are being funded by national governments and international organizations?
- What types of social sciences are privileged by national

agencies (for instance, technocratic or immersive, ethnographic understanding of the most vulnerable), and what are the consequences of such choices?

- What kind of role do the social sciences play outside dominant structures?

We critically unpack the role of the social sciences in COVID-19 responses in Southeast Asia with the purpose of mainstreaming Southeast Asian accounts into broader discussions of the social dimensions of health and ways to address them. To achieve this purpose, we outline below three considerations that can elevate our understanding of the relevance of the social sciences in policy responses to the pandemic.

First, we problematize the inclusion and exclusion of the social sciences, and particularly certain perspectives in the state responses towards COVID-19. As the pandemic progressed and Southeast Asia became a global epicentre in 2021, states had to balance multiple interests while juggling rapid containment measures with macroeconomic concerns. Political considerations featured strongly in shaping the medical- and security-focused strategies adopted by most of the governments, given that the strategies required the assertion of power and discretionary use of state resources. In pursuing their strategies—which in several cases involved the formation of national commissions for pandemic control dominated by bureaucrats and, in some instances, military personnel—some governments roped in social scientists for the kind of studies that would legitimize government stands while excluding more critical scholarship.

Second, the inclusion or exclusion of the social sciences is coloured by the types of funding and resources available. The social sciences in Southeast Asia generally receive less funding than the so-called hard sciences, being perceived by governments as low in market value. Social scientists are often also perceived as being hostile towards the establishment (Rakhmani and Sakhyya 2023, p. 5), a perception that causes governments to further devalue them in spite of their potential contributions to policy formulation and implementation. Governments

tend to commission social science research that privileges technocratic approaches. In contrast, international funding that is channelled into Southeast Asia may provide greater space for social research that takes more comprehensive approaches and includes social health concerns and the study of the socio-economic impacts on the poor and vulnerable groups. Likewise, corporate and private donor funds disbursed to universities, think tanks and civil society organizations (CSOs) widen the informal spaces for collaborative research in social sciences that works together with marginal communities. While such non-government funding allows relatively more academic independence and therefore the scope to build discourses that are alternative to the state's discourse, it remains to be seen whether the insights emerging from such studies are effectively mainstreamed and are able to lead to more comprehensive pandemic prevention and control efforts or to inspire structural change in health and social systems that are also responsive to the needs of marginalized groups.

Third, the picture painted of the social sciences during the pandemic in Southeast Asia reveals meaningful contradictions, an understanding of which could be beneficial. In contexts where state policies are made top-down but are not always effective, working from the margins has forced social scientists to be more adaptable and creative, such as working with the media and CSOs to influence public discourse, if not state discourse. But working from the fringes means the impact of efforts by social scientists to highlight the behavioural and social aspects of health interventions and problems of unequal development that have been exacerbated by the pandemic may be too limited to be translated into state policies.

As border controls are relaxed in the region, questions about what kind of society we envision remain. The three considerations highlighted above serve as focal points for reflection on the kinds of social sciences that played roles in COVID-19 pandemic responses. Drawing on the contributions that social scientists can make is, we believe, a way of placing people at the centre of pandemic responses and of finding more effective approaches to resolving future crises. The articles in this Special Focus collectively encourage a richer

and deeper understanding of the variations and specificities that the Southeast Asian experience can bring to social science discourses internationally, while at the same time drawing a lesson from the global pandemic to ensure that the debate is not confined within spatial boundaries.

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