

The Impact of Covid-19 on Transforming Missional Perspectives on Public Health

Grace Y. Kim

The World Health Organization (WHO), the U.S. Department of State, and many other global authorities have acknowledged impeccable efforts and the role of religious leaders and non-governmental organizations in responding to health and humanitarian crises, particularly in responding to COVID-19 globally. Many countries' governments have granted religious leaders and NGOs to provide essential services to reach out and assist the poor, hungry, needy, and unemployed. Research suggests that COVID-19 has provided new mission-focused perspectives on the realities of the sufferings in the world and moved ministries to help. The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted people's life, work, and the mission and theology of the church. The response of leadership is critical in strengthening the health security of the communities they serve. Christian leaders and members are committed to enhancing and improving global health by addressing poverty and other health determinants, leading to health equity based on the biblical foundation.

Several major NGO activities have taken place in Southeast Asia in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and some of the critical areas of focus include:

1. Providing healthcare services: NGOs are working to provide healthcare services, including medical care and testing, to vulnerable communities affected by COVID-19. Many NGOs are partnering with local healthcare providers to increase access to testing and treatment for COVID-19.
2. Supporting vulnerable populations: NGOs support vulnerable people such as migrant workers, refugees, and low-income families affected by the pandemic. This includes distributing food and supplies, offering shelter and assistance in accessing healthcare, and offering educational resources and mental health support.
3. Advocating for policy changes: NGOs are advocating for policy changes to address the pandemic's root causes and prevent future outbreaks. This includes supporting improved healthcare systems, increased funding for research, and better regulation of industries that contribute to the spread of infectious diseases.
4. Promoting community engagement: NGOs are working to promote community engagement and education around COVID-19, including promoting social distancing, mask-wearing, and other measures to prevent the spread of

the virus. They also work to dispel myths and misinformation about the virus and vaccines.

5. Supporting economic recovery: NGOs are working to support the economic recovery of communities affected by the pandemic, including providing job training and support for small businesses.

NGOs play a crucial role in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in Southeast Asia. Their activities will likely continue for the foreseeable future as the region grapples with the pandemic's impacts. It's important to note that the specific activities of NGOs in Southeast Asia after COVID-19 will vary depending on the country and the needs of the local communities.

The core value and philosophy of public health align with the work of Jesus in terms of promoting health, in particular for the vulnerable population, with an inspirational and dedicated holistic approach. The public health approach has been focused on the core functions of health protection; health surveillance; disease and injury prevention; population health assessment; health promotion; and emergency preparedness and response to relieve health inequities, particularly in resource-poor regions. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), health inequities are "Avoidable inequalities in health between groups of people within countries and between countries." Health inequities have been historically rooted in unfair consequences of morbidity and mortality.

Health inequities have become even more apparent during the COVID-19 pandemic, with individuals from globally poorer socio-economic backgrounds, urban and rural disadvantaged locations, and vulnerable groups of society suffering the full force of its effects. This review aims to understand the disparities within different communities and recommend guidance for religious leaders and organizations to improve health literacy amongst underprivileged communities in preparing for future pandemics.

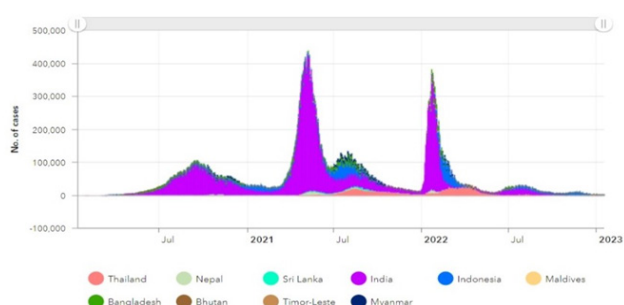
THE IMPACT OF COVID-19

As of January 5, 2023 (WHO, 2023), over 660 million confirmed cases have been recorded, including 6.7 million deaths associated with COVID-19 globally. Regional distribution of points is recorded as highest in Europe, the Americas, Western Europe, South-East Asia, Eastern Mediterranean, and Africa, respectively. The COVID-19 pandemic has led to a dramatic loss of

human life worldwide and presents an unprecedented challenge to public health, food systems, and businesses. The economic and social disruption caused by the pandemic has accelerated the risk of falling into extreme poverty for tens of people.

The number of undernourished people is estimated at nearly 822 million as of the end of the year 2020 (WHO, 2020). In other words, the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted the global crisis of food security, public health, and employment and labor issues, particularly among vulnerable societies, more than ever in human history.

Figure. COVID-19 Situation in the WHO South-East Asia Region
Reported COVID-19 cases by country and date



India – 44,681,154 / Indonesia – 6,726,311 / Thailand – 4,725,885 / Bangladesh – 2,037,377 / Nepal – 1,001,051 / Sri Lanka – 671,964 / Myanmar – 633,750 / Maldives – 185,702 / Bhutan – 62,577 / Timor-Leste – 23,406 (Source: <http://who.maps.arcgis.com>)

FOCUS AREAS IN NEED OF PREPAREDNESS FOR THE NEXT PANDEMIC

Christian leaders and organizations can develop long-term sustainable strategies to focus on challenges facing the health and agri-food sectors. Priority should be given to addressing underlying food security and malnutrition challenges and tackling rural poverty. One way can be by providing more and better jobs in the rural economy, extending social protection to all, facilitating safe migration pathways, and promoting the formalization of the informal economy. Researchers underscored the high association between poverty and low socioeconomic status and poor health outcomes, for example, in South Africa or a region with sizeable economic disparity, which leads to severe health inequality (Mishra et al., 2021).

Although healthcare resources are strained in such difficult times, it is vital to prioritize the at-risk groups and to encourage a more comprehensive health delivery by NGOs and humanitarian agencies. Several measures can be implemented at a community level to help reduce disparities. COVID-19 has demonstrated the seriousness of the consequences faced by those from underprivileged backgrounds and highlighted their predicament between poverty and the pandemic. Swift action must be taken to ensure the needs of these individuals are met sufficiently for them to survive the pandemic and be well-equipped to endure any further strains on global health in the future.

The literature by Tagai et al. (2017) affirmed that faith-based organizations are critical in promoting health for people who lack access to medical care. Christian leaders, missionaries, and mission-oriented organizations based in underserved regions play a role in focusing their mission on both the physical and spiritual needs so that their collaborative works can transform beliefs and the quality of life in the communities they serve. Such organizations are designed to aid in overcoming various types of challenges for individuals, families, and communities. Providing individuals with knowledge concerning basic health principles and practices can promote and achieve better health within communities. Health promotion is multifaceted and allows missionaries to be part of a collaborative team addressing the need for physical, spiritual, emotional, and social well-being. It is a strategic way to facilitate holistic transformational development or an integral mission.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The World Health Organization has underscored that religious leaders, faith-based organizations, and faith communities play a significant role in saving lives and reducing sickness during pandemics such as COVID-19. For instance, essential support, comfort, guidance, and access to health care and social service for their communities can be offered. Christian leaders and missionaries can share health information to protect individuals, who can expand to broader communities as liaisons between the government and the communities they serve. Pastoral and spiritual support can be provided during public health emergencies and other health challenges and advocate for vulnerable populations' needs. By communicating up-to-date, evidence-based steps to mitigate the devastating impacts of pandemics, faith-based organizations can provide helpful information, prevent and reduce fear and stigma, reassure people in their communities, and promote health care practices. Lastly, service and dedicated networks can integrate Christian leaders and organizations into their communities. They can often reach the most vulnerable with assistance and health information and identify those in need. Collaborative global efforts to promote and care for underprivileged populations align with accomplishing one of the utmost missions, which is to love your neighbor and give to all Christians for the glory of God.

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Grace Y. Kim
gracekimyj@gmail.com

Dr. Grace Y. Kim earned her professional doctorate in Public Health and her master's degree in Health Education. She serves as the Director of Transforming Community International at the EWC MR & D, Asian Mission Center. She aims to apply her knowledge and experience to promote community development, particularly in public health, and strengthen mutual accountability in the community she serves."

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