



Asia Pacific CSO Statement Urban and Peri-Urban Development

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Good morning. Thank you for this opportunity. My name is Eni Lestari. I am the chairperson of International Migrants Alliance (IMA), a global alliance of grassroots migrant organizations and advocates present in 35 countries. We work towards empowerment of migrants so that, as our motto states, “we can speak for ourselves”. I am also an Indonesian domestic worker in Hong Kong for 20 years now.

Before that, my family had lived for decades in a rural area with farming as our main income. But by the 1980s, when neoliberal policies and projects started to be heavily imposed, rural development was neglected. Slowly, we lost our livelihood. To find jobs and support for our families, many, especially women and youth, moved to cities, other islands and overseas. I myself work in Hong Kong.

If migration is the solution to our problems, why do we remain poor? There is a need to systematically address the worsening root causes of our forced migration - poverty, unemployment, landlessness due to land and resource grabbing, monopoly of capital.

Migrant workers and the urban poor have many things in common -

We do dirty, difficult dangerous and demeaning jobs many are not interested in;

We are blamed, stigmatized, and discriminated by virtue of our being (for being in the lowest rungs of the social ladder); and,

We are the first to bear the brunt of the crisis - criminalized, scapegoated, and displaced.

We experience state violence - migrants, especially the undocumented, face crackdowns; the urban poor face evictions and demolitions. Their cries for help are answered by “go back home” (as in the case of the Australian government to unemployed migrant workers who can’t find sponsoring employers during the outbreak) or “shoot them dead” (as in the case of the poor calling for food from the Philippine government.)

There, too, is the issue of gentrification. As urban poor are forcibly driven away to settlements far from workplaces and schools, private developers construct high-rise towers as symbols of capital, which appeal only to the affluent. Those who cannot afford, are pushed towards the peripheries but remain the labor force of the city. This is true for migrant workers whose low salaries can only afford them cramped places. Access to jobs, health, clean water, sanitation, shelter, and even freedoms is measured by one’s capacity to pay.

And those who have the least resources, the urban poor, are the first to contract diseases like the COVID-19.

This pandemic highlights our grave disadvantage. Millions of informal workers, like in India and Indonesia, are forced to return to their rural homes. Temporary migrant workers become unemployed but excluded from government support. Where do we turn to during this crisis? And what will happen to us after? How can development be achieved when the whole lot of us are left behind?

Urban development today is about profit-making for corporations at our expense.

I would like to share the recommendations from the APRCEM that I too stand by with -

1. Urban regeneration can happen side by side rural regeneration, with people's interests at their core. The neoliberal approach to development should be unlearned by challenging private monopolies, taxing foreign investments, protecting local farmers as well as locally-owned small and medium industries, and promoting social enterprises by its own people. This way, we can create jobs at home, not abroad. Migration then becomes a choice, not a forced decision.
2. Likewise, we need an intersectional analysis and approach to policy development. Gender is not mentioned in any entry point's profile or recommendations. Urbanization, too, affects women and girls differently due to persistent gender inequalities, social norms and stereotypes. Imagine how this impacts on women with disabilities, migrant women, older women, and women workers.
3. Legislation should be adopted based on the people's needs and on human rights. Participatory governance, especially in development planning, should involve the urban poor and the most marginalized peoples.

The COVID-19 outbreak presents the reality of urban centers unable to address the needs of their people. When quarantines and lockdowns abound. When the threat of mass unemployment looms. When stimulus packages are exclusive. And when the poor get nothing but a couple of canned goods and canned responses from their local and national governments.

We deserve better. Thank you very much.