

Dear Fellows, Colleagues, and Friends,



Nobel laureate Angus Deaton recently wrote that “in history, plagues have tended to make societies more equal,” as diseases affect people irrespective of their race, education, or income level. But Deaton also warns us that this pandemic will likely be an exception, given the unequal infection risks and social challenges that vulnerable and marginalized populations must withstand. We can be certain that the way our societies respond to pandemic-related threats today will shape the trajectory of how our communities develop in the future.

Our former Global Advisory Board chair, Amartya Sen, reminds us in the title of his recent article that “A better society can emerge from the lockdowns.” We are especially proud of the ways our Fellows and partners are responding to the coronavirus and broader equity challenges, in ways that will help a better society to emerge. Some of their actions and equity goals are described below.

My Equity Initiative colleagues and I also are stepping up our efforts. While we are missing the thought-provoking discussions during our Global Learning weeks and the eye-opening experiences during our Asia Trek field trips, it is a privilege to have some quiet time to reflect on how we can do better. We are improving our internal management system, building more online resources and other activities to support our Fellows, while developing new strategies for our equity community work.

Our Southeast Asia Program Advisory Committee has encouraged us to be bold and innovative, so we welcome your ideas on ways the EI program can better support our Fellows and the needs of the region. We are hopeful that our communities will be able to overcome their challenges and bring about a healthy, fair, and inclusive society for us all.

Piya Hanvoravongchai
Program Director

Visit our website for more information on The Equity Initiative

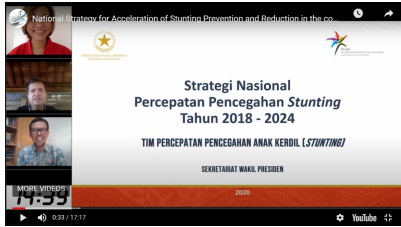
COMMUNITY BUILDING

Cohorts Stay Connected during the Pandemic

While we have not been able to convene in-person gatherings during the pandemic, the conversations among our Fellows are still going strong! Zoom meetings give Fellows a way to continue building relationships, share ideas, and deepen their commitment to health equity. Two Family Zoom Calls, held May 18 and June 13, gave our new **2020 Fellows** a chance to meet each other virtually, and simple ice-breaking games helped them get to know each other better. Fellows in our **2019 cohort**, meanwhile, held two of their own Family Zoom Calls. Their April 14 call was an occasion to exchange notes on their experiences with COVID-19; in the July 16 call, Fellows who went through adaptive leadership “training of trainers” shared some of the ways they are exercising adaptive leadership in their responses to COVID-19. Meanwhile, our **Viet Nam Fellows** engage in a monthly “check in” Zoom call to provide updates on their work and exchange ideas for community building in Viet Nam.



Growing the Equity Community



Our Indonesian Fellows have used a series of webinars to help build a Community of Practice in their country. The Fellows have convened 8 webinars since October 2019, attracting as many as 120 participants per session. The webinars have addressed topics such as national, regional, and global equity challenges; universal health coverage; stunting in children; social determinants of health; and COVID-19. The featured speakers, from Indonesia and other parts of the region, represent a diverse set of backgrounds and professional experience – including EI Fellows from different cohorts and countries sharing their expertise and underscoring the importance of health equity. It is rewarding to see this multisectoral community of actors take shape!

EQUITY IN THE TIME OF COVID-19

In the Words of Our Fellows



With deep experience working with vulnerable communities, our Fellows are well-positioned to respond to the needs of groups who have disproportionately experienced the impacts of the pandemic. Two recent publications, conceived and produced by the Fellows themselves, provide frontline perspectives. In "[Stories Behind the Masks](#)," Fellows highlight the

significance of health equity as they share their insights as doctors, nurses, health policymakers, researchers, and activists. "[Vignettes of Equity](#)," a series of stories from seven countries in Southeast Asia, describes how the pandemic and responses to it are impacting vulnerable groups, based on Fellows' firsthand experiences and fields of expertise.

We express our deep appreciation to [Kotchakorn Voraakhom](#) (2018) for leading the work on "Stories Behind the Masks" and to [Raudah Yunus](#) (2019) and [Gideon Lasco](#) (2019) for their leadership on "Vignettes of Equity."

Solidarity Grants: Scaling Up COVID-19 Responses

In recognition of the critical scenarios Fellows are facing, and their ability to implement ground-level responses, the Atlantic Institute and EI are supporting grants that enable Fellows to scale up COVID-19 responses. The funding allows Fellows to directly support those most vulnerable and at-risk in their home countries, including urban poor, children and the elderly in hard-to-reach areas, refugees, and other populations. Fourteen projects have been approved and 4 are under review, with the funding directed to countries in the region most affected by the pandemic: Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand. The projects focus on areas such as the immediate public health response; aid to vulnerable people most in need; support for small and medium enterprises; protecting workers in the informal sector; delivering mental health and psychological support; and support for employment preparation after the pandemic. We will share the impacts of Fellows' projects in the next newsletter.



Contributing to Regional and International Dialogues

EI Program Director [Piya Hanvoravongchai](#) and 2019 Fellow [Rapeepong Suphanchaimat](#) (2019) reported



on **Thailand's COVID-19 response** in a multi-authored journal article that examines the challenges COVID-19 presents for health equity in 13 different countries. Piya and Poon credit a relatively strong health care delivery system and near universal coverage of health insurance as reasons for Thailand's effective response, although additional steps

are needed to protect migrant workers and address the social and economic implications resulting from the virus and partial lockdown. They conclude with a call for the current crisis to "serve as an important opportunity to mobilize public support to narrow the gaps and strengthen national policies to address social determinants of health and universal social protection." To read the article, published in the *International Journal for Equity in Health*, [click here](#).

In a research article, [Borwornsom Leerapan](#) (2018) and [Rapeepong Suphanchaimat](#) (2019) advocate for **a systems approach to COVID-19**, one that avoids compartmentalized thinking and instead focuses on the interconnected causes of health, social, and economic problems, as well as uncertainties of how to solve such problems. They urge epidemiologists and health systems researchers to consider the society as a complex adaptive system, apply the concepts and tools of systems thinking, and rely on system dynamics simulation models in order to craft well-rounded policy options. To read their article, "Thailand's COVID-19 Integrated Systems Simulation Modeling," published by Health Systems Research Institute, [click here](#).

FELLOWS SPOTLIGHT

Gathering Data on Child Labor

[Nicola Pocock](#) (2016) is leading a small team from the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine to revise the occupational hazards section of the International Labour Organization's Statistical Information and Monitoring Programme on Child Labour model survey. The team also is critically assessing the ILO's conceptual and methodological definition of "hazardous work," for which there currently is no global definition. The project has significant equity implications, as there are an estimated 152 million child laborers globally, of whom approximately 72.5 million are engaged in hazardous work. "We need accurate prevalence data on occupational risks and hazards children face," Nicola contends, in order to inform interventions so that children's "life chances are not blighted as a result of hazardous work."



Youth Leaders for Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights



Knowing that marginalized and underserved populations often face obstacles in accessing sexual and reproductive health services, [Hoang Tu Anh](#) (2018), [Do Thuy Duong](#) (2017), and [Nguyen Quoc Thanh](#) (2019) designed a project called "Youth Leadership Program on Sexual and Reproductive Health Rights in 2020." In March, the team organized a series of advocacy workshops to bring together a range of stakeholders, including youths, people living with disabilities, policymakers from health and

education sectors, civil society organizations, researchers, and others. The participants shared their views, expertise, and experiences, and discussed ways to break down barriers in access to services and rights. Encouraging young people to express their opinions in these types of forums is part of the project's overall work of empowering young people to become youth leaders.

Thailand's Informal Sector: Designing the New Normal

Three 2018 Fellows are combining their expertise to spark ideas for "new normal" lifestyles that will reduce the potential for COVID-19 infection as

Thailand's partial lockdown eases. [May Sripatanaskul](#) brings her skills in design thinking and collaboration, [Pairoj Saonuam](#) shares his deep knowledge of health living and community medicine, and [Borwornsom \(Ack\) Leerapan](#) adds his expertise in systems thinking and systems modeling. Their ideas, described in a [national broadcast](#) on May 10, are aimed at developing "new normal" routines for street food vendors, "mom and pop" shops, motorcycle taxis, and other parts of the informal sector.



Studying the Drug Wars



In his journal article "Drugs and drug wars as populist tropes in Asia," [Gideon Lasco](#) (2019) uses the framework of populism – which he defines as a political style – to survey punitive drug regimes in Asia and make sense of their social and political efficacies. Gideon finds common elements in both historical and contemporary examples in the region, including the conflation of the "drug menace" with ethnic or economic "others," as well as misleading or exaggerated epidemiological and medical claims. To read the abstract from the January 2020 issue of the *International Journal on Drug Policy*, [click here](#).

Finding Ways to Share a Regional Resource

[Pianporn Deetes](#) (2020) joined the April 23 online panel discussion hosted by the Foreign Correspondents Club of Thailand on "[Mekong Update: New evidence of China's dam impacts, and why it matters](#)." The Mekong River supports the lives of tens of millions of people, Pianporn said in her remarks, and should be viewed as a shared resource. Pianporn and her [International Rivers](#) colleagues have been raising public awareness about drastic fluctuations in the Mekong's flow and how they exacerbate the vulnerabilities of many downstream communities. She stressed the importance of transparency and good governance in managing the Mekong, and urged governments to include the voices of affected communities in the policy-making process.



Helping Teenage Girls Explore Challenging Situations

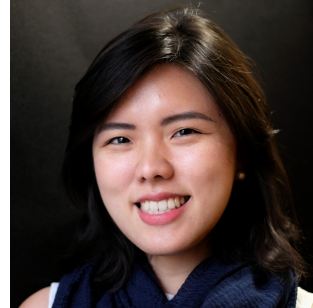


[Raudah Yunus](#), who is one of the co-authors of a newly published book, [HerStory: Tales of Teen Girl Troubles and Triumphs](#). The book is a collection of 12 short stories that explore real-life issues involving teenaged girls, from personal image and relationships with family and friends to dealing with parental separation and the perils of social media. This is Raudah's third book; one of her two earlier books was a collection of refugee memoirs and the other was a book on motherhood.

AWARDS AND RECOGNITION

Traveling Another Pathway to Health Equity

In March, [Beverly Lorraine Ho](#) (2017) was promoted to a new position at the Ministry of Public Health in the Philippines. She now serves as Director of Health Promotion and Communication Service, under the Health Promotion Bureau. In this role, she will help operationalize the Universal Health Care Law's mandate to ensure that all Filipinos are health literate and have healthy living, schooling, and working conditions. Bev has embraced her new role with enthusiasm: "I am excited to contribute to health equity through another pathway!"



Expanded Portfolio for Health Promotion



Pairoj Saonuum (2018) has been promoted to Assistant CEO of the Thai Health Promotion Foundation (ThaiHealth), an independent national agency working in the field of health promotion. A medical doctor with a PhD in community medicine, Pairoj's new role at ThaiHealth will focus on such key working issues as tobacco control, alcohol control, accident prevention, sexual health, mental health, healthy environment, physical activity, healthy food, and the media system.

Master's Studies for Bawi Mang Lian

Congratulations to **Bawi Mang Lian** (2018), who will begin a master's program in global health policy and management at Brandeis University in the United States, starting in January 2021. Bawi's studies will be fully funded through the Fulbright Scholarship Program for young Burmese professionals. Brandeis offers an accelerated, nine-month program that focuses on health systems strengthening and global health policy, which Bawi expects will give him new tools for his work at Myanmar's Ministry of Health and Sport, where he works to monitor Myanmar's National Health Plan and improve the distribution of health facilities.



Recognizing Project TEACH for Best Practices



Archie David (2018) established **Project TEACH** (Therapy, Education, and Assimilation of Children with Handicap) in collaboration with the Mandaluyong City government in order to provide offer free medical, therapeutic, and educational services to disabled children in poor communities. The Development Academy of the Philippines (DAP) awarded Project TEACH its 2019 Government Best Practice Recognition for a local government unit, 1 of 7 programs to receive the designation. The recognition is one of DAP's responses to the rising call for public sector organizations to enhance the quality of service

delivery.

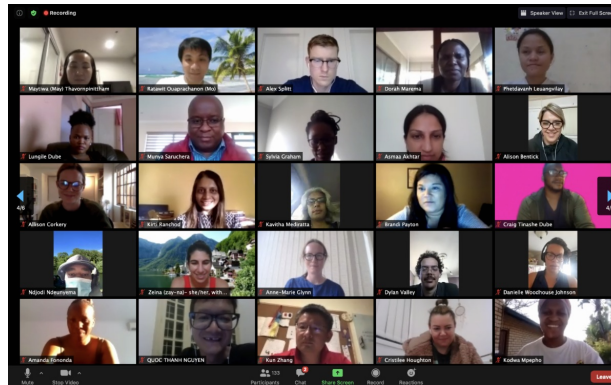
A Champion of Migration

The **International Organization for Migration**, in partnership with the Philippines Department of Foreign Affairs, has designated journalist **Ana Santos** as one of its 2019 Champions of Migration. Ana was recognized for the articles she has contributed to the online news platform Rappler, which have promoted "safe, orderly and humane migration for the benefit of all." Ana's in-depth stories on migration have focused on Filipino migrants in France, the United Arab Emirates, Denmark, and Qatar, including a multimedia series on overseas Filipino workers titled "**Who Takes Care of Nanny's Children?**"



ATLANTIC FELLOWS NEWS

2019 Fellows Join the Atlantic Fellows Community



When our 2019 Fellows completed their induction year in February, they become part of a global network of Atlantic Fellows. They were officially welcomed into the Atlantic community in a “Virtual Welcome Ceremony” on August 1, hosted by the Atlantic Institute. The welcome ceremony was designed to introduce Fellows to the AI platform; create connections across the 7 Atlantic Fellows programs, among Fellows who represent diverse backgrounds, professions, cultures, and ideologies; and present content to inspire and challenge Fellows on issues related to equity and social justice. Our Fellows used a short video to introduce themselves to their peers, which featured each of them showing simple, direct, and powerful statements of their commitment to equity.

EI STAFF NEWS

A Warm Welcome...



Maytiwa (May) Thavornpinittham joined the EI staff in April, assuming the important role of Fellows Relations Manager. May's career reflects her dedication to creating social change through education and opportunities. She previously managed UNICEF volunteer engagement activities in Thailand, and helped develop and implement scholarship programs as a program officer for the Institute of International Education, Southeast Asia. May will help our Fellows – now more than 100 strong – make connections and sustain relationships across cohorts, national borders, and professions. Welcome, May!

...and a Fond Farewell

EI's dedicated program assistant, **Sirikanya (Noon) Santayakul**, will begin the Asia Pacific Master of Arts in Human Rights and Democratization Program at Mahidol University in Bangkok. Her studies will be fully funded by a scholarship from the European Commission through the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights. Noon has been a valuable member of the EI team, and her calm, capable, and friendly approach has improved our programming and endeared her to Fellows. We wish her much success in her studies!



Send us your news!

Help us build an engaged community for health equity by sending us updates on your speaking engagements, highlights of your work and travel, and interesting projects you encounter. Send your news to:

info@equityinitiative.org