The COVID-19 pandemic is the defining global health crisis of our time considered to be the biggest humanitarian crisis in recent history and has presented a tremendous challenge to our societies. In South Asia, the pandemic has caused immense health and socio-economic problems. The governments in South Asia have enforced lockdowns intending to slow the spread of the virus. While the lockdowns have been successful in slowing the infection rates, they have had a significant socio-economic impacts. With millions of people without jobs and income, the region's economic growth rate is projected to decline even further.

In the region, this disaster is exacerbating the already existing insecurity and precariousness. The region's public healthcare threat, painful situation of migrant workers, daily wagers, growing disparity and a growing gap between the rich and the rest of society, debt burden have further increased in the time of crisis.

New cases of COVID-19 infections and related fatality in a region has risen sharply. Extremely low vaccination rates across South Asia have also left the region highly vulnerable. While preparing the article on 26 July 2021, the progress in vaccination in the Maldives seemed fair compared to other countries in South Asia. Though Bhutan's progress in providing at least the first dose of the vaccine was remarkable (68%).

The state of vaccination in Afghanistan is depressingly low as only 2% have received at least one dose and less than 1% are fully vaccinated since the last week of February 2021 when the government launched the vaccination programme. The recent escalation of violence between the Taliban and the Afghan government has hugely impacted the vaccination programme in various parts of the country, which is also helping in the spread of the virus.

In Bangladesh, the rapid surge in coronavirus infection is indicating an urgent need for a wider vaccination programme while less than 4% of people are partially vaccinated. More than 19,000 people have lost their lives due to COVID-19.

Pakistan's vaccination drive is also facing challenges of supply delay and lack of finance while the government is planning to vaccinate 70 million people.
people. Nepal is also facing the same problem as the procurement process is highly competitive and the government has no choice other than to wait. Having similar issues, people in the rural areas are not getting immediate attention as the government is prioritising vaccination drive in the urban areas largely in Sri Lanka.

Furthermore, the COVID crisis has made the inequality crisis more visible and sharper. Every international community have to proactively volunteer for raising voice against vaccine nationalism and vaccine inequality. Our approach needs to reflect on effectively challenging the drivers of inequality through WTO TRIPS waiver and pressing action at the global level to ensure more equitable access to vaccines and prioritising resource and technology transfer to produce vaccines locally.

Since September 2020, the TRIPS waiver discussions are going on at the WTO. Millions have died. Millions did not get the treatment they had a right to. How much longer does the world have to wait?

Therefore, we have to strengthen and continue our fight against this cruel vaccine inequality and vaccine apartheid in the countries, in the region and the world.

As a regional network of civil society organisations and people’s movements, SAAPE members have been collaborating and organising public campaigns to demand waiver of the TRIPS on COVID-19 vaccine and related technologies.

**PUBLICATIONS 2021**

**Fact Sheet: South Asian Governments’ Commitment to Reducing Inequality in South Asia, 2020**

Governments’ spending on public services, the policies on taxation, and the status of workers’ rights have been assessed by the 3rd edition of the CRI Index, published by Oxfam and Development Finance International (DFI) in October 2020. The CRI report “Fighting Inequality in the time of COVID-19: The Commitment to Reducing Inequality Index 2020” was prepared based on the 158 countries’ status in the above-mentioned areas. SAAPE produced the fact sheet by using the CRI index with the status of South Asian countries’ commitment to reducing inequality on March 2021.

**South Asia Debt Fact Sheet 2020**

South Asian countries’ debts due to the recent pandemic have further exacerbated the dismal state of the people and the state capacity to deal with the multiple crises that we are facing since 1990. The issue of debt cancellation remains at the centre of any vision that looks forward to a just recovery from the COVID crisis and aims to guarantee a decent living condition for the poor and marginalised in the region. In the context, South Asia Debt fact sheet 2020 was published on February 2021 as advocacy and campaign material and circulated/distributed among SAAPE campaign.
SAAPE members organised various country-level national assemblies to fight poverty and beat inequality with meaningful interventions and influence in decisions of the governments and IFIs at the national level in collaboration with their country campaign members from 23 September to 08 October 2020 in South Asian countries.

In Nepal, National People’s Assembly for Equality was organised to raise the voices for the people’s free and fair access to COVID-19 vaccine on 08 October 2020. The voice of vulnerable and COVID-19 affected people such as poor, women, farmers, labours, persons with disabilities, elderly, returnee migrants, informal workers etc. was brought in the assembly by the representatives of the networks and federations who represented those sections i.e. National Federation of Disabled Nepal, Dalit NGO Federation, National Senior Citizen Federation, Transportation Labour Associations, Informal Workers Association, National Farmers’ Association, LGBTQI, Land Rights Forum, National Child-Friendly Local Governance Forum, Returnee Migrant Network etc. They speak out the voice of the people how COVID-19 has affected the community and how COVID-19 has increased inequality. The representative of the government, Vice Chairperson of National Planning Commission, Government of Nepal committed to discuss further widely to address the raised issue and demands. Everyone highly praised the initiative and committed to support the campaign in coming days. The event was publicised on Facebook posts using the hashtag #PeopleVsInequality.

In Bangladesh, Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS) and Jonoudyog jointly organised ‘Bangladesh Peoples Assembly’ online on 5 October 2020 with the theme “Impact of COVID-19 on Human Lives and Livelihoods.” In the assembly, the issues of discrimination and inequality during COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on economy and health system were discussed. Civil society activists including indigenous leaders, farmer – labour – trade union leaders, cultural activists, teachers, journalists, writers, students participated in the assembly.

Similarly, with the aim of large-scale mobilisation, the virtual regional people’s assembly was organised on 6 October 2020 by SAAPE. During the programme, the panelists presented the ground realities and way forward as well as deliberation on the rising inequality in South Asia in the time of COVID-19. The health crises brought by COVID-19 pandemic and the impact on exacerbating the severity of inequality in South Asian countries were discussed in the programme.

Mustafa Talpur, Inequality Campaign Lead, Oxfam Regional Platform- Asia presented brief information on the OXFAM publication - Commitment to Reducing Inequality (CRI). Similarly, the speaker, Zakia Soman, Co-founder, Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Aandolan shared how the COVID-19 pandemic has deepened inequality and patriarchy in our society.

In line with the economic crisis and inequality in South Asia, Dilli Raj Khanal, Economist, and Former

People’s Vaccine Week(s) of Action

SAAPE members as a part of the People’s Vaccine Alliance Asia are organising campaigns to demand free and fair distribution of COVID-19 vaccines and waiver of trips regulations which is blocking the mass production of the vaccines and related medical products.

The members are calling on governments to do everything in their power to ensure COVID-19 vaccines are made a global public good – free of charge to the public, fairly distributed, and based on need. The alliance is coming together in light of the urgency of the situation and building on collective power, commit to the key demands to ensure the fair, equitable distribution of safe and effective COVID-19 vaccines and to take steps towards just and transformative change.
Member of National Planning Commission, Nepal shared his views on COVID-19 pandemic impact and emphasized on the need for policy options and measures to revive the economy with a focus on the working class. In addition to contributions from speakers, participants shared their thoughts and ideas on issues of rising inequality in South Asia in the context of COVID-19 pandemic.

Global Protest to Fight Inequality, January 2021

Over the past 30 years, the gap between the rich and everyone else has deepened in many countries across the world. Extreme inequality reduces economic growth, threatens human rights, and worsens health and other outcomes. Each year, 100 million people are driven below the poverty line by having to pay for healthcare. Almost 70 million young people are working but still living in extreme poverty, surviving on less than $2 a day. Women make up the majority of the world’s low-paid workers, getting by on wages that leave them trapped in a cycle of poverty. The working class are hard hit by the unequal structures, policies and practices of society and nation states. However, inequality crisis is not inevitable and that governments have the power to defeat it. In 2015, 193 countries promised to reduce inequality as part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Despite the promises made by the countries to reduce the inequality, gap between the rich and poor is widening and it is worse particularly in recent months due the COVID-19 pandemic - a global health crisis. Governments across the world have declared a public health emergency in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, enforcing restrictions on freedom of movement, quarantines and lockdowns, and stopping ‘non-essential’ businesses altogether. An increasing number of people globally are exposed to health risks and the effects of the crisis that the COVID-19 has brought to economy is unforeseeable. COVID-19 has intensified the stark and systemic inequalities in our societies. There are huge and unequal impacts on people’s lives of official measures responding to pandemics. Due to the lockdown, casual and informal workers, women, and small-scale farmers are the hardest hit as compared to those who are engaged in the formal works and those who control the food system. This is especially true for the working class and the most vulnerable population including those who are unemployed, and women, young people, persons living with disabilities, people with compromised immunity and those living in informal settlements and remote areas.

In this context, each year in January, members of Fight Inequality Alliance come together in one massive movement during the global protest to fight inequality all across the world. This year also, people on the frontlines of inequality mobilised and demonstrated people’s power with the loud voice: “people’s solutions are better than Davos”.

As part of the Fight Inequality Global Campaign, SAAPE members coordinated various inequality actions during the global week of action 2021 in South Asian Countries.

Bangladesh

SAAPE members in Bangladesh organised human chain, demonstrations and webinar during global protest to fight inequality.

A human chain entitled “Let’s End Inequality Together – Make South Asia Fair for All” was organised on 28 January 2021 in Dhaka, Bangladesh. Representatives from Adibasi committee, farmers-labours-trade union, academia, artists, teachers, journalists, writers, students etc. participated in the programme. The human chain demanded effective steps to reduce poverty gaps, wage gaps, discrimination against women. Festoons (in both English and Bangla) were also used in the human chain.

Bangladesh Nari Progati Sangha (BNPS) coordinated the webinar on inequality situation in South Asia and way forward on 30 January 2021. During the programme, a discussion on mobilisation of domestic tax revenue and end of unfair tax incentives, exemptions to rich companies and
individuals. Rich individuals and companies have to pay fair share was conducted. Invest in essential public services to revitalize public health, education, water and sanitation, build strong responsible states and ensure social protection for all.

**India**

In India, the pandemic and the resultant lockdown has created terrible distress putting the lives and the livelihoods of millions at stake. Estimates by international institutions show that the pandemic will hit India very badly. 40 million people might be consigned to "extreme poverty" with widespread hunger and an all pervasive inequality. Very surprisingly, the state responses to these widespread humanitarian crises has been apathetic. The government seems indifferent with no data, no estimation or policy response. Instead, it has embarked on one of the worst anti-people policy measures. It took advantage of the prevailing precarity and the absence of democratic space due to lockdown and other restrictions in place to do away with protective legislations and enforce the anti-worker labour code, anti-farmer farm laws, etc. A series of privatisation, i.e. transferring public assets in the hands of the private capitalists are in full sway which some critics call as a loot. The poor and the vulnerable, who are already in a bad situation, will have to deal with the worst days if the states do not change their policies towards a pro-people and progressive direction.

It is in this context, SAAPE campaign member, West Bengal organised the Fight Inequality mobilisation on January 29, 2021. These voices merged in unison to draw attention towards the terrible state of affairs that make the rich richer and the poor poorer. It has been a sad story of a one way transfer of wealth from the public to the elites.

The major demands raised at the gathering were:

- Free vaccine for all.
- Social protection for all including the right to health and right to livelihood.
- Private indebtedness and inequality.
- Anti people farm laws and labour codes.
- Issues like citizenship and discrimination.

The programme attended by more than 400 people from 3 – 8 pm saw voices raised by activists and ordinary people against the prevailing conditions. Songs and cultural programmes including a play against religious riots conveyed the message far and wide.
SAAPE members in Tamil Nadu, India organised public meeting and street programme in Tamil Nadu, India on 29 January 2021.

A public meet was held on 29 January 2021, participated by women leaders from Dindigul. The speakers shared the violence's faced by Indian women, particularly the cases of women textile workers of Thirupore, Tamil Nadu. They also highlighted the harassments being faced by group of Pollachi young girls and women. Similarly, participants of public need demanded the free and fair access to COVID-19 vaccines.

**Street campaign and demands**

- Government should effectively implement the law and order to end violence against women.
- Liquor ban must be ensured to stop most of violence's against women and children.
- Legal provision of Polygamy to Muslim minorities should be abolished to ensure equal rights of women
- Equal citizenship rights must be ensured to all without any religious discrimination.
- The government should provide proper and equal health care facility to all by upgrading the primary health centers.
- The government should distribute COVID-19 vaccine equitably and free of cost.
- Government should provide livelihood support to the marginal communities to overcome the poverty during this pandemic.
- New education policy should be withdrawn
- Education must come under state responsibility, stop the common eligibility test for the students who are studying in different syllabus in different states.
• Provide 50 per cent reservation to women in all elections.
• The CAA act -2019 should be repealed which is discriminatory against the minority people.

Nepal

Virtual Dialogue on Inequality and Access to COVID-19 Vaccine

CSOs Campaign for Equality, Nepal organised the dialogue among concerned stakeholders to discuss overall status of access to COVID-19 vaccines relating it to inequality and justice in Nepal on 25 January, 2021.

Dr. Jageshor Gautam, Spokesperson of Ministry of Health and Population, Dr. Renu Adhikari, Women Rights Activist, Dr. Suresh Tiwari, Public Health Expert, and President of Dalit NGO Federation, Bhakta Bishwakarma expressed their opinion in the context of inequality and COVID-19. Participants from the government offices, human rights organisations, social movements and women rights organisations participated in the programme.

Speakers at the programme stressed that government of Nepal should allocate sufficient budget for the COVID-19 vaccines and every citizen should get access to vaccines. Also, speakers highlighted that the neediest, frontline workers and vulnerable population must be kept in priority in terms of having access to vaccines and awareness is also needed related to COVID-19 vaccines complication.

Video demonstration in Inequality: The perspective of the youth

Video demonstration programme was organised focusing on perspective of youths from the aspect of inequality issues on 30 January 2021. In the programme, youths from 7 provinces of Nepal expressed their opinion on existing social, economic, cultural, spatial inequalities through the videos which was played during the programme.

Sri Lanka

SAAPE member in Sri Lanka organised online meeting and demonstration during the global protest to inequality.
The Covid 19 Titanic
Living the apocalypse, Surfing the second wave

Every morning I read the newspapers,
The headlines, the small print, the numbers,
The visuals of stretchers, ambulances, nurses, the dying, the dead
The waiting forever,
The visuals crowd out the words, the numbers,
Life a dead Still Life, a painting that cannot be restored,
a story that cannot be told, enough,
As hospital gates clang shut, groaning, sagging with the dying,
The living escaping to home, living to tell the tale…
Ill but alive, they are Fortuna’s children.

Amid high decibel election rallies and religious gatherings
Pyres of rough wood logs doused with kerosene/petrol are lit
Grieving relatives, families, friends at a distance bid goodbye,
if at all they could come…
From this distance nothing can be seen
of the person, gone as nameless, a statistic, the flames sear the skies
The dead light up the dying skies of a setting sun, a rising moon.

In the sweeping anomie of Covid 19
it is a massacre, it is a hurtling disorder,
livelihoods are put on hold as election madness suffer no ban
the choices are numerous…death by suicide, death by Covid 19,
death by hunger, death by a system
Drunken in its powerful cesspools of greed and want.

The word ‘public’ made ‘private’, there are no beds, no medicines,
Doctors, nurses shredded by never ending duties across beds and their ailing.
They come home tired, their white gown a crumpled wet sheath
A sheath that has seen so much, caring for the uncared, holding the hand
Lost to the world, in icy isolation. A Nurse, A Doctor, like guardians to the ill
At home on return, she lies down, half out of this earth, the tiredness like
Blue pools, circling the eyes, shut inside…

When the breeze dries up with your cough,
your losses of smell, your hunger without taste,
your life breathless, the body a burn that does not cool
Lying under a bed, under the waiting bench in a dark corridor
you wait for the next bed to be freed, as one more friend, uncle, aunt,
mother, father, daughter, son, husband, wife, child leaves life behind
in a plastic shroud, gone forever, without trace, touch, a goodbye
stiffened in Covid fear, coveted in an earthen jar,
marked in numbers with white chalk, numb family saying goodbye
from that frozen distance, from that stilled forever distance.
The metal bed awaits the next and the next…

The numbers recede, the surges calm down
Life limps back, amputated in countless ways
Never the same again: Families live, losses pass into histories
Destiny a temporary solace, an acceptance without a choice
A fate, determined by pandemics, like a Coda,
Living with the unknown, learning to walk again.

- Shobha Raghuram, India
Open letter by Women-led Garment Unions in Sri Lanka to the Government, Factory Owners and Buyers

15 May 2021

Key Demands to address the COVID-19 crisis in the Free Trade Zones

To the GoSL & Factory Owners/Employers;

- Prioritize all workers in the FTZ and apparel supply chain for COVID-19 vaccination, both in the western province and the rest of the country. This should include both regular employees as well as employees from the Manpower agencies. Set up vaccination centers at health facilities near the zones, and at the gates of the different Free Trade Zones (FTZ). Have a target of vaccinating all workers within a two week period.

- Put in place a systematic random PCR testing programme across all factories, and immediately take measures to trace, isolate and transport workers who test positive and their first contacts, to quarantine centres. The workers should be informed of the COVID-19 infection situation at their respective factory on a daily basis.

- Provide quarters within each respective factory or the Zone, exclusively for FTZ workers (including Manpower workers), so that there are no delays in transporting workers from hostels to quarantine centres, citing a lack of space. Factory owners need to take much more responsibility to protect their workers. For those workers to whom the factories are unable to provide dedicated living quarters, ensure that practical safety measures are supported in the boarding houses. These places where workers from different factories co-habit must be provided with adequate facilities to maintain COVID-19 safety precautions.

- Workers who are forced into quarantine centers or self-isolation due to being exposed to COVID-19 infection at their work place, on the way to work, or at their boarding house, must be given full pay for quarantine days, and no reduction in attendance bonus and other related incentives. Any quarantine related expenses must be reimbursed by factory owners to the workers. If a factory or part of the factory is closed due to high COVID-19 prevalence, the workers must be paid in full for the month, and any Manpower workers who have been on the roster for the month must be compensated adequately. Workers who are in quarantine should not be subject to ‘No Pay Leave’. Workers who are considered to be at risk due to their condition, should not be forced to come to work during the period. This may include for example pregnant women, workers with diabetes and other non-communicable disease that may be co-morbidities and increase risk of serious illness. They should be paid in full during the period.

- Rs. 5,000 monthly relief ration packs should be distributed to all workers, starting with unemployed Manpower and non-permanent workers. Grama Sevakas must be given clear instructions to not limit assistance to election registration lists, as workers are not included in these lists.

- Ensure that all factories strictly adhere to health and safety guidelines, such as, regular checking of temperature of workers, work space and machinery lay-out that maintains recommended distance between workers, regular sanitizing of machines, surfaces and raw materials, providing PPE for all workers, washing hands regularly etc.

- Ensure that PHI, Labour officers and BOI officers regularly monitor the adherence to the systematic PCR testing and safety measures and remuneration plans recommended above.

- Put in place Health Committees in each factory that has adequate worker representation.

- Immediately put in place a COVID-19 Management Forum in each Zone, consisting of manufacturer representatives, worker representatives, a PHI/health authority representative, a Labour Department representative and a BOI representative that conduct daily online meetings to raise, discuss and deal with worker health concerns.

- Convene a weekly multi-stakeholder online forum between Labour Department, BOI officials, Joint Apparel Association Forum (JAAF), worker representatives and women’s organisation working in the Zone, to raise, discuss and deal with worker issues that arise during the period.

- Put in place a special health hotline that workers can call for information and counseling regarding COVID-19 infection and response measures.

To Brands/Buyers;

- The buyers should pay a premium for production during lockdown/restricted periods. The benefit of this premium should directly reach the workers.

- The buyers should include COVID-19 safety measures in their buyer’s code, and in their periodic audits.

Signed by: Da bindu Collective Sri Lanka, Katunayake; Revolutionary Existence for human Development (RED), Katunayake; Sramabimani Kendraya, Seeduwa and Standup Movement Lanka, Katunayake
Garment Workers in Pakistan: Situation and Challenges
Views from the Ground

This bit of writing is based on a documentation and monitoring on the situation of workers in garment sector conducted by Labour Education Foundation (LEF), one of the SAAPE labour rights campaign member organisations, based in Lahore, Pakistan in February 2021. The study has highlighted the discrimination that garment workers face in terms of their overall status, lack of implementation of labour laws, lack of coverage under laws, working conditions, occupational health and safety, non-implementation of minimum wage, lack of protection by the state and its effects on their dignity. The 15 case studies were compiled under this initiative as an evidence of the kinds of violations of labour rights generally and especially in a pandemic situation. The case studies analyses the ground realities and dimensions of discrimination among the workers in garment sectors.

Sexual harassment on the basis of gender is common in almost all factories that are been faced by women garment workers. Female workers articulated their experiences as men always stare at them and make inappropriate comments when they return home especially at night. In the factories there is no respect for women. The supervisors use abusive language. Some supervisors offer “friendship” and if a woman refuses to indulge with them she is treated by the supervisor as an enemy. Male colleagues also stare and pass comments, female workers do not see any solution against the harassment, there are no opportunities for improving the situation, no trainings against harassment or discrimination, women are vulnerable in factories as they face hooting and harassment from both male workers and the management. Complaining against this situation is not an option, as the management dismisses the complainant along with the perpetrator, saying that she must have done something wrong to invite this kind of behaviour.

Along with rude behavior, supervisors disrespect women and speak loudly to them. They comment about women clothes and painted nails. Moreover, the management discourage workers from talking to each other, especially male and female workers.

Women workers are facing multi-dimensional discriminations - on the basis of sex, gender, age. Supervisors talk with male workers rudely, abuse them, and even comment about their mothers, daughters and sisters with abusive language. The working environment is very challenging for women as the management mostly discourages women workers from making complaints about harassment on the job. Male colleagues emphasize themselves saying earning money to run a house is the main responsibility of men which shows that male workers have perceived notions about the gender division of labour.

The study anlayesd the gender-based discrimination in terms of wages. The male workers are given higher wages in comparison with women for the same work.

Wage Discrimination

In case of Home-Based Workers (HBWs), they generally earn between 10,000 – 12,000 rupees a month for working 10 – 12 hours daily. According to the study, there are incidents of discrimination, violation of workers rights and a division of work whereby women are not given the work of stitching jeans in the factory, as the bosses claim that men do this work more neatly while women workers were of the opinion that as the wages for stitching jeans is higher, so the management want to make male workers more satisfied by giving this opportunity only to them. Female workers are paid less than men for the same value of work, while their working hours are generally higher than that of the male workers. The other main reason of facing discrimination by female workers is due to the appointment of male workers in most of the higher post like supervisors and management positions. They try to show that women are weak and preference is given to men during recruitment process. The orders with higher rates are always given to the male workers.

In one of the factory in Faisalabad city, in the past women used to work in a factory. However in present days, no women are in employment there.
which reflects how the opportunities for women can be narrowed just because of existing gender disparities. Though these are some issues which are not discussed and officially not documented as well.

Moreover, in most factories women workers are treated as less skilled employees and are hired in such sections which require no skill/less skill like in clipping section but in the stitching sector more male workers are hired with better wage in compare with female workers. The starting wage in the clipping section is 18,500 rupees, while in the stitching unit the starting wage is 22,000 rupees per month. Besides this, some female garment workers shared that male workers are given one-hour break, but women only get 15 minutes.

Minimum Wage

In terms of wages, generally, garment sector workers were earning less than announced minimum wage by the Government. Some who were getting salary around 17500 – 22000 described it as insufficient to meet their basic requirements. According to the opinion of the workers, their monthly wages should be between 25000 – 40000 rupees to lead a decent life and some of them demanded that along with this salary the government should provide health and educational facilities for their family members. While discussing the benefits of being a formal worker, majority of the workers said that formal workers have many benefits, including social security cards, registration with the old age benefits institute, proper time frame, better wages and most importantly they can have some sort of job security. On the other hand, in informal work, irregularity in orders is common, wages are too low and informal workers are not recognised workers and are not protected by the laws.

During survey, in two factories, workers said that there is no discrimination on the basis of religion and all workers are given the same benefits and their functions are celebrated by the management regardless of their religion but there are other examples like some workers have faced religious discrimination, as on the festival of Eid, Muslims are not only awarded time off but also Eidi bonuses, but on Easter, Christians only receive a day off from work. In some instances, Muslim workers do not like to eat and sit with Christian colleagues. Those who are from the Christian community are given lower priority in employment and denied annual promotions, skill development and salary increment.

At times workers themselves have some perceptions on the basis of religion and sects. If the owner of the

---

COVID-19 and the Status of Vaccination in South Asia

Globally, new COVID-19 cases increased with the two-wave pattern, the first wave during spring followed by the current second wave in late summer and autumn. Till now, 4,175,396 people have died globally, 13,883,404 active cases among 220 countries and territories. At least 197 countries have started vaccinating against COVID-19, a total of 1,413,699,503 (at least one dose) have been vaccinated to date. (as of 26 July 2021; 06:12 GMT)

South Asia, home to a quarter of the world’s population is fast becoming the new global epicentre of the COVID-19 pandemic. Extremely low vaccination rates across South Asia have also left the region highly vulnerable, hence, pressing actions are needed at the global level to ensure free and fair access to vaccines and prioritising resource and technology transfer to produce vaccines locally.

To track this major challenge, we are starting to share the related updates on a weekly basis by presenting the COVID-19 active cases and deaths due to the pandemic and the status of total vaccination in South Asian countries.

Please follow SAAPE on the Facebook page (www.facebook.com/saape.network) and Twitter handle (@saape_network) to get regular updates.
factory is an Ahmadi then workers do not want to work in his factory. Even family members do not allow the workers to work there because of social pressure and perception in the community. The earning in this kind of factory has no barkat (blessed).

During the survey, some workers shared about the age discrimination among male and female workers while hiring them. The factories hire women who are under or around 30 – 35 years and they firmly believe that after this age women are unable to work properly, whereas the factory keeps male workers up to 50 years of age.

**COVID 19 - A Survival Challenge**

During the survey, it was found that there was one garment factory in Faisalabad where the workers were paid wages even in the lockdown in 2020 and were provided with ration items.

However all big factories started laying off their workers in huge numbers and some factories remained closed during COVID-19 pandemic. Workers were not paid salaries of one and a half months during lockdown period. Even in most of the factories, workers were asked to take safety measures like wearing masks, using sanitizers by workers themselves, and it became an extra burden for them due to the financial crisis during pandemic. Lack of safety measures are major problems for workers in factories. No hand sanitizers or soap are available, and social distancing was not made possible by factory management.

In two factories, where management provided masks and sanitizers for the use by workers, temperatures were also checked and a sanitizing cabins were also installed at the gate. If workers were found to have a fever, management did not allow them into the factory. There is a focus on cleanliness, toilets are also clean and hand washers are also available, filtered clean drinking water is available and masks for employees were available even before the COVID-19 pandemic. In different sections, required safety gadgets, like ear plugs in the embroidery section, are made available for the workers. There is a day care center for mothers who have small babies.

Regarding Ehsaas Emergency Programme, launched by the Government of Pakistan for the financial assistance in the context of the economic hardship being experienced by the vulnerable due to the ongoing coronavirus crisis, LEF was not able to approach any worker who received the support from that programme. Most of the workers received response from the government authority that he/she are not eligible even every workers are affected by COVID-19. More than that the factory refused to give a bonus to workers with escaping words that they were out of business. After lockdown, the factory dismissed some workers, while some have to work on alternative days with half salary, as the factory has not received enough orders to accommodate the previous workforce. Lack of orders due to the COVID-19 pandemic was one of the main reasons for dismissal of workers from the factory.

The survey also observed that the management dismissed those workers who become the ‘troublemakers’ for the factory especially who are raising voice for workers rights or talking about forming an union.

The post COVID-19 situation deteriorated more. Only about 50 per cent of the workers regained their jobs. Similarly home-based workers have less work as the factory has not enough orders. The rate of order piece is even reduced to 50 per cent which vigorously impacted the employment as well as the wages of the workers.