

# **#CloseTheGap: Accelerating post-pandemic recovery through social justice**

## **Concept Note**

### **I. Introduction**

While socio-economic disparities have always run deep across the country, the COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and further exacerbated these inequities. Marginalized groups were disproportionately affected by the pandemic widening inequalities and compromising access to basic human necessities and social cohesion. Vulnerable women, the elderly, disabled individuals, displaced migrants, less-educated individuals, and cultural minorities have higher COVID-19 infection rates. Also, they bore the brunt of widespread community lockdowns (Goldin and Muggah 2020, Perry, Aronson and Pescosolido 2021, Decerf et al. 2021).

The ill effects of the pandemic cut across sectors. Businesses suffered and employment rates fell with workers tormented by no-work, no-pay arrangements, while others have the luxury of work-from-home options. The country's health system was tested to the limit, especially in areas with scarce supply-side capacity. The quality of education suffered especially among less privileged children because of school closures and the adoption of online classes. This reinforced significant learning loss of children, especially from those low-income households. Cultural minorities were further isolated and socioeconomically disadvantaged.

These extreme and disproportionate impacts of the pandemic on the poor and vulnerable reflect the deep-seated structural inequities and injustices in society. Hence, COVID-19 has led to a renewed sense of urgency to break these structural inequities to genuinely address the pandemic and other forms shocks. Scholars and advocates have urged decision-makers to make social

justice the front and center of the post-COVID- recovery plan. They have identified the following policy areas, in which social justice could be realized in the post-COVID world.

1. *First*, given the socio-economic disruptions brought by the pandemic, the government need to rethink the sustainability of current economic models and structures. For example, moving towards *stakeholder capitalism*, reforming labor and education arrangements, exploring fairer taxation, and investing on universal social protection programs such as healthcare for all.
2. *Second*, reinforce the needs of the most excluded segments of the population. This include strategic support for vulnerable population, particularly informal sector workers, women, indigenous peoples, and even middle-class.
3. *Third*, renew commitment to climate and environmental justice. During the long-term lockdowns, many have found appreciation with the environment. This include the desire for everyone to have physical space and mental space to think, and the desire to protect groups prone to environmental injustice.
4. *Fourth*, facilitate international cooperation, that is, veering away from nationalism. This include equitable global sharing of life-saving drugs and vaccines, and robust disease surveillance.
5. *Fifth*, renew the commitment to protect civic freedom (e.g., access to information, demanding accountability).

In the Philippines, the concept of social justice is not something new. The 1987 Constitution, for example, frames the promotion of social justice as a commitment to create equitable opportunities, reduce social-economic and political inequalities, and remove cultural inequities. In Article 13 of the 1987 Constitution of the Philippine Republic. Sections 1 and 2 stated the following:

*“The Congress shall give highest priority to the enactment of measures that protect and enhance the right of all the people to human dignity, reduce social, economic, and political inequalities, and remove cultural inequities by equitably diffusing wealth and political power for the common good”;*

*“The promotion of social justice shall include the commitment to create economic opportunities based on freedom of initiative and self-reliance” (1987 Const. Art. 1).*

Also, social justice is the bedrock of many international declarations, in which the country is signatory, such as Charter of United Nations, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenants on Human Rights, the Copenhagen Declaration, and the UN Millennium Declaration among others. The above declarations push for equality in political and civil rights, particularly in eliminating all forms of discrimination and allowing for equal access to opportunities and acceptable living conditions. Social justice is adapted in the country’s development blueprints – the Philippine Development Plan (PDP) 2017-2022, and the *Ambisyon Natin 2040*. The latter serves as planning pillar that will steer the country towards the penultimate goal of having strongly rooted, comfortable, and secure life by 2040. It envisions a more equitable income distribution from broad-based economic growth, and resilience of the poor against shocks.

Despite all these, social justice remains to be an elusive aspiration even after decades of trying. The current magnitude of inequalities is even less acceptable given the country’s struggle in recent years.<sup>1</sup> However, the consequential and pathbreaking effects of the pandemic provides a policy widow to institute genuine reforms centered on social justice. The resulting welfare concerns unfolded by the pandemic prompt the need for comprehensive discourses on how to move forward toward recovery with social justice, particularly in the thematic areas of public health, environment, labor, and education.<sup>2</sup>

## **II. Defining social justice and identifying thematic areas**

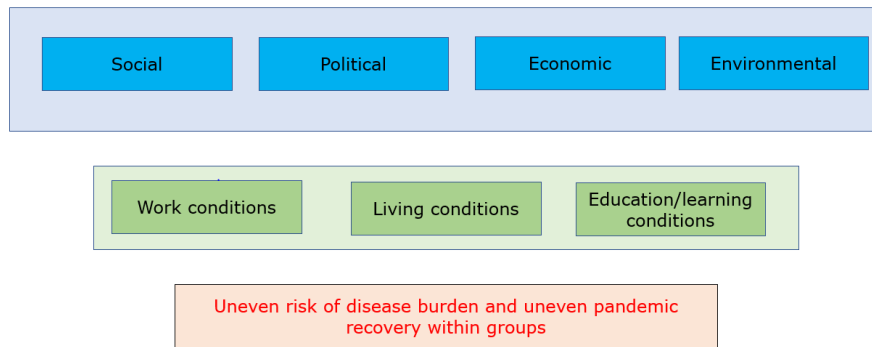
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<sup>1</sup> The Philippines’ Gini coefficient in 2018 was 0.423, an improvement from the estimates of 0.4439 in 2015 and 0.4605 in 2012. But the level of inequality, both domestic and globally, had indicatively worsened over the past couple of years. <https://psa.gov.ph/content/annual-family-income-estimated-php-313-thousand-average-2018>

<sup>2</sup> As the world’s economies, governments, and societies adjust to the lasting effects of the pandemic and situations under the new normal, efforts towards revamping systems, mechanisms, and institutions should not only focus on resiliency but also on their capacities to bridge the inequalities aggravated by the pandemic.

One of the prominent theorists of social justice is John Rawls, who aimed to reconcile notions of freedom and equality in his work, *A Theory of Justice*. Rawls arrives at two principles of justice. The first principle states that “each person has an equal right to a fully adequate scheme of equal basic liberties which is compatible with a similar scheme of liberties for all.” The second principle, states that “social and economic inequalities are to be arranged so that they are both (a) to the greatest expected benefit of the least advantaged and (b) attached to positions and offices open to all under conditions of fair equality of opportunity”. Simply put, this principle suggests that justice could still prevail when there is inequality, but only when it comes to economic and social rights, given that these rights are provided or open to all, and that opportunities are maximized for the “least advantaged”.

At its core, social justice is about assuring the protection of equal access to liberties, rights, and opportunities, as well as taking care of the least advantaged members of society. It questions the equity of the complex socio-political and economic institutional arrangements of societies. In the literature, there are many facets of these inequities: social, political, economic, and environmental. Social inequity means differences of social status (e.g., men or women or cultural differences). Political inequity means structural differences as a result political decisions and power dynamics. Economic inequity means variation of economic standing as measured by income. Lastly, environmental inequity means the expression of an environmental burden that would be borne primarily by disadvantaged and/or minority populations. These different facets of inequities perpetuate and build structural inequities, which then reflects inequities in work and labor conditions, living conditions, and the education and learning conditions. Hence, in the context of shocks such as COVID-19, the impact and recovery will be highly unequal as well (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1. Different types of inequities**

While social injustice broadly affects the entire facts of society, we have identified three broad sectors, in which it largely manifest: human capital, public health infrastructure, and environment.

a. Human capital

While the country has enjoyed economic growth pre-pandemic and is projected to grow at pre-pandemic level in 2022<sup>3</sup>, the challenge of inclusive growth remains due to serious issues in the country’s human capital development. On the aggregate, these are reflected on the dismal performance of the country in the 2018 PISA results and the 2020 Human Capital Index. However, variations at the micro level can be observed along geographical and income divides with children coming from affluent background more likely to have better endowments in terms of resources and networks, and thus, have better chances of attaining better human capital outcomes.

Equality of opportunity or social mobility is the idea that people should succeed based on hard work regardless of background and social origins (Mitnik and Grusky 2015). This is at the core of social justice. Thus, stemming inequality at birth, like the first 1000 days-early childhood care development, is an intervention that has gained traction in developed and developing economies

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2022-01-27/philippines-gdp-growth-beats-forecast-as-recovery-takes-root>

alike. While early life interventions are crucial, those administered at the later stage, such as the provision of scholarships, school-to-work programs and apprenticeships, learning through mentoring, and lifelong learning are also critical.

Indeed, policies and interventions are needed beyond the early age given several interrelated stylized facts related to the country's labor market structures. First, six in every 10 workers in the country are mostly employed in occupations that require general skills, indicating the quality of jobs in the economy. Second, most hard-to-fill jobs require specific and analytical skills, indicating severe shortcomings in the skills and competencies of the country's workforce. Third, ICT developments have created high value adding jobs such as software development/technology, computing, and data science. However, the same developments also facilitate new forms of work arrangements that increase the informality and precarity of work. These include work on labor platforms, such as Grab and Upwork, where workers are considered contractors and thus, have no entitlements and social security benefits. Fourth and related to the third, the development of these types of work have outpaced the development of policies and programs for social protection. The current social protection systems in the country have yet to fully integrate the nature and scope of platform work. High informality has ramifications on tax-financed infrastructures and services as well.

With respect to the education sector, the observed disparities along geographical and income divides have widened and deepened due to the pandemic. The spread of COVID-19 triggered closures of schools in 2020 and forced the transition to remote learning. This arrangement favored those with ready access to gadgets, ICT, and good learning spaces.<sup>4</sup> The pandemic has also resulted in unemployment, the rate of which doubled to 10.26 percent and underemployment rose by two percent. While the employment rate almost went back to pre-pandemic levels at 93.4 percent, and the unemployment rate eased off to 6.6 percent (Mapa 2022), external events can result in shocks to the prices of basic commodities. These can compromise the quality of

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<sup>4</sup> Only 55 percent of students and 26 percent of public schools have access to the internet (Laforga 2021). Around 29 percent of primary level students were not reached (UNICEF 2021).

educational inputs of children whose parents have no stable jobs and steady income flows. Developmental inequality is reinforced with the added barriers to quality education, causing lasting effects on employment prospects, productivity, and social mobility.<sup>5</sup>

It should be emphasized that the ongoing pandemic has also exposed the vulnerabilities of the middle class to health shocks. While the middle class are likely covered by the social protection system, the cost of hospitalization due to the COVID-19 can be substantial and those who are previously well-off can fall into sudden poverty.

#### b. Public Health Services and Infrastructure

In the Philippines, health outcomes have improved in recent decades. However, large disparity persists. While the health outcomes of the richest 20% of Filipinos are similar to most upper-middle and high-income countries, the poorest 20% are comparable to the poorest region in the world. The Philippines is one of the countries with the largest absolute gap between the poorest and richest group for some key health indicators. The large disparity in health outcomes reflects the longstanding challenges of the government to provide equitable access to healthcare service and the vast difference in social determinants that exacerbates health inequities. Social determinants of health are the conditions in the places where people live, learn, work, and play that affect a wide range of health risks and outcomes.

The COVID-19 pandemic has further reinforced the deep-seated health disparity in the country as COVID-19 has unequally affected most of the poor and vulnerable segments of the population. While health services were limited in general during the height of the pandemic, affluent Filipinos

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<sup>5</sup> The connection to inequality and social justice manifest in terms of socioeconomic backgrounds – those coming from households with higher per capita expenditures are more likely to stay in school, decreasing the odds to 0.50 percent in primary school level absences and 0.87 percent in secondary school for every one percent change in per capita expenditure. Urban-rural differentials are also significant in secondary school-age children (Albert, Dumagan and Martinez 2015).

were more likely to access healthcare services, including life-saving diagnostics and drugs. Also, the poor segment of the population was more risk of infection because they are less likely to adhere of health to protocols because of the physical and environmental challenges they are in.

The large disparities in health outcomes remind us that socioeconomic position has been one of the foundational determinants of health and that the country fail to improve health outcomes of all Filipinos without addressing the underlying maldistribution of wealth, opportunities, and privilege within a society. A social justice approach to population health challenges the country to deal with these underlying concerns, to recognize socioeconomic inequality have negative consequences for health, and that we will never improve the health of Filipinos without tackling these foundational causes, and that we will never improve the health of Filipinos without tackling these foundational causes.

### c. Environment

Environmental justice is an integral part of social justice. In the same light, climate change and disaster risk vulnerabilities are integral environmental justice issues<sup>6</sup>. Socioeconomic vulnerabilities are further compounded by the erosion of related ecological integrity apprehensions in critical and environmentally sensitive areas. Concerns transcend natural constructs, covering built environments and the welfare of the most susceptible groups which include cultural minorities<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> The country lies along the typhoon belt where one-third of the most intense tropical cyclones form, around twenty of which enter the Philippine area of responsibility (PAR) per year. Congruent to this are the perennial problems of deforestation and forest degradation. Attendant risks place the country second in the 2018 Global Climate Risk Index, incurring yearly aggregate absolute losses of USD 4,547.27 million and 0.48 percent GDP loss.

<sup>7</sup> The scale of impacts and responses is largely a function of power relations, dependent on the geolocation, gender composition, general practices, and responsibilities in an area (Ryder 2017). The better the socioeconomic status of a particular place, the more likely the community has lower inequality levels and increased social resilience hence why the distribution of resources play a part in eventual casualties and damages following disaster events. Metropolitan areas, while densely populated, are less socially vulnerable than lower income municipalities (Chakraborty et al. 2020).



Embedded in the bedrock fundamentals of the Philippines' development blueprints are safe and sustainable communities with reduced vulnerabilities. But marginalized groups still feel the heaviest brunt with farmers, fisherfolks, and individuals residing in rural communities still posting the highest poverty incidences among the basic sectors (PSA 2020). Indigenous peoples further suffer the consequences of negative environment-related externalities given their compromised access to support provisions, resources and facilities. These make appropriate representations in decision-making structures within relevant sectors necessary, aside from rendering the more traditional mitigation and adaptation-related initiatives<sup>8</sup>.

The presence of landmark legislations like the Climate Change Act and the Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction Management Act, the legislative codes for large-scale and small-scale mining, and the Indigenous Peoples Rights Act, among others, have established institutional oversight structures and encompassing provisions for public welfare, particularly those in vulnerable communities. Aligned international commitments including the Sendai and Paris agreements have also strengthened bureaucratic resolve to work with global partners on sustainability goals. But policy and policy implementation are still left wanting as evidenced by welfare disparities on the ground.

The same welfare disparities have been magnified by COVID 19 pandemic complications. Albeit the marginalized suffer the most, vulnerabilities have been felt by even the mighty upper and middle classes. The meaningful involvement and contribution of the whole of Philippine society, regardless of socio-economic divide, make in-course or post-pandemic recovery and resilience building more encompassing and broad-based. Such make discussions on environmental justice truly relevant to and reflective of the bigger issue on social justice.

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<sup>8</sup> Inequalities and inequities in political institutions also lead to inequalities and inequities in society. To put it more clearly, "The way power is organized and distributed among society's various institutions and the manner in which political processes are carried out have a profound influence on how citizens see and find their place on the social ladder and within in the social fabric." (UN-DESA 2006, p. 19)

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