

INTERNATIONAL SITUATION 2019-2020

NEW CRISES, STRONGER RESISTANCE



IBON INSTITUTE
FOR INTERNATIONAL
DEVELOPMENT

International Situation 2019-2020

New Crises, Stronger Resistance

IBON Institute for International Development
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**International Situation 2019-2020:
New Crises, Stronger Resistance**

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Executive Summary

Economy: From the multiple crises of 2020 to where?

- The world economy has never fully “recovered” from the 2008 financial crisis. The 2020 recession came out of an already troubled pre-pandemic world economy—a running decline in manufacturing and investment follows years of protracted economic slowdown—with worsening global trends in a world economic system structured for corporate giants and ultra-wealthy capital-owners.
- These are amid drains of Southern economies, which lost USD 430 billion in 2018. The backsliding of people’s economic rights is worsening amid the multiple crises in health, economies, and climate. These are seen in worsening poverty, wealth inequality, hunger, unemployment, among others, and the concentration of capital into a handful of giant corporations and finance oligarchy.
- The neoliberal policies since the late 1970s were a response to that period’s crises, and continue to shape unequal relations in trade and investment, the quicksand of debt, and the climate emergency burdening the global South. The failures of neoliberalism, increasingly being criticised even by certain international institutions, were further exposed by the pandemic. But the drive for corporate interests continues to move in capturing the development agenda.

Politics and Militarism: What would current tensions and right-wing regimes mean for people’s sovereignty?

- Increasing geopolitical competition and alliances among world powers—such as the United States, China, and Russia—drive the rise in military spending, as the US scrambles to maintain its stature as the global superpower in a multipolar world. US corporations still lead arms production.
- While the US has shifted its defence priority to the “great power competition” on its so-called “anti-terror” campaigns and roles in foreign intervention continue across the global South, with flashpoints in West Asia and North Africa, the rest of Africa, South and Central Asia and Southeast Asia.

- The US traditional alliances with EU countries are facing instabilities and could further weaken US hegemony. On the other hand, increasing China-Russia alliances are evident especially in political and military ties.
- Competition and compromise among the global powers continue to have significant implications for the efforts of Southern nations and peoples. The trend in right-wing politics prevails with financial and military support from global powers, resulting in increasing and intensifying rights violations. The pandemic was seized by many governments as pretext for more repression.

Resistance: What are the possibilities for stronger people's movements?

- The year 2019 and the early months of 2020 saw an upsurge in people's assertions around the world, which continued in different ways even with the pandemic. In North America and Europe, this was marked by significant workers' strikes and mass protests against militarism and corporate plunder.
- Workers, farmers and Indigenous Peoples also launched mass actions in Brazil, Russia, India, and China. These are in context of right-wing regimes and pro-corporate policies, anti-workers' issues, and repression.
- In the countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa, and Asia, grassroots movements continue to resist anti-people impacts of the economic crisis and various forms of militarist attacks. Prolonged and sustained protests challenged and threatened governments in power – from Chile to Lebanon. National liberation movements advance in Palestine, India, Turkey, Colombia, the Philippines, as well as in West Papua and with Kurdish movements.
- During the pandemic and recession, people's actions were repressed but continued in various forms—from workers' and healthworkers' actions, to country-wide actions against racist state oppression, and against the political class in some countries.
- The growth of people's movements is evident. Long-term victories in claiming people's rights and sovereignty, and of systemic shifts – from the dominance of ultra-wealthy capital-owners and domestic elites, to development and economic paths led by the people necessitates collective actions.

List of acronyms

BRI – Belt and Road Initiative

BRICS – Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa

FDI – Foreign direct investment

COVID-19 – Coronavirus disease 2019

EU – European Union

GVCs – Global value chains

IFIs – International finance institutions

IMF – International Monetary Fund

IPCC – Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

TNCs – Transnational corporations

M&As – Mergers and acquisitions

NATO – North Atlantic Treaty Organisation

OECD -- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

OPEC – Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries

RCEP – Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership

SCO – Shanghai Cooperation Organisation

SEZs – Special Economic Zones

UNCTAD – United Nations Conference on Trade and Development

UN DESA – United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs

OHCHR - Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

US – United States of America

WANA – West Asia and North Africa

WTO – World Trade Organization

ECONOMY

From the multiple crises of 2020 to where?

The 2020 economic recession came out of an already troubled pre-pandemic world economy. This pre-pandemic economy has been marked by dominance of corporate giants and banks, ultra-wealthy capital-owners, Southern resource drain, unequal relations in trade and investment, growing debt, a climate emergency, and a resulting dire state of people's economic and social rights. Computing with latest available data, the global South lost USD 430 billion to Northern states and corporations in 2018. Such drains are expected to rise given the accelerated crisis conditions from the responses and capital flight amid the Coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic. Inequalities are expected to even worsen amid the multiple crises: in health, economies, and climate.

Today, even international financial institutions (IFIs) such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) have dismal assessments of the world economic situation. By late March 2020, the world economy is considered to be in a recession, a general decline compared to previous economic activity. For the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the current recession adds to "the persisting financial vulnerabilities from the tensions between slower growth, high corporate debt and deteriorating credit quality, including in China."¹ The IMF claims that it is a situation last seen during the Great Depression,

and later described it as a recession "we have not seen in our lifetimes."²

A recession year—or years?

By 2019, increased tariffs between the United States (US) and China in their "trade war" shook up the trade relations of the two biggest economies, and created uncertainties for big business and finance. The spread of the COVID-19, declared a pandemic since March 2020, also slowed business operations in many countries, as workplaces closed and many governments implemented lockdowns. Big businesses are concerned about the pandemic's effects on the global production chains, especially with risks of lower profits.

By March 2020, financial markets "in Asia, Europe and the Americas collapsed"³ and saw a sharp decline last seen during the start of the global financial crisis that sparked in 2008. By late-March, IMF officials have declared that the world economy is already in a recession.⁴ By May 2020, there is an emerging consensus that this period of steeper decline is anything but brief, and does not have a swift recovery, and a supposed "partial recovery in 2021," might still be too optimistic.⁵

The earlier US-China "trade war" already drove US businesses to move manufacturing

away from China, towards not only US soil but other Asian countries and Mexico.⁶ The stoppages and slowdowns in world production chains also affected China's supply of parts for manufacturing and production of automobiles, electronics, and other manufactures elsewhere.⁷ While production in China recouped in March 2020, manufacturing declined in many developing countries.⁸ Countries' output, for many developed and developing ones, could further decline by 15 to 31% due to shutdowns, workplace closures, and lower world demand for goods such as oil and minerals.⁹

By mid-April 2020, the Organisation of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) as well as Russia and the US, dubbed the OPEC+, agreed to cut global oil output by 10%¹⁰ — amid decreased demand due to the COVID-19 pandemic and in an attempt to alleviate oil overproduction. This follows already decreasing oil prices after Saudi Arabia unilaterally slashed its oil production in March 2020. Aside from oil, world commodity prices are generally 37% lower by March 2020.

Many countries in the global South experienced a sudden exit of foreign capital in early 2020, due to the economic slump, the oil price decline, and the lockdowns. This amounts to around USD 59 billion of outflows from late-February to late-March, and USD 90 billion since late-January, more than double to triple compared to the immediate effects of the 2008 crisis.^{11 12} The Institute of International Finance claims that 2020 foreign capital flows to such “emerging markets” will be generally weaker than during the 2008 crisis.¹³

The situation has led the world's biggest 20 economies to implement a USD 5 trillion stimulus, or government spending on programs to boost businesses and consumers' spending and in the end prop-up the economy for more capital accumulation. In high-income

economies such as in the US, USD 500 billion from a USD 2.2 trillion bailout¹⁴ were for large corporations, aside from an additional USD 50 billion and USD 17 billion, respectively, for big airline firms and those corporations “essential for [US] national security.”¹⁵ There are also trillions for US financial markets. There are also calls for general stimulus packages for developing countries, such as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) late-March call for the international system to allot USD 2.5 trillion, including a call for using USD 1 trillion to cancel debts of Southern countries.

Optimism about the economic downturn, that this will be brief and will see a “recovery” in late 2020 or even next year, is contrary to how the world economy has been in a longer-term, protracted decline. Even the UNCTAD counters this optimism, admitting that there are different conditions from the 2008 crisis, while the global South remain constrained by multiple structural barriers: huge and “more and more fragile” debt burdens; economic dependence on exporting primary commodities¹ that has left them “more exposed than ever to new shocks” and with low reserves of foreign currency (and so less ability to pay foreign debts and import goods); and more exposure to volatile financial markets.¹⁶

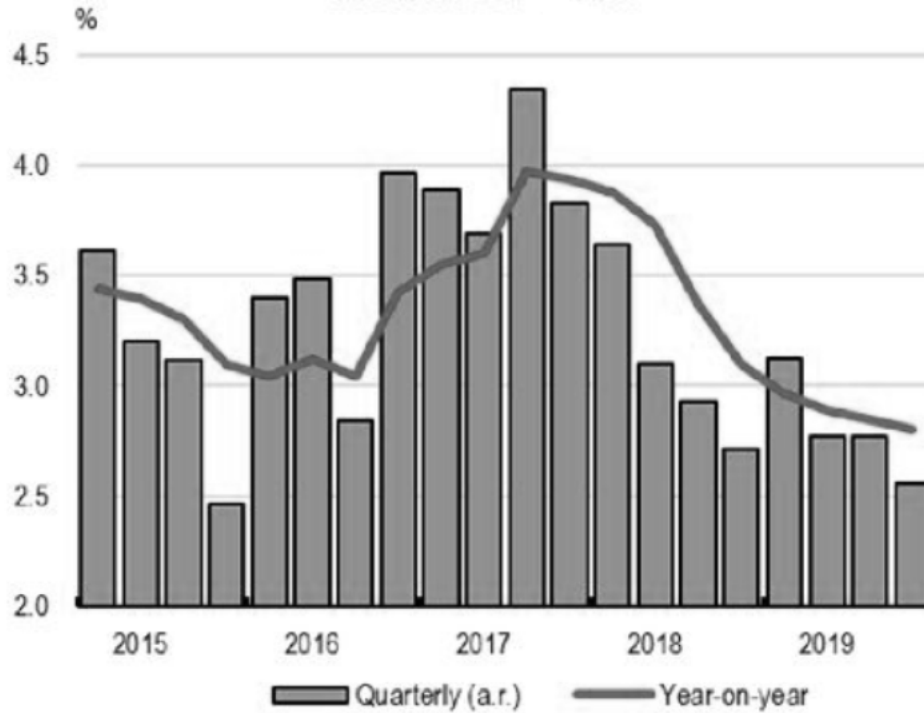
The pandemic and states' response to it are among the crucial factors that worsened the *underlying weaknesses* in the world economy, and worsened systemic inequalities. But these contemporary events have struck, and could accelerate the sharper downturn of, a world economy suffering from longer-term troubles.

Did the economic recession come out of nowhere?

It can be shown that plodding growth characterised previous years and was inching

1 Primary commodities include agricultural products, but also minerals, and energy products such as oil. UNCTAD, for instance, classifies as “commodity-dependent” when more than 60% of a country's exports are made up of these kinds of goods.

Figure 1. Global GDP growth has lost momentum, 2015-2019



Source: OECD. 2020. "Interim Economic Assessment: Coronavirus: The world economy at risk." https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/economics/oecd-economic-outlook/volume-2019/issue-2_7969896b-en

towards a bigger problem, which was *accelerated* in 2020. This belies portrayals that the recession is just due to the pandemic and that without the pandemic the world economy could have continued on under an untroubled status quo.

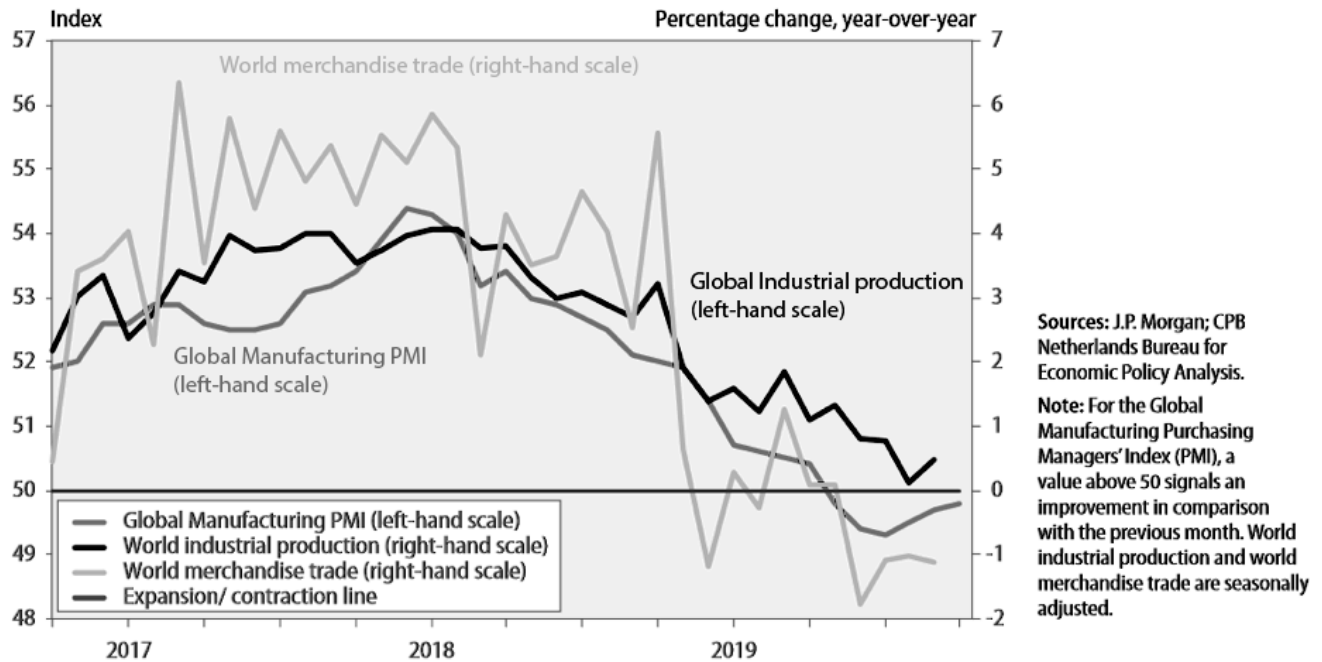
The years post-2008, in fact, after the so-called crisis of neoliberalism, have also since seen a protracted slow growth.¹⁷ Supposed economic "recovery" after 2008 has been fraught with obstacles, where it has, in the words of the OECD, "lost momentum" even under conventional measurements since 2017¹⁸ (*Figure 1*). Late 2019 economic forecasts of the IMF showed fear about an unstable situation for industrialised and global South economies alike, its "lowest level since [the financial crises of] 2008–09."¹⁹ Slowdowns in the growth (via capital accumulation) have been an underlying trend in the longer term, to which neoliberalism served to partly assuage since the late 1970s by shaping state functions

to open up more markets for capital via privatisation, liberalisation, de-regulation and de-nationalisation (also see previous editions of this report).

The global growth problem in the previous years was accompanied by a deeper crisis: a "geographically broad-based, notable slowdown" in industrial production and manufacturing, as well as a "near standstill" in world trade growth.²⁰ These are prominent since 2018 (*Figure 2*). For the IMF, one factor is the mutual tariff increases between the world powers United States (US) and China, which for instance resulted to manufacturing companies' buying fewer machinery, in turn affecting international production and trade.²¹

Even the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) described the global trend in foreign direct investment (FDI) after 2008 as "anaemic" and "weak."²² The amount of FDI, which includes flows of capital for new

Figure 2. Global GDP growth has lost momentum, 2015-2019



Source: UNDESA. 2020. "World Economic Situation and Prospects 2020."
<https://www.un.org/development/desa/publications/wesp-2020.html>

production and buying up existing companies, in 2019 was largely unchanged (at USD 1.39 trillion) compared to the previous year. By 2019, the overall economic climate has caught up with declines in both kinds of FDI, with new investment in production declining 22% and a 40% decline in mergers and acquisitions (or "M&As," that is, when a corporation merges or acquires another corporation outside its borders).

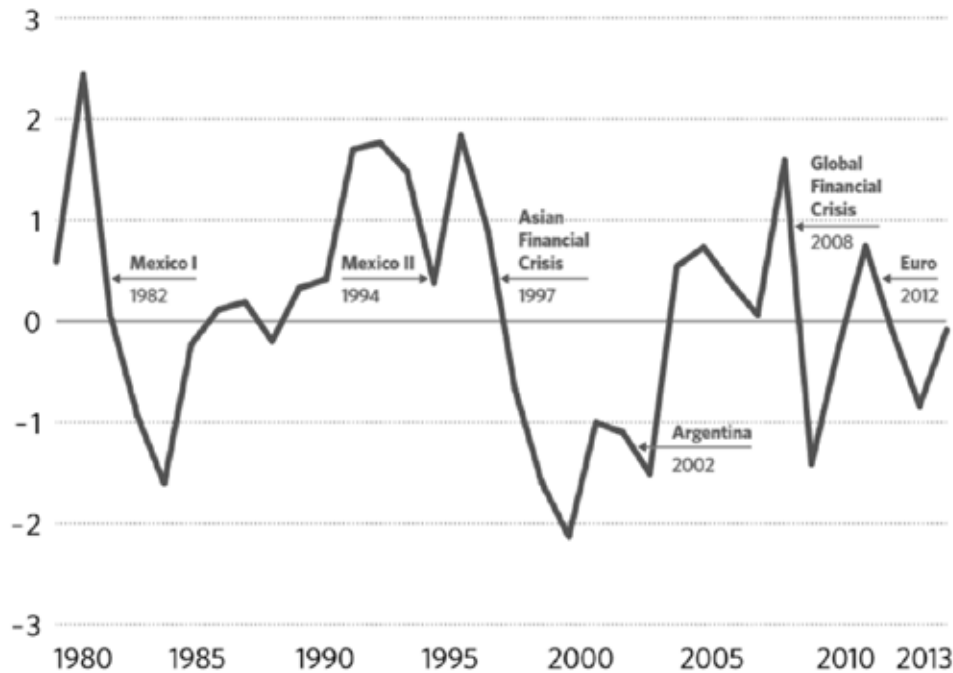
The UNCTAD claims that the post-2008 average annual growth of investment is at a mere one percent. They also attribute investment decline to a longer-term profitability problem: declining rates of return, that is, less new income generated by new investment. World FDI rates of return were steadily at 6.8% for the years 2016-2018, compared to say, 8% in 2010. In developing countries, this was at 7.8% for 2018 compared to 11% in 2010.²³

A trend after the 1980s, still during the neoliberal decades, is the lack of growth

and even contractions in fixed capital (e.g., machines, factories). This is despite supposedly encouraging conditions for big business in the rise in credit, corporate tax cuts, and rising profits. The UNCTAD admits that this means that economic expansion in this period was driven by speculative finance activities (i.e., not investment in fixed capital for production), which "produced financial crises and recessions."²⁴

With the spread of the latest bout of economic woes even to the global South, a bigger issue is revealed in how the world economy is structured. Southern countries are made especially vulnerable to shocks and shifts, to the detriment of people's economic rights. Priorities of further business expansion after economic crisis during the 1970s saw Southern economies "integrated" along production chains dominated by big corporations, along trade and investment relations with industrialised countries, and exposure to the world market's volatile financial markets and commodity prices.

Figure 3. Crises and capital flows to emerging economies, 1980-2013 (as percent of GDP)^t



Source: Gallagher, Kevin P. and Richard Kozul-Wright. 2019. "A New Multilateralism for Shared Prosperity." https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/gp_ggnd_2019_en.pdf

The dominance of finance capital, in the words of the UNCTAD, aimed "more at extracting rents through a whole new range of pyramid schemes."²⁵

This made many countries in the global South subject to foreign investor-driven economic models and development paradigms, and reliant on external financing and primary commodity exports. Financial crises in the South occur via capital exiting "during difficult times" after entering when "times are good," creating conditions for "highly uneven patterns of development"²⁶ (Figure 3). It created international economic relations where foreign capital flight or exit would threaten Southern economies, since many are not oriented for strategic industrialisation, rural development, and people's needs, while state economic policy has been fashioned to encourage even more transnational corporations (TNCs) in the South.

Southern economic drain, the state of people's economic rights

Deep inequalities were already characteristic of the world economy, which continued to be the case after the 2008 downturn until today. These show the structural effects of an economy captured by TNCs to people's rights and development in the global South. The current economic order has facilitated resource drains on Southern economies, facilitated by IFI and corporate-driven neoliberal norms that have been internalised by elite-led governments in the South.

Computing with latest available data, the global South lost an estimated USD 430 billion in 2018—as the amounts flowing out of Southern countries in debt servicing, payments on FDI, illicit financial flows (e.g., trade misinvoicing), are greater than the external finance they receive in FDI, portfolio investment, loan

430 billion USD

ESTIMATED AMOUNT LOST BY THE GLOBAL SOUTH

as the amounts flowing out of Southern countries in debt servicing, payments on FDI, illicit financial flows (e.g., trade misinvoicing), are greater than the external finance they receive in FDI, portfolio investment, loan disbursements, aid or official development assistance (ODA), and remittances.

disbursements, aid or official development assistance (ODA), and remittances. These drains are expected to even rise with the economic shock and capital flight from the COVID-19 pandemic.

These drains and Southern resource transfers have been a feature of the world economy for decades. From 1980 to 2012, Southern countries lost USD 16.3 trillion from various forms of capital flight and other outflows.²⁷ A 2011 report of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs describes that, even after the 2008 crisis, this “trend of increasing resource transfers from developing countries is set to continue.”²⁸

Development aid, or ODA, to the South, a historical commitment and responsibility of Northern donor states under the Development Assistance Committee of the OECD, was at around USD 152.8 billion in 2019. This preliminary estimate shows a marginal increase from USD 150 billion in 2018, but 6.7% of this figure are flows to refugees in the donor countries (which, CSOs claim, artificially bloat aid figures). There was also a 5.7% increase in loans counted as ODA, and only a handful of donor states are fulfilling supposed commitments to allocate ODA worth 0.7% of their Gross National Income. Already anaemic aid flows also face issues of whether they are used according to their mandate of addressing poverty, as they are increasingly being used to “mobilise” private, commercial finance—

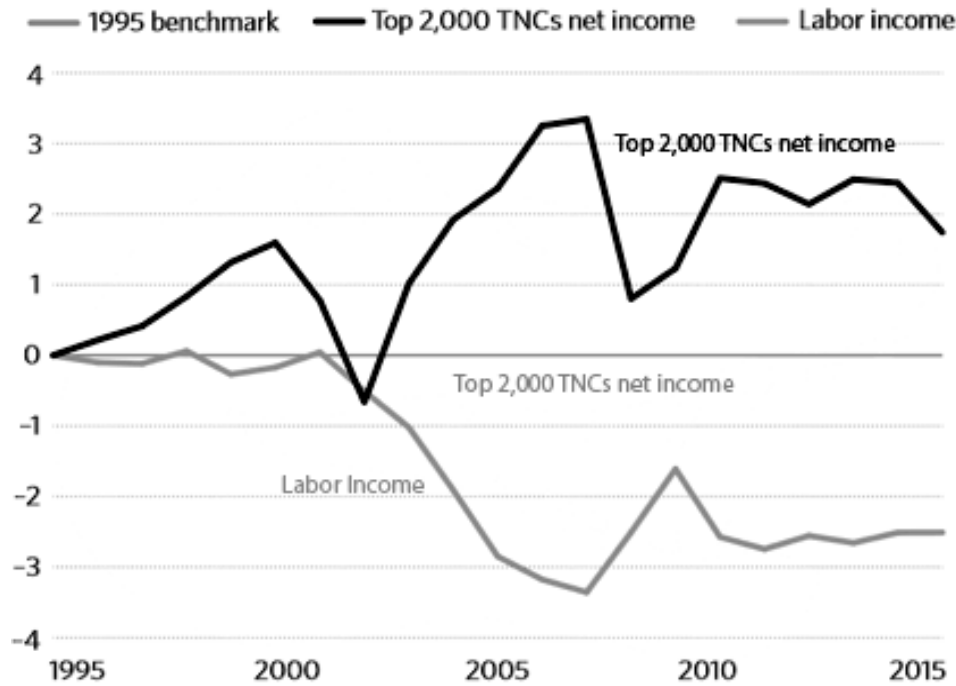
such as institutional investors—to developing countries.²⁹ This is an agenda promoted by major donor states as well as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and other multilateral institutions.³⁰

An aspect of Southern economic drains is the debt problem, which is an outcome of Southern countries’ unequal relationships with leading economies. Amounts funnelled by Southern *governments alone* for debt servicing were at USD 369 billion in 2018, compared to USD 208 billion in 2008, and far from USD 18 billion in 1977, the year which started the 1970s Southern debt crisis.³¹ Debt servicing is eating up state coffers, from an average of 6.5% of government revenues in 2012 to 10.3% in 2018, and even to the extent of more than 25% in many countries (cases such as Djibouti show more than 60% of 2018 state revenues used for servicing debts).³²

Such burdens are usually carried by peoples who face new taxes, and lower public spending in austerity budgets. The total debt servicing of Southern countries, including private actors, amounts to more than USD 1 trillion for 2018. Accordingly, the international currency reserves of developing countries have been shrinking.³³

In a limited comparison, for every USD 1 of aid received in 2018, around USD 2.50 exited Southern countries in order to pay government debts.

Figure 4. Top 2,000 transnational corporations' profit and the global labour income share, 1995-2015 (as percentage point change in GDP)



Source: Gallagher, Kevin P. and Richard Kozul-Wright. 2019. "A New Multilateralism for Shared Prosperity." https://unctad.org/en/PublicationsLibrary/gp_ggnd_2019_en.pdf

Economic drains, in a world economy driven by monopolistic corporations, come with the concentration of wealth (one's total capital, properties, physical and financial assets) into a class of billionaires. By early 2019, the world's richest 26 billionaires own as much wealth as 50% of the world's poorest population, or 3.8 billion people, according to Oxfam.³⁴ The rich seem to be getting even richer: early 2020 data describe how the number of people who own more than USD 30 million in assets, that is, multi-millionaires and billionaires, increased by 6.4% due to stock market activity in 2019.³⁵ Almost half of these "ultra-wealthy" (around 240,000 of more than 510,000 individuals) live in the US, followed by China (62,000 individuals worth over USD 30 million). The pandemic has increased the wealth of many billionaires (**Box 1**).

Incomes (how much one earns) are also skewed for the elite. The chief executive officers of the biggest 350 corporations in the US earn, on average, 224 times higher than their employees.³⁶ In a study of 100 countries, 59 countries saw increased incomes for the richest 1% of their population.³⁷

The amassed wealth and high incomes of the elite is in contrast to the billions in poverty especially in the global South, and contrary to ambitions to "leave no one behind." Around half of the world's population, or an estimated 3.4 billion people, still subsist daily on less than USD 5.50, according to World Bank measures. A September 2019 World Bank update even shows that the number of "extremely poor", or those living within USD 1.90 per day, is 3.4 million higher, at 734.5 million, compared to a previous March 2019 count. Those considered extremely poor reside in the regions of the

Box 1. Inequalities worsen pandemic effects, pandemic worsens inequalities

Today's shocks, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, have brought into light how neoliberal prescriptions—from labour flexibilisation and backsliding of the right to social services—have created uncertain situations for peoples around the world. At its peak, by late March 2020, around a quarter of the world population were under some form of a lockdown.

Working people carry the burden of the pandemic. Among the most vulnerable to the disease are people on low incomes. Amid workplace closures to prevent contagion, there are estimates that, at its worst, 25 million more might be unemployed, and workers in both global North and South could lose USD 3.4 trillion in incomes. The incomes of the world's 1.6 billion workers in the "informal economy" are estimated to have declined by 60% in the first crisis months.³⁸ There are estimates that around 420 to 580 million people will be forced into poverty.³⁹

Women comprise 70% of the world's healthworkers, and face bigger risks. Many women, who still shoulder much of housework and care, face increased intensity in such tasks amid quarantines.⁴⁰ These take place amid policy norms that have not guaranteed rights of workers, especially working women. Lockdown measures also threaten to worsen issues of workers' incomes—for instance, in countries where many people work "informal jobs," such as in India.⁴¹

The obstacles to people's economic and political rights are at the same time the conditions that could worsen the pandemic. A basic measure to prevent the spread of disease is handwashing, but around 40% of the world population do not have access to water and soap at home.⁴² Affordable, decent and mass housing would also be necessary for effective quarantine measures, but around 1.8 billion

people live in "abhorrent housing conditions and homelessness" today.⁴³ For those afflicted by disease, accessible health services are essential, but after decades of privatisation, estimates show that around 210 million people spend more than 25% of their annual incomes on health care.⁴⁴

War and militarism also threaten to worsen the effects of the pandemic on the people. The 100 million people in war and conflict-affected zones face "devastating" consequences, according to the UN, amid cramped living conditions and without sanitation and health services, such as in Yemen, Syria, and Palestine.

These are in stark comparison to the so-called losses of multi-billionaires, many of whom even profited from the crisis. From March to May 2020, Forbes claims that the 25 wealthiest people in the world are even wealthier by USD 255 billion. While a quarter of the US labour force was unemployed, the net worth of US billionaires grew 15% between March 18 and May 19, from USD 2.9 trillion to USD 3.4 trillion. While Jeff Bezos of Amazon was racking up wealth, workers held strikes across different branches against poor working conditions and the fact that they were sent to work amid the pandemic and various work closures.

Technology giants are among those who gained in the early phases of the 2020 crisis and the pandemic. US technology moguls, from Jeff Bezos (Amazon) to Mark Zuckerberg (Facebook) and others, gained a combined USD 132 billion in just two months. A combined USD 78 billion was added to the wealth of the world's 25 wealthiest non-US capitalists, such as Jack Ma (China, e-commerce) and others in the technology, luxury goods, oil, telecommunications industries.

global South: 85% live in South Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa, around 6% in East Asia and the Pacific, 3.5% in Latin America and the Caribbean, and 2.5% in West Asia and North Africa.

These are compounded by how the growth of wages in 2017 was in its lowest rate since 2008, at 1.8%, far below pre-crisis levels.

While workers are the producers in economies, they are getting “smaller pieces of the pie” or the value they produced: the portions of the global income that go to the workers have been decreasing in the last decades, accompanied by rising portions of the income going to big corporations. This means workers are getting less in wages, benefits, and other compensation, while corporations are getting more as profits. This is a trend in both developed and developing countries (Figure 4).

Workers’ rights face other obstacles. Global employment was projected to grow by less than one percent in 2019, slowing further in 2020. Unemployment is also projected to increase due to the pandemic-related work closures (Box 1). Of those employed in 2018, 265 million workers were living below USD 1.90 per day. Eighty-five percent of countries have violated the workers’ right to strike, and the 10 worst countries for workers are almost all in the global South.

The pre-pandemic narrative of “decreasing poverty” around the world was criticised even by a UN Special Rapporteur, for the “misleading reliance on World Bank’s international [extreme] poverty line [of USD 1.90],” used in the UN

Sustainable Development Goals and elsewhere, which “is not based on any direct assessment of the cost of essential needs.” Outside this low standard, the number of people subsisting on USD 5.50 a day only declined from 3.5 billion to 3.4 billion people between 1990 and 2015.⁴⁵ In measuring poverty according to other aspects of their access to health, education, basic services and utilities, around 23% of the

world population, or 1.3 billion people, are “multi-dimensionally” poor.⁴⁶

The global situation of hunger and severe hunger also challenge the narrative of “decreasing poverty,” as a more realistic concept of poverty must take into account the accessibility of needs as basic as food. More than 690 million people are undernourished in

2019, increasing by 60 million from the last five years. More than 250 million are hungry in Africa, 381 million in Asia, and 48 million in LAC.⁴⁷ Around 2 billion people in the world have either experienced running out of food for at least a day or have faced problems obtaining food in 2019, with such food insecurity higher for women than men.⁴⁸ Another 135 million people are experiencing food crises.⁴⁹

The paradigm that creates dependence on food imports plays a big role, as 75% “of the countries with food crises that also suffered from economic shocks are net food importers (25 out of 33) with the value of food imports outweighing the country’s value of food exports.”⁵⁰

Farmers, peasants, and small food producers also face dispossession, as an obstacle to their land rights. Between 45 to 200 million hectares



Land and environmental defenders are under attack, usually related to big businesses in agriculture and mining. *Photo from India Country Today*

Box 2. Quick facts: Economic drains and the state of people's economic rights

- From 1980 to 2012, Southern countries lost USD 16.3 trillion from various forms of capital flight and other outflows. **The global South lost an estimated USD 430 billion in 2018**
- Forty percent of global foreign direct investment (FDI) today is done through shell corporations to evade higher taxes
- Amounts funnelled by Southern governments for debt servicing were at USD 369 billion in 2018, compared to USD 208 billion in 2008. ODA was at USD 149 billion in 2018, increasing to USD 152.8 billion for 2019, but remaining well below historical commitments and responsibility of 0.7% of donor countries' GNI.
- By early 2019, the world's richest 26 billionaires own as much wealth as 50% of the world's poorest population.
- Around half of the world's population, or an estimated 3.4 billion people, still subsist daily on less than USD 5.50. Around 23% percent of the world population, or 1.3 billion people, are "multi-dimensionally" poor—deprived of health, education, basic services and utilities.
- Of those employed in 2018, some 265 million workers were living below USD 1.90 per day.
- Wage growth in 2017 was in its lowest rate since 2008.
- Eighty-five percent of countries have violated the workers' right to strike, and the 10 worst countries for workers are almost all in the global South.
- Seventy-five percent of the countries with food crises that also suffered from economic shocks are net food importers (25 countries in a study of 33 countries)
- More than 250 million are hungry in Africa, 381 million in Asia, and 48 million in LAC. Around 2 billion people in the world have either experienced running out of food for at least a day or have faced problems obtaining food in 2019, with such food insecurity higher for women than men. Another 135 million people are experiencing food crises.
- Around 45 to 200 million hectares of land have been grabbed away from small farmers' control in the last decade, largely in low-income countries.
- With the pandemic and recession, the incomes of the world's 1.6 billion workers in the "informal economy" are estimated to have declined by 60% in the first crisis months. Around 71 million people will be driven into extreme poverty (i.e., subsisting below USD 1.90 a day). Eighty-three to 132 million people more might go hungry.

of land have been grabbed away from small farmers' control in the last decade, largely in low-income countries. Land and environmental defenders are under attack, usually related to big businesses in agriculture and mining. Brazil, Colombia and the Philippines rank high in several CSO lists of countries that saw the highest number of rights violations against land and environmental defenders in 2019.^{51 52}

The social and environmental effects of the worsening ecological crisis are hurting more the peoples in the global South. Rampant resource extraction has health impacts, worsens effects of climate change, and strains water and land-use.⁵³ Nine of the 10 (ten) countries most affected by extreme weather disasters, from typhoons to El Niño, in the last 20 years have been developing countries: Myanmar, Haiti, the Philippines, Pakistan, Vietnam, Bangladesh, Thailand, Nepal, and Dominica.⁵⁴

Corporate giants in the world economy, sources of super profits

A basic structure of the world economy today is of capital concentration and centralisation in ever-large corporations. The structure of a world economy led by corporate giants remains intact.

TNCs from the biggest economies remain the dominant actors: 121 of the 500 world's biggest TNCs are US-based, compared to 119 from China (many officially called state-owned enterprises). There are 127 TNCs with headquarters in the states comprising the European Union (still counting the United Kingdom), and 52 from Japan.⁵⁵

Investment remains an arena dominated by corporate giants. In 2018, 55% of world FDI was from TNCs of developed countries.⁵⁶

For instance, big mergers included French TNC Total buying Maersk Oil from Denmark for USD 7.4 billion, the USD 57 billion Bayer-Monsanto merger, and another USD 108 billion worth of M&A deals in the finance industry.⁵⁷ New production in 2018 was driven by big projects such as in extractives, including the controversial Coastal GasLink Pipeline, a project of the joint venture LNG Canada comprised of different oil giants Shell, Petronas, PetroChina, Mitsubishi, and Korea Gas, that aims to extract millions of tons of liquefied natural gas for 40 years.⁵⁸ The pipeline is also backed by big banks including but not limited to JPMorgan Chase, Citi, the Bank of Montreal, Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, the Sumitomo Mitsui Banking Corporation Group.⁵⁹

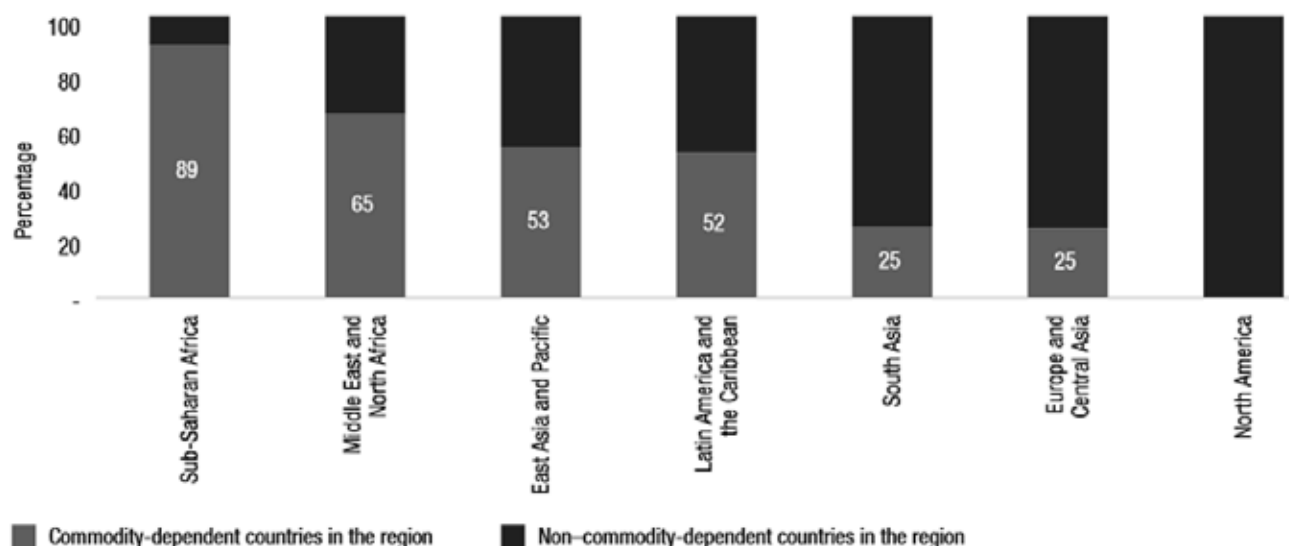
Today, there are various sources of surplus profits for corporations, including but not limited to:

- *Coursing capital through “Southern” entities.* Against claims that investment between Southern countries is “catching up” to traditionally Northern corporate

dominance, usually thought of one sign of “development,” the fact is that investment can be coursed through entities in Southern countries while the ultimate beneficiaries and source of capital remain in Northern TNCs. Tracing such “ultimate investors,” 71% of investment in the global South are still in practice originating from and captured by big business from the global North.⁶⁰

- *Offshore tax havens.* Another mechanism is the reliance on offshore tax havens, with a 2019 IMF paper showing that 40% of world investments—about USD 15 trillion—were done through “shell corporations” in tax havens so that big businesses evade paying higher tax rates.⁶¹
- *Dominance over technologies.* Developed countries' TNCs also dominate technological development. The biggest 100 corporations comprise more than one third of business-funded “research and development” (R&D), worth USD 350 billion.⁶² Of the 10 biggest spenders, 7 are big US technology companies such as Alphabet Inc. (the owner of Google), Apple Inc., and Intel Corporation. These are signs not so much of corporate “innovation” but of corporate control in the resources to develop technology (e.g., through patents) which become sources of surplus profits. Indeed, royalties and licensing fees, such as on intellectual property, have been consistently on the rise despite sluggish investment growth.
- *Investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) cases.* Corporate power also manifests in 71 new ISDS cases in 2018, compared to 65 new cases in 2017, bringing the known ISDS cases to 942. ISDS rules, usually built into provisions of trade and investment treaties among countries, allow corporations to sue governments when the former thinks that certain policies negatively affect profits (e.g., environmental regulation against mining). Many cases are “tried” under the World

Figure 5. Commodity-dependent countries in the world's regions, 2013-2017 (percentage)



Source: UNCTAD. 2019. "The State of Commodity Dependence 2019."

<https://unctad.org/en/pages/PublicationWebflyer.aspx?publicationid=2439>

Bank ISDS "court," the International Court for the Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID). Developed country investors are still the ones pushing ISDS cases (with US investors having 15 cases), usually against developing country governments. While the US has supposedly weakened ISDS provisions in its new agreement with Mexico and Canada, many agreements with ISDS rules remain operative.

- *Exploitation of labour capacities and lower wages.* All these have created a situation of rising corporate profits at the expense of workers (Figure 4), whose low wages, especially in the global South, remain a foundational source for excess profit sources. According to the UNCTAD, "since the 1980s, in all regions and in almost every country, the share of national income accruing to labour has decreased and the profit share has correspondingly increased."⁶³ This is due to "fundamental factors" including corporate concentration of markets, but also TNCs' outsourcing of

production, decreasing unionisation, and wage repression.⁶⁴

Trade and investment: Southern disadvantage

A related issue to the TNC dominance is the offshoring of production to lower cost Southern labour. More than 50% of global trade involves TNC-dominated international production networks and "global value chains" (GVCs), where previous production steps and tasks done in one country are divided into various countries, usually with tasks such as research and development centred in Northern states and more labour-intensive tasks centred in the lower-waged global South. However, GVC expansion has halted along with investment and trade growth.⁶⁵

Nevertheless, GVCs are still heralded by the World Bank as keys to development of the global South. TNC activity along such networks allowed the use of low-waged labour from the global South since the 1990s, who

work in “suppliers” and firms contracted and subcontracted for TNCs. Countries that participate the most in such production networks also have low labour costs, such as India or Indonesia, and thus higher profits for the controlling TNCs.⁶⁶

Special Economic Zones (SEZs) would be another mode of investment especially for TNC activity, where governments dedicate certain areas where TNCs could operate usually with state incentives such as tax breaks. By 2019, there are around 5,383 SEZs in 147 countries all over the world, 89% of which (4,772 SEZs) are found in developing countries.⁶⁷ The number of SEZs and SEZ laws rose along with the neoliberal decades. Of the 127 SEZ laws in effect today, 98 use incentives such as tax exemptions, 94 have provisions to lower or remove tariffs for businesses’ machinery or goods imports, and 33 refer to investor protection (e.g., guarantees against nationalisation).⁶⁸

“Integration” into GVCs and promoting SEZs promised Southern countries technology transfers, industrialisation, and transformed economies. But two-thirds of all developing countries are commodity dependent, *restricted and tied* to a few kinds of exports of agricultural, mineral and fuel goods in the period of 2013 to 2017.⁶⁹ Decades of neoliberal globalisation failed to move many countries out of exporting primary commodities. The UNCTAD claims that from 1998 to 2017, the export structure (in this case, the dominance of primary commodity exports) of 142 countries out of 189 did not change.⁷⁰ 2018 data show developing economies were tilted to extractive industries, with exports from extractives rising from 12.8% of gross exports in 1995 to 18.4% by 2011.⁷¹

Commodity prices – of primary materials such as agricultural, mineral and fuel goods – remained below the peaks reached pre-2008, and remain volatile. Low commodity prices affect the export earnings especially of

commodity-dependent and export-oriented countries in the global South, which given their integration in the world economy, would result to lower funding sources and foreign currency supply to pay foreign debt. For example, 61 commodity dependent Southern countries experienced slowdown related to such commodity price shocks of 2013 to 2017.⁷²

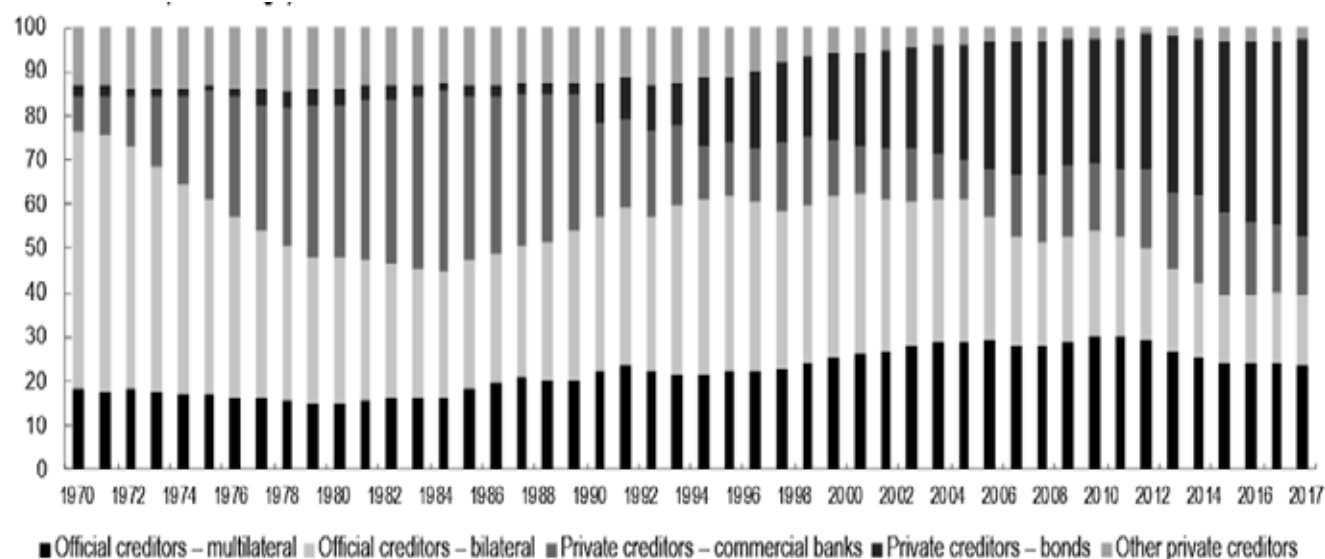
Sinking into the quicksand of debt?

Other than the ongoing recession, another aspect of the world economy on a possible brink of crashing would be a debt crisis. Even the IMF is alarmed about the “key vulnerabilities in the global financial system” in the form of ballooning debt of both businesses and developing country governments.⁷³ Countries of the global North such as the US lowered interest rate levels after 2008. This was to encourage their citizens to borrow and spend (which for big business meant continuing realisation of profits) and for big banks the continuing circulation of capital. However, big private creditors, or businesses who lend capital, driven by a need for higher returns, channelled their lending to the global South, where interest rates are higher and thus would mean bigger interest payments (see also previous editions of this report).

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, official IMF measures already cited at least nine low-income countries as already in “debt distress” (or unable to pay debts). Other 25 countries were classified as high risk, and 23 more in moderate risk. Those at high risk or under distress are at least 44% of low-income countries.⁷⁴

Developing countries are projected to face external public debt servicing in the trillions for 2020 and 2021. This is a “wall of debt service repayments,” according to the UNCTAD, which would amount to between USD 700 billion to USD 1.1 trillion for low- and middle-income countries, and between USD 2 to 2.3 trillion

Figure 6. The composition of long-term external public debt by creditor, 1970-2017 (percentage)



Source: UNCTAD. 2019. "Trade and Development Report 2019."
<https://unctad.org/en/pages/PublicationWebflyer.aspx?publicationid=2526>

for high-income developing countries, and totalling to an enormous USD 3.4 trillion.⁷⁵ Seventy percent of developing countries are seeing higher government revenues allocated for payments of interest.⁷⁶

Foreign debt from private, commercial lenders—mostly through bonds, sold in financial markets around the world—comprises almost half of developing countries' government debt in 2017 (Figure 6).⁷⁷ Much of these have been contracted after 2010 and for which they have to pay the principal amount in the 2020s. Such "increased access to commercial financing," even the UNDESA admits, resulted "in higher debt servicing costs" and other risks.⁷⁸ Multilaterals (such as the US-led IMF-World Bank or the Japan-led Asian Development Bank) follow commercial lenders as the next largest claimants, and then creditor industrialised economies. Some are also making the claim that debt with China is also notable for possible risks created by gaps in transparently reporting the amounts of lending it funnels to Southern countries.

A few Southern states already have escalating debt situations, even before the COVID-19 pandemic. A debt crisis has been besetting the Fernandez administration elected in 2019 in Argentina, a debt legacy of the neoliberal right-wing President Macri with its 2018 USD 57 billion loan with the IMF. Prices of goods have been rising with unemployment, and the Argentine peso devalued to 61 pesos to a dollar in early 2020 (versus 12 pesos to a dollar in 2015).⁷⁹ The IMF, its biggest creditor and which has a tainted legacy in the country due to a 2001 debt crisis, is again involved in renegotiating around USD 100 billion of debt by early 2020.⁸⁰

Amid political and economic turmoil in the country, the government of Lebanon has also expressed need for renegotiation with its creditors due to an inability to make a USD 1.2 billion payment, in foreign currency, by March.⁸¹ Thirty percent of the debts in foreign currency are owned by international creditors.⁸² The IMF has been sought for "technical expertise" in the Lebanese crisis,⁸³ and the Shiite Islam movement Hezbollah, critical of the US,

has said it has “no problem” with “any help within reasonable conditions”.⁸⁴

The economic shock of the pandemic worsens these debt risks. Factors such as interrupted trade and declining commodity prices (e.g., oil prices) would mean less foreign currency income for use in debt servicing—such as for oil export-dependent states in Africa.⁸⁵ This is aside from how money used for debt servicing could be otherwise used for health and social measures during the pandemic. The situation thus opens up the necessity of debt relief in the form of cancellations for payments in 2020, and indeed, even longer-term or full cancellations.

Ecological crises? Climate emergency, rampant resource plunder, and the pandemic

The current world economy of corporate giants is also the engine that historically drove the climate emergency and plunder of resources especially in the global South. By now, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) claimed that the world only has 2030 to curtail disastrous and permanent climate shifts that will have further social and environmental effects. According to 2019 data, just 20 big corporations account for 35% or one-third of greenhouse gas emissions from 1965 to 2017. Aside from state-owned companies, monopolistic TNCs such as Chevron, Exxonmobil, BP, and Royal Dutch Shell are in the list. These private corporations have also been spending USD 195 million a year in advertising and lobbying to stifle developments in climate policy, despite their public rhetoric on environmental goals.⁸⁶

Big finance capitalists are behind energy companies as well. The three biggest asset managers in the US—BlackRock, Vanguard

Group, and State Street Corporation—have stakes totalling USD 286.7 worth of shares in oil, coal, and gas companies, investments translating to around 38% of global emissions in 2018.⁸⁷ BlackRock and Vanguard Group have also blocked more than 80% of climate-related decisions in shareholder meetings of companies where they manage assets.

It is also the corporate giants based in industrialised countries that have been making the most of resource extraction across the global South. Aside from cheaper labour costs, entities that have dominated global production chains have also dominated the use of resources, as developed countries captured 11.8 billion tonnes of “primary [resource] extraction from elsewhere in the world” in 2017.⁸⁸ The share of the biggest extractive TNCs (e.g., mining TNCs, etc.) in the pie of profits of the world’s top 2000 corporations have increased from 9.3% during 1996-2000 to 13.1% in 2011-2015.⁸⁹

In West Papua, for instance, the big mining TNC Freeport McMoran is the largest single taxpayer to the Indonesian Government, with conservative estimates showing USD 696 million in annual taxes. Despite housing the largest gold mine in the world, West Papua also has significantly higher rates of poverty, illiteracy, and mortality as compared to the average rate of Indonesia. Papuans have been calling for the closure of Freeport in line with their call for self-determination, which includes the right to manage the natural resources on their land.

The centrality of ecological destruction in today’s economic paradigms is also considered a factor in pandemics. The “demand for wood, minerals and resources from the Global North,” which, as seen above is facilitated by big business extraction, “leads to the degraded

The centrality of ecological destruction in today’s economic paradigms is also considered a factor in pandemics.

landscapes and ecological disruption that drives disease.”⁹⁰ This is as land use change through big mining, logging, and industrial agriculture meant the “disruption of pristine forests,” and entailed “going into largely undisturbed places,” which in turn created “habitats where viruses are transmitted more easily.”⁹¹ The economic system’s ecological effects are in tandem with the social impact, as it “monopolised land and resources in the hands of big capital” and displaces communities of small producers and Indigenous Peoples.⁹²

Neoliberalism: In crisis, but stubborn

Neoliberal policy, usually comprising privatisation, liberalisation, deregulation, and de-nationalisation, is under fire today with supposed concerns even from certain policymakers.

For instance, the UNCTAD has claimed that the “neoliberal order...has triggered crises of financial instability, inequality, and climate change.”⁹³ It has also been condemned even by the UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres, as he called out “the lie that free markets can deliver healthcare for all” as countries face the pandemic.

In spite of such critiques, **the dominant policy agenda that remains in play today is one where, at its root, state function is oriented to creating favourable conditions for big private capital.** Major shifts in international economic governance will be required to move out of these policy norms that has supported the monopoly capitalist system, after decades of entrenchment worldwide.

Major shifts in international economic governance will be required to move out of these policy norms that has supported the monopoly capitalist system, after decades of entrenchment worldwide.

In 2018, 66% of new national investment policy measures were towards liberalisation.⁹⁴ Various regional and bilateral agreements continue to promote neoliberal investment rules in the global South after the World Trade Organization (WTO). One big agreement still under negotiation is the China-led Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP), which covers many Southeast Asian countries, along with Australia, Japan, New Zealand, South Korea, and formerly, India. RCEP began as a counterpoint to the once US-led Trans-Pacific Partnership and still continues the neoliberal trade regime.

The WTO, as the multilateral institution playing a most significant role in pushing the neoliberal trade and investment regime, marks its 25th year in 2020 amid the trade stoppages. It remains stubborn in forwarding trade liberalisation, such as under the banner of e-commerce, to revitalise TNC-driven trade amid the recession. The WTO, among other institutions, has faced criticisms even from the UNCTAD for “expanding spaces for profit making,” and even increasing carbon dioxide emissions.⁹⁵

As described above, creating SEZs has been a method pushed onto developing countries to encourage investment. The number of SEZ laws especially rose starting with the 1990s. But current rules regarding them remain tied to foreign investors’ interests, while goals relating to people’s rights seem to be an afterthought. In 127 SEZ laws adopted in 115 countries, 68 have detailed goals related to attracting investment and exports, but only 23 laws refer to objectives related to “sustainable development, the quality

Box 3. “Sustainable investment” today: Just corporate capture of development?

Part of the current rhetoric attaches the business agenda to the term “sustainability”: that private investors and corporations can satisfy their goal of even expansive capital accumulation while creating social benefits. This has been expressed even in business circles; for example, how corporate CEOs of the biggest US banks and businesses—from Amazon, Apple, to BlackRock, JP Morgan, and Chase—now say that the “purpose of a corporation” is not only to increase profits for its shareholders but also to “support communities” and “invest in employees,” have “ethical deals with suppliers,” among others.⁹⁷ This shifts the conversation to mere changes in business behaviour, downplaying world economic relations, the power of capital-holders,

and the trade, finance, and development policies that support big business interests.

In this way, the market for “sustainable investing” has grown into a value of USD 30.7 trillion of assets in 2018, increasing 34% in the prior years.⁹⁸ This has led to a situation where there is much hype but not practice: the 2020 Financing for Sustainable Development Report admits how 72% of 700 TNCs mention today’s sustainable development goals, as a “marketing tool,” but only 23% have measurements to evaluate their own corporate practices.⁹⁹ At the same time, more than half of 200 corporations assessed in reference to human rights benchmarks scored below 20 percent.¹⁰⁰

of employment or environmental protection.”⁹⁶ Whether references to development goals are practiced is a different question.

Historically, international finance institutions (IFI) have had long-running support to interests of corporations and big financial capital-holders, such as through what was called “structural adjustment programs” which had loan conditions for developing countries. Of the 58,406 conditionalities that came with IMF loans from 1984 to 2014, 87% of the dictated neoliberal policy shifts revolved around debt actions (e.g., quickly paying overdue foreign debts); financial sector liberalisation; revenue and tax policy “reforms”; and trade, investment & exchange reforms (including pushing for high dollar reserves for debt payments). The remaining 13% of policy adjustments are about privatisation, wage limits, and others such as social measures.

After the failures of direct privatisation and financial liberalisation, and with people’s

concerns against public-private partnerships (PPPs), IFIs today undertake the continued promotion of the “private sector”, which is dominated by big TNCs, in development (Box 3).

At its most fundamental, dominant discourse puts private capital on equal footing with governments and civil society as major actors in development—but big private business and finance is branded to be key to fill in developing countries’ financing gaps to meet their infrastructure and development needs. The use of already scarce development aid, a supposedly unique international finance source with a professed anti-poverty mandate, is being oriented towards “mobilising” and “catalysing” finance capital to developing countries. Encouraging foreign investment remains a blanket recommendation for national frameworks to finance and implement development goals.

POLITICS AND MILITARISM

What would current tensions and right-wing regimes mean for people's sovereignty?

Increasing global insecurity, arising from geopolitical competition and alliances among superpowers, drives the rise in military spending. There is a 4% increase in global military spending in 2019 which is largely attributed to a handful of powerful countries.¹⁰¹ Global military spending in 2019 was at USD 1.9 trillion.¹⁰²

In military spending, the US scrambles to maintain its stature as the global power in a multipolar world. The US military budget has increased every year since Donald Trump came into power in 2017, and the 2019 budget was the largest yet in ten years.¹⁰³ While both US and China military spending grew by 6.6% in 2019 compared to the previous year, the US remained the top military spender at USD 684.6 billion, while China followed at USD 185 billion.¹⁰⁴ The increase in US military spending is simultaneous to its cutback on military assistance to allies.¹⁰⁵

Military footprint, offensives of superpowers

US defence corporations continue to lead arms production, with five (5) US corporations listed as the biggest arms producing companies—Lockheed Martin, Boeing, Northrop Grumman, Raytheon, and General Dynamics (Table 1).¹⁰⁶

These top five (5) companies alone accounted for USD 148 billion (35%) of the total arms sales of the 100 biggest defence contractors.¹⁰⁷ Consequently, the US remained the top arms exporter for the period of 2015 to 2019 (Table 2), accounting for 36% of the world's weapon exports followed by Russia at 21% and China at 5.5 percent.¹⁰⁸

While the US has shifted its defence priority to the “great power competition” against China and Russia, its so-called “anti-terror” campaigns and huge roles in military aggression and foreign intervention continue across the global South, such as in West Asia and North Africa, the rest of the African region, South and Central Asia and Southeast Asia. According to the Costs of War Project at Brown University, the US “war on terror” since 2001 has killed over 800,000 people in Afghanistan, Syria, Pakistan, and Yemen.¹⁰⁹ “Indirect deaths” from “malnutrition, damaged infrastructure, and environmental degradation” would account to more than 3.1 million dead in the said countries, while 21 million people have become war refugees and internally displaced persons.¹¹⁰ The US wars have cost USD 6.4 trillion, excluding future interest costs on borrowings which would add USD 8 trillion in the next 40 years.¹¹¹

Table 1. Top 10 arms-producing companies, in USD million, 2018

Rank	Company	Country	Arms Sales, 2018	Total Sales	Arms sales as % of total
1	Lockheed Martin Corp.	United States	47,260	53,762	88
2	Boeing	United States	29,150	101,126	29
3	Northrop Grumman Corp.	United States	26,190	30,095	87
4	Raytheon	United States	23,440	27,058	87
5	General Dynamics Corp.	United States	22,000	36,193	61
6	BAE Systems	United Kingdom	21,210	22,428	95
7	Airbus Group	Trans-European	11,650	75,195	15
8	Leonardo	Italy	9,820	14,447	68
9	Almaz-Antey	Russia	9,640	9,872	98
10	Thales	France	9,470	18,767	50

Source: SIPRI Fact Sheet: The SIPRI Top 100 Arms-producing and Military Services Companies, 2018

Table 2. Top 10 arms-producing countries, in USD million, 2018

Exporter	Global Share (%)	Importer	Global Share (%)
1 United States	36	1 Saudi Arabia	12
2 Russia	21	2 India	9.2
3 France	7.9	3 Egypt	5.8
4 Germany	5.8	4 Australia	4.9
5 China	5.5	5 China	4.3
6 United Kingdom	3.7	6 Algeria	4.2
7 Spain	3.1	7 South Korea	3.4
8 Israel	3.0	8 United Arab Emirates	3.4
9 Italy	2.1	9 Iraq	3.4
10 South Korea	2.1	10 Qatar	3.4

Source: SIPRI Fact Sheet: The SIPRI Top 100 Arms-producing and Military Services Companies, 2018

Conservative estimates show that, presently, 80 countries are involved in US “counter-terrorism”¹¹² activities through trainings, military bases, combat troop presence, and drone strikes—with an estimated number of 170,000¹¹³ to 200,000¹¹⁴ troops overseas out of more than 1.3 million active duty military personnel.¹¹⁵ In West Asia and North Africa (WANA), and Afghanistan, the deployment of troops has increased under the Trump administration¹¹⁶ despite rhetoric of ending wars in the region.¹¹⁷ Currently there are 60,000 to 70,000 US troops deployed in the region, but the numbers are likely to increase after the recent conflict with Iran.¹¹⁸

The US continues to back Saudi Arabia’s war against Yemen, with military sales since the Obama administration amounting to hundreds of trillion dollars.¹¹⁹ Trump’s USD 110 billion arms deal with Saudi Arabia in 2017 could total to USD 350 billion in ten years.¹²⁰ Saudi has committed to buy US military equipment, including cybersecurity tools, and had US companies build related equipment in Saudi.¹²¹ Trump’s adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner was reportedly making a personal call to the president of the top US defence contractor Lockheed Martin¹²² to negotiate the price for a radar system.¹²³ Early in 2019, Trump vetoed the War Powers resolution to end US support to the foreign intervention in Yemen.¹²⁴

Saudi Arabia remained in third place in world military spending, at USD 78.4 billion,¹²⁵ and the top arms importer in 2019, accounting for 12% of the world’s imports.¹²⁶ War-torn Yemen is described as the worst humanitarian crisis¹²⁷ by the International Rescue Committee Emergency List for 2020.¹²⁸ The Yemen Data Project reports 8,670 civilians have been killed since the US-backed, Saudi-led war began in 2015.¹²⁹ Early in 2020, Saudi airstrikes killed 31 civilians in the Al-Hayjah area in Yemen.¹³⁰

The European Union is proud of allocating millions worth of humanitarian aid for the Yemen crisis in 2019, totalling EUR 440 million

(USD 480 million) since 2015, but its member states remain among the top military exporters to Saudi Arabia. The UK, an EU member state until recently, follows the US in military sales to Saudi Arabia,¹³¹ for having exported GBP 5.3 billion (USD 6.6 billion) worth of arms since 2015.¹³² France comes in third, and has exported arms worth EUR 1 billion (USD 1.1 billion) in 2018.¹³³

US-Iran tensions have escalated at the beginning of 2020 after the assassination of Iranian general Qassem Soleimani in an air raid at Baghdad’s international airport. The US sent 3,000 additional troops to the WANA region following Soleimani’s assassination.¹³⁴ The US-led security alliance, the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO), has shown support to the assassination of Soleimani. Prior to this, 750 troops were deployed to Kuwait as a “precautionary action” to perceived threats following the attack of pro-Iranian militias on the US embassy in Baghdad during New Year’s Eve, which was in turn triggered by a US attack that killed militia fighters.¹³⁵

A significant development in the long-drawn-out peace process in Afghanistan, one of countries ravaged by the US “war on terrorism,” is the agreement signed between the US and the Taliban last February 2020. The deal purports to end the almost two-decade conflict in the country following US invasion in 2001, which has killed over 157,000 people including more than 43,000 civilians.¹³⁶ The agreement stipulates: i) reduction, and eventual withdrawal, of US troops, which numbered 12,000 when the deal was signed last February,^{137 138} as well as NATO allies; ii) pave the way for intra-Afghan talks between Taliban and the Afghan government; iii) lift US sanctions against Taliban; and iv) the exchange of 5,000 Taliban prisoners and 1,000 Afghan prisoners.¹³⁹ While the US pursues the deal in view of overstretched military capacity, thus the current administration’s appeals to “stop[ping] endless wars,” there are concerns that the Afghan government is being sidelined in the

process, and more so the millions of Afghans whose lives have been devastated by the conflict for decades.¹⁴⁰ The Afghan government attempted to assert its position by delaying the release of Taliban prisoners as they said that they were not consulted regarding the said stipulation.¹⁴¹

Anxieties remain over women's situation and future as the Taliban are notorious for their violation of women's rights.¹⁴² Afghan women activists are critical of the "peace agreement" as it did not guarantee women's rights, and are wary of the peace process as it continues to overlook women's participation.¹⁴³ They claim that the much-lauded inclusion of women in the negotiating team in Doha¹⁴⁴ was mere tokenism, especially as the women were abruptly called to join the delegation only two days before the trip.¹⁴⁵ Prior to the negotiation in Doha, women representatives were excluded in the peace talks.¹⁴⁶ Fawzia Koofi, one of the women negotiators, was shot by unidentified assailants.¹⁴⁷ Many have condemned the attack and have voiced concerns that such attacks are detrimental to the peace process.

In Syria, there seems to be no end in sight to the conflict as it enters its tenth year. The Syrian people find themselves mired in a conflict marked by sectarian division and driven by foreign interests. The involvement of both the US and Russia in the conflict are motivated by economic and military interests, but as the US seems to have lost its footing in Syria, Russia instrumentalises the conflict to establish itself as a rising influence in West Asia.¹⁴⁸ It also seeks to "strengthen ties with Turkey and pull it away from NATO."¹⁴⁹

The UK-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights claimed that the conflict has killed more than 116,000 civilians, and displaced more than 11 million people.¹⁵⁰ The UN has been criticised for its incompetent response to the conflict,¹⁵¹ with reports claiming that Russia pressured the UN Secretary General not to release the report on Russia's involvement in war crimes in Syria.

Since 2011, 595 attacks against civilian facilities have been recorded and 923 health workers have been killed. Russia is also known to have vetoed 14 UN Security Council resolutions on the Syrian conflict, including a resolution on cross-border aid deliveries to civilians.

In Africa, US claims of "a relatively light footprint"¹⁵² in the continent are disputed by on-the-ground evidence.¹⁵³ Since 9/11, according to investigative journalist outfit The Intercept, the opposite is actually true: US counterterrorism efforts in Africa included "building up its network of bases, providing billions of dollars in security assistance," "conducting persistent counterterrorism operations that include commando raids, combat by US Special Operations forces in at least 13 African countries between 2013 and 2017, and a record number of US airstrikes in Somalia (just over one attack per week in 2019)."¹⁵⁴ US military documents also reveal 29 military bases located in 15 different countries or territories in 2019, an estimated 6,000 troops and 1,000 Defense Department personnel or contractors who train and conduct exercises with local armies. In addition to the 29 bases, the US utilises "host nation facilities" in Theis, Senegal and Singo, Uganda.

US efforts seemed to have only exacerbated conflicts in the continent. The number of active militant Islamist groups increased to 25 from just five in 2010. In 2019, there were 3,471 reported violent activities by such groups, "a 1,105 percent increase since 2009," and an estimated 10,460 deaths resulting from such activities. Despite the failure of US efforts in Africa, proposals of "scaling back US posture and presence in Africa," including a reduction of US forces in West Africa and abandoning "a recently built USD 110 million drone base in Niger," met strong opposition in the US Congress.

US security relations with the government of the Philippines continue, due to the country's

strategic location in Southeast Asia amid a rising China. On the one hand, US documents claim that the future of US Operation Pacific Eagle-Philippines (OPE-P) is “unclear” after the initial abrogation of the PH-US Visiting Forces Agreement in February this year. The US OPE-P is a joint anti-terror campaign to supposedly fight ISIS-affiliated extremist groups following the Battle of Marawi in the southern part of the Philippines. On the other hand, other avenues for US security relations continue. US military aid and sale of equipment continue, with an April 2020 US State Department approval of a possible sale of six attack helicopters and other equipment totalling USD 450 million. US-Philippine security relations continue to privilege US interests against the Filipino people as manifested in the recent Presidential absolute pardon for US Marine Pemberton despite his homicide conviction for killing Filipina transwoman Jennifer Laude in 2014.

The multipolar international order: The US and NATO

The US traditional alliances with EU countries, such as under NATO, are facing instabilities and could further weaken US hegemony. A recent Pew Research study on NATO shows that while the alliance is generally “seen favourably” among member states at a median 53%, there is a decline of support expressed among citizens in certain member countries including Bulgaria, Russia, Germany, France, and the US, with Turkey conveying the lowest ratings at 21 percent.^{155 156} NATO is challenged by the shift away from the “post-war global order,” characterised by US hegemony and a strong alliance between US and European countries, towards a multipolar world.

NATO now has to deal with “multiple strategic fronts simultaneously” including a “collective defence in Central and Eastern Europe,” and with China and Russia’s activity in the Mediterranean and North African region.¹⁵⁷ Member countries are also at odds on key

issues. Turkey’s invasion of Syria, and its deployment of troops in Libya were opposed by alliance countries.^{158 159}

There are various signs of contradictions within NATO countries. Trump has badgered NATO allies on complying with the military spending target of two percent of GDP.¹⁶⁰ ¹⁶¹ Trump has also clashed with German chancellor Angela Merkel and French president Emmanuel Macron. Merkel said in 2019 that the traditional alliance between European Union and US in the post-war global order is on “shaky footing” and that “Europe needs to reposition itself in a changed world.” She also cited the US together with China and Russia as “rivals of Europe.”¹⁶² During a NATO meeting last year, Trump hit Macron over the latter’s comment on NATO being “strategically brain-dead” over the US-backed Turkey invasion of Syria that were criticised by the alliance.¹⁶³

Outside the NATO, the Cold War-era Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces (INF) Treaty between the US and Russia has fallen out; while there were talks of extending the New Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START), which is set to expire in 2021. According to latest available data, Russia owns the largest nuclear forces at 6,500 nuclear warheads, with 1,600 deployed; while the US owns 6,185 nuclear warheads, with 1,750 deployed. The US and Russia account for 90% of the world’s nuclear weapons.¹⁶⁴

The multipolar international order: China and Russia

On the other hand, increasing China-Russia alliances are evident in their developing political and military ties.¹⁶⁵ China participated in Russia’s large-scale military drills last year called “Tsentr 2019,” together with India, Pakistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.¹⁶⁶ China and Russia’s “security cooperation” and possibility of a “full-fledged defense alliance” threatens to disturb US

interests, including the regional security balance, US-led sanctions, and US military freedom of action and access.¹⁶⁷

Both countries continue to flex their military prowess amid the pandemic. Russia has conducted military drills in Crimea in March 2020. China continues to assert its dominance and violate the sovereignty of Southeast Asian countries it is in dispute with over the South China Sea. For instance, it refuses to recognise the 2016 ruling of the Permanent Arbitration Court in The Hague that declared that the Philippines has exclusive sovereign rights over its territories in the South China Sea (known as the West Philippine Sea). It established military outposts in the West Philippines and even opened new research facilities in the area.¹⁶⁸ Early in April, it sank a Vietnamese fishing boat with eight crew members on board near the Paracel Islands.¹⁶⁹ Besides South China-dispute related attacks, China intimidates Taiwan, currently recognised as a province of China, with its on-going military drills.¹⁷⁰

The 19th Summit of the China-led security alliance, the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), was held June 2019 in Bishkek, capital of Kyrgyzstan. The Bishkek Declaration reiterated the SCO's commitment to fight "terrorism in all its forms and manifestations." The declaration also reiterated the need for increased economic cooperation, as well as support for WTO and the multilateral trading system. All member states except India "reaffirmed their support" for the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).



China continues to assert its dominance and violate the sovereignty of Southeast Asian countries it is in dispute with over the South China Sea. *Photo from Times Asi/Flickr*

The Bishkek Declaration also urged party states to follow through with their commitment to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or the Iran nuclear deal despite US withdrawal. It also mentioned the peace processes in Syria and Afghanistan. The SCO Summit was the first time Indian and Pakistani Prime Ministers Narendra Modi and Imran Khan met since the Pulwama attack in February 2019. The

20th SCO summit was initially set in July this year, with its current chair, Russia, as host, but was postponed due to the Coronavirus pandemic.¹⁷¹ Putin said that it will focus on cultural and humanitarian ties during its SCO chairmanship.

China has steadily expanded its influence through the Belt and Road Initiative. Over

138 countries are involved in BRI projects,¹⁷² with Africa becoming "the largest market for China's overseas construction contracts."¹⁷³

But accompanying BRI projects is China's threat to partner countries' sovereignty. BRI partners are worried about "the overhang of Chinese intellectual property theft and espionage" using fifth-generation or 5G wireless networks by Huawei Technologies.¹⁷⁴ The BRI also tends to exacerbate prior debt problems of Southern states, adding to the historical and continuing burdens from relations with traditional private, bilateral, and multilateral creditors.

In Africa, China exerts its military power through arms sales and port calls, as well as military training and exercises on the premise of "counterterrorism" and humanitarian operations.¹⁷⁵ China maintains a military base in Djibouti, where a US military base

is also located, and looks to open up more bases across the continent. There are US fears that China has set sights on expanding its military bases around the world including in the WANA region, Pakistan, and the Western Pacific to protect its BRI interests.¹⁷⁶ China's proposal to establish research and satellite ground stations, as well as renovate airports and expand mining in Greenland, drove the US to claim that, "civilian research could support a strengthened Chinese military presence in the Arctic ocean, which could include deploying submarines to the region as a deterrent against nuclear attacks."¹⁷⁷ Currently, China has military outposts in the contested South China Sea and in the junction of the Wakhan corridor in eastern Tajikistan. Within Asia, China is the highest military spender, accounting for 60% of the region's military spending.¹⁷⁸ Countries in the region that perceive China as a threat have also increased their spending, including South Korea, Japan, Australia,¹⁷⁹ and India.¹⁸⁰

The US responds to China's power and expanding influence in the region by building military ties with Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Australia, Singapore and India. To counter the BRI, the US, Australia, and Japan had once pushed for a trilateral initiative¹⁸¹ vis-a-vis the BRI. The US also runs a campaign against "China's cyber-attacks, traditional espionage" and technological build-up, as well as "to contain the global reach of Chinese telecom companies Huawei and ZTE Corp."¹⁸²

Aside from China, another rising power is Russia, which maintains its position as one of the top military spenders in the world,¹⁸³ as well as the second largest arms exporter next to the US, accounting for 21% of total arms exports in 2015–19.¹⁸⁴ Forty-nine percent of Africa's arms imports come from Russia; while Russia's

exports to Africa accounts for 17% of its total arms exports. Russia has become a recourse for countries, such as Zimbabwe, that are otherwise restricted by sanctions by the US and its allies.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁶ Russian private military contractors such as the Wagner Group are present in 15 countries across the continent.

There are also reports of human rights violations committed by Russian contractors and militias against civilians who threaten

There are also reports of human rights violations committed by Russian contractors and militias against civilians who threaten Russian mining interests.

Russian mining interests. Russia also looks to establishing military bases in the region, including in the Central African Republic,¹⁸⁷ in Libya near the Mediterranean Sea, and in Eritrea

and Sudan on the Red Sea.¹⁸⁸ State-owned companies have stakes in the natural resources, such as the aluminum group Rusal in Guinea, the diamond mining company Alrosa in Angola and Botswana that will soon enter Zimbabwe as well, and the nuclear company Rosatom in Zambia and Rwanda.¹⁸⁹ Oil companies Rosneft and Lukoil are working in Egypt, Mozambique and Algeria, Nigeria, Ghana and Cameroon.

Militarism and right-wing trends intensify human rights violations in the global South

Competition and compromise between the global powers continue to have significant implications for the efforts of Southern nations and peoples to exert political and economic self-determination in an increasingly unstable world. While people's movements have staunchly resisted autocratic regimes, the trend in right-wing politics continue with financial and military support from global powers, resulting in increasing and intensifying human rights violations.

India was the third largest military spender in 2019, growing by 6.8% to USD 71.1 billion.¹⁹⁰ **The growth in India's military spending is attributed to escalating tensions with China and Pakistan.** China's strong military presence along the 3,500-kilometre disputed frontier, which covers areas such as the union territory Jammu and Kashmir, and Ladakh, continues to threaten India's sovereignty, prompting it to increase its forces along disputed areas.¹⁹¹ The second informal summit between Modi and Xi in October 2019 in India did not result in any significant change in the dispute ever since the 2017 'two-month stand-off' between Chinese and Indian military forces at Doklam. In June 2020, the confrontation between Chinese and Indian forces in Ladakh – which was formerly part of the union territory Jammu and Kashmir – was said to be the “deadliest fighting between the two sides in 45 years” as it resulted in the death of 20 Indian soldiers.¹⁹²

The dispute was exacerbated by the revocation of the autonomous state status, given under Article 370 of the Indian constitution, of Muslim-majority Jammu and Kashmir – situated between India, Pakistan, and China – in August 2019.^{193 194} The revocation of the autonomy of Kashmir, followed by the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) implemented in December 2019, which “makes religion a criterion for nationality,” are also part of Modi's Hindu nationalist agenda.¹⁹⁵ Both India and Pakistan lay claims in the union territory. In the UN Security Council last August 2019, China expressed its opposition of the revocation of Kashmir's autonomy, but also urged India and Pakistan to settle their dispute.¹⁹⁶ Early in 2019, Pakistan and India ‘came to the brink of war’ after a suicide attack on an Indian paramilitary convoy that killed 44.¹⁹⁷

Meanwhile, the CAA implemented by Modi threatens the basic rights of 200 million Muslims.¹⁹⁸ Modi's policies have enabled the widespread growth of Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, a government-sanctioned and right-wing

Hindu nationalist paramilitary organisation. The human rights situation in India's Northeast has also worsened due to prolonged application of emergency laws, primarily the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, 1958 (AFSPA) that derogates fundamental human rights, right to life, right to justice remedy, among others. The effect of the 1958 AFSPA along with other criminal laws like the Unlawful Activity Prevention Act of 1967, the National Security Act of 1980, among others, have led to extrajudicial executions and even sexual violence on women by Indian military personnel deployed to counter liberation groups across states in Northeast India.

Another major pattern of human rights violations in Northeast India is the increased assault against Indigenous Peoples' land and resources by extractive industries, hydropower projects, oil exploration, and large infrastructure projects. These destroy the land, forest, water bodies and other livelihood sources of the Indigenous Peoples in the region. Construction of dams like 1200 MW Teesta Hydroelectric project in Sikkim, Dumbur dam in Tripura, 105 MW Loktak Project in Manipur caused untold suffering to affected communities and militarisation of their land.

State repression and impunity have worsened under the Duterte administration in the Philippines, with movements describing the situation as an undeclared, de facto martial law, even under the COVID-19 outbreak (**Box 4**). There is a harsh political climate against various forms of opposition, from media repression, to civilian criticism and activist assertions facing unjust arrests, harassment, and extrajudicial killings of drug suspects and activists. According to the report released by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) in June 2020, conservative estimates show that more than 8,600 people have been killed by the police and unidentified “vigilantes” in drug war operations, but other estimates are triple this figure. The report verified the killings of 208 human rights defenders between

2015 and 2019. Local people's organisations report that more than 270 peasants have been killed under the Duterte administration, while the 2020 Global Witness Report has yet again identified the Philippines as among the most dangerous countries for environmental and land defenders with 43 documented killings in 2019.¹⁹⁹ The number of victims increases as the killings continue amid the pandemic.

Based on 2019 data released by Philippine based rights group KARAPATAN, there are over 600 political prisoners in the country, and more than half, or 382, were arrested under the current administration.²⁰⁰ The OHCHR report provided further proof of the erosion of democratic and economic rights, and shrinking space for democratic participation, evident in the criminalisation of peoples' organisations and civil society, under the current administration. State forces are further emboldened by laws that condone attacks against human rights defenders such as the Executive Order 70 or the whole-of-nation approach against communist insurgency with local iterations in provinces, and so-called "anti-terror" and "human security" legislation. Following the passage of the Anti-Terror Law in June, 71-year-old peasant advocate Randall Echanis, who was also among the negotiators in previous peace talks between the administration and the armed liberation movement in the country, was brutally tortured and murdered in his home in August 2020. This was immediately followed by the killing of human rights activist and health worker Zara Alvarez.

Neoliberal infrastructure projects such as the New Clark City and the New Manila International Airport have dispossessed peasant and indigenous communities. The Philippines and Colombia were identified as the deadliest country for environmental and land rights defenders in 2019,²⁰¹ and among the worst countries for workers, for 2018.

The US continues to move for military support to the Duterte administration despite urgent budgetary needs for pandemic response in

the Philippines and the regime's notorious human rights record in both its "drug war" and "counterinsurgency" operations.²⁰² Talks about acquiring attack helicopters from the US – six of either Bell's AH-1Z Viper (estimated cost at USD 468.7 million) or Boeing's AH-64E Apache Guardian (estimated cost at USD 1.6 billion) – to further the state's military combat operations against the underground New People's Army in the countryside²⁰³ was criticised by movements for not addressing the socio-economic and political grievances at the root of the armed struggle. The deal did not push through after widespread criticism from the public.²⁰⁴

In Indonesia, the occupation of West Papua continues under Widodo's regime. Central to the occupation of West Papua, and the conflict that consequently occurs therein, is the Grasberg Mine owned by the US company Freeport-McMoran. Other large investments in West Papua include fossil fuel extraction by British Petroleum (BP), palm oil plantations and other agribusiness activities. As the operations of these companies expand, the US and its allied states become more active in supporting the occupation of West Papua. The US, UK, and Australia—who are among top investors in West Papua—provide military training and weaponry to the Indonesian state. Freeport's operations are "secured" by the Indonesian National Army (TNI). The UK funds and trains Detachment 88 – the elite "counterterrorism" unit of the Indonesian police – in Jakarta, alongside Australian, Canadian, US and Dutch police. The unit, deployed as a counter-insurgency force in West Papua, is known for its atrocious human rights record.

Armed conflict between the TNI and the West Papua Liberation Army (TPNPB) usually occurs in the areas of the investments. There was a December 2019 TPNPB offensive on members of the TNI guarding the Trans-Papua road in Nduga and shootouts near the Grasberg Mine in the first quarter of 2020. Both incidents have resulted in large-scale displacement of communities as residents fled from their homes

Box 4. The COVID-19 pandemic as pretext for repression

Aside from revealing and even worsening the dire state of economic rights, the pandemic also served as a pretext for attacks on civil-political rights across the world. Several autocratic regimes have heightened state surveillance and implemented militarised instead of health-based responses and without social support. There are reports of arbitrary detention, harassment at checkpoints, and killings. There were also leaders who withheld essential public information about COVID-19 and even spread false information about the disease, while repressing doctors and journalists and imposing strict measures against those who peddle 'fake news' such as in Central Asia.²⁰⁵

There were instances where people who were demanding food and assistance from the government or securing supplies for their families were met with military and police violence. The worsening human rights situation amid the pandemic has also made it "difficult or dangerous for a woman to get to the hospital to give birth."²⁰⁶ The United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) has already singled out states whose highly militarised pandemic measures have resulted in gross human rights violations including in the Philippines and Sri Lanka where thousands

have been arrested and detained for "lockdown violations."

Repression and a lack of proper social measures were also seen in Kenya and South Africa. Rights violations have also been rampant in countries such as in China where there have also been reports of censorship, intimidation, arrest and detention of journalists and doctors. In the US and the European Union, migrants are discriminated against and refused shelters because of the bigoted belief that they might spread the virus.

In the Philippines, there were reported incidents of people's initiatives such as relief operations blocked by the police, and the volunteers illegally detained. Violence against women and children perpetrated by state forces and local officials are also rampant. In Uganda, corporations such as the Agilis Partners Limited and Great Season Company continue with land grabbing, dispossessing communities comprised of 35,000 people. State forces and other military groups in conflict-ridden and fragile countries are also defying the UN's call for global ceasefire such as Saudi Arabia in Yemen, Turkey in Libya, and US and Iran in Iraq.²⁰⁷ US sanctions are hampering the response of 39 affected countries including Iran, Venezuela, and Cuba.

fearing indiscriminate attacks from the TNI. There were hundreds of deaths due to hunger and disease, aside from the direct killings committed by the TNI.

Papuans expressing dissent in different forms, as well as Indonesians calling out the human rights abuses in West Papua, both experience severe repression of their civil and political rights. The state-backed *ormas* or Indonesian ultra-nationalist organisations have also taken on the "dirty job" of harassing Papuans with racist slurs or physical assault, especially during protest actions—a tactic that was also used by Indonesia during its occupation of Timor Leste. There is limited coverage on the situation in

West Papua due to a *de facto* ban on entry of foreign media and international human rights organizations. Amid protests last year, an internet shutdown was imposed across West Papua, cutting off internet and communications in major cities and town centres which further limited information dissemination outside of the region.

Following the withdrawal of US troops in Syria, Turkey has launched attacks in Rojava, or the autonomous region of Kurdish people in North and Eastern Syria last October 2019.^{208 209} This so-called "Operation Peace Spring" was carried out by Turkish forces and Turkish-backed Syrian militias to push back Kurdish forces,

branded by the Turkish state as “terrorists,” and established a 20-mile (32km) buffer zone.²¹⁰ Amnesty International reports war crimes committed by Turkish forces and their allies such as attacks against and killings of civilians including journalists and children.²¹¹ Hevrin Khalaf, a prominent Syrian-Kurdish female politician, was also summarily executed by a Turkey-backed Syrian militia group.

In Iraq, protests against corruption and unemployment in late 2019 forced the prime minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi to resign.²¹² But the US-Iran situation has become a ‘counter-cause’ that diverted the government’s attention, shifting from addressing the people’s immediate demands to dubitable actions and rhetoric regarding the US-Iran conflict. The political elite has muddled the political situation by reducing it to anti-American versus anti-Iranian factions, when the Iraqi people has clearly objected to “foreign interference of any kind.”²¹³ For instance, the attack of pro-Iranian militias to the US embassy in Baghdad, Iraq in early 2020 was considered “a successful counter-protest by Iran-leaning factions” who have been trying to grab the attention from the anti-government protests since last year.

In 2019, peace talks between North and South Korea took a downturn since the Panmunjom declaration was signed that committed both parties to mutual efforts including denuclearisation to move towards achieving a peace treaty.²¹⁴ North Korea was upset over joint military drills between South Korea and the United States²¹⁵ as the security alliance between South Korea and the US stands, with around 28,500 US troops stationed in the former.²¹⁶

Rohingya refugees refuse to return to Myanmar without guarantee of citizenship despite a repatriation agreement between Bangladesh and Myanmar; 900,000 Rohingya refugees live in temporary shelters in Cox’s Bazar in Bangladesh, a few kilometres from the Myanmar border.

Palestinians have rejected Trump’s bogus and annexationist “Peace Plan”, which furthers Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands.²¹⁷ Early this year, protests broke out across the occupied West Bank following the announcement of Trump’s plan wherein a Palestinian teenager was killed by Israeli forces.

Russian relations with African states, through arms sales, security agreements, and training programs, have continued to secure its economic interests and contest US political influence. For instance, Russia has been developing ties with US allies Tunisia and Egypt; with Libya, a known NATO stronghold; and with former French colonies Mali and the Central African Republic.^{218 219} Faustin-Archange Touadéra, the president of the Central African Republic, appointed a Russian civilian as National Security Advisor. He also announced the deployment of Russian-backed security forces that are accompanied as well by Russian military contractors to restore peace to the country.²²⁰ Russia also builds on old Soviet ties such as with Mozambique and Angola.

Amid China and Russia’s increasing influence over Africa, the US has announced plans to “revamp its economic and security policies” in the continent including increasing finance for projects.²²¹ In line with the goal of gaining support for US plans in the region, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo visited Ethiopia, Senegal and Angola in February this year.²²² US worries over Russia and China’s influence can be encapsulated in statements that “two long-time American adversaries” are “interfer[ing] with US military operations and pose a significant threat to US national security interests.”²²³ The US has imposed sanctions against Wagner on its recruitment and deployment of soldiers “alongside pro-Russian separatists” in Ukraine. Trump’s national security adviser John R. Bolton described the new strategy in Africa “as a ‘great power’ competition and counterbalance to China and Russia.”²²⁴

In Latin America, the US supported right-wingers in Venezuela, Bolivia, and in countries with IMF-backed governments such as Ecuador, Argentina, and Chile, there has been turmoil. The neoliberal right-wing in Argentina through Macri has seen a setback with a loss in the 2019 elections. Macri is known for his pro-business policies. While he initially promised 'zero poverty,' people living below the poverty line rose from 29% to 35% during his term,²²⁵ while one in 10 people are out of work.^{226 227} Alberto Fernández of the Peronist movement won the election with 47.79% of the votes.²²⁸

In Venezuela, moves against the current Maduro administration, which came with new US economic sanctions, were launched through US-backed

Juan Guaidó of the country's social democratic party. US support cannot be more explicit as in early 2020, when Guaidó appeared in the US President's Union address and was referred to as the "legitimate" President of the Latin American country. In Bolivia, the right-wing coup was set off by alleged irregularities in the re-election of Evo Morales. The coup was met by resistance from indigenous peoples and farmers who claimed that their living conditions were significantly improved, and their rights were protected under Morales.^{229 230} Researchers from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology said that there is no evidence for the opposition's claim of electoral fraud.²³¹

In Brazil, Bolsonaro's pro-business policies continue to threaten indigenous peoples' lands and lives including 900,000 Amazon indigenous communities. The burning of the Amazon forests dubbed as the "lungs of the Earth" has caught the headlines last year calling attention to the role of corporations and complicit

regimes in environmental destruction and climate change.

In Colombia, movements continue to decry killings and state violence, which went on even after the supposed "peace agreement" that led to the end of the armed struggle of the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). Six hundred twenty seven activists (627)²³² and 130 ex-guerrilla fighters have been killed since.²³³

The Colombian government under president Ivan Duque has failed to fulfil the stipulations of the agreement including providing basic services such as roads, schools, water, and electricity to impoverished rural areas.²³⁴ The Colombian army has been ordered to

double the number of killings of militants, with disregard for 'civilian casualties',²³⁵ and even offered incentives to soldiers. Such military measures recall the spree of military killings in the mid-2000s which resulted in 5,000 civilians and guerrillas killed outside combat. Around 2,000 to 3,000 former members of FARC have since withdrawn from the peace agreement and have taken up arms.^{236 237}

Last year, massive protests in Chile against neoliberal policies were met with state violence. More than 30 people have been recorded dead and 4,000 have been injured.²³⁸ The protesters revealed the neoliberal attacks against basic rights that have resulted to low wages, privatisation of the pension system and other social services such as education, healthcare, water, and electricity services among others. Even OECD reports confirm that there is high inequality in Chile. Its income inequality gap is 65% wider than the OECD average, and almost a third of its workers are in informal jobs.



In Venezuela, moves against the current Maduro administration, which came with new US economic sanctions, were launched through US-backed Juan Guaidó of the country's social democratic party. *Photo from Times Asi/Flickr*

RESISTANCE

What are the possibilities for stronger people's movements?

The year 2019 and the start of 2020 has seen an upsurge in people's assertions around the world. Protests against governments were seen in 114 countries in 2019. There is said to be an overall increase in the number of demonstrations,²³⁹ as some claim an *annual* 11.5% increase in protests from 2009 to 2019 since the Arab Spring,²⁴⁰ while some record a 51% increase in the number of protests in 2019 compared to 2018²⁴¹ all testament to a claim that the world is "in an age of global mass protests that are historically unprecedented in frequency, scope, and size."²⁴²

These could be viewed as responses, directly or indirectly, to the conditions created by the worsening economic crisis of neoliberal globalisation and the militarist aggression led by a US struggling to counter its "strategic decline" in the world's multipolar situation. With the COVID-19 pandemic, the world has still seen various forms of people's defence of their rights and articulation of their demands. People's growing dissatisfaction with the current order offers openings for amplifying people's assertions.

The growth of people's movements appears as an important trend, with the waves of people's collective actions in 2019 continuing in 2020 even amid limitations and restrictions

imposed by the Coronavirus pandemic. Sustained collective action, with movements' growth in number and influence nationally and internationally, would be required to resolve into long-term victories in claiming people's rights and sovereignty. In the longer term, this could be taken further to systemic shifts for economies and the world economic system in general, away from the dominance of ultra-wealthy capital-owners and domestic elites, and towards development paths led by and for the people.

Major actions in the global North

People's actions persist within the US and other industrialised capitalist economies such as France and the UK, in resistance to different economic issues, to a rising fascism, and to the corporate plunder of the people and planet. Almost 11.5 million people were said to have participated in 16,000 protests across the US from January 2017, since Trump's inauguration, up to January 2020.²⁴³ In 2018, **almost 500,000 workers participated in strikes in the US**—the highest since the neoliberal decades in the 1980s.^{244 245}

US strike participation at this scale was partly due to waves of teachers' strikes in 2018 and

2019, amid grievances related to salaries, benefits and education budgets.²⁴⁶ **Teachers' strikes marked Ontario, Canada** in late 2019 and early 2020, supposedly the largest in 20 years,²⁴⁷ around issues of limited salary increases, education budget cuts, among others.^{248 249} In late 2019, around 50,000 unionised workers of the automobile giant General Motors also launched a national strike to demand wage increases, opening of idled factories, opposing wage differences between workers, among others,²⁵⁰ shutting down 33 factories and 22 warehouses.²⁵¹ Drivers of ride-hailing services Uber and Lyft also went on strike in mid-2019 over low wages and benefits from such precarious jobs in the "gig economy."²⁵²

In 2019, tens of thousands also

protested in Puerto Rico over government corruption and inaction after the devastating Hurricane Maria, which led to the resignation of its governor.²⁵³ Triggered by leaked messages where officials mocked hurricane victims and contained misogynist and homophobic remarks, women's groups resisting structural inequalities, US colonialism of Puerto Rico, and gender-based, state-sponsored violence²⁵⁴ were among those active, such as the black feminist group *La Colectiva Feminista en Construcción*.^{255 256}

January 2020 **anti-US war protests** broke out after a drone strike killed a high ranking general in Iran. Movements in the US but also from Italy, the Philippines, Australia, Indonesia, Japan, Kenya, Guatemala, Canada, and Hong Kong, participated in a Global Day of Action against US war and aggression on Iran.²⁵⁷

Filipinos living in the US who joined the actions also condemned US support of the Duterte administration, worth USD193 million in military aid, which they link to rights violations in the government's "drug war" and "counter-insurgency" campaigns.²⁵⁸

Indigenous Peoples and First Nations also captured the headlines. The Wet'suwet'en

people and their allies have been defending their right to self-determination and land from the construction of the 670-kilometre Coastal GasLink pipeline, a project led by TNCs and banks, and legitimised by the Canadian government. Wet'suwet'en chiefs are among those leading the marches; they also launched a camp to block the pipeline path.²⁵⁹ Indigenous youth and solidarity activists



Across Germany, the UK, the US and other Northern countries, the climate strike movement has mobilised thousands, with many highlighting the need for justice given the responsibility of corporate giants and governments for the even worsening crisis. *Photo from Common Dreams*

also launched protests and occupation of local officials' offices. They vow to continue actions in spite of state violence against indigenous leaders, from armed pre-dawn raids on protest camps of land defenders²⁶⁰ to arrests of solidarity activists.

In France, unions and the Yellow Vest movement, initially coordinated through social media,²⁶¹ have continued to oppose the Macron government's policies. The "Yellow Vests" emerged in 2018 from dissent over fuel taxes,²⁶² and later, high living costs. By late 2019, strikes involving 800,000 to 1.5 million people, from teachers, railworkers, lawyers, to hospital staff, shut down the French transport system in protest of a planned pension reform that would mean longer years in work with lower benefits.²⁶⁴ By January 2020, the strike was said

to have been the longest in decades, since the upsurge of mass actions of May 1968.²⁶⁵ With 1.7 million people protesting in January 2020, officials conceded to ending plans to increase the retirement age, but not scrapping the whole proposal.²⁶⁶ The Yellow Vests still launched actions against the pension reform in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic.²⁶⁷

Across Germany, the UK, the US and other Northern countries, **the climate strike movement has mobilised thousands**, with many highlighting the need for justice given the responsibility of corporate giants and governments for the even worsening crisis. The Global Climate Strike held September 2019, a few days before the UN Climate Summit,²⁶⁸ saw an estimated 4 million people in over 163 countries, making it the biggest climate protest in history.²⁶⁹ Climate activists from the global North and South, with Swedish activist Greta Thunberg among the most publicised, have criticised governments' inaction in curbing emissions.²⁷⁰

Actions in the BRICS countries

Workers, farmers and indigenous peoples also launched mass actions in China, India, Brazil and other developing countries with larger economies.

In Brazil, workers and Indigenous Peoples defended their rights from big business agenda backed by the right-wing Bolsonaro. Around 21,000 workers of state-owned oil company Petrobras have been in "indefinite strike" since February 2020 over privatisation and layoff plans of the Bolsonaro-appointed company chief.²⁷¹ With the Amazon ablaze by August 2019, climate activists and Indigenous Peoples demanded protection for the forests and condemned the state handover of indigenous territory to big agribusiness and mining.²⁷²

²⁷³ Resistance continues – such as through the only Indigenous woman in Brazil's Congress,

Joenia Wapichana, who called for international solidarity for the Amazon.²⁷⁴

In India, multiple protests opposed the Modi government and its right-wing Hindu nationalist, and anti-Muslim measures. Women were prominent in the 150 to 250 million workers who went on a January 2020 general strike, demanding wage increases and blasting the privatisation of public firms and resources.²⁷⁵ Also notable were sit-in protests in Shaheen Bagh of working-class Muslim women, including grandmothers, against the Citizenship Amendment Act.²⁷⁶ In Kashmir, women actively participated in resisting intensified state attacks after Modi revoked the sovereignty of Kashmir.²⁷⁷

Farmers across India have also continued to **oppose the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership (RCEP)**, which will negatively impact local agriculture.^{278 279} **In Northeast India, Indigenous Peoples have been asserting their right to self-determination**, in calls for the repealing of the 1958 Armed Forces (Special Powers) Act and for demilitarisation of the region. They continue the defence of their lands from corporate plunder through dam, oil exploration, and mining projects commonly backed by the Asian Development Bank and Japan.

In China, there have been around 1,400 cases of wildcat workers' strikes in 2019, and with 64 by early March 2020.²⁸⁰ Youth activists are also increasingly working on climate issues and linking up with workers' struggles.^{281 282} Hong Kong, officially a province of China, also saw large protests opposing a now withdrawn bill that would have allowed extradition to the mainland. However, among diverse participants in these actions were groups supportive of US coercive measures and intervention.^{283 284}

²⁸⁵ Some critics claim that clamour for US intervention are not aligned with the long-run interests of the Hong Kong citizens' movement.^{286 287} Protesters were reported

to have used encrypted channels to avoid identification by the police.²⁸⁸

People's assertions in the case of Russia responded to the harsh political climate in the country under the Putin administration.

In mid-2019 an estimated 60,000 have joined in waves of Moscow actions, supposedly among the largest since 2012, after a ban against opposition candidates in a city-level election.²⁸⁹ With the state answering more repression, with many criminalised and jailed, another tens of thousands took to the streets by late 2019.²⁹⁰

The rumbling of people's assertions in the global South

In the rest of the global South, grassroots movements assert people's rights amid economic crisis, neoliberal policy and various forms of militarist attacks. Prolonged and sustained protests challenged and threatened governments in power – from Chile to Lebanon.

Latin America and the Caribbean

In Latin America and the Caribbean, among notable cases of sustained people's defence of rights were in Chile. Mass protests have been held after October 2019, when students launched fare evasions²⁹¹ that led Chilean President Piñera to backtrack on fare hikes. This triggered the brewing discontent against neoliberal Chile's deeper inequalities, from low wages to privatised services. Despite state repression, millions rose in protests, from fare evasions, general strikes, to the *cacerolazo* – a pots-and-pans noise barrage. Chilean women



In the rest of the global South, grassroots movements assert people's rights amid economic crisis, neoliberal policy and various forms of militarist attacks. *Photo from John Englart / Flickr*

also resisted gender-based violence as they commemorated the 2019 International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women in front of the Supreme Court, with performances of the would-be feminist anthem *Un violador en tu camino* ("A rapist in your way").^{292 293}

In Ecuador, Indigenous Peoples, workers, and other sectors launched actions against the

Moreno government's IMF-dictated austerity package that attempted to cut fuel subsidies (thus raising prices) as a condition for a USD 4.4 billion loan. While the Ecuadorian state answered with repression, movements drove the Moreno government to revoke the plan.²⁹⁴ Argentina also saw movements calling for the end of IMF intervention given a

new debt problem – with the current Fernandez government handling USD 311 billion foreign debt (USD 44 billion of which is a conditional loan by the previous, US-backed Macri administration).^{295 296}

Large mobilisations were also seen in Haiti last year demanding the resignation of president Jovenel Moise for corruption and inaction to address an economic crisis that has resulted in food and fuel shortages affecting the people.²⁹⁷ In Colombia, movements continue to decry killings and state violence which continue even after the supposed "peace agreement" that led to the laying down of arms by the *Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia* (FARC, Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia). Around 2,000 - 3,000 former members of FARC have again taken up arms.^{298 299}

Asia

In parts of Asia, other flashpoints of large-scale people's actions included West Asia, particularly Lebanon and Palestine. Waves of protests involving thousands marked Lebanon since October 2019, amid a compounded crisis. People opposed an austerity budget and new taxes on messaging applications amid debt and economic crises,³⁰⁰ and opposed alleged political elites' corruption amid close links with big business.³⁰¹ This eventually led to a declared resignation of the Prime Minister in October 2019.³⁰² But the protests continue amid unsolved economic crises, as the IMF swooped in to "assist" the new government.

In Palestine, thousands joined the Great

March of Return mobilisations since 2018 despite the Israeli state's repression.³⁰³ The US government's 2020 "Peace Plan" drove another spate of protests, with the plan condemned for being annexationist and undemocratic.³⁰⁴ March 2020 actions on Land Day, marking resistance to the expropriation of Palestinian land, were still held albeit online. Campaigns to free Palestinian political prisoners continue, aside from the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) campaign, which aims to end support to the Israeli state's occupation, especially after the release of a list of corporations complicit in rights violations.³⁰⁵

Large protests were also seen in Iraq, with initial demands about corruption and basic services eventually turning into strong anti-government sentiment.³⁰⁶ This later turned to calls against US military presence, and Iranian

government influence, from the country after the US drone strike that killed Iranian General Soleimani.³⁰⁷

There were actions of garment workers in Southeast Asian countries, as the region continues to be a hub for "fast fashion" companies due to cheaper labour costs.

Indonesian garment workers that supply big firms such as Uniqlo have decried long working hours and unpaid wages.^{308 309}

In January 2019, thousands of workers in Bangladesh went on strike to demand living wages³¹⁰—in a multi-billion dollar garment industry employing 4 million, majority of which are women, and comprising 80% of the country's total export revenue³¹¹ as it supplies big chains like H&M, Primark,

Walmart. In April 2019, Bangladeshi garment factory workers also went on a hunger strike to demand their reinstatement after being fired for protesting sexual harassment of an 18-year-old co-worker by an assistant production manager.³¹²

In the Philippines, movements campaign for justice and rights, after massive killings in the government's so-called "drug war" and with a *de facto* martial law targeting grassroots activists and the opposition. Farmers such as in Lupang Ramos ("Ramos land") in Cavite province defend themselves from local elites' landgrabbing. Communities and environmental groups barricaded the operations of mining TNC OceanaGold in Nueva Vizcaya. Workers and indigenous Lumad in Southern Philippines assert their rights amid militarisation for corporate interests. In the capital, a group



In the Philippines, movements campaign for justice and rights, after massive killings in the government's so-called "drug war" and with a *de facto* martial law targeting grassroots activists and the opposition.

Photo from Bulatlat

of mothers and grandmothers patrol their neighbourhood at night to protect their community amid the “drug war” killings.³¹³ Campaigners also push for an international independent probe on rights violations due to state refusal to any form of scrutiny.

Indigenous youth-led protests from mid-August to September 2019 in Indonesian-occupied West Papua were said to be the largest seen in years.³¹⁴ Fifty-seven activists who participated in anti-racism protests were arrested on charges of “treason,” with some activists forced to go into hiding amid heightened surveillance. Among those arrested was Surya Anta Ginting, the spokesperson of the Indonesian People's Front for West Papua (FRI-WP), and the first Indonesian charged with treason since the end of the Suharto dictatorship.

Africa

In Africa, protests were triggered by economic crises or government corruption, leading to regime changes. Among the most prominent were the waves of actions in Sudan that began in December 2018 as triggered by IMF-recommended cuts on fuel and food subsidies that led to price hikes.³¹⁵ The sustained actions were crucial in ending the 30-year violent rule of Omar Al-Bashir by April 2019. Given the Al-Bashir regime's conservatism that heavily policed women's behaviour, the strong participation of women activists, including Alaa Salah who captured media attention, was crucial in the democracy movement.³¹⁶

The ouster of Al-Bashir was overtaken by a military coup which only led to more repression

and killings of protesters,³¹⁷ with a transition to civilian government only made possible by even more mass demonstrations and the intervention of the African Union and Ethiopia for negotiations.³¹⁸ Mass actions continue to be faced with state repression by early 2020.³¹⁹

Algeria has also seen a widespread protest movement against Abdelaziz Bouteflika and

the ruling party, decades after it led decolonisation from France in the Algerian War. Since October 2019 protests have been held in the West African country of Guinea against President Alpha Conde, who has led the adoption of a new constitution that

National liberation continues to be an agenda in parts of the global South. Movements engaging in armed struggle in the Philippines, Palestine, India, Turkey, Colombia as well as in West Papua and Kurdish movements in Rojava, continue until today.

could, critics claim, allow him to serve more terms in power.³²⁰ In another West African country, in Liberia, thousands held protests on January 2020, facing tear gas and water cannons, amid rising inflation and alleged government corruption under President George Weah, who has admitted that USD 8 million out of a supposed USD 25 million injection into the economy was not used and could not be accounted for.^{321 322}

Campaigns to free jailed activists, such as Senegalese activist Guy Marius Sagna, were also launched in 2019. Sagna has been a leader of the No to EPAs Coalition, which opposed neoliberal and EU-led Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs), and the France Degage! Movement, which resists neo-colonial influence in Senegal. Meanwhile, the South African people protested in Cape Town in January 2020 to express solidarity to Muslims and other minorities in India affected by the Citizenship Amendment Act.³²³ The protesters called for the repeal of said Act, the National Register of Citizens and the release of detained protesters.

Movements for national liberation

National liberation continues to be an agenda in parts of the global South. Movements engaging in armed struggle in the Philippines, Palestine, India, Turkey, Colombia as well as in

West Papua and Kurdish movements in Rojava, continue until today.

In West Papua, one of the oldest organizations in the independence movement is the Free Papua Movement (OPM) which has a liberation army that engages in armed struggle against the

Box 5. People's actions amid COVID-19

The current COVID-19 pandemic revealed the cracks in the economic and political frameworks that have not protected peoples' right to health and workers' rights, aside from creating new cover for states to implement repressive measures. Thus, despite restrictions on movement, expressions of dissatisfaction and dissent were still seen in various countries.

Healthcare workers from the US, Spain to Bolivia held smaller actions during the first months of the pandemic in 2020, with common concerns regarding measures to protect health workers amid deaths of their colleagues.³²⁴ By April 2020, unionised nurses in 15 branches of private hospital chain HCA Healthcare condemned how the "wealthiest hospital corporation in the United States," with USD 23 billion profits in the last decade, has shown "disregard" for healthworkers.³²⁵ Workers for Amazon's Whole Foods launched a national refusal to come into work, dubbed a "sick-out," to demand paid leaves, free testing, and doubling of hazard pay amid lacklustre measures to protect the workers.³²⁶

In Bangladesh, the millions of workers in the garment industry are threatened with mass lay-offs as corporations' orders decline. In response, various unions have asserted that workers be paid during factory closures and for protective equipment.³²⁷ Campaigners have also called on big companies to bear responsibility for millions of garment workers in supply chains (who these corporations tap for cheap labour costs) by taking measures to ensure sick leaves and workers' wages despite quarantines.³²⁸

In Europe, workers' strikes broke out despite of, and because of, state and corporate response

to the health emergency. In Basque Country in northern Spain, a reported 5,000 workers of Mercedes Benz shut down a factory after they were forced to work amid possibilities of contracting COVID-19.³²⁹ In Italy, strikes were launched against similar corporate measures of making labourers work despite a nationwide lockdown, and a lack of basic protective equipment. Initially started by workers in various Fiat automobile factories, these strikes later spread to shipbuilders and steelworkers.³³⁰ Workers for Amazon in France also demanded to stop operations.³³¹

Outcry also emerged from state responses. Before the South Korean government was known for its pandemic response, citizens' displeasure actually erupted against Moon Jae-in administration's handling of the health crisis—with more than 1 million signing a petition for the President's impeachment in the country's official petition platform.³³²

In the Philippines, where the government response has primarily been movement restrictions without immediate mass testing and economic support, the President's remarks that he will order the shooting of quarantine "violators" has sparked outcry, including calls for the President's ouster. Amid threats of repression and the emerging de facto military dictatorship in the country, activists held protests against the controversial "Anti-Terrorism Act" that was railroaded in the legislature, with the law's loose and overbroad definition of "terrorism" likely to be used against dissenters. Hong Kong citizens also face similar predicaments and have protested over a national security law passed by China that criminalises dissent on the vague premise of "terrorism."³³³

Massive protests against racist violence and police brutality experienced by Black people took over the US following the killing of George Floyd, a 46-year old Black American by the police. In the protests which racked major US cities, more than 11,000 people have been arrested, 22 killed, and thousands more injured since the protests began in May 2020. Solidarity actions mostly led by Black people, migrants, and other minorities were held in Europe. Indigenous Peoples in West Papua and Australia also held solidarity actions as they experience similar racist violence from state forces.³³⁴

Continuing the waves of actions since late 2019, protests erupted anew in Lebanon³³⁵ in mid-2020 after the explosion of over 2700 tonnes of ammonium nitrate in Beirut which killed more than a hundred people and injured thousands.³³⁶ Protesters occupied several government ministries and The Banking Association to demand government

accountability over the Beirut blast as well as the country's worsening economic crisis. After the blast, and amid the protests against the political class, the government of the current Prime Minister resigned.³³⁷

In Thailand, a similar situation against the country's government—particularly its monarchy and former military junta leaders in power—has been ongoing since mid-2020 as the pandemic triggers brewing discontent from the country's economic and political situation. Protests as big as 10,000,³³⁸ with significant participation of students, were launched against longstanding laws that ban any criticism of the monarchy.³³⁹ The protests also call for dissolving the current government led by a former general who, protesters say, retained power via a rigged 2019 election after leading the military junta in power from 2014 to 2019.³⁴⁰ Activists have been arrested and face "sedition" charges.

Indonesian army and police in the rural areas where the big businesses operate. For armed organisations of the Kurdish people, in which women's participation and leadership remain crucial, the struggle remains to defend territories in Rojava as well as northeastern Syria, after the Turkish government launched late 2019 military attacks³⁴¹ against what they see as a Syrian extension of the Kurdistan Workers' Party active in Turkey.

Armed movements in the Philippines and India continue to oppose superpowers' domination, through allied governments, of economic, political and social life – which they argue has blocked development prospects for the people. Amid continuing military occupation in Palestine, with political and military support from the US, certain movements persist in taking up arms. Such forms of struggle in Colombia continue after the brokered peace deal which has, so far, not stopped killings of activists.

CONCLUSION

A genuine, people's "better normal" is at stake



Photo from Natacha Pisarenko/AP

Corporations, world powers, and elite-led states attempt to rescue the above-discussed status quo from collapse through an agenda of “recovery” and a refurbishing of today’s dominant paradigms. The current context of multiple crises, and the above-charted rise in people’s organised initiative in the last years, pose possibilities, which is also a challenge, for people’s movements and those engaged in working for development in the global South.

Sustained collective action by civil society, people’s organisations and movements, through their struggles, would be essential conditions to carve the path for systemic changes in international systems and in their respective countries. The possibilities of a break from neoliberalism, from the dominance of ultra-wealthy capital-owners and domestic elites, and *for* development paths led by and for the people, are at stake.

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