



Christian Conference of Asia – Webinar Series III

## Right to Health amidst the COVID-19 Crisis

### Concept Note

The enjoyment of the highest attainable standards of health should be one of the fundamental rights of every human being. The right to health for all people implies that everyone should have access to availservices to safeguard their health, whenever and wherever they may require it. There cannot be any losses of life simply because health services could not be accessed due to poverty.

The outbreak of the viral disease COVID-19, originally identified in December 2019 in Wuhan, China has escalated to the level of a global pandemic. The scale and severity of the COVID-19 pandemic now constitutes a public health threat. The growing COVID-19 crisis is not only a health crisis in the short term, but will leave devastating impacts on the socioeconomic lives of people for years to come.

Given that over fifty percent of the world's population has no access to social protection, the impacts are estimated to be manifold. Fragile health systems with under-resourced hospitals and basic medical care facilities are likely to be overwhelmed. This will be further exacerbated by a spike in cases and ultimately, loss of lives. A vast number of people in lesser-developed countries lack access not only to basic health care facilities and have fewer health workers, but also do not have living essentials such as potable water, soap, face masks, and sanitisers. If this persists, this pandemic will become a prolonged health crisis.

The right to health provides that health facilities, goods, and services should be:

- available in sufficient quantity;
- accessible to everyone without discrimination and affordable for all, even marginalised groups;
- acceptable, that is, respectful of medical ethics and culturally appropriate; and,
- scientifically and medically appropriate and of good quality.

### Human Rights and Human Dignity amidst COVID-19

There are various aspects of human rights related to health to be considered during this current situation. Some of the important highlights include:

**1. Right and correct information**

A rights-respecting response to COVID-19 needs to ensure that accurate and up-to-date information about the virus, access to services, service disruptions, and other aspects of the response to the outbreak are made available to all.

**2. Ensure quarantines, lockdowns, and travel bans comply with rights norms**

Restrictions such as mandatory quarantine or isolation of symptomatic people must, at a minimum standard, be ensured. When quarantines or lockdowns are imposed, authorities are obliged to ensure access to food, water, health care, and care-giving support. Many elderly people and people with disabilities rely on uninterrupted home and community services and support.

**3. Ensure protection of health workers**

Authorities have an obligation to minimise the risk of occupational accidents and diseases including ensuring workers have health information and adequate protective clothing and equipment. This means providing health workers and others involved in the COVID-19 response with appropriate training in infection control and with appropriate protective gear.

**4. Reduce stigma and discrimination, protect confidentiality**

People with infection or disease and their families have often faced discrimination and stigma during public health crises. Since the coronavirus outbreak, a number of cases of bias, racism, xenophobia, and discrimination against people especially of Asian descent have been documented and reported from different parts of the world. It should be ensured that response measures to COVID-19 do not target or discriminate against particular religious or ethnic groups, and that responses are inclusive of and respect the rights of marginalised groups, including people with disabilities, women, children, and elderly people.

**5. Ensure marginalised populations can access health care without discrimination**

All health care services related to COVID-19 are to be provided without stigma and discrimination of any kind and what should be made clear through public messaging campaigns is that everyone has the right to access health care. All services should be made available for migrants, undocumented workers, daily wagers and vulnerable populations. Governments should also ensure that financial barriers do not prevent people from accessing testing, preventive care, and treatment for COVID-19.

**6. Protect community and civil society organisations**

Civil society organisations should be recognised and supported in their work and efforts to stem the spread of the virus, as well as those assisting the infected and quarantined patients.

**7. Target economic relief to assist low-wage workers**

Social distancing, quarantine, and the closure of businesses may have enormous economic consequences. The most vulnerable people are low-wage workers in low-income households. Governments should create mechanisms so that workers affected by COVID-19 do not suffer loss of income that might deter them from self-isolating to contain the spread of the virus.

While right to health as a fundamental human right does not guarantee perfect health for all, it includes the government's duty to ensure health care for all. The state must take steps, especially economic and technical, to the maximum of its available resources, to progressively secure full realisation of health as a human right for all. Civil society and faith-based organisations have a role in ensuring that each state is held accountable to a practical expression of the concern for health equity and the right to health.

## **Purpose**

The Christian Conference of Asia (CCA) has been responding to the COVID-19 situation by encouraging member churches and councils to observe the Asia Sunday 2020 focusing on the theme of *'God, Heal Us, as We are Vulnerable'*. CCA also updates its information across Asia to understand the impact of the situation and also collate responses of the member churches and councils.

In order to understand the various challenges posed during this pandemic, CCA has invited experts from various Asian countries to discuss the impact on health as a fundamental human right for those affected by the pandemic. The main purpose is to understand how churches and faith communities in Asia can play a pivotal role in complementing the work of the government, and also to offer services related to health and humanitarian aid with their resources.

## Objectives

- To identify various ways in which churches in Asia can uphold the dignity and human rights of all God's people amidst the COVID-19 crisis; and,
- To sensitise churches and other faith-based organisations on strategies to respond to the pandemic within their resources and capacities.

## Panellists

1. **Dr Salil Panakadan**  
Asia Pacific Regional Advisor of UNAIDS Regional Support Team
2. **Stela Sacaliuc**  
Executive Officer of Asia and Pacific UNAIDS Regional Support Team
3. **Dr Priya John**  
Christian Medical Association of India (CMAI)
4. **Dr Daniel Budi Wobowo**  
Indonesian Christian Association of Health Services (PELKESI)
5. **Dr Prawing Euonontat**  
Medical Ministry of Church of Christ in Thailand (CCT)
6. **Prof. Chiao-Chicy Chen**  
Health and Healing Ministry of Presbyterian Church in Taiwan (PCT)
7. **Rev. Callum Tabada**  
Medical mission of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines (UCCP)

Moderator: Dr Mathews George, General Secretary, Christian Conference of Asia