

Editorial Introduction

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This special issue of the *Asian Review of Public Administration* Journal (2020-2023) features seven case studies on how different countries—Bangladesh, China, India, Nepal, South Korea, Vietnam, and the United States—handled the COVID-19 pandemic. Each author provides critical insights into their country’s approach, sharing unique experiences, best practices, and lessons learned. The articles examine the role of leadership and government structures in responding to the global pandemic, while others explore societal factors and intergovernmental relations that influenced governmental response to address the COVID-19 crisis.

Chinnala and Gankidi tackle the influence of government structures on interventions to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic in their paper titled, “Administrative Decentralization and Combating Covid-19: The Case of a South Indian State.” Using the case of Telangana, a relatively new region located in the Deccan Plateau that links north and south India, the authors argue that territorial decentralization has played a pivotal role in facilitating effective government response. They note how lower levels of government, which are usually seen as “deficient and grossly inadequate in responding to the needs of people” during normal times, transformed into a committed and functioning public service provider, albeit not without challenges, in the face of the pandemic. Over the long-term, the paper recommends restructuring the state’s development strategy that puts in place a system of universal health care; developing technologies to support people in diverse livelihoods; framing new legal regimes that can safeguard the natural resources and environment; redefining the education system; advancing a comprehensive industrial policy; and promoting townships to reduce the burden on cities and contain the spread of diseases.

Pokharel’s paper delves into the government’s experience in managing the pandemic through the prism of intergovernmental relations. In his article titled, “Surviving the Crisis: Making Intergovernmental Relations Strong for Fighting the Pandemic, Case from Nepal,” he identifies both the positive responses of local governments in fulfilling their accountability to the public and the critical gaps in Nepal’s intergovernmental relations. The paper highlights issues, such as deficient vertical and horizontal coordination and communication, discrepancies in funding allocation and COVID-19 caseload, and the absence of a post-recovery plan at all government levels. These shortcomings, as outlined in the article, resulted in ineffective crisis management and exacerbated the burden on the populace. Pokharel asserts that an effective pandemic management is “a function of adaptive leadership competency, healthcare system capacity, resource mobilization, existence of a crisis management strategy, and the ability to marshal the agencies.”

The third article, “Policy Responses to COVID-19 within the Context of SDGs: Experience from Local Governments in Vietnam,” critically examines the pandemic responses of three centrally controlled municipalities in Vietnam—Ha Noi, Ho Chi Minh City, and Da Nang—in the context of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Hue analyzes the

diverse approaches taken by these localities in response to the pandemic, noting that while the cities instituted early pandemic prevention and extensive public communication, the situation became more challenging as new variants of the virus evolved which required greater inter-governmental coordination. The article puts forth a package of recommendations for local government units in preparing for future outbreaks in a way that aligns with the SDGs. These recommendations include the following: strict adherence to national guidelines and policies; reinforcement of public information and healthcare initiatives; adaptive behavioral changes in response to mobility restrictions; and the implementation of community mitigation measures.

Wu and Xiong provide insights into China's initiatives toward work and production resumption, highlighting their profound impact on economic recovery. In their article, "Work Resumption and Employment Stabilization Measures against COVID-19: China's Experience," the authors expound on the effectiveness of China's economic and administrative measures in facilitating the resumption of work and production to pave the way for the country's quick economic turnaround over a relatively short period of time. The paper underscores China's first-mover advantage, exemplifying the nation's solidarity and perseverance in pandemic control, as well as its institutional advantage in efficiently mobilizing resources to contain the virus's spread in certain regions. These measures have proven to be effective in contributing to the country's economic growth amid crisis. To strengthen its economic position to withstand future disruptions, the authors assert that China should "take advantage of its huge market and strong manufacturing and institutional advantages, while seizing the opportunity to ensure strategic reserves and supply chain security."

Kwon, Lee and Hwang present a comprehensive analysis of South Korea's COVID-19 policy interventions in their paper, "Analyzing South Korea's COVID-19 Policy Strategy Using a Regression Discontinuity Research Design." The study adopts a quantitative approach in assessing the effectiveness of implemented interventions and their potential applicability in future pandemics. The article meticulously reviews South Korea's restriction policies, such as business closure, private gathering limits, and vaccine pass requirements. It advocates for a dual approach involving conventional restrictive measures coupled with the enhancement of digital capacities. The authors note that the "[e]ffective and smart ICT infrastructure and transparent big data tracing system of South Korea... [have provided] an excellent digital foundation" for the country's successes in managing the pandemic. This multifaceted strategy is posited as integral to effective disaster management, given the comparable nature of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The article by Chowdhury et al. focuses on the role of higher education institutions in knowledge creation and management of the COVID-19 crisis. Their paper titled, "Dilemmas of Policy Response during COVID-19 Pandemic: The Case of University of Rajshahi, Bangladesh," examines the challenges faced by a public university in ensuring learning and operations continuity in the middle of the public health crisis. The authors analyze these "dilemmas" from three lenses, namely, effectiveness, equity, and political acceptability, and unravel the contextual factors that affect continued higher education learning and teaching at the height of the pandemic. These include the socioeconomic background and psychological state of students, as well as the technological limitations

associated with conducting online teaching. They contend that given the challenges for digital learning in the tertiary education level, a “digitalization agenda” must be developed and implemented.

The last article looks into the experience of the United States. In their paper titled, “COVID-19 and Policy Failure in the United States: The ‘Inequality Virus’ and Practitioner Interaction with Social Inequity Challenges,” Knox and Entress offer a perspective that highlights the social equity dimension of the pandemic. Based on a survey data involving U.S.-based practitioner members of the American Society of Public Administration (ASPA), they contend that the pandemic has not only brought existing societal vulnerabilities to the forefront but has also exacerbated them, as manifested in widening economic gap, racial and ethnic disparities, and health inequities within the United States. The paper underlines that while the government acknowledges some interventions to address social equity, there is a need for further efforts in this domain, specifically noting that “public administration practitioners could benefit from a deeper understanding of social equity, historical inequities, how emergencies and crises can worsen social equity, the power of bureaucratic discretion, and how actions taken by public administrators can ultimately impact social equity.”

Collectively, the articles in this volume make for a rich resource that can inform scholarly and practitioner discourse on the role of public sector institutions in managing a global healthcare crisis. The country experiences contained in this special issue demonstrate how the pandemic has facilitated reforms at various tiers of governance, as organizations had to respond to a wide array of challenges that required urgent action. These perspectives should offer new dimensions for consideration in the future research agenda for public administration and governance in the Asia-Pacific region.