

PHILIPPINES

The Philippines is one of the four Southeast Asian countries where Voice is active.

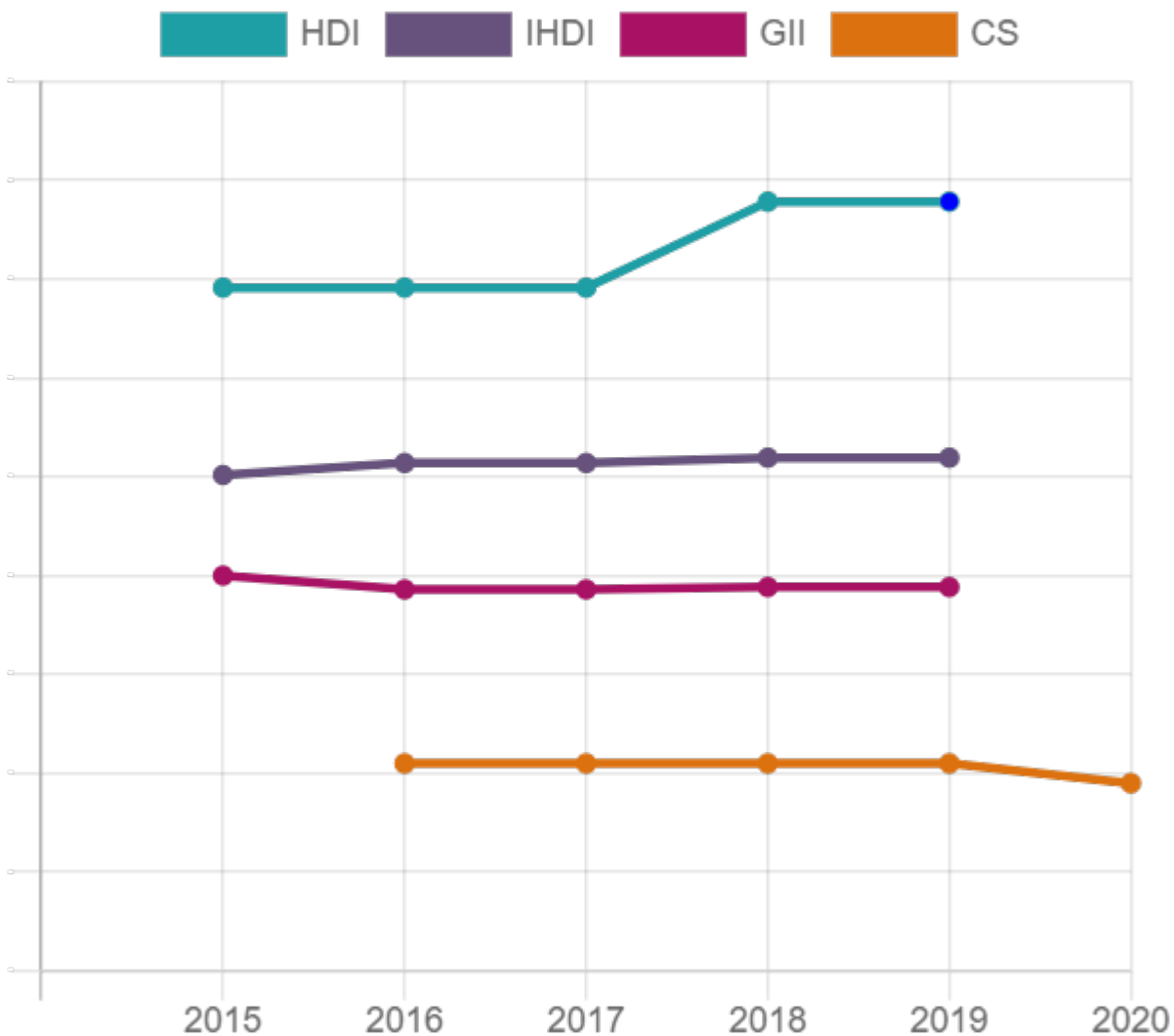
We live in a rapidly changing world – some changes may be for the better – others not so much. In order to continue to ground Voice in local lived realities, a country context analysis is organised every other year, engaging many stakeholders, grantees and rightsholders. The analysis is used to frame Calls for Proposals, to support the applications of grant-seekers and to advance the overall learnings. Below follows a summary of the exercise conducted in 2020, capturing the many views and perspectives of Filipinos.

The summary is structured by presenting the big picture and slowly but surely to zoom in on the voices and aspirations of the rightsholders and to zoom out again by sharing the way forward for Voice. This page can also be downloaded at the bottom of the page.

A full report and previous versions can be availed to you upon request. Please contact Philippines@voice.global

Zooming out

The big picture



Human Development Index (HDI)

The Human Development Index is an index that combines data on life expectancy, education, and per capita income to rank countries. The Philippines climbed 10 places in the HDI ranking since 2016. Unfortunately, the improvement is not felt by many rightsholders. Possibly, some other countries may have been experiencing worse, pushing the Philippines 10 places higher in the index.

Inequality-adjusted Human Development Index (IHDI)

The IHDI measures the human development cost of inequality, or the overall loss to human development due to inequality. The closer to 1 the more equal a society is. The IHDI can inform policies towards inequality reduction. Inequality has slightly reduced since 2016 but still disproportionately felt by women, elderly (especially during COVID-19) and indigenous people after the anti-terrorism law was passed. Those who are in geographically isolated and disadvantaged areas and urban poor areas also experience this more in terms of all Voice impact themes. In addition to this, stateless people and people in street situation experience worse.

Gender Inequality Index (GII)

The GII is an inequality index, measuring the human development costs of gender inequality economically, health- and education-wise. The closer to 0 the better. Despite having almost the same numbers between 2016 and 2020, gender inequality has observably worsened. This is as shared by the rightsholders and as can be surmised from various news, incidents, and situations involving women.

Civic Space (CS)

According to the independent Civicus Monitor which started in 2016, civic space continues to be obstructed in the Philippines. In June 2020, the Philippines has been placed on the Civicus Monitor Watchlist as a country with serious and rapid decline in respect for civic space. This is especially true for indigenous people.

Behind the numbers

The Philippines labels itself as a democratic and republican State whereby sovereignty is within the people. However, democratic backsliding continues to occur as repression and exclusion is perpetuated. Civic space is shrinking due to different forms of oppression, violence, and anti-poor directives. On the other hand, the public continues to rise and take their political space to push for rights and civil liberties. Campaigns from rightsholder groups continue to experience intermittent progress due to various barriers but their persistence remains. Economically, it is among the [fastest-growing in Asia](#) but has entered into a recession with the spread of the [COVID-19](#) pandemic.

Socio-cultural, political, and economic barriers continue to hamper the progress that has been made. The government, as duty-bearers, impose policies and actions that lead to cases of harassment and threats. [Human rights defenders \(HRDs\), vocal in their criticisms and dissent, are treated as enemies of the State or supporters of rebel groups.](#) Anti-poor programs and policies are continuously developed and implemented, which exacerbate social and economic marginalisation of the most vulnerable communities. Despite this condition, the public continues to rise and take their political space to push for their rights and civil liberties.

Political shifts

The online survey with grantee organisations revealed that 92% believe political spaces have opened up to a certain extent and opportunities to participate enabled some of them to occupy that space. However policies that hinder this progress continue to be implemented by the government. For example, the State passed into

law the Anti-Terrorism Bill which contains provisions that are broad or vague enough to suspect anyone, especially activists, as a terrorist.

With the free exchange of information, citizens become more involved in all matters concerning their welfare, and the government is forced to deliver and respond promptly and decisively. But it has to be noted that this responsiveness still varies among the government offices and institutions. Some local government units have more capacity and resources to respond, and in other cases it depends on the leadership/power relations.

The past years have shown an increased participation among the indigenous communities attributed to both their strengthened civic engagement and passage of the Republic Act. 8371 (IPRA) which aims to protect their rights as Indigenous People and Ethnic Minorities.

The country is also keen on implementing the international instruments it has ratified towards gender equality and gender justice. However, patriarchy as a systemic problem, together with the contradictory actions of country leaders, viciously hampers the fulfilment of provisions under these instruments.

The entire gamut of the government's development framework directly affects and influences the rightsholders' state of affairs. President Duterte's [Philippine Development Plan 2016-2022](#) includes a provision on *Malasakit* (Enhancing the Social Fabric) that guarantees people-centred, clean, and efficient governance; administration of swift and fair justice; and promotes greater awareness and respect for the diversity of cultures. These development tenets are crucial in achieving a more inclusive development for Filipinos yet current context suggests that the government is nowhere near in realising its commitment under the *Malasakit* pillar.

Economic shifts

The Philippines seemed to be swiftly growing economically before the recession happened. However, this economic growth has not translated into sufficient employment growth that is at the same time inclusive for women. There remains an income gap in terms of gender and other factors such as corruption, and government budget allocation priorities continue to affect this reality for all rightsholder groups.

In conversations with the rightsholder groups and their allies, they share that more employers are to be open to hire people with disabilities, especially the private sector. But it is noted that many, if not all, organisations/companies/institutions are still lacking inclusive policies and working environments. The lesbian, bisexual, and trans individuals, on the other hand, face multiple barriers due to their gender and sex at birth.

Social shifts

According to the online survey with Voice grantees, 82% of rightsholders expressed that they are able to strengthen their organisation and participation through consistent and concerted efforts by the communities and intermediary organisations in the form of capacity-strengthening, dialogues, and assistance. This is re-affirmed through conversations with the rightsholders themselves and their allies.

Previous gains of the women's movement are overshadowed by crude remarks and sexist jokes about women which are laughed-off by many. This increased cases of harassment against women and justified gender-based abuses.

Based on conversations with the LGBTI community, there is an increased social awareness and education on their rights as citizens and free individuals. This is exhibited by the presence of local anti-discrimination ordinances, local pride celebrations, and the increase of community-based organisations. With the support

from various social actors, the Elderly has increased recognition as a group that has a role in nation-building as well as having the capacity to fight for their rights and advocacies. The youth have also increased their participation and visibility and have occupied both online and offline spaces to share their ideas and voice out their concerns.

People with disability in the Philippines feel that their voices are heard more today than before as their capacity to persistently organise and advocate has increased. However, there needs further harmonisation in the efforts among the different disability groups.

(In)Visible power shifts

Women held only 29.1% of congressional seats. In spite of this low representation in the Philippine Congress, there is an undeniable, visible increase in the number of women's rights advocates and transformative feminist leaders. For women, leadership transcends from being individual-based (e.g. number of occupied government seats) to family/community/society-based.

The LGBTI community has evidently developed stronger political power. Their immense contribution to social development is now recognised compared to previous perspectives, which were hyper-focused on their creativity. More so, a number have found their way into political and policy offices.

Covid-19

According to the Voice rightsholder groups, the pandemic aggravated the already obstructed civic space and exposed the most vulnerable rightsholders in the country. Spaces for political participation and engagement have mostly migrated online, especially through different social media platforms.

The government issued COVID-19 guidelines that made it more challenging for the rightsholders to access basic needs and rights and to move forward with their advocacies. Mobility restrictions and physical distancing posed by the government is observed— a practice that is very new and has been unfavourable to most people, affecting their welfare in general.

Domestic abuse and violence against women, elderly, children, and LGBTI people (all may or may not have disabilities) were more rampant as they were forced to stay with their perpetrators, while having very limited or no access to support and development services. Loss of income is another major challenge faced and accessing basic social services remain difficult.

The shifts exhibited above could be primarily attributed to the long-standing power struggle and resistance of communities. In relation to these shifts, a key player is information and technology. With the free exchange of information, citizens become more involved in all matters concerning their welfare, and the government is forced to deliver and respond promptly and decisively. With the rapid technological advancement and health scare brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, it can be surmised that this trend will continue in the foreseeable future.

Rightsholders and NGOs/CSOs started to re-strategise their plans and learn to access technology more than the usual, while keeping in sight their goals. Many hope to start communities of practice online to encourage learning and reflection, to continue their service, and to innovatively break the social barriers that the pandemic exacerbated.

Zooming in

Voices behind the picture

Despite an increasing visibility of **vulnerable elderly and youth** the interplay of power among government instrumentalities weaken meaningful youth participation.

At the same time, the biggest challenge for the Elderly is having the capacity to sustain this movement beyond external stakeholder support. The COVID-19 pandemic led to a decrease in Elderly participation given the higher health risks and unfamiliarity with technology, not to mention the costs and lack of internet infrastructure in some areas.

Youth lack access to financial streams to fund their ideas, making it challenging for them to get organised, be formally registered, and have the capacity to sustain their organisation.

Within the communities of **Indigenous people and ethnic minorities**, women experience underrepresentation in the decision-making bodies and participation in certain processes such as the Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) remain weak. The security risks faced by indigenous communities in relation to the defence of their ancestral lands come from both the [State and profit-oriented corporations](#) that operate without careful consideration of the indigenous communities and their customs.

As indigenous Human Rights Defenders (HRDs) and their communities continue to face red-tagging, it becomes difficult for them to get the full support of the national government.

According to different local **LGBTI** organisations, there is a notion that the direction of the movement is largely guided by middle class, urban-based organisations, thereby lacking reflections on the actual situations of the urban poor and those in rural areas.

For the LGBTI community, one of the major risks is the non-existence of national laws and policies in relation to their welfare.

People in power tend to go for compliance rather than commitment to existing laws concerning **People with Disabilities** and the Elderly rather than extend programs and services based on pressing needs of the communities.

Collaborating with the private sector is relatively easier for the people with disabilities due to the Expanding the Positions for Persons with Disabilities Act (Republic Act 10524) which gives incentives to private corporations who employ them. However, it must be noted that their idea of being disability-responsive varies.

The situation of **Women facing exploitation, abuse and/or violence** within the women's movement shows some positive changes, unfortunately accompanied by new challenges. Conflicts arise in setting the women's overall agenda due to existing tensions between women groups with different ideologies in the male-centred Bangsamoro culture. Yet, indigenous women have stepped up and shown their leadership in relief work and the documentation of rights violations.

Also, some women's groups are taking a more progressive perspective by recognising sex work as an acceptable means of generating income. However, this poses a conflict within the movement as a majority still views sex work as prostitution and as a by-product of poverty and exclusion.

Their aspirations

Despite challenges, **the Elderly** continue to envision ageing as a recognised intersectional concern. The Elderly also aspire to develop second-liners who will continue to push forward their advocacy through intergenerational transfer and dialogue initiatives. Furthermore, elderly citizens in the Philippines aspire to have the Universal Social Pension available.

The youth, on the other hand, expressed the need for further recognition of their talents and skills, and increased support in actualising their innovative ideas.

While **indigenous peoples** continue to defend their ancestral lands and push for their rights to self-determination and the recognition of their customs and tradition.

Ultimately, **LGBTI people** aim to have the SOGIE (Sexual Orientation Gender Identity and Expression) Equality Bill passed as a law. Within their community, they have also started to develop a more intersectional lens to raise the awareness of the general public that SOGIE equality is not just for the LGBTI community.

The vision of the community of **People with Disabilities** centres on the harmonisation of efforts and initiatives of the different disability groups. They continue to dream of recognition of their abilities, especially of groups far left behind such as women and children with disabilities, those with intellectual/psychosocial disabilities and the hard of hearing group.

Women's groups remain strong despite setbacks from the government's leanings. To tackle these setbacks, they aspire for further solidarity not just within the women's community but with other rightsholders.

Zooming out

Fostering change

This update reflects progress and new and pervasive challenges within and among the rightsholder groups. These opportunities and barriers set by the economic, socio-cultural, political, and health conditions can be faced through innovative thinking, mutual empowerment, and meaningful collaborations. This is where Voice can come in— by encouraging the rightsholder groups and their key allies to reflect more deeply on how transformative change can be brought about based on their current conditions and previous gains and/or setbacks.

Moving forward to the next phase, Voice in the Philippines is keen on the following:

- Strengthening the organisational capacity of community-based organisations, especially of groups identified as far left behind— stateless people, those who are in a street situation, the lesbian, bisexual, trans individuals, and intersex people, women workers in exploitative situations, the hard-of- hearing groups and people with intellectual and/or psych-osocial disabilities.
- Calls for proposals (CfPs) responding to two umbrella challenges: 1) the discriminatory and oppressive leanings of the government which threaten the legal rights and public image of CSOs; and 2) the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Voice rightsholder groups. Specifically, there will be a focus on new Influencing CfPs on intersectionality regarding the upcoming 2022 elections and migration.
- Empowerment CfPs will be a space for the aforementioned groups far left behind and Innovate & Learn grants will explore inclusive economic opportunities, online-offline advocacy approaches, and budget-based storytelling.
- Increasing regional engagements through Innovation Labs and by fostering cross-country learning

exchanges. Emerging themes are around indigenous women's struggles and the development of inclusive social enterprises.

- Strengthening of its Linking & Learning component, increasing support for more intersectional efforts and collaborations within and outside the context of Voice in the Philippines. To do so, there is a need for more mapping out potential links and harnessing more meaningful engagements. These are to be done through more responsive outreach initiatives and by developing more defined communities of practice.
- Working further on grassroots stake-building as a strong entry point for sustained advocacy. This can be done through alliance building efforts, and perhaps the development of inclusion champions.

Developing (further) the intersectional lens among the different rightsholder groups will significantly change the way the civil society analyse and respond to opportunities and challenges. It is important to explore with the rightsholders how we can transcend silos together, ensuring that their collective voice becomes louder and their demands heard better.