

# COVID-19: EveryWoman's Feminist Response and Recovery Plan

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Edited by  
Sylvia Estrada Claudio





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# Foreword

Teresita Quintos Deles

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If anyone had told us a year ago that EveryWoman would be publishing a book before the year 2020 was over, we would have simply brushed it off. While I am sure that, collectively, EveryWoman convenors had enough ready material to fill a book or more, a book project was simply not within our list of priorities – not while there were so many scandals and issues that were popping up that we had to call out and protest almost on a weekly basis.

EveryWoman, a coalition of women’s organizations and formations (currently numbering eleven), combined with individual women affiliates and backed up by a FaceBook Page (with more than 100,000 followers), was formally organized in August, 2017, for the purpose of defending democracy and upholding women’s rights and dignity at a time when these are under severe attack not only in the Philippines but globally. We had come together, cutting across diverse socio-economic, ethnic, professional, ideological, and generational backgrounds, to propel organized pushback against the further erosion of civic (also civil) space and of the status and rights that Filipino women have fought hard to attain and have won over the years. As such, our actions in the past years have tended towards the loud and dramatic – in the streets, in public fora, in stinging public statements, often joining our voice with those of our allied Hubs in Tindig Pilipinas. A book had no space in our crowded blueprint for 2020.

But then the COVID-19 pandemic happened. As with everyone else, EveryWoman’s world was turned upside down. Needing to get back our bearings – personally, organizationally, politically – we started discussions to try to understand the situation better, including the nature of this global health crisis, how it was affecting different aspects of our national life, how it was especially reshaping women’s lives on the ground, how government was responding (or not), the role of the private sector and other institutions, the plight of ordinary citizens. We probed our own areas of work and engagement. We invited friends and colleagues where we needed help. We saw it to be our responsibility to continue to surface and strengthen women’s perspectives and agency in these difficult and extraordinary times. And, thus, this book was born, emerging from every woman talking to each other and claiming our space to speak up and be heard, intent to make a difference – especially since we saw no women at the frontlines of the national task force set up by the President to respond to the crisis.

We held the online discussions on which the chapters of the book were based from April to June of this year, even as we continued to discuss COVID-19 issues in our weekly Saturday Zoom meetings and managed to run a second season of our weekly Usapang Everywoman, live streamed on our FB page. All chapters and vignettes were submitted by the end of October. Unfortunately for the book, however, our lives had returned to full drive – with work-from-home requiring more time

and energy, plus new forms of protest to mark continuing opposition to past and present abuse of power, and new modes of home-based and digital multi-tasking that the pandemic has made even more burdensome for women. Post-writing production work took more time than we had initially targeted.

The book is not as current as we had hoped it to be. The atmosphere appears calmer now than the time when we first struggled with the new communications technologies as well as with the daily doses of incompetence and arrogance from those in charge in the face of a threat more dangerous, insidious, unknown than any we had ever encountered before. With some exceptions, we all know a little better now how to take care of ourselves. The Philippines is exhibiting some improved numbers or indicators, but none of them are really good, many are reversible, and some will haunt the country perhaps beyond our lifetimes.

While some content of the book may have lost currency, much remains relevant and some of it will be true for all time. We offer this book as a record of these times, an insight into things that went (or are still going) wrong, a lesson or proposed framework on how to do better even now, an assertion of a feminist framework that must never be cast aside or sidelined if we aspire for a fairer, kinder, more mindful world and the "better normal" that we aspire to emerge into when this darkness is over.

Please read, reflect, be provoked, act!

# Introduction

Sylvia Estrada Claudio

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This paper began, as with many feminist projects, from a collective desire. During conversations in the coalition group EveryWoman, the women’s hub of the national formation *Tindig Pilipinas*, there was a repeated expression that aspects of gender need to be brought to the fore in the framing of any effective response and recovery work on the COVID-19 pandemic. From the start, we had no intention of sticking only to what could clearly be labeled as that concerning women. Rather, we wanted to come up with a plan that spoke to all the general and fundamental actions necessary to a comprehensive response. A plan that integrated the needs and the agency of women and other marginalized groups.

Those of us who decided to continue the conversation in a more organized series of chats wear many hats, academics, being just one of these. We come from various social sectors and work backgrounds and range in ages from senior citizens to young adults.

This paper is the result of that series of talks where those with more expertise in one area would take the lead in our discussions. Where the group felt the need for input beyond our expertise, we invited resource persons.

As social movement actors, most members of the group have been involved in development work for women and continued to work even during the height of the extreme lockdown imposed by the Philippine government. It is from this work that we also draw our recommendations. Thus, we have included a few vignettes from the experiences of women in our coalition to illustrate our viewpoints, guiding ethics, and recommendations.

We began our discussions by talking about common agreements. From general principles, we came up with sectoral or thematic areas which eventually became the chapters of this book.

## General Principles

1. It is time to value care work properly both in terms of its quantifiable contributions to the productive and reproductive economy but also as a basic human good.

As feminists, we view the economy as composed of 2 spheres: the productive and reproductive. Much of the formal study of economics has centered on the “productive” economy—that which produces goods and services that people pay for: and in capitalist systems, generates profit and competition. There is, however, another sphere of economic activities that fulfills human needs and, in this sense, generates value in capitalist systems and

in other economic systems other than capitalism. These are the activities of reproduction. These activities have also been called acts of “social provisioning” and the purview of the economy that ensures social provisioning has also been called the “care economy”.

Current feminist approaches note that the care economy or the reproductive sphere is not totally autonomous from the productive sphere. Rather, while these can be seen as separate moments in the economic life of our country, they are, however, very much interlinked.

Reproduction includes, of course, the reproduction of human beings – childbirth, breastfeeding, and child care. These activities are exclusively and mostly done by women. Throughout human history such activities have been fundamental to all social systems including economic systems. Although, we contend that even these seemingly natural activities are subject to historical processes.

However, reproduction goes beyond child care. For example, women’s care or reproductive work also has traditionally extended to the care for and reproduction of natural resources. This continues to be true in many farming areas where women continue to take on the task of the reproduction of inputs like seeds but also in the lives of indigenous communities.

For feminist theories, the reproductive economy is about the reproduction of everyday life (including the reproduction of labor power). Here we refer to the tasks of cooking, cleaning, laundry, bodily, sexual, and emotional care that is done at home for free and mostly by women.

We have noted that these activities are vital to the daily reproduction of labor power and should properly be seen as an “input” to the production process. However, the ideology of domesticity pervades even the productive, paid economy because women continue to be given the jobs of “caring” and “routine maintenance” such that they predominate in lowly paid service, clerical, and domestic worker jobs.

The health care system which is at the forefront of the battle for human survival at this time is a clear example of the interlinked nature of reproductive and productive activities. Health provision encompasses the care given to families at home, the unpaid work of community health workers, and the formal health care system. We might add that ideologies of domesticity that tie reproductive work to women ensure that all levels of the health care system are dominated by women.

Similarly, education, the transmission of values and culture which starts at home and ends in institutes of higher learning, is dominated by women. In both systems, as in other areas of productive life, ideologies of gender keep top positions and higher pay as male privileges even if women are doing much of the work.

Even while the term “economic decline” is the catchword for the current national and global economic situation, as feminists we note that this pertains more to the productive

economy. That which has been called the “care economy” or the “reproductive economy” is in overdrive as many remain locked in their homes. Because of the almost universal unequal division of home labor, women are spending even more hours in maintaining families through food provisioning, child-rearing, home education, and keeping homes safe.

At the same time, secretaries, clerks, and other administrative workers are running enterprises such as schools from their kitchen tables as even these vital functions cannot be dispensed with. Again, women predominate in these jobs.

Women in vulnerable situations are even more overworked as decreasing income flows, access to basic services, and increases in domestic violence are pushing them and their children to the brink.

Two chapters are dedicated to the concept of protecting women. One on social protection argues for a broad conceptualization of protection and argues that systems are in place to meet these broader concepts and needs.

A response and recovery plan should be based on a proper valuation of care work at home. Actions should ensure not only that this is valued but also that these result in more gender balance in care work, especially at home.

2. No austerity measures must be imposed at this time and in the recovery period after the pandemic.

Historically, austerity measures that typically reduce public spending for social services have differentially affected the women, the poor, and other marginalized groups. A COVID-19 response must take cognizance of the social determinants of ill health and well being. Any further threat to social security is counterproductive to ending the pandemic.

Indeed as the chapter on social protection argues a broader conceptualization of protection is necessary and systems can be put in place to meet these broader concepts and needs.

The chapter on economic recovery, in this regard, agrees with this, arguing for more spending rather than less in order to prevent a deeper economic downturn and ensure inclusive economic recovery.

3. Equity framework. Poverty and marginalization affect women in different ways and are multifocal and multi-layered. Any feminist plan must look at various vulnerabilities and target the most vulnerable sectors such as

- Indigenous peoples
- Elderly women
- Disabled
- Returning migrant workers especially women

Women workers including women in the peasant sector  
Women in the informal economy  
Women with disabilities  
Young women and children

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, care work also had race and class dimensions as evidenced by the worldwide migration of women who do reproductive work in the homes of wealthier locales whether within or across national boundaries. As the chapter on migration suggests, the COVID-19 pandemic has made inequities in this area even more stark. It is particularly cogent for a country like the Philippines, the economy of which is dependent on remittances from its foreign workers because it is one of the top sending countries for labor migrants.

Our chapter on the environment and indigenous peoples discusses the nexus between women of this sector and their relationship to their indigenous lands and environments. It shows how indigenous women have been adversely affected before and during the pandemic. And how discriminatory practices worsened during the pandemic, this placing the women, their families, and their communities in greater danger.

4. Social cohesion and community resilience are key values that are proving to be the keys to the response of the COVID-19 epidemic as we begin to see solidarity contributions for all sectors and at various levels including stirring stories of individual generosity. It is this that has proven more effective in mustering a response than government efforts so far.

This must be reinforced and heightened as we move forward towards ending and recovering from the COVID-19 epidemic.

It is women who keep the social fabric of the community, another part of what we call the care economy as community structures must be kept functional for social provisioning. Concretely, women do much of what we call "community work" which again is often voluntary. It is also women who are adversely affected when this social fabric breaks down due to calamities.

The chapter on security argues for a reorientation of the security sector to include protection not just in the traditional spheres of law and order. It goes on to argue for a human rights and humanitarian orientation in the conduct of national security and the state forces mandated to ensure these.

5. Human rights framework. All actions, programs, and policies need to uphold, respect, and fulfill human rights including the human rights of women.

One common theme pervades all chapters. That a militarist response to COVID-19 has led to human rights violations that are counterproductive. The converse is also true, that rights-based responses actually make sense, can be done, and are effective.

## 6. Heightened comprehensive relief.

Relief efforts should not be neglected at this time. Special areas of concern are food security, the rise of gender-based violence, human rights violations by police forces in imposing quarantine restrictions, the diminution of sexual and reproductive health services and mental health services, increasing malnutrition. However, there is also a need to empower women with massive community-based education that capacitates them to keep themselves and their families safe and healthy in the light of new conditions.

## 7. Good governance is crucial to response and recovery for all of society but specially for the most vulnerable.

Women need trustworthy and caring leadership that is transparent and truthful. Governments need to recognize the contribution and provide mechanisms of cooperation with social movements, civil society organizations, and people's organizations and include women's groups as a special area of emphasis.

In the end, these recommendations are the best of what social movements can do in a democratic society: provide critiques where government needs to be held accountable, make practical suggestions based on grounded experience, and advocate for more global responses that are the purview of government.

Thus, at the end of each chapter are recommendations that can be undertaken by various social actors but can make a real difference in the lives of our people if taken up by a responsive government.



# 1 Economy

## Designing and Funding a COVID-19 Recovery For All<sup>1</sup>

*Zy-za Nadine N. Suzara*

### **Economic misery at an all-time high**

The Philippine economy has tanked, and economic misery is at an all-time high due to the global outbreak of the coronavirus. The Philippines is officially in recession as gross domestic product contracted 16.5 percent in the second quarter of 2020 (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2020). Economists say this recession is the worst downturn since World War II, and the Philippines recorded the second worst growth performance in the ASEAN region in the second quarter of the year.

Such is the impact of the strict lockdown imposed by the government way back in March. Despite three months of a highly securitized lockdown – one of the longest in the world – the Philippines has failed to bring down the number of cases per day unlike our Southeast Asian neighbors. The failure to control the outbreak has negatively impacted the country's socio-economic

situation. Hunger, unemployment, and drop-out rates in schools all worsened in the midst of the pandemic.

Consumption and investment spending have both plummeted, with services and industry suffering the steepest decline. Fortunately, agriculture recorded some growth despite the long stretch of the lockdown. This economic decline which practically erased the country's economic gains in the past five years coincides with the massive drop in mobility in the Philippines. Quite predictably, this drop in mobility has led to business closures and consequently, record-high unemployment.

The Department of Trade and Industry reported that about 26 percent of firms closed down as of June 2020, and only 22 percent remain fully operational (Philippine News Agency, 2020b). As firms shut down, the country likewise saw record-high 17.7

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter is based on a collaborative research and analysis done by the author with Luis Abad, JC Punongbayan, and colleagues at the Institute for Leadership, Empowerment, and Democracy (iLEAD). Luis Abad is chair of the iLEAD Board while JC Punongbayan sits as a board member.

percent unemployment in April. As many as 7.34 million Filipinos were unemployed during that period (PSA, 2020a). Although the unemployment rate declined to 10 percent in July, this figure still translates to a whopping 4.6 million unemployed Filipinos (PSA, 2020c). Even then, this grim figure hides the uptick in underemployment since the lockdown was imposed. Job losses were likewise seen across sectors. Services and industry shed the most number of jobs.

Adding to the domestic unemployment situation are the number of jobless OFWs who are continuously being repatriated from host countries. Since May, about 140,000 OFWs have already been repatriated according to the Department of Labor and Employment (2020), and about 600,000 more have been seeking government assistance to be able to return home. Based on a survey conducted by the Social Weather Station, hunger has also skyrocketed. Meanwhile, a study conducted by the Philippine Institute for Development Studies says in a scenario where everyone is on the receiving end of a 10 percent decrease in income, the number of poor Filipinos could increase by 5.5 million, absent government support (Albert et al., 2020).

### **Misguided assumptions about economic recovery**

With the lifting of quarantine restrictions, the economic managers seem convinced that the economy can immediately bounce back as soon as it resumes its infrastructure development program. But this belief is misguided as the pandemic affected the country's main growth drivers. Confidence of citizens and businesses is critical in refueling the economy, and this confidence lies in the government's ability to effectively contain the outbreak and to boost healthcare capacities.

While testing capacity in the country has increased over the last six months, the thousands of new cases per day only show the failure of the government to control transmission – a reality that does nothing but dampen confidence among ordinary citizens and businesses. As such, mobility data suggest that despite the easing of quarantine restrictions, Filipinos still do not go out for fear of contracting the virus at a time when hospital capacity is bursting at the seams and incomes have declined.

This lack of confidence will continue to impact on consumption. What's worse, the decline in OFW remittances has also left a dent on domestic consumption as 15 percent of it is directly dependent on remittances. How soon OFWs can bounce back is still uncertain.

Apart from the decline in consumption, the contributions of exports and foreign direct investments to growth have both been anemic even before the coronavirus outbreak. Export growth momentum for both goods and services has been stunted since 2017. It has also dropped to a negative level during the lockdown. Meanwhile, foreign direct investments have also been steadily falling for the past three years and will likely worsen due to COVID-19.

As consumption plummeted and exports and investments have not been stellar, non-performing loans have been rising. In July, BSP Governor Benjamin Diokno said the BSP has released a total of Php1.3 trillion into the financial system. But the impact of monetary policy actions also seems limited due to the slowdown in bank lending. BSP has also observed a slowdown in bank lending during that quarter due to tightening of bank lending standards. Bank lending has in fact been at its lowest in more than a decade.

Nonetheless, the BSP is clearly looking after banks, but who is looking after households?

### **Inadequate fiscal response**

Governments around the world have launched their economic aid and stimulus packages to support both businesses and households in this time of crisis. Unfortunately, even if the national government did the same, the scale and speed of fiscal response has failed to rise to the challenge.

In April 2020, Congress passed the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act (Bayanihan 1). Bayanihan 1 authorized President Duterte to reallocate, reprogram, and realign funds in the 2019 and 2020 General Appropriations Acts. This law essentially allowed Duterte and his Cabinet to recast the existing budgets to be able to effectively respond to the pandemic.

Bayanihan 1 gave them the flexibility to channel resources into ramping up mass testing, contact tracing, and increasing healthcare capacity. It also enabled Duterte to provide emergency cash subsidies to cushion the economic impact of the lockdown on the poorest and most critically affected sectors of society.

Latest reports of the Department of Budget and Management show that a total of Php398 billion was reallocated for the pandemic response. A large portion of this reallocated budget was used to fund the Social Amelioration Program (n.d.a). The amount may seem huge, but Ph398 billion is a tiny fraction of the combined total of the 2019 and 2020 budgets, which is Php3.78 trillion and Php4.1 trillion (DBM, n.d.b), respectively. This corresponds to only 10 percent of the 2020 General Appropriations Act.

In his late-night addresses, President Duterte has been saying the government does not have money to respond to the crisis. The Bureau of the Treasury's report shows otherwise, but his economic managers insist on pursuing fiscal prudence in the face of the Philippines' worst economic crisis in recent history. Thus, the recently signed Bayanihan to Recover as One Act or Bayanihan 2 was kept at a level of only Php165.5 billion.

A total of Php40.5 billion will fund health-related expenditures, and another Php40 billion will be provided as increased capitalization for the Landbank of the Philippines and the Development Bank of the Philippines (DBM, n.d.c). The rest of the expenditure items are assistance programs for sectors such as tourism, transportation, agriculture, and higher education. Bayanihan 2 does not have any allocation for another round of emergency cash subsidies like the Social Amelioration Program. It also does not include sufficient funding support for the public education system's shift to distance learning which started in October.

Like Bayanihan 1, Bayanihan 2 is also not a supplemental appropriations law. The expenditure items identified by Congress will only be funded through reallocations and/or realignments within the 2020 General Appropriations Act. Essentially, the government is still operating on a budget crafted a year before the pandemic opened our way of life.

Second quarter GDP losses amount to an estimated Php700 billion. For all intents and purposes, Bayanihan 2 is a disproportionately small package compared to the economic losses and wide-scale suffering of ordinary citizens.

## **Fiscal response is key, but proposed budget ill-prepared**

Unless confidence among businesses and households is fully restored, it is unlikely that drivers of growth like consumption, remittances, exports, and FDIs will pick up. Thus, an effective and inclusive fiscal response is key to restoring confidence and driving recovery. The 2021 national budget is crucial in all of this.

As the national budget is the most important tool for economic recovery, Duterte's economic managers and Congress should get this budget right. It should deliberately address the socio-economic impacts of the pandemic. But analysis done by the Institute for Leadership Empowerment and Democracy shows that the Php4.5 trillion 2021 National Expenditure Plan (NEP) – the President's Budget, as it is called – fails to consider the "new normal" as funding priorities have remained unchanged. The 2021 Proposed Budget is structured in a way that is similar to the Duterte administration's pre-COVID-19 budget proposals.

During the Senate Development Budget Coordination Committee hearing, the economic managers said the 2021 NEP is anchored on a three-pronged strategy called "Reset, Rebound, Recover." The plan rests on 1) responding to the pandemic, 2) reviving infrastructure development, and 3) adapting to the post-pandemic life. This appears to be a cohesive strategy, but upon examining specific allocations for health and recovery programs, more money will be provided for infrastructure, as if economic recovery depends solely on supposed multiplier effects of infrastructure.

With a Php1.1 trillion of the fiscal space carved out for infrastructure (DBM, n.d.c.), the budget does not seem to consider the fact

that nearly all sectors of the economy were badly hit by the pandemic, and are thus in need of adequate aid and stimulus from the government. This fixation on infrastructure over health spending in the midst of a global pandemic would do little to improve the capacity of our public healthcare system.

There may be a component of the strategy for responding to the pandemic, but surprisingly, the budget of the Department of Health will be cut from a total of Php181 billion to only Php127 billion next year. Php181 billion corresponds to its original budget level in the 2020 General Appropriations Act and the top-ups it received under Bayanihan 1 and 2. There will no longer be significant allocations for personal protective equipment (PPEs), test kits, and other medical supplies and equipment even if the pandemic would likely continue to rage on.

Other equally important health programs also suffered cuts such as Human Resources for Health and epidemiology, surveillance, quarantine and international health surveillance, national reference laboratories, and local health systems. The budget for health information technology was also slashed to only 8 percent of its 2020 budget level.

How can the government effectively respond to the pandemic when DOH funds suffered a 27 percent cut and budgets for COVID-19 expenditures are so little? There is only Php1 billion for testing kits and only Php2.7 billion for vaccines. Assuming that a vaccine becomes available for purchase in 2021 and PTIC can frontload the cost of procuring the vaccines, won't the DOH need funds for rolling out a vaccination program?

Rather than beefing up the health budget and improving healthcare systems,

Duterte's economic managers continue to tout Build, Build, Build, as the swiftest, and most reliable vehicle for the recovery of all sectors of the economy. Yet, only when the threat of COVID-19 subsides will economic activity resume, and so much depends on the ability to control transmission.

It is quite disturbing to find that as opposed to the health budget, the budgets of the Department of Public Works and Highways and Department of Transportation – Office of the Secretary, grew 51 percent and 39 percent respectively. The total proposed budget for DPWH is Php666 billion (DBM, n.d.c). Except for one major program, all other major budget items of the department increased. These include the budget for its bridge program, flood management program, network development program.

For 2021, the total proposed budget of the DOTr is Php129 billion. Budget items that increased are mainly those allocated for its railway projects, payment of right-of-way, and its subsidy for MRT 3. The ones that suffered marginal cuts are the budgets for its aviation and maritime infrastructure program.

Without a doubt, the Duterte administration intends to go on an infrastructure spending binge next year. This would have been an appropriate response if the Philippines was ravaged by war or a massive natural disaster. Obviously, that is not the case. What the government must consider rebuilding is not just infrastructure capital, but the country's human capital. The global pandemic has left millions of Filipinos sick, hungry, jobless, and on the verge of slipping back to poverty.

The 2021 Proposed Budget alarmingly does not provide enough aid for Filipinos even

when economic misery is at an all-time high. Misplaced fiscal prudence is most evident in the budgets of the Department of Social Welfare and Development, Department of Labor and Employment, Department of Trade and Industry, and the Department of Tourism.

There will be no more additional cash transfers in the DSWD budget next year. No significant additions were provided as well to the department's existing welfare programs. In the budgets of DOLE, DTI, and DOT, one finds that there is even less assistance for displaced workers and MSMEs even as 26 percent of firms have already shut down (DTI, 2020), and exports and FDI have been lackluster in the past three years. Key programs of the Department of Trade and Industry such as MSME development program, industry development program, exports and investment development program have all suffered budget cuts. Oddly, DOT's branding campaign budget will receive some increase despite uncertainty in tourism arrivals.

Where else did the increases go?

Apart from infrastructure, the pet departments of President Duterte will receive substantial funding increases. The PNP budget will increase by about Php3 billion to Php190.5 billion next year, while the AFP budget will increase from Php186.2 billion this year to Php203.3 billion next year (DBM, n.d.b., n.d.c.). AFP retirees are also set to receive payment of pensions that the national government owes. The large increase in the Pension and Gratuity Fund is largely due to payment of pension arrearages of the military.

Moreover, a lump sum fund amounting to Php16.4 billion pesos was also set aside for the

National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (DBM, n.d.c), prompting Sen. Franklin Drilon to question Budget Secretary Wendel Avisado if insurgency is a bigger threat than hunger and unemployment.

That Php16.4 billion could have been allocated to better support the public education system's shift to distance learning, or to provide some subsidy to millions of public school students who were forced to drop-out following the lockdowns. Amid this shift, the Department of Education's operations budget for schools nationwide was cut by about Php8 billion from about Php36 billion this year to only Php27 billion next year. The budget for education service contracting was also cut by nearly Php10 billion, despite the appeals of private schools to provide a little support in this time of crisis.

Duterte's administration appears deaf to the plight of the grassroots – to the parents, students, and teachers who have all appealed for various forms of government support to make distance learning work for the students.

### What a COVID-19 Recovery Budget must look like

As it is, the 2021 NEP appears to be no

different from the Duterte administration's pre-pandemic strategy. It's more of the same, displaying the same lack of imagination. But the 2021 Budget presents an opportunity to recalibrate policies and policy directions. What should these priorities be?

First, the 2021 Budget should prioritize the mitigation of COVID-19 transmission. This can only be done by providing adequate funding that would boost our health systems.

Second, the 2021 Budget should go beyond a singular focus on infrastructure spending. The fiscal space must be reallocated to beef up programs that would aid those whose lives and livelihoods have been severely affected by the pandemic.

Third, since the government will be the key driver of growth in the medium-term, it should address longstanding problems of the bureaucracy such as underspending, procurement delays, and other technical deficiencies.

It is not too late. There may still be hope but only if Congress rises to the challenge.

### Livelihood/Supply Chain

*Lot Ortiz-Luis*

I've known Mercy for five years. She is 45 and married for over 20 years. She and her husband Joe both reached high school. Her family is still part of the thousands of urban poor families but they have been working their way up past the poverty line. Joe used to drive a delivery van for a *matadero* — a company that distributes

fresh pork to markets/outlets. They have five children, with the two older girls reaching college with the help of scholarships that Mercy creatively sourced. The oldest has graduated and has been able to help a little with the family expenses but would soon move out to start her own family. The second was still in college but soon to finish. The

third, a boy, dropped out and just wanted to work as a delivery man while the youngest two were still in high school and in grade school. With increasing family expenses Mercy thought of going into a small *tocino* or preserved meat business. It was easy to order a few kilos of pork from her husband at a good price. When she told me about it I encouraged the idea. I said I would help her with orders if she can come up with a product that is clean, without additives, and not too sweet for the market I can reach. We experimented and once she was ready I became her booking agent for several months for a higher-end market and her cash sales were good.

Mercy then decided to share a stall in the neighborhood market to sell fresh pork while taking care of her small *tocino* business. It was to their advantage that Joe learned how to cut up meat properly. He could buy a whole pig from the *matadero* at a discount and drop it off at the stall while doing his rounds. To be able to buy a whole pig from her husband's company, Mercy needed a starting capital of P10,000. I agreed to lend her this amount for six months without interest and we agreed that she will pay me back five percent of the loan with every order I placed (we priced her *tocino* very well to get a good margin even with her loan payback of five percent per order). She was able to pay back her loan. Later she and her husband decided that the stall rent was costing too much and it limited her to just selling pork. So they decided to rent a little space for a *sari-sari* store a few steps away from their house where she could sell both fresh pork and other basic commodities. They did well for about two years until last year when she told me they would have to close the store because the landlady wanted to sell the place (note that they are all informal settlers in the community — no one can really buy and sell the government-owned lots — just the structures they

build). Seeing how sad she was to have to abandon the business they had grown for a few years and which provided for the family, I asked if she wanted to continue the business. She said “yes” she would really like to but they do not have the P30,000 cash her landlady wants. So I said I can lend her the money interest-free but she has to pay it back in six months at P5,000/month. She happily said “yes!” Again, she was able to pay back the loan on time.

Since then they have fixed up the store, painted it, and continued to grow the small business. By this time the store has developed a strong presence in the community. She and her husband would wake up at two a.m. every day to go to Divisoria to buy vegetables. By six a.m. the store opens. Their product mix has widened to include fresh chicken, eggs, some frozen products (she now has a freezer). Some items are dropped off by suppliers with whom they have developed a relationship.

During the ECQ, around mid-April, I asked her how the business was going and she told me their mobility has been curtailed. They do not have a permit to travel to Divisoria like before. She said it was very difficult to get goods to sell from supermarkets because of the limitation in the quantity of items they can buy to resell and the length of time it takes them just to get in and then pay for their purchase. Unfortunately, they are not big enough to join special groups like the Aling Puring of Puregold to get preferential treatment and special discounts. I said if we can get goods that she needs, how much can she afford to buy at one time and how long will the stock last? She said she can afford to buy P10,000 worth of goods that can last her a month. I said if we can find a way we can stock her store with what she can afford to pay and I will add another P5,000 as a loan to be able to get more stock. She

can then pay when the lockdown eases up. By the second half of April, we could see the growing difficulty of movement by the barangay residents because of the increased number of COVID-19 cases in the area. The convenience of having a sari-sari store stocked with goods for the residents to run to for supplies without having to go out of the community for prolonged periods has become apparent. At the same time, we could also see that it will be good for Mercy's business if she could offer enough merchandise to service the needs of the neighborhood. Through contacts, we were able to purchase the stocks for Mercy's store and got them delivered to tide the store over for at least a month or so even if the prices were not at wholesale. As foreseen, it was not before long when the residents' trips out of the neighborhood were limited to only three times a week. By this time Mercy's store had become very busy but she and her husband had been able to continuously replenish their stocks somehow on their own (with ease brought in by the infusion of additional P15,000 worth of merchandise on interest-free credit to boost inventory and cash flow). Then a one-week total lockdown was announced in May. They were the "store of last resort" for people who did not get to prepare their provisions early enough, especially the new SAP recipients who lined up all night the day before the first day of the total lockdown of the barangay. It was so critical that there were basic items available and within easy reach once people received their money to purchase basic necessities.

The convenience of having easy credit is a very important component of running and sustaining a micro neighborhood business, especially in the pandemic environment. Otherwise, the small entrepreneurs are easy prey to the usurious rates of lenders who make borrowing and paying back seem so easy but whose usurious rates are in fact "uncomputable." The success of Mercy's business can also be attributed to her ability to overcome the danger of her family eating up the earnings (then ultimately the capital) of their small business which is the pitfall of most start-up home stores among the poor, on top of unabated credit given to friends and neighbors. Mercy had exercised the discipline of keeping their store afloat despite the day-to-day needs of the family. It helped that in the beginning, Joe had income to cover a big portion of family expenses. It also helped that Mercy developed skills in Inventory Management and Cash Flow Management from the city Manpower Development Center which she thought to attend because she knows nothing about business. Her ways may still be unsophisticated and even unorthodox at times but at least she learned the theory and practicality of running a business. Mercy is industrious and enterprising with a good relationship with her husband who does not mind minding the store while she creates an important support network outside.

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# Livelihood 2

## Microfinance: The Poor's Access to Capital and Other Social Services

*Maria Anna de Rosas-Ignacio*

Let me begin with the story of Nanay Kikay, one of the member-owners of Kabuhayan sa Ganap na Kasarinlan Credit and Savings Cooperative (K-Coop). Nanay Kikay, 58, is married with four children. Her family owns a public utility jeepney which her husband drives to contribute to the family income. Their eldest, still single, works as a teacher in a public school near their home while their second child, also a college graduate, helps in their *sari-sari* store and *carinderia*. The third child is in Grade 11 and the youngest is in Grade 6. Nanay Kikay and her family live in Bagong Silang, one of the original resettlement communities in Metro Manila and the biggest barangay of Caloocan City in terms of population.

Nanay Kikay is one of the original client-beneficiaries of Kasagana-ka Development Center Inc. (KDCI), a microfinance non-government organization (NGO) which started operations in 2002. When the microfinance operations of KDCI was transferred to K-Coop, she was among those who gladly welcomed becoming a member-owner. K-Coop retains the methodology of *grasya*, a combination of Grameen and ASA approaches<sup>1</sup>, for its microfinance operations while ensuring that a significant share of its income is redistributed back to the members-owners. Nanay Kikay serves as the center-chief, lead officer of their center composed of 70 members.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Both Grameen and ASA methodologies were first introduced in Bangladesh. They are globally recognized as effective formulae in providing access to credit by poor women. Many different versions or mutations came about from these models. What is important to note is that many microfinance institutions (MFIs) subscribe to the principle of the double bottom line. i.e., MFIs provide a combination of both credit and social programs to their client-beneficiaries and adheres to a set of client-protection principles, protecting the rights of their borrowers.

<sup>2</sup> In many Grameen Model replications, the borrowers or client-beneficiaries are grouped into 14-40 members. The size of Nanay Kikay's center is exceptionally large, which usually happens when the center leaders or officers hold the trust of their members.

When asked about her experience with KDCI and K-Coop, Nanay Kikay will reminisce about the difficult times her family experienced and would say that these institutions have been her support. She would also admit that she had tried other lenders particularly when the loans limits of K-Coop do not meet her requirements but she remains faithful to K-Coop as it has been her constant companion, providing for her needs, not just financially but also in many other ways too. She proudly states that she has availed of almost all products of K-Coop. She has an enterprise loan which she uses for her *carinderia* and *sari-sari* store. One of her members once mentioned to her that Nanay Kikay's daughter who is a teacher told her students once that they should not be ashamed if their mothers borrow money. She is an example of how the loans from K-Coop, helped her finish her studies. Nanay Kikay would regularly rely on the educational loans for school fees, projects and to buy a computer. She also avails of the yearly health check-up for her entire family and even her glasses, too, are paid on installment basis. She also holds the title of their lot after paying in full the amortization for the home lot awarded by the National Housing Authority. Nanay Kikay plans and plans to seek another housing loan to add a second floor to their house. She pays her SSS and PhilHealth contributions through K-Coop. As a member of K-Coop, she is also a member of the Kasagana-ka Mutual Benefit Association, its sister micro-insurance provider, and could avail of different insurance packages such as basic life insurance for a family of seven, credit life insurance, fire and accident insurance, and health insurance. Just a year ago, three of their center members' houses burned down.

Fortunately, they all were covered by K-Kalinga insurance and one even bought five

plans at Php50 each. Each plan will entitle the policyholder to a claim of Php10,000 if their house gets destroyed by fire. The one who bought five plans received Php50,000 plus a grant assistance of Php5,000. KMBA has a track record of releasing death insurance claims within 24 hours upon submission of the death certificate.

The story of Nanay Kikay and her members is typical of many poor Filipinos. Nanay Kikay is certainly resourceful and disciplined, able to thrive amid the many challenges that Filipino families face because they have joined social networks that provide services, both economic and social. Yet, a significant portion of our population has limited access to fund sources. A clear indicator is provided by the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas, placing the percentage of unbanked Filipinos at 77.4 percent. (Agcaoili, 2019). Less than a fourth of our population has access to formal banking or financial services. They usually resort to informal money lenders or private lending groups, both business and social enterprises such as MF-NGOs and cooperatives. Oftentimes, a family may resort to multi-lenders, combining loans from relatives, friends, MF-NGOs, cooperatives, and loan sharks.

The Microfinance Council of the Philippines (MCPI), a self-regulatory network of microfinance NGOs, banks, and cooperatives in the country, holds yearly conferences among its members. During such occasions, microfinance practitioners share their experiences and best practices in combining financial products and social programs to the enterprising poor and unbanked. It is there that stories of many more Nanay Kikays, Aling Jennifers, and Inay Solings are heard. Member-organizations of MCPI claim to serve nine million<sup>3</sup> microentrepreneurs, 80 percent of whom

are women, with a combined portfolio of Php 59.72 billion. Microfinance operations are labor-intensive and the total labor force of MCPI members alone is 50,000 employees.

Despite the contribution of microfinance NGOs and cooperatives to the struggling microenterprises of our country, government is not one in supporting the sector. One could not help but compare the aggressive assistance provided to microentrepreneurs in other countries. Through a combination of incentives, financing window, capacity-building, and exemptions, microenterprises in these locales enjoy a better chance of succeeding. In the Philippines, the little help which was strongly advocated for and won by the sector, such as the Cooperative Code and the Microfinance NGOs Act, are in danger of being repealed and its benefits for the sector erased. Instead of improving the access of poor microentrepreneurs to affordable capital and much-needed social services, government policymakers and agencies give them a difficult time with inefficient processes, unnecessary requirements, and uncoordinated policies. The capacity, too, of the local government units (LGUs) when dealing with and supporting their poor population is limited. From unlisted or unregistered enterprises to failure to understand the role of MFNGOs and cooperatives, LGUs add to the challenges of providing financial literacy and resources to the poor, particularly women who face multiple hurdles to avail of these opportunities.

## **The COVID-19 Pandemic: Disruptions and the New Challenges Presented**

Let us go back to Nanay Kikay's story. When the enhanced community quarantine was announced in mid-March 2020, Nanay Kikay had just finished her center meeting. She received a message from her socio-economic officer that K-Coop has to close all its satellite offices and all activities of K-Coop including its sister organizations, KDCI and KMBA, would have to be suspended. No loan releases will be made and members cannot withdraw their savings, make repayments or pay their insurance premiums. In the course of the ECQ, her husband could not ply their jeepney, the sales of their *carinderia* and *sari-sari* store significantly decreased. She still receives, though regular communication from K-Coop and her center members. They created a chat group where prayers and health messages were exchanged. As Center Chief, she farmed out whatever helpful communication she gets. Twice her family received five kilos of rice and 10 cans of sardines from the barangay. She also received assistance from K-Coop and civil society organizations. These she farmed out to her center members. When K-Coop and KDCI provided small financial assistance to their center, all members agreed to give the entire amount to one of their members who just gave birth and the new-born contracted measles.

One of Nanay Kikay's center members unfortunately met an accident and passed away in mid-April. With help from her K-Coop socio-economic officer and manager, the family of the deceased immediately received the claim of Php100,000. She also heard of

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<sup>3</sup> These numbers only represent members of the Microfinance Council of the Philippines and do not include the other MF-NGOs, banks, and cooperatives. These will definitely increase significantly if the numbers for the entire cooperative and rural and thrift banks offering microfinance loans are included.

some members experiencing symptoms of the new disease and kept sending messages on what to do. She would send messages too to K-Coop staff, responding to the surveys they conducted and asking questions too on what will happen next to the cooperative.

By the end of April 2020, more than a month after the ECQ was implemented and its operations were suspended, K-Coop conducted a rapid survey among its members. Responses from 5,000 respondents were received. Of these, 75 percent of the members' sources of livelihood were negatively affected. This went up to 92 percent in the survey done at the end of May. Already, 40 percent reported skipping meals and experiencing hunger. Entire family incomes were decimated, their capital for the microenterprise ate up their daily expenses for food. The lack of public transportation added to the difficulties in accessing food supply and materials for their enterprises. Many services, too, are stalled, including government transactions needed to run the different businesses.

It is not only the members or client-beneficiaries of MF-NGOs and cooperatives that experienced difficulties. The institutions too are reeling from the havoc brought about by the pandemic. Mandatory suspension of operations, restrictions in travel and accessibility, and social distancing measures disrupted the normal flow of transactions and services. This could mean that the livelihoods and sources of income of nine million entrepreneurs could be totally lost and whatever gains obtained may be erased if the situation will not allow their economic activities to be restarted. The Department of Labor and Employment announced that as of April 24, 2020, affected workers reached 2,073,362 while 687,000 workers saw a decrease in their income from the measures

adopted by firms, including less workdays, rotation, forced leaves, and telecommuting (GMA News Online, 2020).

The high level of unpredictability caused by the pandemic and the added confusion brought about by government's ineffective approach to the problem could mean the vulnerable microentrepreneurs would be unable to sustain their sources of livelihood, and restarting them will be a real challenge. Surviving this financial and economic crisis with the added burden of a health crisis almost seems insurmountable, more so for the poor of this country.

MF-NGOs and cooperatives responded to the crisis by putting in place debt relief measures for their client-beneficiaries and members. These included loan restructuring, loan rescheduling, lowering of interest rates, reduction in fees, penalties, and charges, aside from the moratorium during the period of the ECQ. Despite the suspension of operations, the different institutions tried their best to address, even in a limited manner, their social and health needs. Despite the suspension of operations, the different institutions tried their best to address, even in a limited manner, their members' social and health needs. They also continued to pay the salaries of their personnel. No assistance was received from DOLE nor SSS. The loss of income stream from the suspension of operations forebodes liquidity problems for the institutions providing microfinance. Many MCPI members indicated that they can only last from one to four months using their fund reserves. Collections below 75 percent of its normal levels would mean significant reduction in its capital flows and consequently risk the very survival of the institution. The longer the suspension of collection lasts, the more difficult it will be for them to return to near-normal levels of their operations.

The closure of a MF-NGO or cooperative will mean the loss of hope for all its employees and members. Using a medium-sized institution with 50,000 client-beneficiaries and 400 employees, this already means 252,000 individuals losing a chance to survive the crisis. As the majority of the funds are all lent out to the members, the non-collection of the loans means non-recovery of the savings of the members. Closure of an institution with a sister microinsurance association will also spell the default of the insurance entity on the insurance plans of its members. This means that the abnormal rate of deaths brought about by the health crisis will leave families unable to receive the much-needed insurance money.

### **Recommendations: How to Survive the Crisis**

There are three areas that require immediate and much-needed interventions. These are (1) livelihood and food security, (2) health and LGU capacity building, and (3) connectivity.

First is the revitalization of the sources of livelihood and closely connected to this is food security. If families will be allowed to restart their enterprises and sources of livelihood then food security follows. They will have the means to buy their food supply.

Going back to Nanay Kikay. In the middle of June, K-Coop with Philippine Business for Social Progress and BayanihanMusikahan, Jollibee Group Foundation, and Civil Society Collab, implemented Project Karinderya sa Bagong Silang. The objective is to help restart 10 enterprises and provide meal subsidies to 200 families for 30 days. Ten *carinderya* owners were identified. Included

in the ten was Nanay Kikay. They were trained through teleconferencing on how to make more nutritious menus and on proper and safe food handling. The 200 families were those living near the selected *carinderias*, as accessibility is also a key factor to the project's success. These families were selected using a list of criteria including obvious need for assistance and families with lactating mothers, pregnant women, with senior citizens and PWDs needing special care, and those with at least five children below the age of 15.

Project Karinderya meal subsidies were given the entire month of July. In the evaluation, Nanay Kikay and the other owners expressed their gratitude for the project. It increased their sales, they were able to receive more clients, get to know more potential contacts in the community and learned from the training provided by the Jollibee Group Foundation. Aside from the 200 families who were in the list of beneficiaries, leftovers at the end of the day were given to others who also needed help but were not included in the list. The trained health cadets<sup>4</sup> of KDCI also actively participated in the monitoring of the *carinderias*, noting if the protocols are followed including disposal of garbage and minimizing the use of plastic bags.

Because of the very positive results of this pilot, four other Project Karinderyas will be implemented in Quezon City, Sapang Palay (San Jose del Monte, Bulacan), Rodriguez (Rizal), and Paranaque City. Forty additional *carinderya* owners will be assisted to restart their enterprises and 800 families will receive meal subsidies for a month.

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<sup>4</sup> KDCI trained health cadets (Kasagana-ka Kalusugan Kadets or KKKs) are also members of K-Coop and from Bagong Silang. This is part of KDCI's Health and Wellness Program that aims to train a KKK per center for all the 1,800 centers of K-Coop members.

If localized lockdowns will be the response of government, then localized attempts at reviving the enterprises of the poor and addressing their food security should be given emphasis. The role of LGUs is crucial, too, but given that they are overwhelmed by the crisis, then the role of civil society has to be emphasized. As civil society organizations attempt to address this front, national government agencies and LGUs should simply enable them and allow them to perform their interventions.

The second recommendation is, of course, in the area of health and the capacitation of LGUs. This crisis shows how our government, both national and local, has failed to strengthen the health system of our country. The devolution of health services was given a different interpretation by the executive officials of the local government units, rendering most unable to effectively respond to the pandemic. There are some shining examples though of how a local health system can be effectively and efficiently employed and may their tribe increase! It is frustrating though how ineffective and inept our present health system is with government leaders out to grease their own pockets instead of prioritizing the lives of our people. We could have taken more risks in allowing economic activities to resume if we had a robust health system down to the barangay level. A simple issuance of changes in initials and acronyms will not suffice. An efficient flow of much-needed resources, including personnel, medicines, supplies, and information in best practices all the way to the communities is necessary to address the crisis. Economic activities will not return to normalcy or even reach near-normal levels if there is no confidence in our health services.

And lastly, infrastructure on different levels of connectivity needs to be established. These

are the infrastructures for communication, transportation, and e-financing/transactions. Even if microentrepreneurs are provided the capital to restart their enterprises, if they have no access to markets through social media marketing, the attempt will be a sure failure. Access to the internet will be an additional burden on the poor. This not only means access to markets but also to information and education for their school-age children. Many far-flung communities and poor communities in urban areas have no or little access to this form of communication.

Another key to access to markets is transportation. The supply chain was delinked in many places. These need to be reestablished to ensure flow of raw materials, finished products, services and personnel. Many are moving into offering their products and services through telecommunication or social media. If these are not transported at the time required then no actual exchange transpired and therefore this is not a business transaction.

The final ingredient to connectivity is the flow of finances. Money transfer facilities or e-financing represents the third prong of the connectivity concern. MF-NGOs and cooperatives have started dabbling into money transfers and digitalization because of security problems and the limitations of transaction with commercial banks. The prohibitive costs of developing their systems and the additional costs of e-money transactions limit the extent of how smaller MF-NGOs and cooperatives can take advantage of these facilities. Again, an enabling environment has to be created by the government to allow them to cross the digitalization divide.

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# 3 Migrant Workers

## Migration of Filipinos in the Time of COVID: Issues, Challenges and Recommendations

*Aurora Javate de Dios*

The Philippines is one of the top migrant-sending countries in the world today. There are 10 million OFWs working or living in more than 200 countries and territories (Commission of Filipinos Overseas, n.d.). Philippine contract worker migration has been around for more than 40 years and is regarded as one of the most widespread diaspora in the world. Filipino domestic workers are found in homes from Saudi Arabia to Italy; as nurses in London, Jeddah, and New York; as engineers in oil refineries in the Middle East and as seafarers in cargo ships and luxury liners. Though migration was first introduced as a temporary policy to address rising unemployment and decreasing foreign exchange reserves (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2017), it eventually became a permanent feature of the country's development strategy. Despite the continued increase in the volume of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) over the years, the government always insisted that overseas employment is a temporary strategy.

In 2019, OFWs remitted \$33.5 billion (Rivas, 2020) far greater than the Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) inflows to the country. Remittances also improve the foreign exchange standing of the country and cushions the economy from the impacts of economic crises. More importantly, remittances have supported the daily needs of families including food, health needs, education of children, housing, and livelihood projects. The migrants' economic contribution, however, comes at a heavy price in terms of its social costs. Studies have shown that long separations have long-term impacts on the stability of families, particularly on children who are negatively affected by the long absence of their parents particularly their mothers (UN Women, 2008; Asis, 2017). The migration of highly skilled Filipinos may also deprive the country of much needed human resources for its long-term development.

One feature of Philippine migration has been its feminization since migrant

women workers constitute 54.5 percent of overseas Filipinos deployed abroad (Philippine Commission on Women, 2012). They are usually employed in lower-paid and precarious jobs such as domestic work, caregiving, factory employment, sales, retail, hotel and restaurant services (including in cruise ships) – all job sectors with high exposure and risk during pandemics. Even before the pandemic, the conditions of Filipino domestic women workers, particularly in Middle Eastern countries, have been a matter of serious human rights concern. Ironically, 64 percent of Filipino women migrant workers are deployed in these high-risk countries where there are practically no human rights protections. Before COVID-19, women migrant workers had been suffering from multiple forms of discrimination such as restrictive migration policies, racism, lack of legal recognition and social protection, physical and sexual violence in destination countries. According to the Department of Foreign Affairs, data from 2013 to 2016 show that on average:

- 4,830 OFWs in distress, 75 percent of whom are women who seek assistance per year from the embassy for complaints such as physical, verbal and psychological abuse, sexual harassment and rape;
- 402 are trafficked each year (92 percent women); with 13,838 (75 percent) OFWs repatriated per year;
- Undocumented migrants face constant threats of arrest, detention, and deportation. Since they are literally invisible, they are excluded from immediate assistance by Philippine foreign embassy officials.
- Many destination countries do not automatically extend social protection to migrants such as health, including reproductive health services; legal and

emergency services and in times of crises, the government will most likely prioritize emergency assistance to their own nationals.

### **COVID-19 Policies in Destination Countries Affect Overseas Filipino Workers**

Unlike the pandemics of the past such as SARS, Ebola, and Mers Cov which were confined in specific countries and did not result in massive displacement and job losses, COVID-19 is a global pandemic affecting the economies of both sending and receiving countries, with the most severe impacts occurring in developing countries. In destination countries such as the US, Europe, the Middle East region, as well as Singapore, Hongkong, Malaysia where thousands of migrants are working, the pandemic has resulted in dismissal and displacement of migrants. Lockdowns and travel bans directly affect the employment and wages of foreign workers, limit their mobility, and increase the risk of contagion in their places of work. For women domestic workers, the pandemic increased their work demands and caretaking responsibilities for members of the household who are forced to remain indoors during the pandemic. They clean, cook, take care of children and/or elderly family members in addition to taking on extra duties cleaning and disinfecting homes. Because women domestic workers lack legal protection, particularly in the Middle East, there are no limits to the number of hours they may be asked to work per day, no paid sick leave or weekly or annual leaves. COVID-19 has exacerbated the difficulties that women migrant workers have already been experiencing prior to the pandemic. Because many of them have live-in arrangements with their employers, women domestic workers are particularly vulnerable to gender based violence like rape and sexual harassment as well as exploitation and abuse.

In the Middle East, female migrant domestic workers work under the Kafala system. The system ties migrant worker status to the individual sponsor or employer. (Migrant Forum in Asia, n.d.). Under this system workers are excluded from the national labor legislation and other human rights protections (Amnesty International, n.d. 2019). Their welfare, and the extent to which their basic human rights are protected, are dependent on the benevolence of employers (Huda, 2006). Without social protection and health coverage, Filipino domestic workers in Hongkong, Singapore and the Middle East are vulnerable to COVID-19 infections which often lead to dismissals. Nurses and other frontline health workers in Germany, UK, US, and the Middle East are also particularly vulnerable because of their exposure to COVID-19 patients (Wright, 2020). Compounding their difficulties, migrants have to deal with travel bans and requirements like COVID-19 health certificates that prevent them from returning home. Both for documented and undocumented the risks of deportation is more likely now than before. In one example, Amnesty International (2020) reported that Qatari authorities "rounded up and expelled dozens of migrant workers from Doha, Bawa City and Labour City after telling them they were being taken to be tested for COVID-19." Though the Philippine government has an explicit policy to assist all OFWs regardless of status, its 63 embassies and 26 consulates general are not nearly enough to attend to the needs of OFWs much less to provide emergency relief and repatriation services to large numbers of OFWs who have been stranded in far-flung work destinations. Inevitably, Filipino communities in destination countries are called upon to provide critical assistance including food packs and transportation in times of emergencies.

## **From Crisis to Crisis: Coming Home to COVID-19**

For the last 40 years, Filipino OFWs have experienced conflicts, wars, economic crisis, natural disasters, and health pandemics in destination countries but such crises were relatively short-lived and did not disrupt the migration flow from the Philippines. To respond to such crises, the government developed policies and plans to protect and repatriate OFWs when the need arises. RA 10022, the Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipinos Act, mandates Philippine embassies led by the Ambassador in coordinating efforts to assist OFWs in crisis. A Joint Manual of Operations was developed by the government to ensure a coordinated response in crisis situations. During the Gulf War, about 30,000 OFWs had to be repatriated to the Philippines, the first such massive effort in repatriating OFWs undertaken by the government (Asis, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic is unlike any of the crises experienced by OFWs in the past. For OFWs who have experienced traumatic events abroad, coming home usually provided relief and comfort. With the outbreak of the pandemic in the Philippines, the OFWs' homecoming this time around was less than welcoming and for many, quite distressing. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, 185,650 Filipino workers have been repatriated back to the country having lost their jobs due to the pandemic (Mabasa, 2020). With the unprecedented numbers of OFW arrivals, OWWA as well as other agencies such as DSWD, were simply overwhelmed by the sheer volume and magnitude of returning OFWs needing assistance. Thousands of returning OFWs experienced long waiting hours for their turn to be tested and waiting for test results which took weeks to be obtained. In the meantime with the suspension of land, air, sea travel, even those who got their negative test results could

not return to their provinces immediately. Except for some, local governments were not fully prepared to receive big numbers of returning OFWs as they too were bound by strict health protocols. The result has been chaotic with returning migrants stranded in airports, seaports, and in the streets as agencies were too overwhelmed to quickly respond to unexpected situations that fell through the cracks of established procedures (Asis, 2020). Compounding the problems of returning OFWs was the discrimination and stigma that they were receiving from their townmates who viewed them as possible carriers of the COVID-19 virus.

### **COVID-19 Disrupts the Philippine “Migration Story”**

Due to massive job losses of migrants during the pandemic, remittance flows to the East Asia and Pacific region, which includes Southeast Asian nations, is projected to fall by 13 percent this year from \$147 billion in 2019. (Tani, 2020). The Philippine economy is expected to go into recession in 2020 (NEDA, 2020) with about 1.8 million workers losing their jobs. As of April 2020, the Philippine Statistics Authority said the unemployment rate rose to 17.7 percent (vs 5.1 percent in April 2019) an increase of five million jobless (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2020).

For thousands of Filipino families, remittances from loved ones abroad have been their economic lifeline for their daily needs. On average, an OFW household relies on remittances for 43 percent of its total household income. The total loss of remittances can negatively impact on the family (Mangahas & Ducanes, 2020). Most of the OFWs in low income households are women in elementary occupations (including domestic workers) and services. Thus the complete loss of remittances can drastically pull down the incomes of OFW

households in the second income quintile and even some of those in the third income quintile below the poverty line” (Mangahas & Ducanes, 2020). Studies show that 96 percent of remittances are spent on the daily needs and consumption of the family such as food, health needs and education. With prolonged loss of jobs, limited savings, no social protection nor membership with SSS (only 1.12 million OFWs have SSS membership) OFWs will not be able meet the needs of their families. To be able to survive, many have resorted to various survival strategies such as selling assets and property, borrowing from friends and relatives, starting small businesses or livelihood projects and for some, having only two meals a day. Many civil society groups and NGOs have been trying to provide emergency relief services such as food rations, cash donations and temporary accommodation to stranded migrants.

Reintegration programs in the Philippines were originally assigned to the Overseas Welfare Worker Administration (OWWA), the social fund that provides a variety of assistance programs to migrants and their families. The Migrant Workers and Overseas Filipino Act of 1995 (Republic Act [RA] 8042) mandated the establishment of the Replacement and Monitoring Center, which was intended to facilitate the reintegration of Filipino migrants. This was later modified by Department Order 79-07 which established the National Reintegration Center for Overseas Filipino Workers (NRCO) in 2007 under RA 10022. Aside from NRCO and OWWA, Center for Filipinos Overseas, POEA, DOLE and DSWD have separate livelihood programs and assistance for migrants. These include several types of assistance such as job referrals, assistance to micro enterprise development and entrepreneurship. The Department of Trade and Industry and the Technical Education and Skills Development

or TESDA offer various training and capability programs. Services for returning distressed migrants include a variety of services, such as rescue and temporary shelter assistance, legal assistance, medical assistance, and repatriation assistance. *Balik Pinay! Balik Hanapbuhay!* is the program tailored in particular to the reintegration of distressed women migrants. Between 2011 and 2014, 3,720 returning female migrants took advantage of the program (Battistella, 2018).

### Recommendations

In light of the volume and magnitude of repatriated migrants during the pandemic there is a need for immediate, medium and long-term plans to assist stranded and displaced migrant workers.

#### Immediate:

1. Immediate evacuation by the government of stranded migrants abroad back to the Philippines and from Manila to the provinces with the assistance of private recruitment agencies;
2. Establishment of a reliable sex disaggregated data gathering system of returning migrants including migrants coming home as a result of COVID-19 pandemic emergencies;
3. Due to the vulnerability of OFWs in transit and upon return to the Philippines, the government can provide access to free or low-cost testing and treatment for COVID-19;
4. With loss of jobs and income, emergency food and temporary accommodations for returning/displaced migrant workers should be made available during the duration of the pandemic;
5. Provide emergency cash transfers to workers and their families with particular focus on single women-headed households and victims of

gender-based violence, to (partially) compensate them for income loss and to provide debt relief; and

6. Transportation subsidies for migrant workers to facilitate their return to their provinces need to be provided immediately in partnership with local governments.

#### Midterm:

Information on available services, labor market information, accessibility to retraining programs, provision for skills certification, and human rights of migrants should be widely disseminated through trimedia and social media.

Deploy employment services to promote employment among migrant workers nationwide with the assistance of local government units. Employment services like job matching and job search programs can help migrant workers who are displaced by the crisis to fill labor market gaps created by travel restrictions.

#### Long-Term:

1. The short- and long-term economic and social impacts of COVID-19 are alarming and devastating for our Overseas Filipino Workers. In all probability, the pandemic may take longer to dissipate than many countries are prepared for. Thus it will take years for both the economies of sending and receiving countries to recover. This situation requires a more strategic rethinking of the migration policy and strategies taken thus far by the government. Economic diversification with focus on agricultural development and other economic sectors must be explored so as to significantly reduce the country's over-reliance on remittances.
2. Our embassies must intensify their efforts

to negotiate for more bilateral relations that ensure social protection measures for our OFWs including inclusion in health services and emergency treatments during pandemics.

3. Government must harness multi-sectoral cooperation and coordination of private sector, civil society, local governments and migrant resource centers in implementing short- and long-term programs to ensure that repatriated migrants are successfully reintegrated into local society.

### **After Forty-Six Years of Migration and COVID-19: Need for Strategic Reforms**

More than 40 years of Philippine migration should have given enough time for the Philippine government to seriously and critically reassess its migration policy. COVID-19 and its debilitating impacts on the lives of all particularly the marginalized including overseas Filipino workers has highlighted the fragility and the temporal character of migration. The positive material benefits of migrant labour remittances for the family have been well documented and confirmed. Remittances have become the lifeline of the families dependent on them – helping to lift families out of poverty, diversifying household incomes, and providing insurance against risk and emergencies. Not enough has been done, however, to address the numerous issues related to the social cost of migration to families, communities and the development implications of the loss of talent and professionals. This is the time to conduct a serious reassessment of the socioeconomic and development costs of migration rather than limiting its impacts only in monetary terms.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the weaknesses and gaps in the governance of migration. The present programs assisting

limited numbers of distressed migrants – victims of violence and those that have been displaced by conflict and localized health pandemics in the short term – has been relatively adequate. However the government's response to a massive crisis like the COVID-19 repatriation of thousands of distressed migrants has exposed its inadequacy in terms of preparedness, coordination and systematic management of emergency services.

The remittance-dependency of the Philippines enabled the country to weather the financial crises of the past decades but it also prevented the government from seriously pursuing long-term diversified development directions and strategies that include the retention of its human resources to serve the long-term development goals of the country.

Though the Philippines has made its mark as a country committed to protect the human rights of its migrants, especially the most vulnerable migrant women workers, there is a need to acknowledge that international advocacy for safe, orderly, and regular migration has its limits as receiving countries grapple with their own economic difficulties. The deepening economic crisis, inequality, and political instability both in the receiving and sending countries will only increase.

## Feminism, the Inescapable: The Experience of the Young Feminists Collective

Shebana Alqaseer

It is March 2020, and it has been a little over a week since the Philippines went on a belated lockdown after the staggering spike of COVID-19 worldwide. Work stopped. Schools closed. Malls, public spaces, even churches shut down. Transportation ground to a halt. A friend had reached out to one of their members, asking for help. The Young Feminists Collective, or YFC, had decisions to make—decisions that, in retrospect, were inevitable, if not inescapable.

Three months earlier, the Young Feminists Collective was born as a support group for young feminists. It encouraged collective self-care and provided spaces where young feminists, sharing similar advocacies, work, and principles, can simply debrief and decompress. The group decided to meet regularly for de-stressing activities. They planned sessions for baking, poetry readings, cooking lessons — places and spaces to hang out, to perk up, to wind down.

Unfortunately, it wasn't meant to be.

The COVID-19 outbreak quickly became the most disruptive event in modern history. And the same is true for the YFC — though *transformative* might be an apt word as well. For YFC, it was a turning point. They had been able to meet a couple of times prior, but YFC's original plans were put on indefinite hold because of the pandemic. Now a friend of a member — in turn asking for a friend — came to the group with a call for help for the mothers of the Dr. Jose Fabella Hospital, a maternity hospital of such size and hectic activity that it has earned a reputation as a “baby factory.” The call for help was for

in-need mothers and mothers-to-be in the hospital.

Again, it bears repeating: YFC was conceived as a space, in so many words, to *get away*. Even for a bit. Even for just a day. The work of organizing, educating, advocating — the work of feminism — can often be so draining and tiring. YFC was conceived from an impulse to care — to care for fellow feminist workers from different arenas and walks of life.

And it was this same impulse that pushed YFC outwards. Because by March 2020 the decisions to be made weren't whether they were going to jump in and help: YFC was already there. Because the truth is: *there is no getting away*. And so the group was not talking about whether, but how best to help.

By then, in the earliest stages of the lockdown, most of the help and donations came to frontline health workers: with cooked food, protective gear, financial assistance, and equipment. No one was even beginning to think about *everyone else* in need.

And so, impelled by the same impulse of care, YFC was able to quickly assemble dignity kits for the mothers of Fabella. Despite — or perhaps because — of its unstructured nature and its aversion to hierarchy, it moved quickly and decisively. It tapped each member's particular strengths and organized teams to handle finances, communications, and logistics. But in the face of the pandemic, what happened perhaps was less an overt act of organization-building: what it was, more accurately, was an *unfolding*. Whatever

YFC became only came from whatever was already there to begin with — and it unfolded only because the group knew it had to respond to the desperate times brought by COVID-19, to help in whatever way possible.

YFC's first foray was a success — and the surplus of donations meant it could be of help to more people in need. Its next beneficiaries included sanitation workers in San Juan. The story is pretty much the same: YFC sees an overlooked group, and quickly does what it can to help. For the sanitation workers of San Juan, YFC provided sanitation kits and protective gear. They were later able to give the same assistance to sanitation workers in Makati, Quezon City, and Malabon. They were also later able to deliver food packs for the mothers of Fabella.

Because of the overwhelming support YFC received whenever it issued calls for donations, it was able to keep extending assistance to often-overlooked populations. When the group heard that victim-survivors of the online sexual exploitation of children were facing difficulties because of lack of funding — which was originally sourced from church donations, which were gone with religious gatherings banned — it collected donations and financial assistance for food packs, clothes, and toys for children. It was also able to send hygiene kits, face masks, and *Bantay Bastos* kits along with food and cash assistance for survivors of gender-based violence.

In June, when reports went viral of hundreds of stranded individuals taking shelter under an expressway near the Ninoy Aquino International Airport and in Baclaran, sleeping on cardboard mattresses and braving bad weather as they waited for flights home, YFC was able to quickly visit the area, deliver help in the form of hygiene kits, PPEs, blankets, medicine, coffee, and cash for meals. It was among the first to

respond to the LSIs, and its early reports on actual needs in the evacuation centers where waiting passengers were moved were of immense help to others seeking to extend assistance.

But YFC also realized that because of its membership, its operations were largely limited to Manila especially due to lockdown restrictions — which is why it decided to partner with other organizations to extend its reach. It was able to send help in the form of cash assistance for widows and single mothers in Marawi with the help of the Al-Mujadilah Development Foundation. It sent cash assistance for Muslims in La Union, cash and hygiene kits for Dumagat families, dignity kits for solo parents in Lucena, Quezon, and dignity kits for persons with disability in Quirino, among many others, with the help of Angat Bayi.

With donations from local pharmaceutical giant Unilab, YFC was also able to assemble dignity kits — including lotions, make-up, and facial wash — as well as medicine kits with vitamins and basic medicine. The medicine kits were distributed to the Golden Gays home for elderly LGBTQI++ people and to elderly persons in Bataan, while YFC managed to send both dignity kits and medicine kits for solo parents in Quezon City and the Likhaan Community. The dignity kits were a novel form of assistance — but YFC understood that while lotions, make-up, and facial wash might appear unnecessary, these are useful items that can help people deal with COVID-19 with dignity.

With students getting ready to go back to school, YFC has also started to extend help to students in need, providing an internet tower and router and paying for a month of internet connection for Lambontong National High School in North Cotabato, and providing a photocopier for BS Aquino National High School in Tarlac.

Today YFC continues to gather donations and extend help wherever it can — keeping an eye out, in particular, for those in the margins and for those often overlooked, and looking at the needs that are often the first to fall through the cracks especially during an emergency. First brought together by the impulse to care for each other, the very same

feminist principle now keeps powering the Young Feminists Collective as it continues to care for others. Because what the experience of the Young Feminists Collective proves is that feminism is inescapable — and it will always rise to the occasion.

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# Social Protection

## Who Protects the Poor during COVID-19?

*Corazon Juliano-Soliman*

### **Social Protection before COVID-19**

The social protection framework that guides the government in its programs is defined by the NEDA Social Development Committee as “policies and programs that seek to reduce poverty and vulnerability to risks and enhance the social status and rights of the marginalized by promoting and protecting livelihood and employment.” It should increase the capacity of the citizens to manage economic and social risks, such as natural disasters and sudden loss of income.

The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) is responsible for implementing programs to address the situation of the most vulnerable populations and their immediate needs and help them move out of poverty. The conditional cash transfer (Pantawid Pamilya Program) began in 2008 with the objective of breaking intergenerational poverty by keeping the children in school and keeping them healthy. It currently serves 4.4 million families with a budget of PHP 108,765, 970,000 and supporting 7,855,610 children (DSWD, n.d.).

There is a social pension for indigent senior citizens which has 3.4 million registered beneficiaries. This was based on R.A. 9994 (2020) which provides benefits to indigent senior citizens, addressing their daily food and medical needs. To address the needs of children of poor families a supplementary feeding program through the day care systems is also implemented – for 2020 more than 854,000 children were enrolled in the program (Manila Bulletin, 2020). In addition, the TRAIN Law 1 provided for unconditional cash transfer for vulnerable families to help them cope with the increase in prices of basic commodities; DSWD registered 2.2 million additional families to the existing list of vulnerable families already included in the DSWD list. These programs had been implemented in the last 12 years and had contributed to reducing the poverty incidence to 16.6 percent in 2018 (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2019).

Sectors with increased vulnerabilities are assisted with specialized programs. Persons with disability (PWD) are provided skills training to help them to be self-sufficient.

Women victims of violence are sheltered in different “Havens for Women and Children” for counseling and life skills training including income generating capacities. For young people who are in conflict with the law there are rehabilitation facilities in different regions to build their capacity to be productive citizens of the country. The poor who have emergency needs are assisted by the Assistance to Individuals in Crisis (AICS) which are implemented by the different regional offices in the archipelago – cash is provided for medical, burial, and educational needs.

Since devolution, the DSWD has been implementing most of the programs in partnership with the local social welfare and development offices (LSWDO). DSWD provides for capacity-building programs to enhance the capacity of the LSWDOs in implementing social protection programs.

### **Social Protection in the Time of COVID-19**

In February 2020, COVID-19 was a growing public concern since news of its spread in China was carried by major news outlets. There was a clamor for a government ban on planes from China to prevent Chinese tourists from coming to the Philippines during the Lunar New Year celebration. This should have signaled the DSWD to develop a response plan in the event of the virus spreading in the country. A meeting with the Department of Health (DOH) could have been undertaken to devise a coordinated response to what at that time was a potential health crisis which could affect the very vulnerable sectors of society.

The national government finally declared an Expanded Community Quarantine on the second week of March; but there were no comprehensive plans for responding to the needs of poor communities whose daily food needs are taken from daily wages or

informal sources of livelihood. The lockdown of communities prevented poor families from earning a living but no immediate provisions were available to help them survive the sudden crisis. The Bayanihan law was signed on March 24, 2020, one week after the declared lockdown. The law provided for a Social Amelioration Program to provide for 18 million vulnerable families.

DSWD was responsible for implementing the Social Amelioration Program or SAP. However, on March 13, 2020 a Department Advisory was released on “Guidelines for the Prevention, Control, and Mitigation of the Spread of the Coronavirus Disease-19 (COVID-19).” The guidelines suspended the scheduled payouts from March 15 to April 14 of Pantawid, Social Pension for indigent senior citizens and Unconditional cash transfers. The different organized groups of Pantawid Pamilya such as *Samahan ng Nagkakaisang Pamilya ng Pantawid* and various senior citizens groups protested loudly because they were expecting the cash grant would help them during the lockdown period.

The Bayanihan law superseded the guidelines since DSWD had to implement the Social Amelioration Program. The identification of the beneficiaries made up the first phase of the process of distributing the SAP. DSWD could have used the list of beneficiaries in their existing programs which already consisted of 10 million families in the Pantawid Pamilya, Social Pension for Indigent Senior Citizens and the additional beneficiaries of the unconditional cash transfer lists. These have been verified and validated by the LWSDOs and the DSWD. Instead, DSWD decided to start a new list of beneficiaries by asking the local government units to register the vulnerable families in their cities or municipalities. This was to be implemented by the barangay officials.

The process of registration was tedious and ill-prepared. The LGUs were expected to print their own registration forms which was done in computer printers because the printing shops were closed. This delayed the registration process. The barangay officials were not prepared to be the main implementers of the identification of beneficiaries. It opened the doors for unscrupulous persons to take advantage of the situation by copying the registration forms and filling it up with the names of unqualified beneficiaries; resulting in elite capture of the registration process and confusion surrounding the implementing guidelines for registration.

As a result, there were disagreements between the LGUs and the DSWD on the validity of the list as well as the fund allocation for the city or municipality. The national government through DSWD allocated funds per city and municipality based on estimates. This was the basis for fund allocation for SAP but when the list was submitted, the number of beneficiaries exceeded the funds allocated. Negotiation and revalidation processes were done which resulted in an additional five million families for SAP tranche 1 (Joint Memorandum Circular No. 2).

The delay resulted in hunger for poor families. Based on an SWS survey conducted on May 4, two million families experienced hunger at this time; the number increasing to 5.2 million families when the survey was conducted in July. Families who were not counted among the SAP beneficiaries also began airing numerous grievances. The LGUs through the barangay officials again were the conduits for the SAP, but much of media coverage showed that during the distribution of funds physical distancing requirements were not followed; the lines were long and the people were jam-packed in basketball

courts. Understandably so as the people were anxious to get the cash since they had not been earning during the lockdown period. They also feared that their names might be erased from the list. By May 10, 2020, the plan was to complete the distribution of SAP 1. This was not accomplished especially for the additional five million families; though the payout is scheduled to take place with SAP2 distribution.

The April 30, 2020 Executive Order 112 and the May 2 Memorandum issued by Executive Secretary Salvador Medialdea defined the beneficiaries of the second tranche of SAP to include 17 million low-income families – 12 million living in ECQ area and the five million families waitlisted beneficiaries. The ECQ areas covered: NCR; Region III, except Aurora; Region IV-A; Benguet; Pangasinan, Iloilo; Cebu Province; Bacolod; Davao City; Albay Province; and Zamboanga City. DSWD contracted six financial firms to assist in the disbursement of SAP – a Memorandum of Agreement – Multilateral Agreement for Electronic Payment of the Social Amelioration Program subsidies – was signed on June 30 with the following financial firms: 1) Starypay Corp., 2) G-Xchange Phil. Inc., 3) Pay Maya Phil. Inc., 4) Rizal Commercial and Banking Corporation, 5) Robinson's Bank Corporation, and 6) Union Bank of the Philippines (Philippine News Agency, 2020).

DSWD installed a digital platform for beneficiaries to self-register themselves as beneficiaries through RELIEF AGAD. This was accomplished through the support of DICT, USAID, and private provider DevCon Community of Technology eXperts (DCTx). As of the deadline set by DSWD only 4.5 million had used the facility. There were problems of connectivity in most areas and those who were in dire need of the SAP did not have mobile phones that could access

the platform. The families who had not used the digital platform will still have to go to the LGUs to register themselves. The LGU will then upload the data to DSWD. The DSWD will do a validation through 1) the registration number of the Social Amelioration Card number based on the list that the LGU had given for the first tranche, 2) the certificate of eligibility issued by the LGU, and 3) a duplication check of the names against the Pantawid database, SSS, DOLE and DTI Social Amelioration Program beneficiaries' lists.

Secretary Rolando Bautista of DSWD announced that SAP tranche 2 distribution will be 80 percent completed by July 31, 2020 except for families in geographically isolated areas, and those that are still being validated by the department (Cabuenas, 2020). However, based on the report of DSWD as of August 4, the department has only covered 69 percent of the targeted 14.1 million households. DSWD also indicated that the beneficiaries for SAP 2 had been reduced to 14.1 million from the 17 million families done through a delisting process. Malacañang however reiterated that the Bayanihan Act provides for 18 million families to benefit from SAP 1 and 2. Undersecretary Glen Paje said that they plan to complete distribution by August 15. However, under MECQ they would face issues of mobility of personnel to carry out the disbursement (Aurelio, 2020).

Malacañang instructed DSWD to look for new beneficiaries to fill up the slots in order to be consistent with the law. It also inquired regarding plans to assist the vulnerable families during the MECQ; DSWD said they plan to augment the LGUs in distributing food packs (Aurelio, 2020).

## **Assessment of the Social Protection Response during COVID-19**

"Despite one of the world's strictest and longest lockdown policies, the Philippines' securitized approach to containing the COVID-19 pandemic has led to unnecessary suffering, especially in poor communities" (Quijano et al., 2020).

The provision for food for vulnerable families was not adequately carried out in a timely and responsive manner. Prepositioning of food packs is a standard operating procedure for social welfare offices; however, the LGUs and regional offices as well as the national warehouse of DSWD did not have enough provisions.

While COVID-19 is a pandemic that the country had not previously experienced, there were early warning signs from media reports on Wuhan. A scenario building tabletop exercise could have been conducted by DSWD to develop different responses in the event of the spread of COVID-19 in the Philippines. Disaster response preparation is key to an effective response mechanism. A discussion dialogue could have been convened with the humanitarian actors from international and national organizations to plan for mitigating the impact of the pandemic. Thus, DSWD was not prepared to implement an effective and efficient response to the pandemic. It did not assert its knowledge and expertise in disaster response on relief and early recovery. This resulted in delayed and confused implementation of the Social Amelioration Program.

The *Balik Probinsya* program was also ill-conceived and was haphazardly implemented. This is evidenced by the spread of COVID-19 in municipalities, cities, and provinces which had no cases of COVID-19 but began to experience contagion when

the beneficiaries of *Balik Probinsya* went home. There was a lack of coordination between the national government and LGU; with the LGU unprepared to receive the people from NCR. The national agencies in charge of *Balik Probinsya* including DSWD did not have clear guidelines on procedures to process required documentation of travel. This resulted in long lines of people in the pier under the rain when the travelers were again required to get a swab test before boarding; and the congestion in Rizal Stadium of families who had been informed they could go home under the *Balik Probinsya* program only to find out that there was not enough transport for them, forcing many to camp out on the steps of the stadium.

The impact on women and girls is intensely burdensome. They had to find ways to bring food to the table and ensure that the children are safe and following the protocols especially that of staying at home. There had been reports of increased violence on women and children – exacerbating the burden of women in abusive relationships. The VAWC desks reportedly do not have people reporting for duty while the safe havens are inaccessible to many victims.

“...the Philippine government’s prioritizing of punitive policies such as detaining quarantine violators or attempting to decongest Manila by sending poor families to neighboring provinces, magnifies existing socio-spatial inequalities and further spreads disease. In many of these communities, poverty is a co-morbidity” (Quijano et al., 2020). Social protection is a system that provides safety nets for the poor and vulnerable; it stands on the principles of recognizing human rights and dignity of the poor. The response of the government on this pandemic disaster violated these principles.

## Moving Forward – Recommendations

The pandemic of COVID-19 will continue beyond 2020. The national government cannot just wait for a vaccine. There needs to be a plan for the economic and social protection sector. The Philippine economy is in recession, increasing job loss, while the return of OFWs will create a new poor. The hunger of the most vulnerable families will increase and sickness other than COVID-19 will beset these families. The most at-risk sectors – persons with disability, indigent senior citizens, women and children who are victims of abuse and violence, internally displaced persons, and families will experience severe food insufficiency and face the probability of falling ill due to weak immune systems. It is urgent that the government must develop a shock responsive social protection system. The following are recommendations for consideration of the authorities:

1. Develop a targeting system that will identify the beneficiaries of social protection measures that will be implemented by the government. This beneficiary listing must include the new poor – those who have lost jobs and sources of income such as returning OFWs, service sector employees, and construction workers/jeepney drivers. This beneficiary list should be a list that can be used for at least two years, to avoid a registration process every time a social amelioration program is implemented.
2. Create a strong food monitoring system that will identify access and availability of food for the most vulnerable and at-risk populations. This should be a collaboration between the national government agencies charged with social protection and the local government units. The data can be used to develop targeted programs

- that will address hunger vulnerabilities such as repositioning food packs, supplementary feeding programs, and community kitchens.
3. Design an early recovery program by activating the community-based economic activities that will engage the people in income-generating activities. This can take the form of cash for work for refurbishing health centers to make it COVID-19 protected, expanding day care centers to make them learning hubs for distance learning; disinfection of the communal spaces in the community, to mention a few.
  4. Introduce the Sustainable Livelihood programs (SLP) that will catalyze community-based economic transactions. It can utilize the community driven enterprise development tools for job generation.
  5. Engage the community-based organizations and CSOs to collaborate on community-based social protection responses and monitoring the effectiveness of programs on the ground.

## Masks4AIPH – Made by the Community, for the Community

Elizabeth U. Yang

“Why does it look good on her, while I don’t look as good wearing it?” quipped Young Pinay Bans Alqaseer. She was referring to the face mask being modeled by former Miss Universe Catriona Gray (nicknamed Queen Cat) in her capacity as brand ambassador of Mask4AIPH.

Behind the glamour of the ad, however, is a diverse group of community sewers and social development professionals providing technical and logistical support.

### From Melodies to Masks

Mask4AIPH was conceptualized by the group that created *Bayanihan Musikahan* (BM), the pioneer online fundraising platform featuring nightly performances by prominent artists and entertainers to implement complementary responses to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. These responses included distribution of food and health packages to urban poor communities, in partnership with the *Samahan ng Nagkakaisang*

*Pamilya ng Pantawid* (SNPP), building of community isolation centers in partnership with Likhaan Women’s Health Centers and distribution of personal protective equipment and sanitation kits through the Philippine Business for Social Progress (PBSP). When it ended on 30 May 2020, BM was able to reach out to 100,000 urban and rural poor families as well as raise a total of Php 120 million. Realizing that there is a need to go beyond merely food distribution, the organizers of BM began to think of approaches that would focus on sustainability in the medium- and long-term. Thus, a portion of the funds raised from the BM concerts was spent for germinating activities of sustainability initiatives — one of which is Mask4AIPH.

Simply put, Mask4AIPH is “free masks made by the community, for the community,” as explained by Queen Cat. The idea to produce face masks for the poor stemmed from the projection that everyone will be required to wear these as part of the New

Normal, which would further strain the already dwindling income of the poor due to loss of jobs. On the supply side, there is also a need to provide livelihood for skilled sewers whose employment or livelihood have been adversely affected by the pandemic. The project concept was simple and straightforward — tap community sewers to produce the face masks, pay them a decent price for each mask sewn while providing the raw materials, raise funds to pay for the masks and distribute these to urban poor communities. But, where to find the sewers?

### **EveryWoman and the Sewers' Groups**

Enter, EveryWoman, the *palaban, lumalaban* (feisty and fighting) coalition asserting women's rights and defending democracy. As the coalition continued to do online and offline monitoring and critique on the anti-poor and harsh quarantine policies and measures adopted by the administration, each of the member-organizations also did their part in providing humanitarian assistance to communities on the ground. Seeing the need to provide emergency employment, EveryWoman agreed to buy-in when Dan Songco, the BM project coordinator, introduced the idea of Mask4All. EveryWoman was responsible for scouting and recruitment of skilled sewers. PILIPINA member Annie Serrano designed the initial skills and equipment inventory survey for sewers which other members circulated to potential sewers' groups.

After more than a month of assessing the capacities of the groups that submitted the survey with the corresponding testing of their sewing skills, five groups with a total of 70 sewers were selected to join the Mask4AllPH sewing team. The members of these groups, however, are not just skilled sewers. They are also active in pushing for their respective advocacies. The groups include the following:

- BuB Livelihood Sewer/Bagong Pag-asa Homeowners Association is a peoples' organization affiliated with the Alyansa ng Samahang Pantao (ASAP) working for housing and land rights. Some of its members were able to avail of training on sewing and sewing equipment through the Bottom-Up Planning and Budgeting program under the Aquino Administration. Taytay City being a center of the garments and textile industry, the group proved that they could be competitive in producing curtains and pillowcases as well as ready-to-wear apparel;
- Montalban Action Group is a homeowners' association of residents who were relocated from danger zones in Metro Manila to E. Rodriguez (Montalban), Rizal during the Estrada Administration. They realized the need to organize themselves so that they could negotiate for basic social services, which was practically non-existent when they moved to the community. In 2013, the organization was able to access training on sewing with equipment under the Bottom-up Planning and Budgeting Program of the Aquino Administration. They have since started to produce t-shirts, rags and curtains;
- Pinag-isang Samahan ng mga Magulang (PINASAMA) is an organization of community-based day care workers and parents operating a network of day care centers in District 2 of Quezon City (Payatas, Commonwealth, Batasan Hills, and Bagong Silangan). It is also active in working against gender-based violence;
- Pinag-Isang Tinig at Lakas ng Manggagawa (PIGLAS) – Cavite started as a trade union of garment workers in the Cavite Export Processing Zone. It has since evolved into an organization of home-based workers. They are in the process of organizing themselves into a producers' cooperative.

- And, finally, the star of the pack, the Solidarity With Orphans And Widows (SOW) – Payatas. Organized by the Parish of Ina ng Lupang Pangako (Mother of the Promised Land), SOW is composed of family members, mostly widows and mothers, of victims of drug-related extra-judicial killings who were trained in sewing and produced bags and pouches on their first year. During the COVID-19 pandemic, SOW was one of the groups contracted by the Office of the Vice President (OVP) to produce personal protective suits.

### Turning the Ugly Duckling Mask into a Shining Swan

Coming up with the design of the face mask took several twists and turns. Grrrl Gang Manila leader and member of EveryWoman Mich Dulce brought in her colleagues from the Manila Protective Sewing Gear Club (MPSGC), providing the much needed technical expertise in the design and production of the facemasks. She also turned over 3,000 flour sacks

made out of *katsa* (muslin) donated by the Aboitiz Foundation. These were made into flat-fold masks with two elastic bands worn around the head. At first, there were issues about the masks made from the flour sacks — their wearability, safety, and aesthetics. These doubts, especially about the attractiveness of the masks, were all put to rest when Queen Cat modeled the mask. The design, especially in regard to safety, had also been approved by doctors from the Philippine General Hospital (PGH).

To date, Mask4AllPH has produced more than 16,000 *katsa* face masks, most of which have already been distributed in urban poor communities, including a group of street dwellers. It is ready to embark into scaled-up production. The group of sewers are thankful for the project, not only because it will enable them to earn a decent income, but will also give them a sense of fulfilment, knowing that their products will protect the lives of others in poor communities.

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## A Feminist COVID-19 Response and Recovery Plan

*Sylvia Estrada Claudio*

A COVID-19 response and recovery plan necessitates a whole-society and whole-government strategy that is led by the health sector (World Health Organization, 2020a). In the months since January 30, 2020, when the Director-General of the World Health Organization (WHO) declared the coronavirus disease 2019 outbreak a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC), it has become even more evident that the pandemic has been a test of health care systems (Tanne et al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020; Cohen & Kupferschmidt, 2020).

### **Health Care Situation Before the Onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic.**

Pre-pandemic, the Philippine health care system, while recording significant gains in the past two decades, continued to face challenges due to endemic weaknesses. Dayrit et al. (2018) note that the Philippines is in “epidemiological transition” as it battles pneumonia and TB as leading causes of disease even as it also contends with the rise of non-communicable diseases such as heart disease as well as the health impact of globalization and climate change. This is known as the “triple burden of disease.”

Indicators related to women’s and children’s health are troubling. The latest National Demographic and Health Survey shows a stagnation in neonatal and infant mortality rates in the last decade (Philippine Demographic and Health Survey, 2017). Latest statistics as reported by the WHO Global Health Observatory on maternal mortality ratios for the Philippines show a similar stagnation of maternal mortality rates.

Equally troubling for the Philippine response to health needs prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and for its response to and recovery from the pandemic is the fragmented, inequitable, and underfunded nature of the Philippine health care system.

The enactment of the Local Government Code in 1991 led to a dual system of governance in the public health sector, with the DOH governing at the national level and the local government units governing at the subnational level. Capuno (2017) notes that this devolution resulted in the fragmentation of what had been conceived as an integrated health care system from

local to national levels that also coordinated primary, secondary and tertiary care referral chains. The flow of health funds also became more complicated and inequitable with the weak link between health budget allocation and devolved health functions. Both local and national officials encountered difficulties and discord among local officials and the politicization of health care for partisan purposes in many instances.

To add to this fragmentation, the Philippines also has a health private sector that is larger than the public sector. This is also described as a “two-tier” system because the private sector is often better resourced and services the wealthier classes of society. The Oxford Business group (2018) reports that the private sector caters to only about 30 percent of the population but is far larger than the public sector. The Department of Health (2016) notes that about 65 percent of the 1,224 hospitals in the country in 2016 were private.

Furthermore, the DOH (2018) states that:

“The country also lacked over 2,500 RHUs<sup>1</sup> or health centers and more than 500 barangay health stations to serve the population in 2016. This has limited access especially to the poor to healthcare given that the majority of those who go to these health facilities belong to the poorest income quintiles, as shown by the 2013 NDHS” (p.13).

The poor cannot however easily seek care from the larger private sector which generally is paid through user fees at point of service (Oxford Business Group 2018). This has resulted in high out-of-pocket expenditures (OOP) for health. The

proportion of OOP payment to total health expenditures has traditionally been above 50 percent, compared to 15–30 percent seen in emerging economies with successful and more equitable health-financing strategies (Dayrit et al., 2018).

Apart from economic considerations, there are other barriers related to social and geographic factors that result in inequitable outcomes.

Hence, based on another indicator, sufficiency of hospital beds, only four regions (NCR, CAR, Region X and Region XI) out of 17 regions complied with the standard local hospital bed ratio set by the Department of Health (DOH), which is 10 hospital beds for every 10,000 population. Only NCR complied with the World Health Organization’s (WHO) requirement of 20 hospital beds for every 10,000 population (German, et al., 2018). The Philippines’ hospital bed density rate is the fourth-lowest in ASEAN, after Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia (Oxford Business Group, 2018).

In terms of health human resources inequities can also be noted. There were 3.9 doctors working in health institutions for a population of 10,000 in 2017 (Dayrit et al., 2018). The highest density is 10.6 in the NCR while the lowest density is 0.9 in the ARMM. There are only 52,000 physicians and 351,000 nurses in the country (Abrigo et al., 2019). This is below the World Health Organization-prescribed ratio of one doctor for 1,000 persons. (UP COVID-19 Pandemic Response Team, 2020a). The UP team also noted that there were 8.2 nurses per 10,000 nationwide in 2018 compared to the WHO-prescribed ratio of 1:1,000.

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<sup>1</sup> RHU stands for Rural Health Unit

Total health expenditure in the Philippines grew by 39 percent to PhP655.1 billion from 2012 to 2016. Due to incremental revenues from sin taxes allocated for health, government expenditures have increased which have led to a dramatic increase in PhilHealth<sup>2</sup> coverage. Nonetheless, the huge share of out-of-pocket payment (52.2 percent) still dwarfed the share of government subsidies (18.9 percent) and PhilHealth social insurance (16.7 percent) to total health expenditures (DOH, 2018) showing an unmet need for financial protection.

An analysis of PhilHealth shows continuing problems on the way to meeting the goal of providing universal coverage. These include poor communication with its members so that many are unaware of existing benefits, difficulty in identifying the poor whose membership premiums are paid through national coffers, lack of performance reporting, gatekeeping and overly strict accreditation of facilities and a lack of an equity framework in its relationship to providers (Picazo et al., 2015). PhilHealth has also been wracked by corruption scandals pre-pandemic while the corruption is alleged to have increased because of the bigger funding granted to it by the Bayanihan We Heal as One Act of 2020 which gave the Executive power to reallocate funds for, among other things, additional insurance (Gavilan, 2020).

### **Health Care System During the Pandemic**

The private tertiary care hospitals, especially in the National Capital Region (also known as Metro Manila) were the first to admit cases of COVID-19 upon the

declaration of community transmission in the Philippines by the Department of Health on March 7, 2020 (DOH, 2020a). For example, the initial 20 patients reported by the DOH on March 9, 2020 were all in private hospitals except for one patient (DOH, 2020b). By March 25, five major hospitals, only one of them a public hospital, announced that they were full and could no longer accept COVID-19 patients (Calleja, 2020). It may well have been that members of the middle- and upper-classes were more at risk initially as the early cases were either those who had traveled abroad, though the distribution also reflects the fact that private hospitals have a bigger overall capacity in terms of beds and ICU units than government hospitals. Given the overwhelmed capacities of the big private hospitals, the government moved to designate health care referral networks that included, among others, the designation of some tertiary care hospitals as COVID-19 referral centers (DOH Memorandum No. 2020-0178, 2020).

Consequently, the government designated several hospitals as COVID-19 referral centers although indications were that these hospitals were reluctant because of their own assessment that they did not have the capacity to serve as catchment hospitals for severe cases.<sup>3</sup>

In any case, it was clear that a health care system that was not prepared to handle a pandemic (Dayrit et al., 2018) was reeling. Relief came because of what has been described as one of the most severe and prolonged lockdowns (in official government parlance called an "extended community

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<sup>2</sup> The National Health Insurance Act of 1995 created the Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth) to provide health insurance coverage for all Filipinos.

<sup>3</sup> See for example the Facebook post of the Philippine General Hospital's Director

quarantine” or ECQ) had indeed flattened the curve (The Economist, 2020). However, such relief was temporary as subsequent events would show, because the government failed to increase health care system capacity during this period.

Indeed as former Health Secretary Esperanza Cabral noted on April 21, 2020, only 40 percent of the goal for daily testing capacity had been achieved. She also noted that there were 523 public ICU beds with 79 percent of all public hospitals reporting their data, 2,543 public isolation beds with 62 percent of all public hospitals reporting their data and 681 ventilators with 87 percent of public hospitals reporting their data. Noting that 80 percent of patients had been treated at private hospitals, Cabral warned that the capacity of the public sector was yet to be tested and she called for, among other things, the need to improve the surge capacity of both private and public hospitals.

Cabral also declared that “Primary health care for mild-moderate presumably and confirmed cases (mainly self-care, isolation, and monitoring) should be accelerated to reduce the burden on hospitals.” The call is consistent with the need, pre-pandemic, for a more integrated and less fragmented health care system.

The most severe form of lockdown (ECQ) for Metro Manila (started March 12, 2020) and Luzon (started March 16, 2020), was eased slightly on May 16, 2020 to what the government called a “modified extended community quarantine (MECQ) and eased even further by May 30, 2020 to a general community quarantine (GCQ)<sup>4</sup> (Kravchuk, 2020).

The final easing allowed for full return to work for many industries including government offices, the return of public transportation under new safety protocols and the opening of malls, again under strict guidelines.

Had the government used the period of extreme lockdown to prepare for the surge of new cases once restrictions had been eased?

Abrigo et al. (2020) posed this same question before the final easing of restrictions and came up with dire scenarios. Using a discrete-time susceptible-exposed-infected-removed (SEIR) compartmental model stratified by province, they modeled COVID-19 spread in the country and came up with the estimated health care needs of the Philippines based on several scenarios of ever-increasing interventions.

Their results revealed that without interventions the health system would require as much as 1.51 million regular hospital beds, 456,000 ICU beds, 246,000 ventilators, 727,000 doctors, a million nurses, 91,000 medical specialists, and 36 million sets of personal protective equipment (PPE) for hospitalized COVID-19 cases on the peak day of the outbreak which would fall sometime in August 2020.

Looking at the best case scenario with interventions that would include better testing, including better reporting of test results, and the ability to isolate at least 70 percent of cases, the research concluded that the country’s health system would require 182,000 beds, 55,500 ICU beds,

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<sup>4</sup> Various types of quarantines have been imposed since March 2020 in different parts of the country. Another hard hit city, Cebu had also been placed in prolonged ECQ periods.

30,000 ventilators, 88,000 doctors, 118,000 nurses, 11,000 medical specialists, and 4.41 million PPE sets by May/June 2021 the peak infection for this scenario.

Taking a different set of assumptions and setting an  $R_0=2^5$ , the UP COVID-19 Pandemic Response team (2020) estimated that to handle only critical patients, there should ideally be one attending physician for every two patients, one nurse per person, and one intensivist, one pulmonologist, and one infectious disease specialist for every five patients. At  $R_0=2$ , this roughly corresponds to 14,500 doctors and 13,200 nurses.

Both the UP study and Abrigo et al., noted that heavy interventions needed to be made in order for the hospitals not to be overwhelmed.

Apart from increasing critical care capacities (including increasing isolation centers, hospital beds, ventilators) and testing capacity as has already been discussed, the WHO's detailed country preparedness guidelines (2020b) include increasing contact tracing capacity and stockpiling PPEs.

On May 26, 2020, a few days prior to a second easing of restrictions, the DOH announced that it was short of 94,000 contact tracers based on its own recommended ratio of one contact tracer per 800 population (Magsambol, 2020). Indeed, a few days prior to this announcement, Dr. Socorro Escalante, WHO acting representative, noted that there was a "very, very short window of opportunity" to improve on the country's contact-tracing system, prior to further easing of the lockdown (Esguerra, 2020).

The DOH claimed quite early that they had enough personal protective equipment (Montemayor, 2020) and it has been a continuing claim. However, there is some inconsistency of messaging because DOH Secretary Francisco Duque has also admitted shortages in PPEs (Cepeda, 2020). There have also been allegations that the DOH purchased overpriced PPE sets at P1,800 each, when market value for the product supposedly only ranged from P400 to P1,000 (CNN Philippines, 2020a).

Similarly, government attempts to increase the number of healthcare workers has been marred by failure and controversy. For example, on March 21, the DOH called for volunteer doctors and nurses for three COVID-19 referral hospitals. But the offer of PhP500 (USD10) daily allowance, free accommodation, and free food stoked public outrage (Sandoval, 2020).

In its 14th report to Congress on June 29, 2020 on the COVID-19 response, the Office of the President noted that of the 8,553 approved hires for human health resources only 4,045 had been hired.

It would seem from all indicators that the government had failed to use the time it had bought with its harsh lockdown to prepare the health care system to respond to the pandemic. Subsequent events were to prove this to be the case.

From the time the lockdown was loosened to MECQ and then GCQ in May 2020, the number of COVID-19 cases surged. Towards the end of June 2020 the number of cases in the Philippines had surpassed 35,000. WHO data showed that the country also

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<sup>5</sup> A scenario at the peak of the COVID-19 crisis, where a COVID-positive person can infect two others ( $R_0=2$ )

recorded the fastest increase in the number of infections in the Western Pacific region in the previous two weeks (Al Jazeera, 2020). By August 6, 2020, the Philippines had the most number of cases in Southeast Asia with wide discrepancies noted in the case numbers of neighboring countries which, other than Indonesia, showed numbers in the hundreds or a few thousands (CNN Philippines, 2020c; Center for Strategic and International Studies, n.d.).

The reasons for this surge were identified by the majority of the medical community in the Philippines. On August 1, 2020, the heads of more than 80 medical societies held a press conference requesting the government to return Metro Manila to the most severe lockdown provisions (ECQ), citing the need for a “time out” (Philippine College of Physicians, 2020a, 2020b). Prior to this, the three big private hospitals that had announced shutdowns in March 2020 reiterated their inability to accept COVID-19 cases again in July. They were joined by nine other hospitals. The DOH also reported that four of the country’s regions (Calabarzon, Bicol, Central Visayas, and Socsargen) were in the “warning zone” for posting 51.9 percent utilization for COVID-19 ward beds while Metro Manila is in the “danger zone” as 77.4 percent of such beds in the region were already occupied (Kravchuk, 2020b).

The more than 80 medical societies stated the following reasons for their request for a return to ECQ:

1. Hospital worker deficiency – citing failure in hiring, burn out, resignations

and increasing infections among health workers resulting in a decreasing workforce;

2. Failure of case finding and isolation;
3. Failure of contact tracing and quarantine;
4. Transportation safety – citing a lack of solutions that allowed people to commute to work safely;
5. Workplace safety – citing the failure of the government to craft and disseminate protocols for employers.

Apart from the reasons stated, the country’s data system on COVID-19 has been marred by controversy with critics questioning the reliability of data, the timeliness and data gaps for example with regards to where cases tested positive could be found.<sup>6</sup>

## Recommendations for a pandemic response

### Short-term

The science of the proper response to the COVID-19 pandemic, despite the fact that this is a new virus, is not controversial. Very early the WHO issued guidelines and updated these, though the basic elements remain the same.

Many have also applied the science to local needs. For example, Vice President Leni Robredo has taken up the recommendations of several experts making wide-ranging suggestions. For the healthcare system she has called for:

1. A faster, more accurate, easily accessible and centralized data gathering and management system.

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<sup>6</sup> See for example UP COVID-19 Pandemic Response Team. POLICY NOTE NO. 6 / 08 May 2020. Prevailing Data Issues in the Time of COVID-19 and the Need for Open Data. More recently Quezon City Mayor Joy Belmonte bewailed the lack of reliable data for proper contact tracing.

2. A communication campaign (The government to date does not have a communications plan for addressing COVID-19) (Flores, 2020).
3. Increasing testing, testing time turn-over, and eliminating backlogs.
4. Strengthening the health care system, particularly hospitals.

With regards to the health care system, the pre-pandemic need to ensure synergy and cooperation between primary, secondary, and tertiary health care facilities needs to be strengthened. Primary health care capacities including isolation centers for the mild to moderate cases need to be increased especially in areas where the number of infections is high.

It should be noted that women compose the majority of workers in the healthcare system but especially among primary healthcare workers. Full employment of barangay healthcare workers is a short term and appropriate response. This must be accompanied by the necessary training that will allow them to respond to healthcare needs in their community including the emergent needs for community education on the necessary behavioral changes for COVID-19 prevention, home isolation protocols, and triage skills for proper referral to isolation facilities or hospitals. Boosting employment of health care workers at the community level also contributes to alleviating the emerging job crisis that is particularly devastating for the poor.

Similarly, the government must fulfill the necessary quota for contact tracers. Women may again be hired in greater or in equal numbers and trained.

However, for workers at all levels of the healthcare system adequate pay, reasonable

work hours, benefits, and protections are a must. There is some anecdotal evidence that some LGUs have asked that women do contact tracing on a volunteer basis and have not even provided adequate PPEs.

Massive increases in ICU bed capacity are also needed if hospitals are to meet the needs of severe and critical patients not only from COVID-19 infections but for the continuing needs of the general population. It takes P14 million to outfit a 26-room wing for negative pressure ICU capacity according to a private Metro Manila hospital (Matias, 2020). The private health care system is in as dire need of help as the public health care system. Public and private hospitals have faced what Mendoza (2020) has called the “two-pronged pressure of higher costs combined with dramatically lower revenues.” Mendoza notes further that many hospitals are showing there are strong financial stresses faced by many hospitals which have had to resort to budget cuts, lay-offs, and closure of some services.

Prior to the pandemic, many hospitals had already been shouldering huge deficits because PhilHealth had not been reimbursing insurance claims from these hospitals, a matter that is now the subject of an ongoing Senate probe on the matter. The government through PhilHealth, has also capped any reimbursements for COVID-19 hospitalizations and has prevented private hospitals from charging for any expenses beyond the limits set. These limits are patently low for many cases thus increasing the financial burden carried by hospitals. The government has essentially passed on its financial protection obligations to the private sector. The appeal of hospital leaders is that they be allowed to collect the balance of fees beyond that covered by PhilHealth (Matias, 2020).

Of equal importance is the need for the government as a whole, but the Department of Health in particular, to formulate a more proactive communication and mass education plan which must be effectively implemented.

#### Medium-Term to Long-Term

It is becoming increasingly clear that the choice is not between the health of the people and the survival of the economy. As the pandemic rages, countries who are able to bring COVID-19 infection and death rates under control are better able to also bring their economies back into gear without risking permanent damage.

Most analysts expect that the recovery from the COVID-19 will start upon the invention of a safe and effective vaccine which will then have to be mass-produced and distributed to a large majority of the global population. As of August 13, 2020, the WHO notes 29 candidate vaccines in development of which only six are in Phase 3 clinical trials. No vaccine has passed clinical testing and is deemed ready for registration and manufacture. Several vaccines are in the final phases of clinical trials. In any case, even the most optimistic believe that the earliest vaccines will be available only in 2021.

As we await a vaccine, the ability to test, trace, and care for those infected with COVID-19 will be necessary as a continuing public health response and to underpin economic recovery. Furthermore, there are indications that non-COVID-19 cases are being neglected (Lasco & San Pedro, 2020) and these include the reproductive health needs of women for contraception and other reproductive and sexual health services. Violence against women is also known to increase during situations of social stress such as during calamities and pandemics

(World Health Organization, 2020b. We may very well have a second wave of critical cases because of the decrease in health care-seeking behaviors for non-COVID-19 ailments and the closure of some services due to the stress the healthcare system is undergoing. Increasing joblessness and an economic standstill have already resulted in increasing hunger rates and threaten long-term food security for millions (Philippine Daily Inquirer, 2020).

Any crisis recovery impetus package must fund the health care system at all levels and particularly in terms of infrastructure, human resources, equipment, and the emergent needs for telecommunications (such as those needed for telemedicine) and data management systems. Infrastructure outlays to build rural health units, emergency obstetric, and neonatal care units, and hospitals may also add jobs and boost economic activity in a faltering economy.

It is necessary to ensure proper and graft-free leadership of the country's health insurance system, mainly Philhealth. Immediate payment of debts to hospitals whether private or public is necessary. The request of hospitals for balanced billing options should be permitted along with a review of current COVID-19 coverage guidelines within an equity framework so that the poor are not disenfranchised. But these measures need to be continued in the medium and long term. Recapitalization may be a necessary step given recent announcements that PhilHealth coffers are running low (CNN Philippines, 2020b).

A comprehensive response also must address preventive and promotive health strategies for COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 related concerns such as those that can respond to food insecurity and hunger and

address issues such as violence against women and the mental health needs of a stressed population.

During this period as well, behavioral change will need to serve as a front line of defense. Mask wearing, hand washing, and sneezing and cough hygiene must be taught through an aggressive mass education campaign that will generate livelihood for even more women and men.

For both response and recovery, the pandemic presents for the Philippines a necessity and also a historic opportunity to put in place a comprehensive and equitable health care system.

## Rural Health Units Under Stress: The Intersectionality of Peace, Security, Governance and COVID-19

*Yasmin Busran-Lao*

Based on several studies, the almost 50 years of armed conflict in Muslim Mindanao has resulted in the people lagging behind the rest of the population in terms of economic and human development. For several decades, the provinces of Lanao del Sur, Maguindanao, Sulu, Basilan, and Tawi-Tawi were found to be at the bottom ten of the country's poorest provinces as well as the lowest in human development. The various political negotiations entered into by the Philippine government and the Moro rebels have failed to address the armed conflict, thus further pushing these areas into instability, poverty, and human insecurity.

There is great hope among the people of Muslim Mindanao that the signing of the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro (CAB) in March 2014 and the ratification of the Bangsamoro Organic Law on January 21, 2019 that put in place a new government, would change the status quo, ushering in enduring peace and security, economic prosperity, and better quality of life.

In May 2018, the Marawi Siege took place displacing around 360,000 individuals or 77,000 families from the 24 barangays of

Marawi City. The siege totally devastated the lives of the people in all aspects, posing a great threat to the much-awaited peace and development resulting from the peace agreement.

Based on UNHCR data, of these 77,000 displaced families, it is estimated that 25,355 families are now temporarily staying in the different parts of the country, with 22,400 families staying with relatives and friends, 218 families accommodated in day care centers and madaris (Islamic schools) and 2,954 families in 17 transitory shelters located in Marawi City, and in some municipalities of Lanao del Sur and Lanao del Norte. These displaced families have been demanding from the government that they be allowed to return to their homes in Marawi City, despite their being heavily damaged, to enable them to start rebuilding their lives and put an end to their suffering in the temporary shelters as these lack the basic necessities of water, sanitation, food, medical assistance, access to livelihood and education of their children thus endangering their overall well being.

With the entry of COVID-19 in the country, the IDPs from Marawi became one of the sectors most vulnerable to the pandemic.

They have no access to the required basic needs such as water, sanitation, suitable shelter, and nutritious food to protect themselves. The Local Government Units (LGUs) in which they are located do not have sufficient health services and health infrastructure to deal with the pandemic.

The rural health units (RHUs) in Lanao del Sur are at the frontline in providing basic health services to their respective municipalities. In the absence of other hospitals/clinics in the area, RHU personnel are on-duty 24/7 for the health needs of all their constituents including far-flung households despite the meager supplies/resources and the low salaries they receive. Amid the presence of *rido* (clan conflicts) and proliferation of small arms, their personal security is also always at risk. It is noteworthy that the majority of the Rural Health Physicians (RHPs), nurses and midwives in these RHUs are women.

With the imposition of Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) due to COVID-19 on March 16, 2020, RHUs in Lanao del Sur were faced with the greatest challenge of dealing with a health problem way beyond their capacity and scope of responsibility.

#### **Information Dissemination**

In the majority of the municipalities the RHPs, nurses, and midwives were the ones who had to conduct information dissemination to Barangay officials and their constituents when the Municipal Interior and Local Government Officials (MILGOs) were not present. In the absence of clear guidelines and accurate information, it became incumbent upon the RHUs to provide the necessary information and gather data.

#### **Training of the Barangay Local Government Units (BHERTS) and the Municipal Disaster Risk Reduction Officers (MDRRMOs)**

In the most cases where the Barangay Local Government Units (BLGUs) were not prepared to conduct the training, the RHPs also did the training of the Barangay Health

Emergency Response Teams (BHERTS) who are responsible for monitoring and contact tracing of the People Under Monitoring (PUMs) or People Under Investigation (PUIs). They also provided the training for the Municipal Disaster Risk Reduction Officers (MDRRMOs) who are tasked to transport Locally Stranded Individuals (LSIs)

#### **Manning the checkpoints to ensure compliance**

At the beginning of the community quarantine, the RHUs were deployed to join the PNP at the checkpoints to conduct body temperature checks for those who pass through the municipal borders. Later on they were also tasked to check for proper documents of people suspected to be Locally Stranded Individuals (LSIs) and Returning Overseas Filipinos (ROFs) who were part of the Hatid Probinsya program of the national government. Some of these folk did not have the necessary papers and did not have proper coordination with the local government units. Due to the absence of clear guidelines, the RHUs could not detain or refuse entry to those found to be lacking proper documents.

#### **Issuance of Health Travel Clearance**

Perhaps among the tasks undertaken by the RHPs, the most contentious is the issuance of health travel clearance to any resident of the municipality who wants to travel outside for business, social, health, and other purposes. Every MILGO is mandated to inform all of its Barangay Local Government Units (BLGUs) regarding this guideline and for these BLGUs to educate their constituents on the importance of this clearance as part of the COVID-19 management protocol and ensure strict compliance. The task of the RHP is to conduct the necessary medical protocol before clearance is released. Clearly, the success of this COVID-19 management relies on effective and efficient coordination and support between the RHP and the BLGUs. However, in most cases the MILGO would leave it to the RHP to inform the BLGUs about the said guidelines. Tasking

the RHPs to perform responsibilities beyond their scope of duty somehow created tension between the RHPs, the BLGUs and their constituents. It turned out that ensuring strict compliance with the requirements for travel clearance became somehow the responsibility of the RHPs. With many constituents seeking the interventions of the LGUs for them to be issued the clearance, the issuance of the clearance became not just a health issue but a political issue as well with the RHPs receiving the brunt of the people's ire. There were reports of threats and violent harassment experienced by some RHUs which placed their personal security at risk.

Keenly aware of the plight of the micro entrepreneurs and daily wage earners who rely on their daily income for survival, the RHUs could not easily provide travel clearance for them as they will be using tricycles and jeepneys as their modes of transportation. These modes of transportation were banned for most of the quarantine period hence making the travel clearance also an economic issue.

#### **Insufficient Supplies/Resources**

Even before the onset of COVID-19, most RHUs in Lanao del Sur suffered from insufficient funds for the effective and efficient operation of their units. The meager medical and office supplies, as well as transportation expenses would often leave RHUs exploring other sources of support, with some even shelling out funds from their own small salaries.

With the COVID-19 response requiring more than their usual needed supplies, RHUs expected that these emergency needs would be provided for by the national government. However, basic supplies such as facemasks, alcohol, disinfection kits, even regular water supply were still supplied by the RHUs with some receiving support from politicians from national, regional, and municipal levels. There were some PPEs supplied by the national government but they turned out to be unsuitable for use in humid areas where the RHUs are not air-

conditioned. In the end, the RHUs had to provide their own PPEs from their own meager resources. Bond paper, printing inks and other office supplies which became in demand due to the issuance of travel clearances also became a problem. Other government offices such as the MDRROs, BHERTs and PNPs also would request PPEs and facemasks from the RHUs everytime they conduct their duties thinking that the RHUs would have ample supplies that would also cover their own needs as well.

#### **RHUs Becoming One Stop Shops**

When the lockdown was imposed, most RHUs became a one-stop shop for the community. While they are carrying out their regular daily services and the whole gamut of COVID-19 management response, people would go to them for all sorts of needs: psycho-social counseling, economic woes, family problems and maintenance medicines, especially of the elderly, prescribed by their doctors which they could not buy outside due to lack of public transportation. The clinics had to be the ones to bear the burden of public service.

#### **The Hatid Probinsya and setting up of Municipal Quarantine Facilities**

The Hatid Probinsya Program of the national government has further exacerbated the weak health infrastructure and governance of the local governments. Thousands of LSIs/ROFs were sent home by the national government through its Hatid Probinsya program without the proper coordination with the receiving local government units. Due to the non-readiness of the receiving LGUs, Community Quarantine Facilities (CQF) were barely set up when the surge of LSIs/ROFs took place thereby creating undue pressure on the weak health infrastructure, in the process spreading panic among the poorly informed population.

LSIs and ROFs seemed to be pouring in from everywhere (by air and by land) with no proper regulation, some not registering

with the local governments for proper processing and quarantine procedures. Many would then take public transportation to their homes, putting other commuters at risk.

It became an additional burden on the RHUs to look for these LSIs and ROFs and convince them to subject themselves to testing and quarantine procedures. In situations where these LSIs and ROFs refused to cooperate some local chief executives preferred not to get involved for their own political survival. It was the same story with the issuance of the travel clearance, with the burden falling solely on the shoulders of the RHPs. When some of these LSIs and ROFs would turn out to be COVID-19 positive, it became the responsibility of the RHUs to place them in the CQF, if there's any, manage them with the limited resources they have or refer and transport them to a government hospital.

Due to poor information dissemination and education on COVID-19, communities near the CQFs would become apprehensive for their safety. Some families became so afraid that they left their houses thus creating a new problem of displacement.

#### **Polio house-to-house vaccination**

Currently, the RHUs are very much worried by the DOH policy on the conduct of house-to-house vaccination for polio. With no consultation with infectious disease experts, they are afraid that the risk of local transmission would be high. As dedicated public servants they have to comply. As they go on with their duties, they put their fate in the Almighty and rely on whatever resources they have to protect the children, their families, and themselves.

#### **Low Valuation and Appreciation of RHU Services**

Majority of health workers at the RHUs feel that their work is undervalued and unappreciated. This is manifested in the low

salaries they receive, the lack of Monthly Operating Office Expenses (MOOE), lack of ambulances to ferry patients needing emergency responses, and generally poor government support.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, they were hoping that they also be given hazard pay similar to what is given to other agencies being deployed like the PNP who receive a daily amount of P500 while manning the checkpoints. The RHU staff were also deployed at the checkpoints in addition to their daily regular medical services at the clinic, the issuance of travel clearance, monitoring of PUMs and PUIs and testing of LSIs and ROFs which they also transport for referral to the government hospital in Marawi City. They also had to create their own COVID-19 database which they had to provide daily to the provincial government and the Marines. When public transportation was banned, they had to find ways to report to the clinic and be back at home to take care of their families.

Perhaps what makes their work more painful is the attitude of people toward them due to the insufficient information regarding the spread of the virus. Health frontliners serving in COVID-19 facilities are perceived to be carriers of the virus hence being shunned by the public. There were reports of vendors of bottled water, food and some other necessities refusing to transact with them. Some say they even experienced violence from the public.

The pain is made worse by the attitude of their own families. There were those who were told by their own families not to come home and instead stay at the RHU during the whole duration of this pandemic. This made them feel like outcasts, evicted from their homes, rejected by their families, deprived of the emotional and spiritual support which they need most at this trying time.

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# 6 Education

## Learning in a Time of Pandemic

*Maria Serena I. Diokno*

The Department of Education (DepEd) reports that as of 17 July 2020, 21,344,915 children had enrolled in public and private schools nationwide for the school year 2020–21. Of this number, 5.6 percent (1,197,895) enrolled in private schools. Together, these numbers represent 76 percent of last year's total enrollment; and broken down, they represent 88 percent of public school and 27 percent of private school enrollment (2020c). Focusing on the public school sector where the majority of Filipino children study, two questions immediately come to mind. How do we teach these approximately 20 million children amidst rising infections due to COVID-19? And what do we do with the nearly three million children who did not enroll this year?

### **Delivery of learning**

With regard to the first question, the DepEd's The Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan in the Time of COVID-19 (2020a) has prescribed four ways of delivering education during the time of the pandemic. The first is face-to-face learning, which the DepEd initially allowed

in low-risk areas (geographically isolated, disadvantaged, affected by conflict), with no history of infection, and subject to health safety protocols such as physical distancing, monitoring of external contacts, and risk assessment (p. 31). In late July, however, President Duterte ruled out in-person learning entirely until a vaccine reaches the Philippines. Our position is to allow children in low-risk areas as described above to go to school, subject to the conditions outlined by the DepEd. Face-to-face learning engages students directly, enables them to interact during the learning process, socialize with their peers in a variety of activities, and offers teachers instant feedback that loops back instantly into the teaching/learning process. Children in low-risk areas must not be denied this opportunity. Should infections occur in the area, school officials must be prepared to shift to remote learning.

The second and more dominant means of delivering education in the present time is distance learning, which allows little or no contact among learners and between learners and school personnel. The DepEd

has outlined three types of distance learning: modular distance learning, online distance learning, and television/radio-based instruction. Of these, online distance learning is the most difficult to implement given the absence of internet service providers in parts of the country and, where these providers exist, weak signal and slow or unstable connection pose added obstacles. The DepEd (2020a) says that 22,645 or 48 percent of public schools have internet, while another 8,478 or 18 percent are in areas where internet providers exist but are not yet connected (p. 22). There is no data about how many public school learners' homes are wired, but they would certainly not be the majority. In its Learning Continuity Plan for the pandemic, the DepEd admits:

Given the differing circumstances and capacities of learners and households to cope with the new modalities of learning, we anticipate that there will be more learners that may be left behind. Thus, efforts to provide remediation and enhancement activities shall also be given more attention (p. 27).

As for public school teachers, the DepEd says that based on the online survey it ran in April 2020, with 787,066 respondent teachers, 87 percent indicated that they have computers at home and 13 percent do not. Among those with computers at home, 49 percent have internet access, 41 percent do not, and the rest have no signal in their area (p. 25). We have seen in the news videos of teachers camped along the highway just to obtain a signal so that they can take part in an online seminar organized by the DepEd. Web-based learning is also difficult because of the lack of devices (desktop, laptop, tablet). The DepEd claims it has distributed more than a million devices across 44,155 schools or 93 percent of the total. But the

Department also admits that the number of devices students can take home represents only two percent of all public school students (p. 22).

Clearly, then, this is one area where government must act. Access to the internet is a necessity of life and learning in the 21st century. Whether in part or in whole, for teaching or research, wifi access has become a quick, facile and practically indispensable tool of learning and communication. Government must therefore consider the provision of internet services in public schools and poor communities as a fundamental and immediate need, if not right, for living in this century and in this whole new world created by COVID-19, and take the necessary steps to ensure such provision. The Philippine Digital Strategy of 2011-15, in fact, adopted "Internet Opportunities for All" as a strategic thrust of the nation's digital policy. The recommendations outlined in this strategy are worth pursuing because of the emphasis on the provision of broadband service in unserved communities and public schools. To encourage investment in unserved or under-served areas, telecommunication firms may be given tax incentives for providing internet services to these locales.

The other type of remote learning, which the DepEd (2020a) calls modular distance learning, entails individualized instruction and independent learning through the use of self-learning modules and other learning resources (textbooks, worksheets, etc.) in print or online. In this type of distance learning, the teacher monitors the work of the students who can seek advice, clarification, or further instruction from the teacher by telephone, email, or text messaging. If possible, the teacher visits the learner at home to render direct, face-to-face assistance (p. 31). The delivery of printed rather than digital modules

and learning resources is the most viable of all the methods of remote learning. Materials may be delivered directly to the barangays or the learners, accompanied by a parent or guardian, can pick up the materials from school on scheduled dates. A senior high school in Rizal is working on other methods of delivering printed materials, such as by volunteer riders or a bicycling group who can deliver learning resources directly to homes or communities, or through community kiosks such as sari-sari stores that double as pick-up centers for learning resources (Luz, 2020).

What is not clear, however, is why the DepEd has to develop new self-learning modules when there are existing textbooks (which contain exercises at the end of each unit) and activity sheets devised by teachers in the previous year that can easily be printed and distributed to school children. While the DepEd has reduced the learning competencies to the “most essential,” given the constraints imposed by the pandemic, all the DepEd has to do is identify which parts (pages) of the textbook require attention and use existing activity sheets for the specified sections. Instead, the DepEd chose to produce self-learning modules hastily, without prior review, at the level of the regions and divisions. Errors in the module became inevitable given the haste, at least with regard to the typographical mistakes, but the rest of the errors are grave and worrisome. The DepEd has conveniently tossed the blame for the errors to the divisions that made them, which does not, of course, speak well of the Department and its branches.

The third type of distance learning uses television and or radio (DepEd, p. 32). On 10 August 2020, the DepEd launched its DepEd TV Channel with 19-minute allotments for selected subjects and grades. The

development of TV lessons takes time, and based on those featured thus far, the DepEd has a considerable way to go before it can complete the package of (good quality) lessons all school year-round. Rather than (again) reinvent the wheel, the DepEd should download videos of the Knowledge Channel (available on YouTube), produced by and aired on the channel whose franchise this government recklessly and baselessly refused to renew) and distribute copies of the videos to communities for shared viewing. The DepEd should also negotiate with erstwhile educational TV show Batibot regarding the use of selected segments.

President Duterte, meanwhile, has expressed his preference for learning by the most boring and least engaging means—transistor radios—in areas without Internet and television. Again, the distribution of textbooks and activity sheets would be a better mode of delivery than radios, and in distant areas that are hardly exposed to the COVID-19 virus, face-to-face learning should take place, subject to the practice of health safety measures.

In addition to in-person and remote learning are two other approaches proposed by the DepEd: blended learning and homeschooling. The first is a mix of face-to-face and any form of remote learning. Since the government has ruled out face-to-face learning altogether, blended learning is not (yet) possible. Homeschooling, on the other hand, entails the active participation of qualified adults (parents, guardians, or tutors) in learning which takes place at home. The DepEd (2020a) has reservations about adult facilitation and the curriculum, however, and expects to release an issuance at a later date (p. 32). It must be stated, nonetheless, that even prior to the pandemic, homeschooling was being practiced by some parents who

availed of foreign school curricula and taught their children at home.

### **A community approach**

The UP College of Education (2020) has enumerated eight major strategies for learning in the time of the pandemic, guided by the principles of compassion, inclusion, and innovation, namely:

- Prioritize teacher and student safety, health, and well-being.
- Recalibrate curricular and assessment priorities.
- Enact flexible learning options.
- Empower families for home-based learning.
- Lead for resilience and innovation.
- Redesign the learning environment.
- Evaluate education financing.
- Create new knowledge.

We accept this framework and approach it from the perspective of the home and the community, which will need to bear a larger than usual responsibility for learning, given the physical closure of schools. In the time of COVID-19, the home will become the new primary site of learning. This shift, while inevitable, poses a tremendous challenge to poor communities where physical space is limited and there is little or no access to the Internet. Mothers or older sisters who typically teach their younger siblings (or compassionate adult neighbors) will have to take on the additional and heavy task of facilitating the learning process as they continue to make ends meet for the family.

Learning spaces must first of all be designated within the community. In high-risk COVID-19 areas, if the school is located within or close to a community, individual learners and companion adults must be allowed access to parts of the school as

learning spaces. The use of space may be rotated by the half-hour or hour to ensure social distancing. If the school is not easily accessible, the community will have to designate a learning space which families can share on a rotating basis so as to allow for physical distancing. After all, if parts of a place can be declared a heritage zone (Republic Act No. 10066, 2010) then surely a barangay can set aside spaces exclusively as learning areas. The obvious site would be the barangay hall or community center. If none exists, the learning space can be out in the open provided it is sanitary, relatively quiet (free from interruption, videoke and other noise), adequately lit, safe, and permits physical distancing. The local community should be collectively responsible for maintaining the shared learning space.

In these community learning spaces, students can study the printed learning kits. Printed teaching guides designed for parent-teachers would also be necessary in the same manner that teachers' manuals come with textbooks. Cognizant of the need for adult supervision particularly of K-3 learners, the DepEd (2020a) speaks of "trained para-teachers" for whom a Facilitator's Guide would be made available (p. 35). Still in doubt is if these guides will be ready in time for October classes or if the training of para-teachers has commenced prior to the school opening, or whether para-teachers have been identified in the first place at the community level.

In any case, the training of para-teachers is necessary both to supervise young learners and teach literacy to adults in the manner of a family literacy program suggested by the UP College of Education (2020). Already, some schools, such as the Navotas National High School and the Taytay Senior High School in Rizal, are recruiting para-teacher volunteers

to assist learners in the community (Luz, 2020). We propose the development of a community-based para-teachers program to assist, facilitate, and monitor the learning process in homes and the community and enable working parents to earn a living for the family. Para-teachers must not only be trained but compensated just as barangay health workers are. Health workers, for instance, are required by law to undergo training programs offered by accredited government and non-government organizations and receive hazard and subsistence allowances and other benefits for performing voluntary primary health care services in the community. Barangay health workers are accredited by the local health board (Republic Act No. 7883, 1995). A similar measure should be undertaken for para-teachers to specify their functions, ensure appropriate credentials for the specified functions, and provide reasonable compensation and benefits. Returning OFWs, displaced workers, and unemployed adults with some education are potential para-teachers with adequate training, accreditation, and initial supervision by local teachers. In this manner unemployment can also be reduced. The Bayanihan 2 bill ("Bayanihan to Recover as One Act," awaiting the president's signature as of this writing) authorizes the DepEd to realign the unused balance of its budget for personnel to hire para-teachers. The Institute for Leadership, Empowerment and Democracy (2020) proposes that 300,000 para-teachers be hired with a monthly compensation of P10,000 for five months, which would amount to P15 billion. We strongly support this recommendation.

Pending the establishment of a more institutional community-based para-teachers program, we propose that:

- Qualified mothers who serve as para-teachers rotate among families in case some mothers find the task too difficult and demanding, cannot spare the time, or are unwell. Roving mother-teachers should be compensated for their work.
- Unpaid home teaching by the *nanay, ate, lola* or *tita* be quantified as the contribution of women to both the productive and reproductive economy and the enhancement of human good;
- Individually or in groups of five to seven, para-teachers including mother-/parent-teachers be given mobile phones with wifi access through which they can communicate instantly with the local DepEd office for consultations and micro content messaging. The cost of these devices and wifi service must be covered by the DepEd;
- Communities be encouraged to develop ideas born out of life experiences and neighborhood concerns and integrate these into the curriculum in keeping with the DepEd policy of a flexible K-12 curriculum that enables schools "to localize, indigenize and ... enhance it [the curriculum] based on their respective educational and social contexts" (DepEd Order No. 21 s. 2019);
- Existing community-driven learning programs, such as madrasa schools and schools of living tradition in indigenous communities, continue to be supported with the added provision of adequate protection measures. Special needs children must also continue to receive care. The incidence of COVID-19 is low or non-existent in remote areas, making face-to-face learning possible; and
- The DepEd's feeding program in public elementary schools for K-6 students be continued for, as the UP College of Education (2020) rightly points out, the number of undernourished

school children is expected to rise as a result of joblessness (p. 5). The 2020 budget of the DepEd has 6.5 billion pesos earmarked for the school-based feeding program (Department of Budget and Management, 2020). It is imperative that the DepEd share these resources with communities whose K-6 students are identified as malnourished. The management of the home-school feeding program can be vested in a group of community women in coordination with the local DepEd office and with mother-teachers.

### **Outside the radar**

The other big question we raised at the start of this paper is what to do with the nearly three million children who did not enroll this year. The answer lies in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) created by law to provide out-of-school children, youth, and adults with basic education (Republic Act No. 9155, 2011) pursuant to the constitutional provision that encourages the development of “non-formal, informal, and indigenous learning systems, as well as self-learning, independent, and out-of-school study programs particularly those that respond to community needs” (Article XIV, Section 2 of the 1987 Constitution). Designed as “a parallel learning system ... that provides a practical option to the existing formal instruction” (DepEd, n.d.), the ALS serves those unable to attend formal schooling. ALS learning takes place at home or in the community (community learning center, barangay multi-purpose hall) and is run by ALS learning facilitators (mobile teachers, district ALS coordinators) at a schedule and place agreed upon by learners and facilitators. It is interesting that the pandemic has softened the rigid lines between formal class-based and non-formal community-based learning.

Modules for ALS learning already exist, and the DepEd has had considerable experience in running the program. ALS facilitators are in place, while teachers respond to queries remotely. The ALS also encourages peer learning when learners live in the same area, subject to local government regulations during the pandemic (DepEd, 2020a, p. 37). In the time of COVID-19, the DepEd has allowed those who completed the elementary and junior high school ALS programs to provisionally move on to Grades 7 and 11, respectively (because the readiness tests have not yet been administered), and those who failed to complete the previous year to re-enroll just the same (DepEd, 2020b). We propose that the DepEd extend the ALS model to youth and adults outside even of the ALS system—those who have never enrolled in the program—by offering basic literacy and numeracy to those who need them, and providing higher level modules to those prepared to take them. We suggest that enrollment requirements be eased or dropped entirely, and that in their place, diagnostic tests be administered simply to determine the learner’s grade level. Printed ALS modules can be made available in the same manner as textbooks and activity sheets are distributed, primarily through communities. Para-teachers can play a role in the ALS program as well. The key to a successful ALS program, as the UP College of Education (2020) asserts, rests on its flexibility, as demonstrated in pedagogies focused on learners who will have a say in determining the language of learning, learning content and strategy, learning milestones, length and period of study, and so on (pp. 14-15).

The end result of these measures is to provide and broaden access to basic education in the time of COVID-19 and its immediate aftermath. The thrust toward the home and community serves another

important purpose: to not only assist families and neighborhoods but also empower them as active agents and collaborators in the learning process. Communities will have to be mobilized in order to help distribute learning materials, designate and maintain common learning spaces, co-arrange the feeding distribution system, work with partners (government and citizens), while ensuring the health of all in the time of the pandemic.

Mothers and other adults, including overseas workers who returned home, can acquire new skills as learning facilitators and carers of public nutrition through the feeding program. There is also the potential of livelihood through the para-teachers and feeding programs.

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# 7 Indigenous People and Environment

## Forests, COVID-19 and Indigenous Women

*Ruth Canlas*

### **Deforestation and COVID-19**

Deforestation is a main contributor to climate change and the world's second largest human source of CO<sub>2</sub>-emissions after fossil fuel combustion. Studies show that deforestation accounts for 6–17 percent of CO<sub>2</sub>-emissions globally (van der Werf et al., 2009).

Prior to the emergence of COVID-19, scientists were already expressing alarm that as more and more forests are being cleared, the next deadly pandemic could emerge from within the forests. Deforestation displaces wildlife species and puts them in closer proximity with each other and with humans.

While China disputes that the novel coronavirus (SARS CoV-2), which is closely related to bat and pangolin coronaviruses, came from the wildlife market in Wuhan, China, it is a scientific consensus that COVID-19 originated in nature. The wildlife

market in Wuhan is where the spillover from animals to humans probably occurred, and the initial jump from a wild bat to an animal that was acquired and consumed by a human may well have happened there, too (Lovejoy, 2020).

### **Philippine Forestry Situation, COVID-19 and Indigenous Peoples**

The Philippines is considered one of the world's mega-diverse regions as its forest is home to a wide range of plants and animals. However, data from the Forest Management Bureau of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) show that around 47,000 hectares of forest cover are lost every year and only 24 percent of forest cover from the 1900s remains (DENR, 2013; Nieva, 2020).

Forest biodiversity and the ecosystem services that the Philippine forests provide are crucial for the survival and well-being of Filipinos as they are sources of food, water,

shelter, energy, and income to many Filipinos. However, the country's rich biodiversity has made it a major source and transit point of wildlife trafficking products. The Philippine government has a list of threatened animal and plant species. One of these endangered species is the Philippine Pangolin, which is endemic to Palawan. It is heavily hunted and trafficked for local use of its meat and scales as well as for international trade elsewhere in Asia. While scientific studies are not yet clear on the role of Pangolins, scientists discovered viruses closely related to SARS-CoV 2 in pangolins smuggled into China that had binding sequences similar to those in human viruses. This suggests that the bat and pangolin viruses met in the same hosts and exchanged genes (Marshall, 2020).

Despite the many environmental laws in our country, weak and conflicting policies, corruption, poor enforcement of the law, and the lack of inclusion of indigenous peoples and local communities in forest governance have resulted in further deforestation and forest degradation through the destruction brought about by mining, agro-industrial plantations, and large infrastructure projects.

Based on Republic Act 8371, otherwise known as the Indigenous Peoples' Rights Act (IPRA), indigenous peoples refer to a group of people or homogenous societies identified by self-ascription and ascription by others, who have continuously lived as organized communities on communally bounded and defined territory, and who have, under claims of ownership since time immemorial, occupied, possessed and utilized such territories, sharing common bonds of language, customs, traditions and other distinctive cultural traits, or who have, through resistance to political, social and cultural inroads of colonization, non-indigenous religions and cultures, became

historically differentiated from the majority of Filipinos. It is estimated that at least 10 percent of the country's population are indigenous peoples. But, even if the Philippines has the IPRA, a law that grants the IPs their ancestral domains and the right to self-governance, the IPs continue to be marginalized and poor.

### **COVID-19 and the IP Women**

The COVID-19 pandemic has further marginalized indigenous peoples. A lot of them were not even aware of what COVID-19 is all about and the dangers it posed. Because of the lockdowns, the IPs who already face food insecurity experienced more difficulty accessing their sources of food. They were not allowed to go into the forest areas where their farms are located and where they can harvest and hunt for food.

Indigenous women and men often describe their traditional division of labor in their communities as complementary and reciprocal – men farm, hunt and gather food while women tend to domestic and reproductive chores. However, the reality is that many indigenous women participate in and are also involved in farming, hunting and gathering food. IP women are seen as food providers in their families.

Because of COVID-19, indigenous women faced difficulties in providing food for their families. As one Mangyan woman remarked: "We fear dying from starvation more than the virus itself." With the dry season coming early, some of their produce withered and died. Those who can sell their harvest in the market were not able to do so as there was no public transportation and no buyers in the market. The IP women were also afraid to go out because of the virus (Lilak Purple Action for Indigenous Women's Rights, 2020).

A lot of IP women are also into traditional weaving and indigenous arts and crafts making. Some of these women who are engaged in weaving traditional fabrics had to stop as they cannot go to the forest to source raw materials (abaca and piña for most of them) and they do not know where to sell their products as only essential goods are allowed to be transported and sold. With the loss of their traditional livelihoods, IP's face an even more difficult situation than their previous dire economic straits.

The COVID-19 pandemic also has serious impacts on the health and well-being of the indigenous peoples. IPs have poor access to health care, lack access to essential services, sanitation, and other key preventive measures such as clean water, soap, disinfectants, etc. They also had difficulty accessing traditional medicine found in their forests. Again, the IP women are the most affected by this situation as their and their families' health is their concern.

The COVID19 pandemic also came at a time when the government was bent on 'ending communism.' In December 2018, Executive Order # 70 on "Institutionalizing Whole-of Nation-Approach in Attaining Inclusive and Sustainable Peace to End Local Communists and Armed Conflicts" was issued by the President, which was implemented in 2019. Some areas were further militarized while NGOs, organizations and IPS are increasingly 'red-tagged' (connected to the armed wing of the Communist Party of the Philippines and thus considered terrorists).

Last March 19, 2020, an indigenous woman leader was arrested as part of the government's red-tagging campaign. As the Philippines was on lockdown, it was difficult to have her bailed out. Some NGO leaders from the Cordillera region all experienced

red-tagging in social media, particularly in Facebook. The threats initially came from trolls and fake accounts and then later, from Facebook pages of the PNP and AFP, in particular the 5th Infantry Division. The NGO leaders are called "terrorists" and "NPA recruiters."

Mining operations continue in their ancestral lands despite COVID-19 since mining is an export-oriented industry and thus allowed under the Bayanihan to Heal as One law. Anti-mining indigenous communities in Nueva Vizcaya province confronted challenges to their ongoing barricade against the large-scale mining operations of Australian-Canadian mining company Oceanagold. Despite operating without a contract, the mining company deployed brutal police enforcement in dispersing the barricade to push through with refueling shipment for their operations (Mangobay, 2020).

The recent pronouncements by government agencies aggravated the situation of the IPs and the status of the remaining forests. The Department of Agriculture recommended converting part of the IPs' ancestral domain to farms for vegetables and high-value crops. The Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) has also suggested the revival of mining as part of the Philippines' economic recovery response amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The government is continuing with its flagship program Build, Build, Build, which includes the Kaliwa Dam. During the quarantine, the access road leading to the dam site was still being constructed despite the absence of an ECC and FPIC (CNN Philippines, 2020).

## Moving Forward

### On COVID19 and Other Basic Services

There is a need to provide indigenous peoples with adequate, accessible, and culturally appropriate information including the use of indigenous languages on COVID-19. Many IPs are not aware of or have limited knowledge of the disease. There is no data yet on the rate of infection among IPs but given their communal lifestyle, the virus could spread rapidly. Thus, there is a need to provide relevant information on COVID-19 including preventive measures.

There is also a need to ensure that indigenous peoples have access to clean water, soap, disinfectant, masks, etc. and healthcare services and facilities that are IP-friendly.

### On Indigenous Practices

Indigenous peoples can contribute to finding solutions for the pandemic. There are indigenous knowledge systems and practices, including traditional healing methods, that must be respected.

Indigenous peoples' representatives should be included in health committees in communities where they are present. Indigenous women should also be effectively engaged in decision making related to COVID-19.

The IPs should be allowed to enforce their practices of sealing of communities to prevent the spread of diseases. In the town of Bauko, Mountain Province, the community elders invoked *tengao*, which is the indigenous variation of a lockdown. Once invoked, it means no one can enter or leave the community for a day or more, depending on the decision of the elders. Other towns across the Mountain Province have invoked

this practice, which is also called *te-er*, *to-or*, *sedey*, *far-e*, *ubaya*, or *tungro* by varying ethnolinguistic groups (Lapniten, 2020a).

Indigenous peoples have other practices that should be emulated. The town of Sadanga, Mountain Province has waived food relief from the national government and instead has asked that the relief be channeled to its less fortunate neighbors. Its mayor said that it could ask the *kadangyan* (rich families) in every village to sustain the communities by opening their *agamang* (rice granaries) should the lockdown be extended (Quitason & Cabreza, 2020).

Another notable practice among the Ifugao is the *baddangan*, which refers to a cultural obligation of Ifugao residents to help members of the community who are experiencing a crisis. During the ECQ, Ifugao volunteers were able to distribute relief goods and cash to over 1000 Cordillerans who were stranded in different provinces (Lapniten, 2020b).

### On Food Security

The Department of Agriculture should look into developing existing farmlands instead of turning supposedly idle portions of ancestral domains into food production areas.

For one, the department could support the IP practice of shifting cultivation or *kaingin* that is based on sustainable traditional resource rights and observe a fallow period. Decriminalizing the practice of *kaingin* by IPs could be a start.

### Gender Training for IP Women

There is a need to conduct gender training among IP women. It is difficult for IP women to discuss gender-related issues basically because it touches on their culture and traditions.

## On Livelihood

Traditional livelihoods of indigenous peoples (weaving, crafts, non-timber forest products- based and agro-forestry-based livelihoods) should be supported by:

- Simplifying the permit process for NTFPs. In order for the IPs to harvest NTFPs from the forest, they need to secure permits from the government. (For instance, to harvest almaciga resin or more popularly known as Manila copal that is used for the manufacture of varnish and lacquer, the IPs go through several steps and need to pay administrative and SOP fees. It takes several months or even years to secure a permit that is only good for one year.)
- Building capacities of IPs to manage their enterprises.
- Giving priority to Technology and Product Development so that IP craftspeople can shift to currently marketable products.
- Government providing the IPs information on the market including prevailing prices so that they can be properly guided and would get possible maximum benefit.
- Government and NGOs to provide logistical and marketing support for products coming from indigenous peoples.

## Forest Conservation and Protection

Support the protection and conservation efforts of the indigenous peoples through strengthening IP governance and designating Indigenous Community Conserved Areas. ICCAs are territories and areas governed and conserved by IPs. These may be sacred spaces or ritual grounds (such as sacred forests and mountains, indigenous territories, and cultural landscapes or seascapes).

The Enhanced National Greening Program (2019) is the biggest reforestation

program of the government as it aims to cover the remaining 7.1 million hectares of unproductive, denuded and degraded forest lands nationwide. However, based on COA reports (2019), the program was not able to achieve its targets while committing several irregularities in its implementation. It is recommended that the government streamline the process for CSO (especially community-based forest management groups and indigenous peoples) participation to ensure the attainment of both biophysical and socio-economic objectives. It is also recommended that native and endemic species be planted rather than fast-growing trees.

Revise the law on illegal possession and sale of wildlife to impose tougher penalties. At present, Republic Act No. 9147 (2001) only carries a maximum penalty of Php30,000 to Php300,000 with imprisonment of two to four years. In addition, there should also be specific clauses relating to engaging in illegal online wildlife trade.

Shift the policy framework on extracting minerals from the Philippines from mere extraction to minerals management towards national industrialization. The Philippine Mining Act of 1995 needs to be scrapped while a new minerals management law is prepared and passed.

Stop the expansion of plantations until social and environmental impact studies are conducted and sustainable practices are identified. For plantation companies, there is also a need to come up with clear policies to prevent and address human rights abuses.

Revoke the Kaliwa Dam project signed by the Philippine government with the Chinese government as it will destroy the forest and biodiversity of Sierra Madre and will endanger residents downstream.

On the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP)

Under RA 8371 (IPRA), the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples (NCIP) is the primary government agency responsible for the formulation and implementation of policies, plans and programs to promote and protect the rights of indigenous peoples, including the recognition of their ancestral domains. However, several IP groups have been very vocal in saying that NCIP is not carrying out its responsibilities.

There is a need to restructure NCIP so that it can be responsive to the needs of the IPs, including the issuance of Certificate of Ancestral Domain Titles, and to fulfill its mission based on the law. It should also provide a bigger budget for the delineation of ancestral domains and the protection of indigenous knowledge systems and practices (IKSP).

## Dumagat Women Rise

Gaby Alegre

In the middle of a pandemic, the Kababaihang Dumagat sa Sierra Madre learn volumes from setting up a marketing initiative by women, for producers, consumers, for all.

At the height of COVID19 lockdowns last April, Clara Dullas, a Dumagat woman from Daraitan, Tanay, Rizal received a call from Soc Banzuela of the national farmers federation, PAKISAMA (Pambansang Kilusan ng mga Samahang Magsasaka). In the middle of the enhanced community quarantine, *“Kailangan raw ng mga taga-siyudad ng pagkain mula sa kabundukan, dahil hindi makalabas o makapunta sa bawat palengke, dahil bawal lumabas dahil sa pandemic,”* Clara shared. (City dwellers need food from the uplands, as they are unable to go to markets because of the pandemic-induced lockdowns.)

Clara, the president of the Kababaihang Dumagat sa Sierra Madre (K-GAT), with Marites Pauig, K-GAT treasurer, seized the opportunity to market local products from their ancestral domain and fellow Dumagats’ farm lands directly to urban

dwellers in Marikina. Within a couple of days, they made the rounds, contacted and visited their fellow Dumagats’ farms in the sitios and barangays surrounding Daraitan. *“Kung ano ang kayang bilhin ng aming hawak [na pera], yun ang aming binili,”* (We bought what we could with the cash pooled) said Clara, as they gathered enough *kamote*, native garlic, avocado, *saging na saba*, *saging lagkitan*, *guyabano*, *kalabasita*, among other fruits and vegetables, from their fellow Dumagats to fill the large open-air *kubo* beside her house.

*“Biglaan laang dumating ang pagkakataon sa K-GAT,”* said Clara. This marketing venture presented a sudden, but timely opportunity for K-GAT officers in Daraitan, and Antipolo, Rizal, at a time when markets were closed, and livelihoods at a standstill. Clara and her fellow K-GAT officers saw this as a means to support both their fellow Dumagats, and residents of Dela Costa Homes in Barangka, Marikina - right in the middle of a pandemic. But it was far from an easy task.

## Building trust in the face of “*Babae ka lang*”

“*Ang K-GAT ay naipuno hindi para maging kooperatiba, o magtinda ng fruits and vegetables,*” (K-GAT was planned not as a cooperative or business) shares Clara. K-GAT was newly organized by Clara and fellow women leaders from three Dumagat ancestral domains (Bulacan, Quezon, and Rizal) in five municipalities (Gen. Nakar in Quezon, Montalban and Tanay in Rizal, Dona Remedios Trinidad in Bulacan, and Antipolo) in the Southern Sierra Madre, with the assistance of NGO network, Non-Timber Forest Products - Exchange Programme (NTFP-EP) Philippines in November 2019. “*Ang plano namin dito... ang pangangalaga ng ancestral land, na kababaihan ang gumagawa - dahil sa pananaw namin, ang samahang kalalakihan at samahang kababaihan ay halos magkapantay lang.*” (Our plan for K-GAT was to form a federation of women that cared for and conserved our ancestral land, rooted in our belief that a women’s group can prove equal to that of men.)

Clara faced similar discrimination and intimidation in the past as K-GAT president, and as part of a broad network of groups calling for a stop to the building of the mega Kaliwa Dam that will submerge their sacred sites, forests, and livelihoods along Tinipak River in Daraitan. When K-GAT was newly formed, persons gathering intelligence, or “intel,” visited her home repeatedly, demanding to know what the group was for, and whether they were affiliated with members of rebel groups. “*Pati ang aking mga anak, natakot na, kasi pabalik-balik sila sa bahay,*” (Even my children expressed their fears, because they kept coming back to our house.) she said. “*Masakit man para sa amin yun, hindi kami pinanghinaan ng loob. Pinakilala talaga namin ang K-GAT, pati lahat ng tumutulong, lahat ng mga ka-partner, [at sabi namin sa nag-iintel] kayo na*

*bahalang mag-imbestiga niyan,*” (Though that hurt us, we strengthened our resolve, we shared who was supporting us, who our partners were, and told them, it’s up to you to investigate) Clara confided. Still, she faced the challenge head-on, as she knew that K-GAT was a legitimate federation with nothing to hide, standing up for Dumagat women and their rights.

When the time came to deliver their produce, Clara recounted similar struggles in gaining confidence even within the community itself. “[*Tingin ng iba,*] *para bang wala kaming kakayanan para ihatid ang aming produkto.*” (Others thought that we did not have the capacity to deliver the products to the market). From managing the logistics, and transportation, and being able to follow through, Clara faced the perception of some members of her community that she was “merely a woman,” “*babae ka lang.*”

Yet from making the rounds of government offices to securing travel permits, Clara and three other K-GAT women did all that they could to be able to transport fresh fruits and vegetables from Daraitan across the river, and down to Metro Manila. On the eve of their first delivery, they scrambled, late in the night, for a van that would transport their products. They felt that nobody trusted them enough, and this challenged them. “*Walang nagtiwala. Isang naging hamon din sa amin - gabing gabi, naghahanap kami ng sasakyan para may mapagsakyan ang aming produkto,*” (Nobody trusted us, it was a challenge we confronted. Late at night, we were still looking for a vehicle to transport our products) Clara recounted.

Their persistence did not come unrewarded. “*Hindi kami tumigil para lang mai-deliver ang produkto. Nakakuha kami ng sasakyan, dahil may nagtiwala kahit papano. Noong una, napakaganda ng pagmamarket namin, maganda ang resulta.*” (We didn’t stop at just having the produce delivered.

We were able to secure a vehicle because somebody believed in us somehow. At first, our marketing efforts were seamless, the results were beautiful). Personally involved in advocacy and organizing work, Clara admitted that she herself had no previous business experience. But together with her partners and fellow K-GAT officers, Dess Doroteo and Marites, who had some experience in marketing produce, they were united in their goal: *“Paano mag-manage na pantay sa farmer, pantay sa consumer, at pantay sa samahan, kung paano ito ipapatupad ng patas at maayos,”* she says. (How to manage the marketing initiative to ensure that it is fair to the farmers, to consumers, to K-GAT, and to be able to do this justly, and properly.)

### **Making sense of business**

Managing the business, and ensuring all goes smoothly, Clara says, was the biggest struggle. First, there were logistical challenges that they needed to plan for and learn from. When there were heavy rains, they couldn't cross Daraitan River to bring the products to Manila on time, and they needed to account for such external factors. They were severely undermanned, coordinating hundreds of kilos of produce weekly. *“Madaling araw, nakahiga na kami sa sahig ng Dela Costa covered court sa pagod, naka-sandal sa kalabasa, at sa sako ng saging,”* shared Clara. (In the wee hours of the morning, we were so tired, we lay down on the floor of Dela Costa covered court, leaning against piles of squash and sacks of bananas to rest). They were a three-woman team navigating the whole value chain: coordinating with farmers, consolidating products, arranging delivery, finding and coordinating and selling produce in Marikina.

They kept at it, and they were happy to finally be able to deliver produce to urban dwellers in Marikina. But as the weeks

progressed, demand grew, and Clara and her companions encountered hurdles at every step of the way.

On one hand, Clara was at ease, because farmers preferred to sell to K-GAT, who were their relatives. They counted on K-GAT to buy their produce at prices higher than traders offered. *“Nagdadala sila [sa amin], ayaw nila ibenta sa iba, kay K-GAT talaga nila ibebenta, at babayaran namin yan,”* says Clara. (Farmers would bring produce to us, and would not sell to others, so of course we bought them). As word spread that there was produce in Dela Costa in Marikina residents flocked to the covered court. The team was overwhelmed by the support, and with the help of online delivery facilitated by partner NGO groups like PAKISAMA, and CustomMade Crafts Center, and Bukluran Market, K-GAT produce reached markets beyond Marikina.

However, there were also instances of poor quality produce, such as when fruits were harvested too early, or too late. She shared, *“Kagaya sa mga produkto, minsan hindi namin matanggihan ang kapwa naming tribo, lalo na't ang pinanggalingan ay maghaponing nilakad.”* (When it came to buying from our fellow Dumagats, there were times that we were hesitant to say no to them, and bought all their produce [without all the necessary quality checks]. This was especially true when our suppliers hiked for hours to bring their produce.) As their market expanded, Clara also experienced several instances when buyers reneged on a promise of an order, or did not pay immediately for the produce upon delivery, as agreed. These processes of engaging the producers and consumers, Clara said, all needed to be addressed. K-GAT shouldered significant losses due to spoiled produce, and are determined to put systems in place to ensure the quality of products in the future. The need to implement better

systems is what she considers one of the toughest lessons learned in the first months of their marketing venture.

### **Moving forward with lessons learned**

While the Dumagats traditionally plant primarily for their own consumption, and rely on outside traders to buy their excess produce, they now see the value of supplying fresh produce to city buyers through K-GAT. *“Bilang kababaihan na katutubong Dumagat, ngayon natutuwa kaming na hinihikayat mag-negosyo, na magtanim ng sobra, hindi lamang sapat para sa pamilya -- para makapagtinda at magamit sa pagpapaaral ng mga anak, mabili ang anumang gamit na kailangan nila hinggil sa pagaaral at kung ano pa man.”* (As Dumagat women, we are happy and encouraged by this marketing initiative, to plant more, beyond household consumption -- to be able to sell, and augment our children’s needs for schooling, among other essential needs.) Clara and fellow officers Marites and Dess consider this a viable potential livelihood alternative, that if done right, can be a worthwhile venture to build up for K-GAT.

Four months into their start-up marketing initiative, a small group of K-GAT officers were finally able to convene, (with two women, from Rodriguez, Rizal, connecting virtually via Google Meet). Clara, Marites and Dess, shared the trials and tests of their brief yet meaningful marketing engagement,

celebrating small wins, and bittersweet losses, but with the same gratitude, persistence, and desire to pay it forward. The women of K-GAT are now intent not only on strengthening their federation, but building on their startup experience and forming a cooperative. They have reached out to their partner NGOs, and government agencies like the Cooperative Development Authority for technical assistance.

They are pausing operations to reevaluate their processes, refine and integrate financial management systems to be able to move forward, to ensure fair pricing, fair trade, and the sustainability of their initiative. Despite the challenges posed by navigating a startup marketing venture in the middle of a pandemic, they are determined to pursue livelihoods that nurture their land, their people, and people beyond their community. *“Gusto ko sana na makita ng ibang ahensiya yung kagaya namin na pursigido na tumulong sa samahang K-GAT, tumulong sa community, tumulong sa consumer, walang iiwanan. Bale sila lahat ay pantay. At dito, patuloy pa rin ang K-GAT,”* Clara says (I hope other agencies see women like us who are determined to help our fellow women, our community, consumers, leaving no one behind, everyone as equals. And here K-GAT will continue.) With these lessons in hand, K-GAT will forge on, as women, for

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## Feminist Approach to COVID-19 Response and Recovery - Security Sector Governance

*Teresita Quintos Deles*

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the government has imposed what has been described as the longest and most “draconian” lockdown in the world, with the entire Luzon Island placed under Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) for two-and-half months from mid-March up to the end of May, and the entire country covered by varying degrees of “community quarantine” since March to date. The “quarantine,” which President Duterte himself admitted was just another term for “lockdown,” has carried an unmistakable militaristic face. In his weekly, late-night, public appearances, the President has delivered unequivocal orders only to the uniformed forces, mandating the use of physical force to keep people indoors and, if necessary, even “shoot them dead.” In contrast, whatever rare instructions were directed to the civilian bureaucracy have been confused, rambling, and left to senior officials to decipher.

The results of the government’s harsh approach became clear in August. On

August 1, two months after the partial lifting of community restrictions in June, a broad alliance of medical associations and practitioners held an unprecedented press conference to call for a strategic “time out,” sounding the warning that “we are losing” and the health system was on the brink of collapse. Two days later, it surfaced that the Philippines had surpassed Indonesia in having the largest number of COVID-19 infections in the whole of Southeast Asia. The same day disclosed further bad news on the economy: for the second quarter of 2020, the Philippine GDP fell more severely than any other country in the region. It was the country’s worst economic downturn since World War II, exceeding its contraction in the last years of the Marcos dictatorship. Marking negative growth for two successive quarters, the Philippines is now technically in recession, for the first time after 30 years.

With the country facing dire prospects on the fronts of both health and the economy, it is timely to insist on a different approach

towards containing the crisis. This paper seeks to examine the features of the current security sector-led approach and to explore alternative directions relevant to the security sector, as gleaned from both national experience and international learnings and practice.

### **Situation of the Security Sector before COVID-19**

By the end of the Aquino presidency in 2016, it seemed that the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) was finally on its way to shedding its tattered image on human rights and corruption under Marcos' martial rule. Military adventurism, which had marred the early years of democratic transition, appeared to have been subdued. Faced with the successive disasters inflicted by the Zamboanga siege and typhoon Yolanda, respectively, the military response was seen to be credible, even heroic. As well, the armed forces presented a steadfast and dependable front in forging and sealing peace in the Bangsamoro. In 2010, the AFP adopted an 18-year Transformation Roadmap (AFPTR), which it continued to pursue with civilian, multi-sectoral oversight and support, aimed to transform the institution into "a world-class AFP that is a source of national pride by 2028." While the AFP was not unscathed by anomalies and controversies under the Aquino years, it was generally acknowledged that a system of discipline, transparency, and accountability had begun to take root in its policies and practice.

This assessment was upheld in the early years of the Duterte presidency with significant sectors of society agreeing that the defense establishment appeared to be the only institution in government that dared to hold the line against the President's most controversial policies. When Duterte told the

military to join the police in carrying out his bloody "war on drugs," its leadership stalled the order by asking the chief executive to put his instructions in writing. When, upon the declaration of martial law following the Marawi siege, the Commander-in-Chief assured the soldiers that, if they raped three women, it would be on him, it was the military spokesperson who publicly clarified the constitutional limits of martial law, affirming that the Constitution and the rule of law remained firmly in place. It was widely suspected that opposition from the uniformed corps caused the shifts in Duterte's full embrace of Chinese incursions in the West Philippine Sea, and many believe that the President's repeated threat to install a revolutionary government has not pushed through for lack of military support. Nevertheless, with the rapid turnover in the AFP's topmost leadership, with the most recent appointees hardly known by the public, there is growing concern that the military may not be able to hold the constitutional line for much longer. There also remain persistent calls for a thorough, impartial investigation into its handling of the Marawi siege.

It was a different story with the Philippine National Police (PNP). Even before Duterte took office, the incoming Chief PNP, whose designation was known to be based on his long association with the former mayor of Davao, had already indicated his unquestioning support for Duterte's banner campaign to eradicate illegal drugs by targeting small-time users and pushers in the country's most congested urban communities. With tens of thousands having been killed in the name of the war on drugs, the government's human rights record has come under the scrutiny of international human rights bodies. In its recent report on the Philippines pursuant to a UN Human Rights Council resolution (2020),

the UN Human Rights Office pointed to the troubling lack of “due process protections” and the use of “such ill-defined and ominous language” in the government’s key policy documents which, “coupled by repeated verbal encouragement by the highest level of State officials to use lethal force, may have emboldened police to treat the circular as permission to kill.” State-related killings have furthermore spread beyond the stated campaign against drugs, claiming the lives of “human rights defenders, legal professionals, journalists, and trade unionists.” The UN report underscored the need to address the state of “persistent impunity and formidable barriers in accessing justice” now prevailing in the country.

### **The Government’s Security Sector-Led Response to the Pandemic**

From the start of his presidency, Duterte has made clear his reliance on intimidation and force to get things done. Insults and violent threats have peppered every public appearance, directed at anyone, most especially women, and anything which stands in his way – including, at the start of 2020, an erupting volcano and a menacing virus. The President is not known to refer to data or expert advice as the basis for government actions. Selective about the issues he addresses, his approach has been singular in focus: point to an enemy and threaten to kill or eliminate it if it does not behave in accordance with his wishes. Not surprisingly, he has demonstrated increasing dependence on the support of the security sector in running the government. According to a Rappler report in December, 2018, the number of Duterte appointees drawn from the ranks of retired military and police officers had already reached 46. “Ex-military and police generals comprise a third of his Cabinet. Every AFP chief of staff who has served in his presidency is awarded a civilian

government position upon retirement.” (Ranada, 2018) He has said that he likes working with the military because they are trained to follow orders, no questions asked (Santos, 2020). It may also be added that it helps in calming potential restiveness among the uniformed ranks.

In the face of the most ominous health crisis which today confronts every country on this planet, there has been no shift in Duterte’s mode of governance. When it became clear that threatening to slap the “veerus” was not enough to stop the entry of the pandemic into the country, the President ordered a lockdown of Metro Manila, followed by other parts of the country, in mid-March. The entire country remains under varying degrees of community quarantine. To date, physical restrictions, imposed by force with little education, consultation, or help offered for those most disadvantaged, constitute the national government’s only major course of action to stem the pandemic – this, despite the quick passage of a law mandating multiple emergency responses and granting special powers to the President to take whatever actions are needed.

Rather than address the problem as the health crisis that the rest of the world has been fighting, the government has defined it as an issue of law enforcement. It has pushed a strategy that has promoted militaristic mindsets and the liberal use of force. Instead of pursuing health diagnostics and expanding the capacity of the health system as seen in the most successful examples in the world, it has increased the presence of the state’s armed might in streets and communities.

The following features confirm the militaristic characterization of the government’s response to the pandemic:

- *Retired Generals at the helm.* The creation of the National Task Force (NTF) on COVID-19 as the “operational command” of the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) on Emerging Infectious Diseases effectively put three retired generals in charge of the execution of the government’s anti-COVID-19 response, as its chair, vice-chair, and “chief implementer,” respectively. Designated to their NTF positions in their civilian capacity as members of the Cabinet, all three are, in fact, retired generals, with two of them retiring after having reached the peak of military service as AFP Chief-of-Staff under Duterte. Another recently retired AFP Chief-of-Staff occupies a key position in the NTF as Secretary of Social Welfare and Community Development, further consolidating the Task Force’s military face. There is no counter-balance to the phalanx of former uniformed officers holding key positions in the NTF. The Department of Health, whose Secretary, at least nominally, chairs the IATF, was relegated to head one of its seven component Task Groups, composed of sub-Cabinet officials. It doesn’t help that the Health Secretary faces dwindling respect among the medical community and the general public. Furthermore, despite the massive impact of the pandemic on the economy, no member of the Cabinet Economic Cluster sits in the implementing body.

That three ex-military officers ended up heading the government’s anti-COVID-19 response was not a coincidence. In announcing their appointment, the Presidential Spokesperson explained that the President selected them because of “their culture of discipline, obedience to superiors, training in organization, tactical strategies in fighting the enemies

of the state, and thorough preparedness in organization.” (Gotinga, 2020). Highlighting the culture of discipline and “obedience to superiors” reflects the President’s disdain for discussion and debate. The reference to “enemies of the state” indicates the kind of fight that the NTF is expected to wage. No mention was made of the need for expertise on health and disease nor on the economic and humanitarian aspects of the crisis.

The NTF leadership’s lack of expertise and experience on health is not the only issue being raised. There is concern as well over promoting a leadership style which puts a premium on obedience and seniority and upholds a chain of command that does not encourage transparency, consultations, and the consideration of alternative options, particularly in the face of a problem that is new, unknown, and unseen. There are questions over how this vertical management approach will be able to navigate the bureaucracy, which has its own layers of protocols, rendered even more challenging with the need to bring different agencies to work together. And then there is the “mistah” culture – the most rigid of the “old boys’ club” – discouraging the participation of women and those who are perceived to be weak or different. This is especially worrying in the face of documented evidence that women, the displaced, the elderly, children, and minorities suffer distinct, additional vulnerabilities in times of crisis, even more so in a health crisis. While, indeed, it is possible for former soldiers to shift mindsets, rarely does this happen in an instant. For sure, it does not happen automatically with the shedding of the uniform and the assumption of a civilian title.

- *Punitive and coercive.* The lockdown in the Philippines has been described as among the most severe in the world. Community quarantine was imposed without adequate provisions for food, shelter, and the most basic necessities for every family. While essential services were needed, public transportation was suspended, punishing front-liners who were forced to walk to work. Little thought was given to those stranded in the metropolis who were suddenly out of a job and a place to stay. In light of the one-size-fits-all rules that were imposed, the police were given every leeway to interpret their proper application and to punish violations as they saw fit. Physical distancing, curfews, facial masks, motorcycle barriers – no need to explain why, and never mind the reasons why people are unable to comply.

Not only were the rules strict and sometimes unreasonable, measures to exact obedience were coercive and punitive. People were arrested for infractions that included a man who used a towel instead of the standard face mask that not everyone can afford; an elderly woman asleep on the sidewalk; volunteers cooking food together to distribute as *ayuda* to communities; a biker who took off his mask to take a drink; jeepney drivers, jobless for months, begging on the street. Too many examples turn anecdotes into policy. There were also reports of curfew violators being beaten up or put in a dog cage. As of the end of July, 76, 000 had been reported arrested by the PNP (Cabato, 2020), further congesting jails or creating situations that exposed people to the disease, rather than protecting them.

The full arsenal of coercion has been put on display: fully armed soldiers and police, checkpoints, even tanks, on the streets. A former soldier suffering from mental disorder responded slowly to a police order and was shot twice, dying instantly. Contrary to the evidence, the government is pushing the narrative that people are at fault for the continuing rise of COVID-19 infections, being disobedient and pasaway. The solution: more rules, more law enforcement, increased police presence. The security sector is being tagged to do tasks logically handled by health and humanitarian workers: contact tracing, identifying and isolating the infected, even handling the vaccine when this becomes available. More and more, it's looking like another war, which again especially targets the poor.

- *And still the killings continue.* In this season of many deaths and inconsolable mourning, there has been no respite from the killings. If one were to judge from the President's late-night invectives, illegal drugs still comprise the biggest problem of the country and, indeed, the killings continue in the poorest neighborhoods. If not drugs, then it's the communists the President rails against. There is no ceasefire in the war between government and communist rebel forces, despite an early pronouncement on both sides that they would abide by the UN Secretary-General's call for a Global Ceasefire. With the passage of the Anti-Terror Law, unarmed activists are being more virulently, blatantly, even lethally, red-tagged, with the most recent killing exhibiting signs of torture and the desecration of the victim's remains. And, while other countries are fighting to save lives, Duterte has prioritized the re-imposition of the death penalty and the

lowering of the minimum age of criminal responsibility in his legislative agenda.

- *Constricting democratic space.* While the country reels from the pandemic, the government has been preoccupied with pushing its authoritarian agenda towards its full control and perpetuation of power. Press freedom received hard blows from the closure of broadcast giant ABS-CBN and the politicized conviction of Maria Ressa and former researcher Reynaldo Santos of news website Rappler on the charge of libel. The Anti-Terrorism Law was quickly passed, pushed as a national security requirement under the principal sponsorship of a retired general in the Senate. That this new law has instead raised the level of insecurity among the population is evidenced by at least 34 petitions filed to date by different sectors questioning the constitutionality and the legality of the law before the Supreme Court. And now, with attempts by Congress to change the Constitution going nowhere, moves have again been resuscitated for the President to declare a "Revolutionary Government" to shift the form of government before the scheduled 2022 elections. Unable to contain the pandemic, the government has added still another front causing fear and confusion among its citizens.

## Recommendations

Worldwide and through recent history, the security sector has played key roles in times of disasters and crisis. This is due to its assets which are crucial in facing calamities, especially in terms of logistics, supply, and transport, covering all fronts: land, sea, and air. Security personnel are moreover strategically placed in all parts of the country, more extensively than any other government agency, with its troops ever-ready for deployment, including units dedicated to

medical and engineering work. Particularly in the case of COVID-19, security actors are being tasked to support the implementation of laws and regulations regarding physical distancing, closure of businesses, bans on mass gatherings, lockdown and stay-at-home measures or quarantines.

While security assets are of critical importance in times of crisis, however, a review of global experience reveals that these are not necessarily the game changer. Instead there is growing consensus that "arguably the most important asset for any government in responding to a national health crisis such as COVID-19 is the trust of its citizens." (Saferworld, 2020, p. 7). Countries which have been most successful in flattening the COVID-19 curve appear to be winning the compliance of their citizens with the needed physical restrictions through trust rather than force. Accordingly, specific guidance directed to the security sector calls for its "responses (to) prioritize human security rather than state security." (p. 3). In summary, "Its role should support and enhance a civilian-led, inter-agency response that puts people's health and safety first." (p. 2).

With trust identified as the most crucial asset in containing and overcoming the pandemic, the DCAF Geneva Centre for Security Sector Governance (2020) lays down the serious implications for the security sector. This has specific pertinence for the Philippines, with its martial law experience under Marcos and the more recent and sustained tainting of the PNP with the human rights abuses related to Duterte's bloody anti-drug campaign:

A key challenge in this regard is the lack of trust in, and poor perceptions of, security forces by the people they serve. This, in turn, affects their behavior. All too

often even the best intentions on the part of the security forces face skepticism and resistance by the population.

If security forces abuse their central role and wide-ranging authority during this period of crisis, the consequences will be felt long after it is over. If the population witnesses a lack of discipline and competence on the part of security forces – if their actions are viewed as punitive and coercive – trust will be undermined and take a very long time to rebuild.

It is imperative then that the actions taken by the security sector in response to the pandemic are guided by principles that help to grow people's trust in the state, including its security institutions. In this light, six interrelated and overlapping principles are outlined below, with selected tips drawn from international experience. These principles comprise pillars of good governance with particular application to the security sector at all times but especially in times of crisis:

- *Putting communities and people's health and safety first*

The nature of the current pandemic, including the behavioral modifications needed to stem its spread, has put people in a state of heightened dread, in fear for their lives, their livelihood, and the future. In the face of these multi-layered challenges, it is the responsibility of the government to assure its citizens that it is doing all it can to keep them safe from harm and hunger. Security personnel are thus urged to undertake all their assigned tasks, including the enforcement of physical distancing requirements, in a way that makes people feel safe, instead of adding to their burden and sense of insecurity. With other government personnel, security sector actors must strive to be seen

primarily as helpmates in securing the safety and daily needs of the population rather than as forces of coercion and punishment.

- » Community policing has been seen to be more effective in eliciting the cooperation of residents and in spurring local voluntary responses to the crisis at the level where they are most needed (Everbridge, n.d.). This security approach stresses the need to build trust and relationships between security providers, local authorities, and community residents at all levels possible. It relies on these local partnerships to identify and address which safety and security priorities really matter to people, including marginalized groups who are often overlooked (Saferworld, 2020).
  - » Security responses must be attuned with the changing situation of the pandemic and must be adapted to the specific needs of communities, particularly those whose circumstances may differ because of religion, culture, or gender, including transgender people.
- *Upholding human rights, non-violence, and the rule of law*

COVID-19 has forced countries to adopt extraordinary measures which limit people's freedom to enjoy many human rights. Rather than abandoning human rights norms, however, governments must now, more than ever, uphold people's basic rights and the rule of law. Only then will trust and cooperation be built and sustained between the state and its citizens. In different parts of the world, people are voluntarily giving up some of their rights and freedoms with the understanding that these are temporary

measures which will be applied fairly, without discrimination, for their own benefit and to achieve the common good of containing the pandemic. The use of coercion and punitive action, without thorough explanations, on the other hand, elicits resentment and resistance. If prohibitions are imposed but people have no way of getting food and other basic needs, rules will inevitably be broken, creating tensions, polarization, and possible outbreaks of violence, surely resulting in a slower and more troubled recovery. To avoid exacerbating social conflict, security actors need to apply calibrated, non-violent approaches that respect individual rights.

- » Minimum force must be resorted to only in cases where people violating the rules become unreasonable and pose a threat to public safety.
  - » While the use of technology to locate and track COVID-19 infection is encouraged, this must not lead to routine monitoring of citizens and systemic violation of privacy rights.
  - » In the face of the pandemic, once and for all, the drug-related killings, with their complete disregard of human rights and the rule of law, must be completely stopped.
- *Civilian leadership and democratic oversight*

The constitutional tenet establishing civilian authority over the military at all times becomes even more inviolable in times of crisis as it underpins the trust in the security agencies necessary to secure people's consent to limit their free movement. All security measures which are imposed as part of a pandemic response must be placed under the charge of accountable civilian-led, preferably inter-agency bodies that include and are advised by public health

officials and experts. It bears repeating that simply discarding the uniform upon leaving active service does not guarantee a civilian mindset. Thus, oversight must also be public and democratic. Other accountable bodies and constituencies must do their part in accordance with the constitutional principle of checks-and-balance and the bill of rights. The elected legislature is mandated to set the legal and budgetary parameters of security measures pertinent to the pandemic and to conduct regular reviews to ensure their proper implementation. Local governments must assert their powers and duties to protect the rights and welfare of their constituencies. Civil society, the media, academics, and independent lawyers, among others, should all play a role in demanding that security agencies serve the public good and not just the commander-in-chief.

- » Effective oversight includes empowering citizens to report transgressions of security agencies. Citizens also have the right to demand public disclosure of pandemic response strategies, transparent implementation of legislation, and open-source information on policing tactics and impacts. (Saferworld, 2020)
- » When needed to address the pandemic, the deployment of military resources such as supply lines, vehicles, doctors, military laboratories, and hospitals, must be subject to civilian supervision and time-bound mandates.
- » Civilian oversight is indispensable in extreme cases when the military needs to be mobilized to support other government agencies and, in the process, end up engaging directly with the public beyond their conventional role. The temporary nature of such emergency deployment must be clear to all concerned parties and more so to the public.

- *Coordination, transparency, and accountability*

Good collaboration between civilian and security actors is critical in building trust during a health crisis. This requires clear and unambiguous terms of engagement which must be set by law if it requires the military and police to undertake functions that are beyond their traditional mandate. Rules and responsibilities must be clearly defined with specific expiration dates that can only be extended by representative bodies and in line with expert health advice. Transparent and enforceable lines of coordination should be established on every manageable level between security personnel and the relevant civilian agencies, local governments, and the population directly affected by the extraordinary security measures. Proper coordination, transparency, and democratic oversight are essential to prevent abusive security practices and their harmful, even possibly fatal, consequences.

- » Joint briefings for the public will help to project the smooth coordination between security and civilian agencies.
- » The issue of corruption merits special attention, with corrupt actors ready to exploit the state of disruption, uncertainty, and distraction to their advantage. Taking bribes can compromise security and the health of many.

- *Inclusion and women's participation*

While no one is guaranteed safety from COVID-19, its impacts, as with most other crises, bear more heavily on those who are already oppressed or excluded on account of their age, gender, ethnicity, or other identities. These pre-existing conditions determine

people's vulnerabilities to infection, their capacity to cope with quarantine measures, as well as their experiences of violence under these restrictions. In this period of increased uncertainty and hardship, efforts must be specifically focused on ensuring that those already disadvantaged in society don't fall even more deeply through the cracks of society's negligence. It is important therefore that security oversight bodies include women and, where possible, provide appropriate modes of representation for the most vulnerable groups. Beyond tokenism, women, the elderly, youth, and minorities must be provided mechanisms to meaningfully participate in shaping security policies and measures. If response measures are designed only by men, and especially men in uniform, the specific needs of women and of sexual and gender minorities will surely be overlooked, rendering these measures less effective and even potentially harmful for the entire population.

- » Security responses must take cognizance of the increased risks of violence for women and children arising from the disruption of social and protective networks and decreased access to services. As people are forced to stay at home, the risk of intimate partner violence is likely to increase (World Health Organization, 2012).. Security personnel must be sensitive to these issues and partner with local authorities and community institutions to provide safeguards against violence especially for those who are most vulnerable. And, most of all, security agencies must ensure that their personnel do not themselves become a source or threat of gender-based violence.

- *A Word about Ceasefires*

In an appeal issued in March, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called on all warring parties across the globe to lay down their weapons in support of the bigger battle against COVID-19. In his words, “The fury of the virus illustrates the folly of war... It is time to put armed conflict on lockdown and focus together on the true fight of our lives.” He underscored the importance of ceasefires “to help create corridors for life-saving aid, open windows for diplomacy and bring hope to places among the most vulnerable to COVID-19.” (UN News, 2020). In the face of the greatest threat to the life and security of Filipinos, the imperative of the Secretary-General’s call must be heeded both by government and rebel forces.

### **Transformation towards the New Normal**

The coronavirus pandemic has put a stop to life as today’s generations have known it. While causing severe and terrifying disturbances in people’s daily routines, however, the crisis has also opened promising possibilities. In the words of one report: “It has created opportunities for cease-fires between combatants, for peace between enemies, for cooperation across and within borders, and for building trust where there may be none.” (Trenkov-Wermuth, 2020).

In the Philippines, the military has only recently begun to move out of the shadow of its martial law legacy, with its existing transformation roadmap still needing almost a decade more to run. The national police, on the other hand, is embroiled in a human rights scandal, the scale of which has reached the attention of international criminal jurors. The pandemic has turned the world around, in the process, exposing cracks through which are shining opportunities for possible fresh starts. The question looms: will these extraordinary

circumstances, and the measures taken to address them, further erode public trust and expose weak security sector governance, or will the opportunities prevail to “build back better” in a way the country had not previously endeavored to achieve with its armed forces? Another international think-piece pushes the question further:

More specifically, will the actions of security actors in response to the pandemic reinforce existing inequalities and grievances – setting back hard-won progress on trust and accountability – or can they strengthen confidence in state-security relations and revive flagging security sector reform processes, so that they are more people-centered, inclusive, and accountable (Saferworld, 2020, p. 2).

The Philippines’ security sector, particularly its armed core, again stands at the crossroads. As the country approaches the closing year of a presidency that has persisted in its authoritarian tendencies even in the midst of the world’s greatest health and humanitarian crisis since the 19th century, “we, the sovereign people” are called to dig deep to draw forth what security must mean for the world’s “last, least, and lost”; from there, to determine what is the role of armed forces – those given the sole authority to use or order the use of force, including arms – in providing and protecting that security in a democratic society; and, on that basis, examine the relationship between security forces and their commander-in-chief which leaves them prone to co-optation so that the use of force is turned against citizens instead of protecting them. Security sector governance must not be left to those who are in the chain-of-command. That must be one of the major lessons of the COVID-19 pandemic for the Philippines.

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# About the Authors

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## ***Gaby Alegre***

Gaby Alegre is the communications and advocacy officer of Non-Timber Forest Products – Exchange Programme (NTFP-EP) Philippines, and continues to be inspired by indigenous wisdom, agroecology, and small steps towards more sustainable food systems. She is on her nth attempt at trying to grow veggies in her tiny balcony, and is happiest when reading, walking, cycling, swimming, and being with people outdoors.

## ***Shebana Alqaseer***

Shebana Alqaseer is a feminist activist working on gender and human rights. She is currently the Program Manager for a UP CWGS-Oxfam project and a Gender Reform Consultant for The Asia Foundation. She is co-founder of the Young Feminists Collective, a member of PILIPINA, and the youngest convenor of EveryWoman.

## ***Yasmin Busran-Lao***

Yasmin Busran-Lao was the former Secretary of the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos and an ex-officio member in the Government Peace Negotiating Panel for Talks with the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (GPNP-MILF). She has been in women and development work in various capacities as educator, researcher, and development practitioner for more than two and half decades and co-founded the Al-Mujadilah and Nisa Ul-Haqq Fi Bangsamoro. She is a member of Pilipina, Everywoman, and the Board of INCITEGov.

## ***Ruth Canlas***

Ruth Canlas is the Executive Director of Non-Timber Forest Products Exchange Programme Philippine (NTFP EP Philippines), an NGO working on forest conservation and livelihoods for indigenous peoples. One thing that has guided her through each day is living out Eric Clapton's Change the World.

## ***Sylvia Estrada Claudio***

Dr. Sylvia 'Guy' Estrada Claudio is a doctor of medicine and PhD in Psychology, Dean of the College of Social Work and Community Development and a Women and Development Studies Professor in the University of the Philippines. Guy spent most of her life working in social movements. She is co-founder of Likhaan, an organization working on SRHR.

## ***Aurora De Dios***

Prof. Aurora Javate de Dios is currently the Senior Project Director of the Women and Gender Institute. She was formerly the Phil Representative to the ASEAN Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Women and Children's Rights (2010-2017) Chair of the National Commission on the Role of Filipino Women (2001-2003); Member of the UN CEDAW. A feminist activist de Dios is a member of Kalayaan, EveryWoman, Baigani and the Coalition Against Trafficking in Women International

***Teresita Quintos Deles***

Teresita Quintos Deles has been at the forefront of civil society peace and women's rights initiatives. She served as Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process in 2010–2016, when the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro was signed. She currently sits as chairperson of INCITEGov and chair-convenor of the women's coalition Everywoman

***Maria Serena Diokno***

Dr. Maria Serena I. Diokno is Prof. Emeritus of History at the University of the Philippines. She was Chair of the National Historical Commission from 2011–16 and UP Vice President for Academic Affairs from 1999–2005.

***Maria Anna de Rosas-Ignacio***

Maria Anna de Rosas-Ignacio, or Ate MeAn to many, calls herself a development worker. She believes that any development intervention should be grounded, rooted in the life experiences of the community and expertise of the one introducing change. She is an organizer, honed thru her work with labor union leaders, small fisherfolk, urban poor and small entrepreneurs. Her family history, Jesuit education, experience with poor, and dealing with civil servants all combine to make her a determined midwife of change and empowerment. She believes the poor should deserve nothing but the best and challenges all development workers to do and give their best.

***Lot Ortiz-Luis***

Ma. Lourdes Ortiz-Luis is the Philippine Representative of Cross Catholic Outreach, a US non-profit organization. She is the Secretary General and Mandaluyong Convenor of PPVR (People Power Volunteers for Reform). She is the President of Soroptimist International of Mandaluyong and sits as a Board Trustee of an international educational institution. She is an Organization and Talent Development Consultant.

***Corazon Juliano-Soliman***

Corazon Juliano-Soliman is former Secretary of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) where she spearheaded innovative poverty-reduction and social protection projects, such as the Kapit-Bisig Laban sa Kahirapan – Comprehensive and Integrated Delivery of Social Services (KALAHI-CIDSS) and Pantawid ng Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps). She is a founding member of the International Center for Innovation,, Transformation and Excellence in Governance (INCITEGov), currently leading its social protection and community-driven development program. In addition, she serves as Convenor of the Alyansa ng Samahang Pantao (ASAP), a coalition of non-government organizations (NGOs) and people's organizations (POs) which seeks to protect the democratic space and assert the rights of the poor and marginalized.

***Zy-za Nadine Suzara***

Zy-za Nadine Suzara is Executive Director of the Institute for Leadership, Empowerment, and Democracy. Her career spans over 15 years of policy, communications and development work in government and the international development sector. She has likewise served as a consultant at the Philippine Senate. She graduated from Ateneo de Manila University.

***Elizabeth U. Yang***

Elizabeth U. Yang is the National Coordinator of PILIPINA, which is known as the first homegrown Feminist organization in the Philippines. She serves as coordinator of the different sewers/groups, quality inspectors and packers for the Mask4All project.

# EveryWoman Convenors

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## Convenors-At-Large

Teresita Quintos Deles  
Sylvia Estrada Claudio  
Maria Serena Diokno  
Aurora Javate De Dios  
Shebana Alqaseer

AMDF - Yasmin Busran Lao, Zahria Linky Muti-Mapandi (+)  
AWARE - Mel Alonzo, Cheche Lazaro  
AKBAYAN WOMEN - Mariquit CS Melgar, Reyanne Librado  
BAIGANI - Socorro Reyes, Lan Mercado  
GRRRL GANG - Joanna Marie Caumeran, Mitch Dulce  
KAMALAYAN - Marlene V. Dela Cruz  
LIKHAAN - Hope Basiao-Abella, Mina Tenorio  
MULI - Raqui Garcia  
PILIPINA - Elizabeth Yang, Karen Tanada  
PINASAMA - Andrea Menguria, Estrella Soriano  
PANDAYAN WOMEN - Ruth Canlas, Odette Magtibay  
PPVR WOMEN - Lot Ortiz Luis, Ninian Sumadia

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---

Dawn Marie Castro - Lay-out Designer  
Rina Jimenez-David - Copy Editor  
Pauline Fernandez - Reference Editor  
Hazel Manalo-Suba - Administrative and Finance Support  
Elizabeth U. Yang - Activity Coordinator

