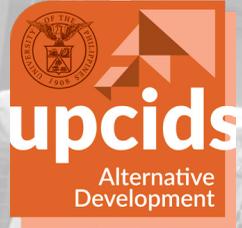




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CENTER FOR INTEGRATIVE AND DEVELOPMENT STUDIES  
**PROGRAM ON ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT**

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01

# Marginalized Societies and the State in the Time of a Pandemic The Philippine Case

Eduardo C. Tadem  
Micah Hanah S. Orlino  
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Ananeza P. Aban  
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Edwardo Roldan  
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Marivic Capuno

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Norman Capuno  
Lemuel Capuno  
Belinda Mauricio  
Jette Roldan  
Judy Sumayop  
Save Our Schools  
Network (SOS)  
Jose Monfred Sy  
Nathaniel P. Candelaria  
Bantay Kalusugan  
Pampamayanan (BKP)





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PUBLIC POLICY MONOGRAPH SERIES • 2021-01

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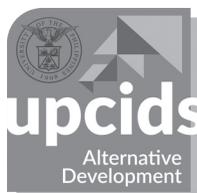
## The Philippine Case

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Cover image: Alyansa ng mga Samahan sa Sito Mendez,  
Baesa Homeowners Association, Inc. (ASAMBA)

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# Introduction

Eduardo C. Tadem

In July 2020, the Program on Alternative Development (AltDev) of the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) entered into a partnership with the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) Jakarta Office for a four-month research project on *Producing Evidence to Promote Equitable COVID-19 Response and Recovery Policies*.

The collaboration between the UP CIDS AltDev and the UNESCO has the objective of supporting the Philippine government in the decision-making process focused on the mitigation of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic through:

- (1) Identifying critical policy areas where the pandemic and the government's response and recovery have significant social and economic equity implications;
- (2) Conducting research to collect inequality data/evidence that employs participatory methodologies and is geared towards filling specific gaps in the availability of data/evidence for inclusive policymaking; and
- (3) Informing public discourse and contributing towards devising coherent and equitable policy solutions in critical policy areas.

The COVID-19 pandemic has seriously impacted on the economies, politics, and social fabric of practically all countries and their peoples around the world. As states confront the COVID-19 pandemic and struggle to contain its spread, reports of infections and deaths continue to mount. The UP CIDS AltDev–UNESCO project focuses mainly on the issue of equity and thus looks at the impact of the health crisis on specific marginalized and vulnerable populations. As the UNESCO project document puts it:

Ensuring equity in the pandemic response is critical because epidemiologically, societies are as strong as their weakest links. Ensuring equity in the pandemic recovery phase is just as important to make sure that the distribution of scarce resources earmarked for socio-economic relief and recovery reinforce social cohesion, and do not increase the existing inequalities. (UNESCO 2020, 1)

The main part of this report presents in a concrete and grounded manner the effect of the pandemic on vulnerable sectors of society by using the case study method of research, documentation, and analysis. For this purpose, five cases were identified, namely an urban poor homeowners association, a health watch program of a relocated urban poor community, a women's micro social enterprise, an indigenous people's community, and a school for indigenous children and youth. These communities have been selected among the fifty or so partners of the UP CIDS AltDev in its ongoing major research on documenting alternative practices of peoples in Southeast Asia at the grassroots level in pursuit of an alternative Southeast Asian regional integration model (Tadem et al. 2020b).

The conditions of a government-mandated extended lockdown and various levels of quarantine measures precluded the UP CIDS AltDev team from undertaking the Program's normal field research activities. The alternative therefore was to conduct interviews and focus group discussions through electronic means, such as mobile phone calls and group chats via available and accessible social media platforms. Despite some difficulties, the process went relatively well. It helped immensely that the communities are at various levels of organization and were experienced in working together for the common good. The stories that were recounted and vividly narrated by the residents and their communities generated empirical data and valuable information which lent substance and quality to the case studies.

### **The case studies**

The macro picture appears bleak for Philippine society and its peoples. It is not surprising, therefore, that at the ground level, ordinary Filipinos are suffering and enduring the worst possible effects of the pandemic. Despite all of these, some communities have also shown remarkable resilience, self-determination, and autonomy in responding to the COVID-19 crisis. The UP CIDS AltDev has been continually monitoring and documenting these local initiatives in Southeast Asia (Tadem et al. 2020a). In this current report, five of these initiatives in the Philippines are presented as case studies.

### An urban poor homeowners association

The struggle in the 1990s of more than 500 displaced urban poor families from Sitio Mendez, Barangay<sup>1</sup> Baesa organized under the **Alyansa ng mga Samahan sa Sitio Mendez, Baesa Homeowners Association (ASAMBA)** has resulted to their return to their community under an on-site, in-city relocation supported by the Quezon City government. The families camped out for one and a half months at the Quezon City Hall, staged daily protest actions, held lobby activities and regular dialogues with city officials, and won the broad support of various sectors, including religious and local officials. This resulted in their return to Sitio Mendez marked by the more than six-kilometer *Martsa ng Tagumpay* (March of Success) which was participated in by 5,000 urban poor. The “victory” of Sitio Mendez was claimed as a victory of the urban poor sector in their fight for land tenure.

### A community-based health program

**Bantay Kalusugan Pampamayanan (BKP, Community Health Watch)** is a community-based health program established in 2013 in a community of urban poor relocatees from Metro Manila in the City of San Jose Del Monte, Bulacan Province. It has a health clinic and a component emergency transport system. With over 1,000 members, the BKP has survived funding problems and has become an independent and sustainable healthcare program through their own organizational efforts. To assist in its projects, it has established partnerships with civil society groups and the academe. It has a core of volunteers and a Secretariat that coordinates and manages its various committees on health monitoring, health education, and rescuers.

### Women social entrepreneurs

The **Ma-Igting na Samahan ng mga Panlipunang Negosyante ng Towerville (Association of Social Entrepreneurs of Towerville or Igting)** is a peoples’ organization composed mainly of mothers living in Towerville, City of San Jose Del Monte, Bulacan Province. The members were also once informal settlers in Metro Manila. Between the years 2000 to 2010, they were relocated to Towerville as part of the government’s plan to remove informal settlers from so-called danger zones or due to impending development projects. Once relocated, they faced the harsh reality of the relocation sites—mainly the absence of basic services and livelihood opportunities. Through the help of a Korean non-government organization (NGO), Igting was formed to address the lack of livelihood in Towerville. Drawing from the principles of social enterprise and community organizing, Igting has since become a sustainable sewing business providing livelihood for its forty members.

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1 The *barangay* is the country’s basic administrative unit, akin to a village.

### Indigenous peoples

The work of **Ayta-Mag-indi women in Porac, Pampanga Province** in the Central Luzon region delves into culture-based women organizing to address emerging accounts of gender-based violence and to contribute to their people's ongoing struggle for self-determination and culture-sensitive governance. The Ayta-Mag-indi are a peace-loving indigenous people. While they have struggled to preserve and bequeath their culture from one generation to the next, they have become vulnerable to the influence of outside cultures with many accounts of development aggression and multiple displacements.

Meanwhile, the **Save Our Schools Network** is an alliance of child-focused NGOs, church-based groups, and other stakeholders advocating for indigenous children's right to education. Since the establishment of alternative tribal schools in the 1980s, Lumad<sup>2</sup> students and faculty have instituted the **Bakwit School** in Metro Manila as an expression of children's resistance against attacks on Lumad education. Due to the worsening political conditions in Mindanao, the Bakwit School has remained in different university campuses and areas in Metro Manila to allow Lumad children to exercise their right to education.

### Conclusions, recommendations, and dissemination

The last part of the report summarizes the research findings, draws conclusions, and compiles a list of policy recommendations for the government and the private sector to act on. These recommendations are mainly of an immediate and urgent nature and can be acted upon in the shortest possible time. Some medium-term solutions are offered as well. The authors of the report believe that all these can be adopted and implemented if the proper political will is surfaced and mobilized. The most basic of these is the proposal for a "whole-of-society" approach that brings together health experts, the relevant government bodies (including local government units), civil society organizations, sectoral groups, and the affected communities themselves to set aside their differences and work as one cohesive unit to address the most serious health crisis that the country and the world is currently facing.

This analytical report will be followed by a much shorter think piece that will contain the key findings and recommendations as outlined in the longer report. The last part of the project will be to disseminate widely the research findings "to the public through social media, TV, radio, print media and other relevant means" (UNESCO 2020, 2).

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2 "Lumad" is a collective self-ascribed designation for the more than thirty indigenous ethnolinguistic groups in the island of Mindanao in southern Philippines.

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# A Philippine National Situationer on the COVID-19 Pandemic

Micah Hanah S. Orlino and Karl Hapal

On January 30, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a public health emergency of international concern (PHEIC) due to the growing number of infected cases of a new disease caused by a novel coronavirus (NCoV),<sup>1</sup> now known as COVID-19.<sup>2</sup> Chinese health authorities confirmed the existence of the virus and its origin in the Chinese city of Wuhan on January 9, 2020. Soon after, the WHO received reports of cases in places outside China. In less than a month, the number of these cases reached 98 in 18 countries alone, but with no reported deaths. Three weeks after, the WHO declared the spread of NCoV infections as very high in China, high at the regional level, and high at the global level (WHO 2020b).

In the Philippines, the first case of COVID-19 was recorded on January 20, 2020. The next two confirmed cases were reported in the first week of February 2020. All three were labelled as imported cases since all involved Chinese nationals with a history of travelling from Wuhan. On March 5, 2020, local transmission of the disease was recorded by the Department of Health (DOH), resulting in the raising of COVID-19 Alert System to Code Red Sublevel 1. Two weeks after, President Rodrigo Duterte declared a state of calamity in the country and imposed an enhanced community quarantine (ECQ), restricting all movements to prevent the spread of the virus. The quarantine was originally a month-long measure that was supposed to end on April 12, 2020 (DOH 2020a; WHO 2020b). After almost eight months, however, and despite being placed under different levels of community quarantine, the number of active cases in the country continues to increase dramatically. The cumulative number of confirmed cases as of October 12, 2020 has reached 342,816 with 6,332 deaths and 293,152 recoveries (see Table 1 on the next page).

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1 The virus is now named as the severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 or SARS-CoV-2.

2 COVID-19 stands for coronavirus disease 2019.

**Table 1**  
COVID-19 cases in Southeast Asia (as of October 12, 2020)

Country	Confirmed cases	Deaths	Recovered
Philippines	342,816	6,332	293,152
Indonesia	336,716	11,935	258,519
Singapore	57,880	27	57,705
Myanmar/Burma	27,974	646	9,742
Malaysia	15,657	157	10,913
Thailand	3,641	59	3,454
Vietnam	1,109	35	1,024
Papua New Guinea	554	7	472
Cambodia	283	0	278
Brunei	146	3	143
Timor Leste	29	0	28
Laos	23	0	23
Total SEA	786,828	19,201	635,453
Total World	37.79 million	1.08 million	28.37 million

Source: Worldometer

### COVID-19 situation in the Philippines

The following section presents the overall situation of the Philippines regarding the COVID-19 pandemic. This report will also look at the various government policies and programs in response to the pandemic as well as their strengths, weaknesses, and the main challenges. Finally, the report highlights the socio-economic impact of COVID-19 on the country.

Data from the DOH (as of October 21, 2020) shows that the cumulative number of COVID-19 cases in the Philippines has reached 362,243, with 6,747 deaths and 311,506 recoveries from the initial March 18 figure of 3,667 confirmed cases or a 9,752 percent increase (DOH 2020a). The current number of cases also represents an average of 1,652 new cases daily. This data is drawn from 4.45 million COVID-19 tests conducted, with a positivity rate of 9.8 percent. The National Capital Region (NCR) has the highest number of cases among all 14 regions with 180,941 (50 percent), followed by Region IV-A (Calabarzon) with 66,159 (18.3 percent), and Region VII (Central Visayas) with 23, 226 (6.4 percent), and Region III (Central Luzon) with 21,030 (5.8 percent).

As of this writing, there are a total of 1,270 health facilities (including hospitals) that receive and treat COVID-19 patients nationwide, with an occupancy rate of 41.4 percent, majority of which are in the *safe zone* with only 30 percent of beds allocated

to treat people infected with the virus occupied and 12,631 vacancies. However, this is not the case for hospitals who are in hotspot areas such as Metro Manila. Hospitals have been reporting that they already reached full capacity for COVID-19 patients and can no longer accept them. Among these Metro Manila hospitals are St. Luke's Medical Center in its Quezon City and Bonifacio Global City branches, Makati Medical Center, Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital in Santa Mesa, Manila, the National Kidney and Transplant Institute (NKTII) in Quezon City, and The Medical City (TMC) in Pasig City (Jazul and Baron 2020).

As COVID-19 cases continue to rise and the healthcare capacity, especially in hotspot areas, approach critical levels, Metro Manila and adjacent communities reverted to what the government calls the Modified Enhanced Community Quarantine (MECQ) in August.<sup>3</sup> This meant the restriction of economic activity, suspension of public transportation, and the strict imposition of stay-at-home orders. By October, however, this was eased to a less restrictive general community quarantine (GCQ) following disturbing reports of the country's economic performance, which has now officially entered into a recession (Aguilar 2020).

### **Government response against COVID-19**

This section will discuss the range of interventions that the Philippine government has deployed to suppress the spread of COVID-19 and mitigate its negative impacts. In particular, the section will focus on the Philippine government's overall approach in addressing the pandemic, the implementing structures that it established, and the enabling laws and policies governing its responses. The report will then turn to the major responses of the government to contain the spread of disease and to alleviate the suffering or dampen the negative impacts of the pandemic, namely the imposition of community quarantine, the Social Amelioration Program (SAP), and the *Balik Probinsya, Bagong Pag-asa* (BP2) Program.

### **Response framework**

The response framework of the Philippines is articulated in the government's National Action Plan Against COVID-19 (NAP). The NAP was developed by the National Task Force Against COVID-19 (NTF) at the behest of the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID). Its main imperatives are centered on

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3 Strict lockdown measures were initially imposed from March 15, 2020 to May 31, 2020 first in Metro Manila and then the rest of the country. The country was reopened gradually thereafter. The middle of July 2020 until the first week of August 2020 saw the acceleration of the spread of the disease. This, together with pleas from healthcare workers who have expressed concerns of exhaustion and the need to recalibrate the government's response, prompted the reimposition of the stricter Modified Enhanced Community Quarantine (MECQ).

mitigating the impacts of the virus on the country, giving aid to the most vulnerable sectors, and creating a harmonized response led by the national government and cascaded among local government units (LGUs). The NAP was implemented in two phases. Phase I focused on containment and prevention of the virus through strict community quarantine; elimination of the threat by providing medical treatment and interventions; and mitigation of negative social impacts by ensuring that basic services are delivered to the people. While Phase I centered on the containment of the virus, Phase II serves as a point of transition from containment to what the government calls the “new normal.” Among the key features of Phase II are promoting change in people’s mindset with strong focus on health and disease prevention; striking a strategic balance between health and economic objectives; and mainstreaming the Prevent-Detect-Isolate-Treat-Reintegrate strategy. The NAP Phase II aims to address the health and welfare of Filipinos by sustaining the low fatality rate, and at the same time, to direct the recovery of the country’s economy. The NTF describes the NAP as a national-government-enabled, LGU-led, and people-centered response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Malindog-Uy 2020; NTF 2020).

### Implementing structures

Established in 2014, the IATF-EID is a government body mandated to create measures; and formulate, develop, and implement policies, programs, and activities in preparation, prevention, and control of emerging and re-emerging infectious diseases. It is headed by the DOH and is composed of representatives from the following national agencies:

- Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA);
- Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG);
- Department of Justice (DOJ);
- Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE);
- Department of Tourism (DOT); and
- Department of Transportation (DOTr).

The IATF-EID issues resolutions providing information and measures on addressing the pandemic. They are also to assist in the operations of the NAP. Meanwhile, the NTF was created to lessen the burden of the IATF-EID and to streamline and decentralize operations. Thus, the NTF serves as the operational command under the Secretary of National Defense.

In the Phase II of the NAP, the NTF identified four (4) anti-COVID-19 czars for contract tracing, testing, isolation, and treatment of COVID-19. Testing czar Vince Dizon (President and CEO of the Bases Conversion and Development Authority) is responsible for scaling up the country’s testing capacity. Isolation czar Secretary Mark

Villar (of the Department of Public Works and Highways), manages the efforts of the government in scaling up the building of isolation and quarantine facilities. Tracing czar Mayor Benjamin Magalong (of Baguio City) leads the development of a contact tracing ecosystem that comprises a troupe of interviewers, analysts, encoders, and technical support personnel. Finally, treatment czar DOH Undersecretary Leopoldo Vega oversees the scaling up and expansion of the bed capacity of hospitals for COVID-19 patients, increase in healthcare personnel in public and private hospitals, and augmentation of the medical supply needs of health facilities across the country (Malindog-Uy 2020).

### Major legal bases for COVID-19 recovery and rehabilitation programs

The major legal bases for the government's COVID-19 recovery and rehabilitation programs are the following:

- (1) *Presidential Proclamation No. 922, s. 2020*, which declared a State of Public Health Emergency throughout the Philippines on March 8, 2020 per the confirmation of locally transmitted COVID-19 cases and the recommendation of the DOH;
- (2) *Presidential Proclamation No. 929, s. 2020*, which declared a State of Calamity for six months throughout the Philippines, allowed the utilization of appropriate funds, and imposed an Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) from March 17 to April 12, 2020;
- (3) *Republic Act No. 11469* (“Bayanihan to Heal as One Act of 2020”), which was passed into law on March 23, 2020 and approved by the President the next day, contains the following salient points:
  - Provision of an emergency subsidy to 18 million low-income households ranging from Php 5,000 to 8,000 a month for two months
  - Provision of a COVID-19 special risk allowance to public healthcare workers, a compensation of Php 100,000 for those who have contracted severe COVID-19 infection, and Php 1 million for those who died from the disease
  - Implementation of community quarantine by LGUs consistent with the national government and allowing them to utilize no more than five percent of the amount allocated for their calamity fund
  - Allowing the speedy procurement of goods and other services needed in addressing the COVID-19 situation
  - Discontinuation of appropriated programs, projects, or activities of any executive department that can be used as additional budget for COVID-19-related PPAs;

- (4) *Republic Act No. 11494* (“Bayanihan to Recover as One Act of 2020”), signed by President Duterte on September 11, 2020, represented the second phase of the government’s social amelioration program, including the following:
- Provision of a stimulus package of Php 165 billion (Php 140 billion in regular appropriation and Php 25 billion as standby funding)
  - Provision of loans for sectors like micro, small, and medium-scale enterprises, transport, tourism, and agriculture
  - Allocation of allowances to students in private and public schools at all levels whose families were adversely affected by work stoppage due to lockdowns
  - Provision of the retroactive payment of Php 100,000 hazard duty pay for health workers, employment of existing emergency health workers, and risk allowances for public and private healthcare workers attending to COVID-19 patients, among others.

## Major responses

### **Community quarantine**

Various iterations of community quarantine measures were imposed in the Philippines in order to suppress the spread of the virus by limiting mobility. This began in March 2020 when the entire Luzon island was placed under Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), which was supposed to end by April 12, 2020 but was extended for another month. The ECQ in Metro Manila was lifted and downgraded to Modified Enhanced Community Quarantine (MECQ) from May 16 to 30, 2020. Under MECQ, additional businesses were able to operate and religious gatherings were allowed albeit in limited capacity. However, travel and public transportation remained restricted. On June 1, 2020, Metro Manila transitioned from MECQ to the General Community Quarantine (GCQ) in which at least 50 percent of non-essential businesses were able to resume operations. Due to the observed acceleration of the virus since the imposition of the GCQ, and with pleas from healthcare workers, Metro Manila and adjacent provinces were ordered to revert to the MECQ from August 4 to 18. In September, this was eased to GCQ until the end of October.

### **Scale-up of testing, contact tracing, and critical health care capacity**

As of October 21, 2020, the DOH reports that 4.2 million individuals or about 1.1 percent of the population have been tested. An average of 19,309 tests were conducted per day since March 18, 2020. The DOH also added that the efforts in the expansion of testing capacities have complemented its enhanced surveillance strategies, particularly active case finding. The number of tests conducted daily was a

huge improvement compared to when the crisis began in March 2020. Nonetheless, the ramping up of testing capacity and actual tests conducted remains slow given that the government targeted to conduct 30,000 tests per day by the end of May, and about 50,000 tests per day by the end of June. The target of 30,000 tests per day was only achieved by the end of July. The Philippines has yet to conduct 50,000 tests in a single day. In terms of contact tracing, the Philippines has yet to meet the WHO-prescribed contact tracer to population ratio of 1:800. The national government, through the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG), has yet to hire, train, and deploy the said number of contact tracers. Instead, it has mainly relied on the contract tracing initiatives of LGUs. This has led to inconsistent and differing practices and approaches when it comes to contact tracing.

### **Social amelioration measures**

The government's social amelioration measures are contained in the Joint Memorandum Circular (JMC) No. 1, s. 2020 among a number of executive departments. It serves as the basis for the implementation of various social amelioration programs and provides the overall guidelines on relief and recovery from the health crisis. Moreover, this serves as the basis for the implementation of social protection programs, projects, and services to the targeted 18 million low-income families, to which an emergency subsidy ranging from Php 5,000 to 8,000 a month for two months shall be given to provide for food, medicine, and toiletries. Apart from low-income families, JMC No. 1 also identified vulnerable populations, which include senior citizens; pregnant/lactating women; solo parents; overseas Filipinos in distress; underprivileged sectors such as homeless families, indigents, indigenous peoples and other vulnerable groups; informal or self-employed workers; employers; rice farmers; and service-conduit borrowers. Due to the wide and multi-sectoral impact of the pandemic, the government's response saw the need to harmonize its programs and services to effectively alleviate and mitigate the effects and socio-economic shocks brought about by the community quarantine. Table 2 (on the next page) presents a summary of the programs of various government agencies responding to various sectors or vulnerable populations in the Philippines. However, these agencies ran into problems in implementing their programs. Some of these, as identified by Acheron (2020), were related to the identification of qualified beneficiaries; gaps in disseminating information to the public; unresponsive or ineffective communication lines; and the readiness of LGUs as co-implementors of the programs.

### **Economic impact**

The imposition of various quarantine measures since March 2020 has impacted heavily on the Philippine economy. For the first quarter of 2020, the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) reported a 0.2 percent decline in the country's gross

**Table 2**  
Summary of government social amelioration measures

<b>Program</b>	<b>Implementing agency</b>	<b>Brief description</b>
Tulong Panghanapbuhay sa Ating Displaced, Disadvantaged Workers	DOLE	A community-based (municipality/ barangay) package of assistance that provides temporary wage employment for displaced workers, unemployed, and self-employed workers
Barangay Ko, Bahay Ko Disinfection, Sanitation	DOLE	Provision of employment opportunities that entail disinfection and sanitation of houses and immediate communities
COVID-19 Adjustment Measures Program (CAMP)	DOLE	A safety net program that offers financial support to affected workers in private establishments that have adopted flexible work arrangements (FWAs) or temporary closure during the COVID-19 pandemic; this includes a one-time financial assistance equivalent to Php 5,000 to workers regardless of employment status
Food and Non-Food Items (FNI) Distribution	DSWD	Distribution of food and non-food essentials to the most affected individuals and families, including stranded workers and homeless individuals
Assistance to Individuals in Crisis Situations	DSWD	Provision of integrated services by the DSWD to individuals and families in crisis or difficult situations that serve as social safety net or stopgap measure to support their recovery; the program provides Php 3,000 cash assistance and Php 25,000 burial assistance per deceased of families that suffered loss/death of member/s
Livelihood Assistance Grants (LAG)	DSWD	A form of financial assistance granted to eligible families whose livelihoods were affected by the implementation of the community quarantine through support of micro-enterprise- or employment-related activities particularly to those in the informal sector and providing seed capital for new alternative income generating activities or certain micro-enterprise ventures or as a support and an additional capital to the existing viable micro-enterprise

**Table 2**

Summary of government social amelioration measures (continued)

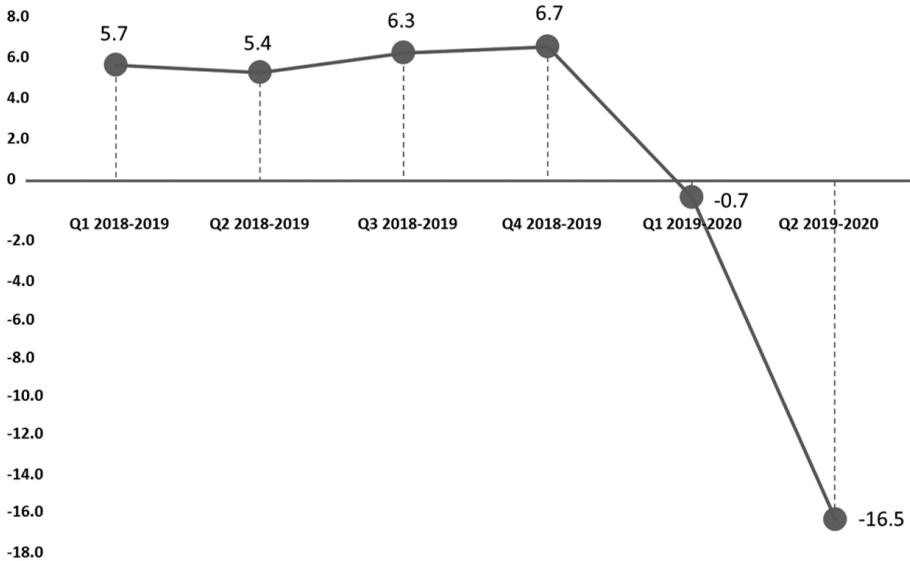
Program	Implementing agency	Brief description
Expanded and Enhanced Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps)	DSWD, DOLE	Provision of assistance in cash or non-cash to families who have no incomes or savings to draw from, including families working in the informal economy and those who are not currently recipients of 4Ps
COVID-19 P3 ERF	DTI	Provision of loans for micro, small, and medium enterprises amounting from Php 10,000 to Php 50,000 for small enterprises with asset size of not more than Php 10 million
Cash Assistance for Rice Farmers	DA	A one-time provision of decoupled payments amounting to Php 5,000 to eligible rice farmer beneficiaries
Survival and Recovery (SURE) Assistance for Marginalized, Small Farmers and Fishers	DA	A Php 25,000 interest-free loan assistance for farmers and fisherfolks
Livelihood Seeding Program/ Negosyo Serbisyo sa Barangay (LSP-NSB)	DTI	Php 200 million fund assistance for micro-entrepreneurs in the form of enterprise development training and/or the provision of a livelihood kit amounting to at least Php 5,000 but no more than Php 8,000

domestic product (GDP). This is the first contraction of the Philippine economy since the fourth quarter of 1998 (PSA 2020b). Nevertheless, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the government projected that the economy would still grow by four percent, while some economists disagreed, saying that it may even be as low as negative ten percent (Lim 2020). On August 6, 2020, however, the PSA released its second quarter report showing that the economy contracted by 16.5 percent, the biggest quarterly drop since 1981, placing the country technically under a recession (PSA 2020c).

Many businesses have also either shut down, halted operations, or adopted scaled-down alternative work arrangements. Surveys in April by the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) and the Department of Finance (DOF) showed that the majority of the economic sectors had no operations while almost all the

**Figure 1**

Philippine gross domestic product from Q1 2018-2019 to Q2 2019-2020



Source: PSA 2020c

sectors have either zero or greatly reduced sales. Manufacturing and tourism were the top sectors that had zero sales in April (Lim 2020).

The pandemic did not only bring infectious disease to Filipinos, but it also resulted in the country's incurring billions of dollars in loans from international financial institutions and donor countries. The Department of Finance (DOF) secured at least USD 7.73 billion (approximately Php 385.3 billion) as of July 2 from the Asian Development Bank (ADB), World Bank, and Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA), among others. These funds were borrowed to finance the government response to the health crisis (*ABS-CBN News* 2020). The Department of Finance projects that the country's year-end foreign loans would reach Php 9.59 trillion or equivalent to almost 50 percent of the country's GDP (de Vera 2020a).

### Social impact

The impact of COVID-19 has led to the biggest slump of the Philippine economy since 1981 (Dela Cruz and Morales 2020). Consequently, its social impacts have also been profound and adverse—rising poverty, joblessness, and hunger, to name a few.

Workers from both the informal and formal sectors are losing their jobs while many are expected to work at home with highly inadequate financial support from employers. Children and the youth and their teachers are having a difficult time

adjusting to a “new normal” type of education as they are confronted by remote and blended learning methodologies. Meanwhile, many poor families cannot afford the technologies accompanying this instructional method, hence the risk of dropping out this school year. Furthermore, women, particularly in urban poor communities, become even more vulnerable to abuse and harassment as many families are confined to their cramped dwellings.

The government programs discussed in the previous sections were aimed to benefit the more vulnerable groups, yet figures on the worsening conditions of the basic sectors tell a different story. This is evident, particularly among the working classes. The PSA (2020a) reported that in April 2020, the number of Filipinos who became unemployed has reached 7.3 million or a jobless rate of 17.7 percent, as compared to the April 2019 unemployment rate of 5.1 percent. Meanwhile, the employment rate in the same period declined dramatically to 82.3 percent or 33.8 million compared to 94.9 percent or 41.8 million employed persons last year. Moreover, the number of workers who had a job but did not work in 2019 was 447,000, but it grew significantly in 2020 reaching 12 million workers or 28 percent of the labor force (Lim 2020).

On the other hand, informal sector workers, such as public transport drivers, street vendors, domestic workers, and self-employed individuals, among others, with no job security are most affected by this pandemic. Under the quarantine regime, the government has banned public transportation. Jeepney drivers, who number from 55,000 to 70,000 in Metro Manila, carried the burden of this policy with income losses of at least Php 78,000 in three months (IBON Foundation 2020).

Meanwhile, women and children continually experience abuse and harassment during the lockdown. The DOJ reported a threefold increase in online sexual exploitation of children (OSEC) due to the failure to block prohibited materials by telecommunication companies. Comparing the data from 2019 with reported cyber tips of 76,561 to 279,166 cyber tips from March to May 2020 shows an increase

**Table 3**

Employment situation in the Philippines, April 2019 and 2020

	April 2020	April 2019
Total population, 15 years old and over (in '000)	73,722	72,539
Labor force participation rate (in %)	55.6	61.4
Employment rate (in %)	82.3	94.9
Unemployment rate (in %)	17.7	5.1
Underemployment rate (in %)	18.9	13.5

Source: PSA 2020a

of around 265 percent. On the other hand, advocates also fear that gender-based abuse and violence during the lockdown might increase even more as stay-at-home measures may hinder abused women and children from reporting and seeking help. Based on the data from the PNP-Women and Children Protection Center (PNP-WCPC), a total of 804 incidents of gender-based violence and abuse against children and women were reported from March 15 to April 30, 2020 (Ranada 2020).

One of the identified age groups who are at high risk of being infected by COVID-19 are senior citizens or older people. UN Women (2020) reported that one effect of the pandemic on the senior citizens is the delayed issuance of their social pension. Not all of the elderly receives the pension because only indigent senior citizens are qualified. This leaves other older people more vulnerable as they lack access to immediate and needed support given the lack of financial support from the government. One of the loopholes of the SAP subsidy is its local government-centered approach in which some older people who are not in their registered local cities are deemed ineligible for the subsidy (*ibid.*).

Finally, urban poor households living in informal settlements in Metro Manila are also among the most vulnerable groups during the pandemic. As individuals are ordered by the government to stay in their homes and to practice social distancing, informal settler families who are congested in the small spaces of their makeshift dwellings become more at risk of contracting the virus as it spreads rapidly in this type of living arrangement.

A September 2020 survey conducted by the Social Weather Stations (SWS) showed that “71% of Filipino families received money-help from government since the start of the COVID-19 crisis” or a national total of 16 million families, 2 million less than the announced target of 18 million families but which was nevertheless “a respectable 89 percent” accomplishment (Mangahas 2020). On the downside, the same SWS survey showed that the Metro Manila region and Luzon provinces were highly privileged over Mindanao and the Visayas islands in terms of percentage of families receiving assistance, the number of times aid was given, and the average amount received per family. Lastly, the SWS calculated that a total of Php 120 billion was distributed out of the Php 200 billion released by the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) for the social amelioration program, leaving a gap of Php 80 billion that has to be accounted for.

Despite the SWS findings that almost three-fourths of Filipino families receiving social amelioration aid, the government planning agency NEDA admitted that “more Filipinos could slip into poverty and joblessness until 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic” (Lopez 2020). In an August 2020 report, the state-run think tank Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) projected that “even with the SAP and small business wage subsidy in place... (and) on top of an economic recession and temporary unemployment, the COVID-19 pandemic is seen (as) inflicting a bigger

damage on the Philippines' goal to reduce poverty and become a middle-class society by 2040" with "incomes contracting by ten percent (and) the number of poor Filipinos rising by about 1.5 million from the baseline figures..." (de Vera 2020b).

Increased poverty and rising joblessness led to increased hunger with a September 2020 survey by SWS showing that an estimated 7.6 million Filipino households "went hungry due to lack of food at least once during the height of the coronavirus pandemic" (*Rappler* 2020). This translated into a hunger incidence rate of 30.7 percent, topping the previous record of 23.8 percent in March 2012 and 22 points higher than the 8.8 percent hunger rate of December 2019.

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# **Community Responses and Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic**

## **The Case of the Alyansa ng mga Samahan sa Sitio Mendez, Baesa Homeowners Association, Inc. (ASAMBA)**

Ananeza P. Aban, Erlinda Sapiandante, Mina Amata-Justo, and Edwardo Roldan

Communities living in the urban margins are undocumented and largely ignored by mainstream media. In the past, they have seized opportunities to reclaim spaces and resources and to fight for their rights. This is evidence that the urban poor are capable agents and are not idle players waiting for government support or subsidy. There are myriads of exceptional possibilities and alternatives that the poor can do in the face of worsening urban poverty and complex socio-economic costs. In the midst of anxiety and uncertainties, the homeowners of the Alyansa ng mga Samahan sa Sitio Mendez, Baesa Homeowners Association, Inc. (ASAMBA) in Quezon City, Philippines have devised their own ways of mobilizing effectively in response to a health crisis. This article draws from stories of ASAMBA members and illustrates their creativity and resilience in spite of the COVID-19 pandemic.

A year before the COVID-19 pandemic, senior leaders of ASAMBA spearheaded the documentation of their community history through life histories that was facilitated by the Program on Alternative Development (AltDev) of the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS). The primary purpose of this participatory documentation was both for the current residents to memorialize and for future generations to understand the birth pains that the community endured when it was established amid the backdrop of constant harassment and violent demolitions faced by Metro Manila urban poor communities during the 1990s. A secondary objective was to identify and narrate how

they managed to move forward with community organizing and its accompanying struggles throughout the past two decades.

The results of the research and documentation process were supposed to be presented in 2020 during ASAMBA's 23rd founding anniversary in August. The pandemic, however, altered this schedule. But the crisis, on the other hand, has proven the worth of their cause and the relevance of the initiatives they undertook to improve their community—from livelihood to wellness activities and raising funds and other resources. These initiatives have stood out in a time of a global crisis when formal social structures are falling apart and government has become largely ineffective in addressing the basic services related to public health and welfare.

Immediately after the Philippine government declared the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) across the country in mid-March 2020 as a measure to contain the

**Figure 1**

The entrance gate of the ASAMBA Village with COVID-19 prevention reminders



Photo by ASAMBA

**Figure 2**

The women gatekeepers of ASAMBA during an afternoon break from guarding their gate



Photo by ASAMBA

spread of COVID-19, ASAMBA leaders convened an emergency meeting to discuss the urgent actions in response to the public health crisis. Mindful of the debilitating images of COVID-19 patients yet absorbing courage from one another to fulfill their responsibilities, the entire ASAMBA leadership was mobilized to be the first community responders during this exceptional situation.

A group of women leaders proceeded to their village's portals to strictly monitor the mobility of every resident (*bantay sa gate*). They made sure that people are staying home, no one is loitering (*walang tambay sa labas*), and physical distancing is practiced. Some officers who have the necessary skill volunteered to retrofit the ironworks of their second gate in order to make it sturdier. These gatekeepers constantly reminded residents to wear face masks and carry their identification cards (IDs) when entering or leaving the community, otherwise they are not allowed entry or re-entry. They also strictly screened non-residents entering the community. For important public announcements, they maximized the use of a public address system with seven speakers (*trompa*) surrounding their whole community.

*"Biglaan ang ECQ, maraming nagutom kaya nag-food rationing kami"* (The ECQ was sudden. We immediately distributed food rations because many went hungry), said ASAMBA President Edwardo "Eddie" Roldan.

ASAMBA supplemented this gatekeeping with their own social protection measures. Other community leaders quickly worked to release a portion of their organization's savings for the procurement of immediate food needs (especially rice), along with the distribution of these food packs to all their members. It was actually ASAMBA which initiated the first and second waves of relief operations within their community from their own funds, not the local government. Experience had taught them that government relief goods take time to reach them, while their members were already starving by the day. Meanwhile, having partnerships with social movements and civil society groups, ASAMBA was also able to secure food packs from these allies during the earlier days of the ECQ. Furthermore, donations from friends and support groups continue to pour in up to the present.

This kind of collective leadership through the visibility of ASAMBA officers' working as frontliners to enforce basic COVID-19 preventive measures (such as physical distancing, staying at home, and wearing of face masks) made it possible and easier for all the residents to comply with public health protocols. The key element in their response was not imposing draconian and punitive-based measures to get people to comply with the mandated restrictions. When they set their own rules and regulations to supplement the quarantine policy of the government, they enable residents to understand the situation and cooperate. In fact, because of ASAMBA's self-regulation, there was lesser need for the barangay council to monitor and enforce compliance of the protocols within their community. ASAMBA President Eddie said that they really exerted extra efforts to make all the households understand the situation and the policies.<sup>1</sup>

Mina Amata-Justo, one of the frontliners at the gates, explained that people were reprimanded when they tend to forget to follow the protocols. There are times when police officers enter their premises to check any violators of the law related to Bayanihan to Heal as One Act.<sup>2</sup> ASAMBA's tireless reminders of the quarantine protocols has, so far, resulted in zero cases of arrests for violating the law.

### **Significance of ASAMBA's history in COVID-19 response**

ASAMBA's methodical planning and estate management, the tactical implementation of plans, and the capacity to organize the neighborhood come as no surprise. The ASAMBA members' ability to quickly mobilize among themselves and plan practical

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1 "Households" here refer to the ASAMBA homeowners or members, their extended families or the sharers, and space renters who are mostly temporary residents coming from different provinces and who have opted to stay in Metro Manila for their jobs.

2 A new law, the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act (Republic Act No. 11469), was recently enacted in the Philippines as a response to the COVID-19 health crisis.

moves to prevent the spread of a deadly disease in their locality are rooted in their community organizing training and subsequent struggles for land and housing in the late 1990s when they defied a series of illegal and violent demolitions of their shanties in this particular area where their permanent shelters are now standing. This is supplemented by their sense of neighborhood and culture of solidarity that were honed during that period of struggle, strife, and eventually, success (Asiddao-Santos 2020).

Amid the pandemic, the homeowners of ASAMBA commemorated the 23rd anniversary of their *Martsa ng Tagumpay* (March of Victory) on August 15, 1997 (*Manila Times* 1997). Their commemoration celebrated their victory in their struggle for land tenure, decent housing, and the right to the city.

Erlinda “Ka Linda” Sapiandante, then ASAMBA president, explained that the wisdom they acquired from that struggle significantly shaped them to become

**Figure 3**

Officers of ASAMBA working to reinforce the gates of ASAMBA compound



Photo by ASAMBA

better leaders and grassroots organizers of their community. At that time, Ka Linda worked alongside Flora Asiddao-Santos, an icon of urban poor organizing. Together, they went to dialogues with various actors, such as the Quezon City government, concerned official agencies, the landowner, the church, and allied non-government organizations (NGOs) and social movements. These dialogues took place alongside spontaneous pickets, mass actions, human barricades, propaganda development, and networking for broad mass support and media projection (Badilla 1997).

Ka Linda and the other elders of the community could still vividly recall the days when the community was under siege. Poor and with no security of tenure in a depressed urban area of Metro Manila, they daringly defended their lives and community from the Quezon City demolition crew, armed security guards, the police, and the government's Special Weapons and Tactics (SWAT) Team who jolted them out of their beds before daybreak with indiscriminate firing of gunshots, bulldozing of their site, dismantling of their shanties, lobbing teargas to disperse them, and burning their confiscated belongings. While human barricades were set up in the vicinity of the demolished site, around 500 ASAMBA families camped out and picketed at the Quezon City Hall for over a month to pressure the local government of the late mayor Ismael Mathay, Jr. to come to the negotiating table and cease the violent evictions that already killed one leader, elderly residents, and infants who succumbed to tear gas (ASAMBA, forthcoming; Cueto 1997; Padua 1997; Ubac 1997).

The ASAMBA experience, among other cases, generated public outrage on how the government grossly violated its very own Urban Development and Housing Act of 1992 (UDHA; Republic Act No. 7279), particularly on demolition and eviction protocols under Section 28.<sup>3</sup>

Reaping the fruits of their sacrifices and resistance, ASAMBA members continue to own and manage their hard-fought properties while being engaged in various livelihood activities. Although locked down in the middle of an uncertain situation under COVID-19 restrictions, having a shelter of their own and a responsive community to rely on have become their formidable social support system.

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3 Section 28 of the UDHA stipulates that there should be "(2) [a]dequate consultations on the matter of resettlement with the duly designated representatives of the families to be resettled and the affected communities in the areas where they are to be relocated;" that "(5) [e]xecution of eviction or demolition only during regular office hours from Mondays to Fridays and during good weather, unless the affected families consent otherwise;" and that "(6) [n]o use of heavy equipment for demolition except for structures that are permanent and of concrete materials."

### COVID-19 cases and the health status of the ASAMBA neighborhood

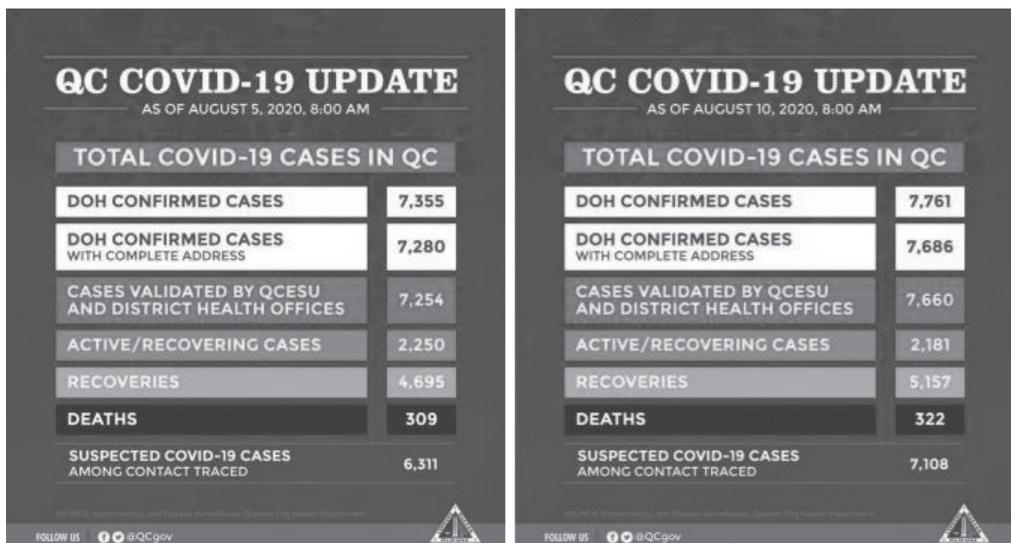
In the months that followed the lifting of the ECQ in Metro Manila, mobility restrictions became more relaxed and many among the workforce have been allowed to go to work. In the absence of free mass testing, the whole community has become more exposed to the virus. In July, ASAMBA monitored two COVID-19 cases within their neighborhood. Both were employees of private companies and have reportedly recovered. At the beginning of August, four more asymptomatic cases were identified. Since there were no reported cases within the community during the ECQ period (although this observation was in the absence of mass testing), the community concluded that these residents were infected when they began to return to their workplaces.

Since August 1, Quezon City has reached almost 7,000 confirmed COVID-19 positive cases. Barangay Baesa, where ASAMBA members reside, already had over a hundred cases (QC Local Government n.d.b). The cases in Quezon City have been increasing at an alarming rate. For instance, the August 5 data from the Department of Health (DOH) recorded 7,355 cases in the city. In a span of five days, by August 10, this surged to 7,761 cases (see Figure 4 below).

“*Natatakot pa rin ako*” (I am still scared), said Mina who is still stationed at the gates since the ECQ. She explained that she became anxious after she found out that the government staff whom she assisted for the house-to-house

**Figure 4**

COVID-19 updates from the Quezon City government, August 5 and 10, 2020



Source: Quezon City Government Facebook page

**Figure 5**

ASAMBA homeowners conducting temperature monitoring in partnership with the barangay



Photo by ASAMBA

assessment needed for the Social Amelioration Program (SAP)<sup>4</sup> tested positive for COVID-19.

This atmosphere of distress is overwhelming even beyond the confines of the ASAMBA community. People are fearful that their own barangay might soon be included in the list of the city's COVID-19 hotspots, which may eventually result in another painful lockdown. A necessary preventive measure that they know, however, would not be complemented with sufficient social services needed during a public health crisis.

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4 Part of the Bayanihan to Health as One Act are provisions to support low-income households through the SAP, a government emergency cash subsidy of up to Php 8,000 per month distributed by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD).

ASAMBA residents continue to worry of their health situation that is compounded by the increasing problem of food insecurity, unemployment, lack of livelihood opportunities, and the no-work-no-pay status of the workforce settled here. ASAMBA is home to many workers in the private sector, many of whom also belong to the informal economy.

### **Job displacement, livelihood options for survival**

*“Marami ang nawalan ng trabaho sa ASAMBA. Kailangan ngayon ang diskarteng nanay.”* (Many in ASAMBA have lost their jobs. What is needed now is the ingenuity of a mother.), said Ka Linda who herself has started to sell her homemade processed food at her doorstep.

ASAMBA residents, like many urban poor, are important players in the urban economy, whether in the formal or informal sector. Working as clerks, company crew, drivers of private business establishments, sellers of multi-level marketing company products (such as cosmetics and skin care), vendors, and domestic helpers, among others, are their common means of livelihood. All these have been disrupted when the government restricted the movement of peoples and temporarily ordered the closure of most business establishments for two to three months (or even longer). Those who were later asked to return to work were only advised to work for only three days a week with a corresponding three-day wage—a drastic cut from their previous wages for five days of work, and therefore means a huge cut as well in their household income.

Eddie, who works as a driver, was among those who have been forced to reduce his workdays. He now reports for duty only every other day. To make up for the slack and make both ends meet, he started to run his own food take-out counter in front of his house: *“May tindahan na rin ako sa harap ng bahay ko.”* (There is now also a store in front of my house.)

Given the prolonged quarantine period with no assurance of a recovered economy in the coming months, ASAMBA members started to set up their own livelihood shacks in front of their houses, while others resumed with their paid household work from neighbors (e.g., doing the laundry).

*“Kabiti pabarya-barya lang ang kikitain, okay na”* (Even if income is just a pittance, that is fine), explained Ka Linda when she observed that, aside from her, almost all of her neighbors have set up tables in front of their houses to sell cooked food or wet and dry goods. They hope that the meager income from vending can be enough to buy a few kilos of rice.

A few have also tried online selling like Mina. Since biking has become the alternative means of transportation, Mina is into online retail of bicycle parts, while her son delivers them to online buyers within their reach. Her only wish is for the country’s trade and industry department to reconsider the proposal to tax small-time

**Figure 6**

ASAMBA homeowners selling take-out food in front of their houses during the quarantine period



Photo by ASAMBA

sellers such as herself whose incomes are barely sufficient for their family needs while still in quarantine.

Ka Linda added that the one positive outcome is the circulation of money within their community. This scheme, where residents buy food and basic necessities from other residents in the neighborhood, allows them to patronize each other's products and appraise everyone's skill like specialty cooking, food preparation, and online selling. She mentioned that urban vegetable gardening has also found a revival in the community. This has somehow solved their problem about their lunch or dinner's main course (*pang-ulam*).

### **Children's education as a concern**

The education of children in the community is another cause for worry. They believe that the Department of Education (DepEd)'s decision to begin classes by September (which was later moved to October) is premature. Moreover, the shift to blended learning did not consider the situation of the poor. Eddie explained, "*Unahin ng*

*mga pamilya ang pagkain kaysa sa cellphone o gadget.*” (The poor families’ priority is food security instead of cellular phones or gadgets needed for online learning.) He expects that in the ASAMBA community alone, around 50 percent of the school children will drop out this school year. For those who have enrolled, there might still be dropouts in the middle of the term when classes resume.

“*Yung nanay, hindi niya maasikaso ang mga bata dahil magbabantay at maglalako pa siya ng paninda niya. Ang tatay, three days na lang ang pasok. Magbabayad pa ng renta sa bahay. May mga kaso na ng renters na umurwi na ng probinsya dahil sa kakulangan ng budget para panggastos sa pamilya at pambayad sa renta ng bahay.*” (The mother cannot attend to this home-based education of her children because she has to peddle her goods for a living. The father only has three-day work these days. There is the house rent that has to be paid. There have been cases of families deciding to return to the province due to lack of budget for household expenditures including rent.), Eddie discussed.

### **Defying the dole-out mentality**

ASAMBA’s COVID-19 response demonstrates their autonomy and ability to self-govern. This has made them flexible in addressing immediate concerns of their community and less reliant on government dole-outs.

“*So kami inunahan na namin, may monitoring na kami. May sarili po kaming diskarte. Tumayo po kami sa aming sariling paa. Okay lang kung may relief; kung wala, ayos lang. Self-reliant naman kami. Marami pa ring hindi nakakuha ng ayudang pera, lalo na mga senior citizen, pero lahat nabigyan ng food packs.*” (We moved ahead by setting up a monitoring system right away. We have our own initiatives. We stood on our own feet. Whether we get external relief or none is fine because we are self-reliant. While there were those who did not receive emergency cash subsidy from the government, especially senior citizens, everyone received food packs.)

This is how Eddie described their actions from the very beginning of the lockdown. He continues to volunteer as a gatekeeper and oversees the officers whenever he is off from his day job. Until present, gatekeepers continue to guard the gates for 24 hours with two shifts.

Nevertheless, the food packs and emergency funds from the government arrived. Residents availed of the SAP from both the national government and the local government of Quezon City. Those who have been included in the list of qualified persons to receive the SAP received Php 8,000 from the DSWD. For those who were left out, the local government provided Php 4,000. Apart from that, there were those who received Php 2,000 through the local Kalingang QC program. The payout was even done in ASAMBA’s locale, with the assistance of the local frontliners.

The Kalingang QC program of the Quezon City government provided Php 1.2-billion financial aid to the city's residents identified as belonging to vulnerable sectors and those badly affected by the ECQ. The program covers those in the informal economy and daily wage earners. But the coverage was later expanded to include solo parents, lactating mothers, persons with disability, senior citizens, scholars, and sellers of dry goods and cellular phone accessories (QC Local Government. n.d.a).

However, ASAMBA saw a deficit in providing the special needs for older persons. Not everyone was fortunate to receive their social pension. Distribution of maintenance drugs (such as for hypertension and diabetes) and immunity-boosting vitamins was inadequate. Some of these distributed drugs had nearing expiry dates, while those of better quality are sourced from compassionate individuals. Ka Linda, also a leader among the senior citizens, said she has already lodged a complaint to the Office of the Mayor and has submitted a masterlist of all their names, on behalf of those older persons who have not yet received their social pension, which is deemed helpful for their medical and maintenance requirements and for those needing dialysis.

### **Spirit of volunteerism and self-reliance**

To replenish the organizational funds that they steadily use for emergency purposes, ASAMBA has religiously collected monthly dues of Php 20 from its members and from households who are considered renters and sharers. Other sources include parking fees from those with motorized vehicles. The pandemic, however, provided more time for ASAMBA officers to manage their community. They were able to conduct an inventory of all the residents in their vicinity and update their records. They found out that there are 338 members (plus the extended families of their children who are considered as sharers) and around 700 renters.

When the government reverted to the general community quarantine (GCQ), ASAMBA decided to provide allowances to volunteer gatekeepers who lost their jobs after the ECQ, but are still willing to guard the gates. The source for these is the homeowner's association funds. There are now a total of seven guards: three guards in the morning shift receive Php 4,000 each, while four guards in the graveyard shift receive Php 2,000 each.

Another innovative approach that ASAMBA spontaneously did to ease the burden of food subsidy for the gatekeepers is to include these guards in the number of guests of every family's simple birthday celebration. Ka Linda said, "*Kung sino ang may birthday, pinapakain rin ang mga frontliners.*" (Whoever celebrates a birthday, the celebrant also feeds the frontliners.)

This way, according to Ka Linda, the strong community spirit becomes alive. "*Hindi nanghibina ang mga opisyal. Nag-iisip ng ano pa ang pangkabuhayan.*" (The officers did not lose their initiative and optimism. They kept thinking how else to economically survive.)

**Figure 7**

ASAMBA officers organizing the food rations during the first wave of their own relief distribution



Photo by ASAMBA

This positive attitude lives on even in responding to residents with COVID-19 who were advised to self-quarantine. Driven by compassion instead of fear, ASAMBA was also the first to provide food rations to these affected people on hard lockdown. The gatekeepers accompanied the barangay health workers in monitoring the health condition of these affected residents.

### **Demands from the government**

ASAMBA is confident that while their organization can successfully undertake alternative social measures among their members to help prevent the spread of a highly infectious disease, they also need to remind the government of its responsibility in providing social services, especially universal health care.

ASAMBA joins the call for free mass testing in Quezon City, citing that other cities have implemented this program. This demand was pushed by the increasing number of COVID-19 cases in the city and the increasing susceptibility of the urban poor sector to this virus with no access to adequate health care. ASAMBA also asked the government to revive the schedule of vaccinations to newborns, which was suspended during the quarantine period.

**Figure 8**

Vegetable garden in an ASAMBA member's home



Photo by ASAMBA

### Reclaiming their space

For Eddie, Mina, and Ka Linda, if there is any redeeming factor in the quarantine period, it is the opportunity to become closer to one another. Now, they have tested their collective capacities to perform to the best of their governance skills. And it pushed them further to self-discovery, of what higher levels they can reach and achieve as a peoples' organization.

In the case of ASAMBA, the pandemic, although resulting in a harsh atmosphere and stressful circumstances, has surfaced the underestimated capacities of grassroots communities who will endeavor selflessly in addressing human needs because of their now-ingrained outlook based on solidarity, cooperation, and sharing of resources.

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# Social Enterprise in the Time of Pandemic

## The Case of Igting

Maigting na Samahan ng mga Panlipunang Negosyante ng Towerville, Inc.<sup>1</sup> and Honey B. Tabiola

Social enterprises are seen as the lifeline of many low-income communities, aside from being a significant facet of informal employment in the Philippines. It is usually the only source of income for members, often struggling with employment without social protection and with seasonal work through contracts and subcontracting arrangements. This makes them even more vulnerable in the time of a pandemic. In 2012, informal employment in the Philippines remained high, with most of the jobs in the country found in the informal economy (Serrano et al. 2016). At the lowest end of the value chain in the informal economy are subcontracted and home-based workers, predominantly women who also tend to have the lowest earnings (Chen 2017). Despite challenges, social enterprises and their members continue to make steady progress within their communities using the tools of community organizing and social entrepreneurship. This section documents the case of Igting as a social enterprise, in particular its members' experiences, struggles, and strategies of collective action to address the challenges in the time of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **About Igting**

Maigting na Samahan ng mga Panlipunang Negosyante ng Towerville Inc. or Igting is a social enterprise which sells quality garment products and provides custom sewing services (Igting 2017). In 2014, Igting began as a livelihood project of CAMP Asia, Inc., a non-government organization and subsidiary of CAMP International. As a platform for income generation and community empowerment, Igting aims to

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1 Contributors from Igting are Wennie Santos, Lea Viray, and Bea Rodriguez. All names provided are pseudonyms.

provide work opportunities to residents of a resettlement area in Towerville, City of San Jose del Monte, Bulacan Province, Philippines. Many of the residents were informal settlers who were compelled to relocate due to urban development projects of the government or whose dwellings were devastated by typhoons and floods. Ninety-eight percent of the members are women. Igting specializes in sewing custom-made uniforms, men and women's apparel, bags, and pouches.

For every product, half of the value price goes to labor (the so-called “piece raters” or members who earn from every piece of product they produce in a day), while the other half goes to the trust fund of Igting (used for electricity and water bills, maintenance of equipment, the wage of “daily raters,” and savings).<sup>2</sup> Members also pay their Social Security System (SSS) and Home Development Mutual Fund (HDMF)/Pag-IBIG monthly contributions with Igting counterpart funds. As of July 2020, there are 33 members who are piece raters (including three who are home-based) and ten members who are daily raters. Igting suspended work from March 15 to April 15, 2020. At the time of this pandemic, resumption of their work solely depends on the availability of job orders from their clients.

Igting sewing center is located at Lot A-2 Upper Quarry, Brgy. Minuyan Proper, City of San Jose del Monte, Bulacan. As of August 9, 2020, there are 493 confirmed COVID-19 cases in the city, with 228 active cases, 245 recoveries, and 20 deaths (SJDM PIO 2020).

For this report, three key informants were engaged in a series of interviews. Wennie Santos (47 years old) and Bea Rodriguez (61 years old) are pioneering members of Igting who hold managerial positions in the social enterprise. Lea Viray (54 years old) is an officer of the organization.

## Impact of the COVID-19 pandemic

### On lockdowns

“If you do not let me out, would you be able to feed my family—  
all twelve mouths?”<sup>3</sup>

In the case of Barangay Minuyan Proper, residents were only allowed to go out of the confines of the community during Wednesdays and Saturdays. This rule

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2 “Daily raters” are members of Igting with managerial roles with fixed daily wage depending on their function in the social enterprise (e.g., marketing head, production head, supervisor, line leader, cutter, purchaser, finance officer, etc.). Daily wage ranges from Php 250 to 350.

3 In this chapter, all quotes were translated to English from the original Filipino.

appears to be designed for middle-class families who usually have enough money to buy their basic necessities in bulk and can therefore consistently schedule their trips to establishments outside their houses around this restriction. The key informants not only revealed that this rule is too constraining considering their socio-economic conditions, but also observed that the implementers of the rule subjected them to processes of interrogation which are unnecessary and cumbersome.

A widow, Bea belongs to a household of twelve people, comprised of her children and their spouses and five grandchildren. According to her, she prefers that they all stick together, all crammed in one small house, so she can closely watch over her family. Every meal, the household consumes three kilograms of rice. With the sudden stoppage of her work at Igting for one month, she had to figure out how to make both ends meet to support her family. The household had to pool their resources such as the SSS pension of her deceased husband and the salary of her son who is working in Quezon City.

**Figure 3.1**

Members of Igting volunteered to repack the relief goods from CAMP Asia to be donated to the local government



Photo by Igting

Given the amount of food requirements and other basic necessities of the household vis-à-vis its meager resources, Bea finds it difficult to buy in bulk all the household's necessary supplies within the schedule set by the barangay.

On one occasion on a Thursday, the family ran out of money and food supply. On her way to the pawnshop to claim the money transfer from her cousin in the province, Bea found herself imploring the barangay personnel to let her out of the community. She told the barangay personnel that the money transfer was tendered to her name and that she badly needed the money to buy food. Still, the barangay personnel refused to allow her to leave. As an act of desperation, she showed the personnel her drug prescription for hypertension and pretended that she also needed to buy her maintenance drugs. She was finally allowed to leave.

On another occasion, on her way to claim the pension of her husband, Bea was apprehended by the barangay personnel for leaving her house out of schedule. She reasoned: "My family needs to eat. Tell me. Is the food pack of the government enough, especially for us who have nothing, who lost our job? If you do not let me out, would you be able to feed my family—all twelve mouths?" In her effort to convince the personnel, she even struck a deal with them. She said she would only go to the establishment located just in front of the checkpoint, just to get the pension. She showed the contents of her bag and promised to show them again later just to prove that she only claimed the money. After intense negotiation, she was finally allowed to go.

This grueling interrogation was also experienced by Wennie's son. She sent her son to buy medicine for her ailing father, but he was stopped by the barangay *tanods* (civilian guards). Her son was asked a series of questions, leading to unnecessary delay. Wennie expressed, "We understand that these measures have to be taken because of the pandemic, but the government needs to orient its personnel properly so they can perform their tasks well." During the community quarantine period, Wennie's father got seriously ill and died, an incident which she described as "too painful to fully recount" and the "worst thing that ever happened to me and to my family."

### On social amelioration measures

"Even dogs choose what they eat. I hope people in government  
act as if they were in our situation."

For mothers who largely depend on their earnings from Igting for their daily necessities, the COVID-19 pandemic caused them enormous economic distress. As such, they had been looking forward to receiving the food packs and cash aid under the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) of the government. But because of

long delays of government relief efforts, they had to rely on other social support systems such as the relief program of their spouses' or children's employers and money transfers from relatives to put food on the table. Lea stated:

During the community quarantine, we were struggling. My husband's work stopped. As a regular employee at a construction company in Taguig City, he was given Php 1,400 per week by his employer for the last two weeks of March. In April, in lieu of his salary, he was given half of his 13th month pay for 2020. In May, he was given his one-month salary despite not reporting for work. In June, he was not given anything, so he looked for sideline jobs in the community. At one point, his relatives from the province also sent money. Thankfully, in the second week of July, he was back at work.

Similarly, because of Bea's frustration in the delays of the distribution of government food packs, she also had to rely on other means to support her extended family's basic needs being the head of the family. She stated:

We are twelve in the family. Three kilos of rice, that is just for one meal (laughs). It is really difficult. At one point, my siblings in the province sent money because they know I am already a widow... The local government gave us ten kilos of rice, but for my family, that is not enough. I need to look for other ways. Thankfully, my deceased husband who used to work as a security guard has SSS pension which helps to sustain us... My son also received assistance from his employer—Php 1,000 per week. It lasted for one month and a half. That helped, too.

According to Memorandum No. 4, s. 2020 of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), “[t]he Barangay shall identify and prepare the list of qualified beneficiaries” (p. 14) who are low-income households or workers in the informal economy. It further states that the identification process is to be conducted by an “identified personnel of the barangay” through a house-to-house distribution of Social Amelioration Card (SAC) forms to be accomplished by the head of the family. The generated data will be reviewed at the city/municipality level and the DSWD Central Office and will be the basis of the final list of target beneficiaries.

Three weeks after the declaration of the community quarantine, the first of the three rounds of food packs from the local government arrived. It contained five kilos of rice, eight cans of sardines, and four packs of instant noodles. Meanwhile, the first

of the two payouts of the cash aid (amounting to Php 6,500) was made on the third week of May.

The key informants all agreed that the barangay could still improve their procedure for the implementation of social amelioration measures. In terms of processing the cash aid, the residents were asked to line up in long queues, drenched under the heat of the sun, just to submit their accomplished forms at the barangay hall. For the distribution of family food packs, the barangay picked “block leaders” who were tasked to come up with a list of names of beneficiaries. According to Bea, the identification process for food packs seemed arbitrary and subjective, instead of carefully considering the eligibility requirements of the potential beneficiaries. She said:

If you have a *sari-sari* store (neighborhood sundry store), or your house looks somehow presentable, you will not be included in the list... It also seems that the block leaders can personally choose who they want to include in their list.

Wennie had the same observation about the identification process. For her, one problem was with the people delegated by the barangay who were not properly following the procedure. She explained:

Block leaders tend to prioritize those who are close to them. For people like me who are not always outside the streets and who prefer to stay at home, we are often surprised to learn that there is already a list, and we are not included in it. It is really not fair... We suddenly learned that the “first” round of distribution of food packs already took place. Some people were knocked at their doors and received food packs at dawn. This caused clamor in the community for a proper system. In the second and third time of distribution, block leaders started to make rounds in houses to make their list and distribute stubs for claiming the food packs. But then again, we also learned that there was another round of distribution in other blocks and in other phases. Some blocks, including ours, were not included... If I would be given a voice, I would really say that the assigned personnel should follow the procedure. For me, all households must receive family food packs because all people in our block lost their livelihoods; all people in our block eat... Our barangay captain must take the helm on matters like this.

This lack of prudence often led to errors. For instance, Wennie knew someone who was a beneficiary of cash aid but was obviously well-off due to her husband’s

overseas work as a seaman. Lea seconded this idea by saying that the list is open to *dagdag-barwas* (adding and subtracting) which led to chaos such as the case of her block:

In our block, many got angry because many names suddenly disappeared from the list. When the truck distributing family food packs arrived, our block was skipped. We were told that they ran out of stock, but we saw that the truck still carried some food packs. We were also told that we were “*pasaway*” (hardheaded). We yapped until a councilor returned to our block two days after to resume distribution.

Finally, in terms of the contents of the food packs, Bea opined that it should also be equitable and compassionate. She wondered why in other communities and provinces, as seen on television, households receive one or one-half sack of rice and one whole chicken as relief goods. In comparison, their community only received a few kilos of rice and canned goods. Some received dried fish, some did not. She is worried that people might get urinary tract infection (UTI) from eating canned goods. She insists, “even dogs choose what they eat. I hope people in government act as if they were in our situation.”

### On work suspension and loss of daily earning

“In one snap, life changed, as if in a dream.”

The lifeblood of social enterprises is the regularity of job orders from their clients. For Igting, a huge volume of their monthly income comes from subcontracting. While precarious work due to fluctuations in work orders from their clients is a perennial challenge, this problem has been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. When the community quarantine was implemented, the impact of the pandemic was not immediately felt because the members were still finishing orders from their clients. When the orders were accomplished, their production ceased, leaving the members uncertain and anxious about their daily subsistence.

Wennie describes the situation of Igting prior to the pandemic this way: “Before the COVID-19 pandemic, our production had been regular. And our clients did not have problems. Orders just kept on coming.” Igting used to maintain two lines of account. For the first account, they produce shoe bags and pouches. The weekly target for the shoe bags is at 1,600 pieces while the weekly target for the pouches is at 2,000 pieces. The second line of account is composed of eco-bags, which they produce at 1,000 pieces per day, and giveaway bags for a pharmaceutical company, which they

produce at 500 pieces per day. The volume that they can produce depends on the complexity of the design of the product.

With the pandemic, Igting found it difficult to reach targets because their regular and biggest clients ceased operations. According to Wennie:

Our biggest client temporarily closed. We are really struggling now. This client usually gets huge contracts and farms out to Igting the sewing of giveaway bags for [name of pharmaceutical company withheld]. For now, this client ceased operations. Meanwhile with our second regular client, there are potential job orders, but they could not reach us because there are no personnel to take out the materials from their stockroom. The owners of the firm do not yet allow their personnel to resume their duty and come to Bulacan... In one snap, life changed, as if in a dream.

The suspension of work at Igting was hard for all the key informants because their daily earnings were a major, if not the only, source of income for their households. For Bea, her income generated with Igting was her bread and butter, sustaining her household of twelve. For Lea, her income at Igting was also a huge help to her husband. Wennie articulated the importance of her work at Igting and her worries with the loss of her only income:

Losing income for a month was difficult for me as a mother who still has two children to support. My youngest is still a student and the other also lost his job as a teacher. My husband is already a senior citizen and is jobless... I depend on it [Igting] 110% for our daily needs. When I lost that income, I was too dismayed. I said, "How will this be? I cannot just keep on asking for help from my other children who also have their own families to feed."

### **Strategies of Igting to cope with the crisis**

"I observed that our members became very determined and hardworking"

After a month of halting operations, CAMP Asia saw the formidable challenges that Igting faced. By way of resuming operations, CAMP Asia approached Igting to produce 100,000 face masks to be given as donations to various non-government organizations (NGOs). This show of support by CAMP Asia was deeply appreciated

by Igting members. Wennie shared the moment when she was told of the prospect of Igting resuming operations:

Hearing CAMP Asia tell us that it would help us restart operations gave me life... The officers of Igting and the production head met with CAMP Asia to plan the resumption of production under the conditions of the pandemic. We discussed the necessary adjustments and preparation and how much Igting would make for this order ... We really made sure that our sewing center is ready for the new conditions of our work life at Igting.

After the said meeting, Igting members came up with a list of occupational safety and health measures which were strictly enforced and carefully followed by the members:

- (1) A thermal scanner at the entrance of the Igting Sewing Center will be used to measure the body temperature of each member. Members whose temperature is 37°C and above will not be permitted to enter the premises and will be sent home to rest.
- (2) Each member should always keep handy rubbing alcohol within the premises of the center. Igting also has alcohol stations inside its sewing center.
- (3) To maintain physical distancing, sewing machines are kept apart by one meter.
- (4) Members who have their own sewing machine at home shall work from home.
- (5) Clustering/gathering in very close proximity is prohibited at the sewing center (e.g., eating, chatting, etc.).
- (6) Cleanliness will be maintained at all times. Daily mopping of the floor with disinfectant will be observed. A wet rag soaked in a solution of disinfectant will be placed at the entrance of the sewing center.
- (7) Frequent hand washing will be observed.
- (8) Work hours will be from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. in consideration of the curfew hours of the barangay.
- (9) Along with the marketing officer, the officers will collectively deliberate on any decision to accept new job orders. Things to be discussed are the details/design of the product and pricing, among others.

For the job order of 100,000 face masks, each piece was priced at Php 7. Since CAMP Asia offered to shoulder the salary of daily raters, half of the price goes

**Figure 3.2**

Sewers are physically distanced from one another by one meter; each sewer wears a face mask and has alcohol on hand in case they need it.



Photo by Igting

to labor (piece rater) and the other half will serve as savings for Igting. With the challenges brought about by the pandemic, upon the resumption of operation, the officers of Igting noticed a change in the work disposition of their members. Wennie enthused:

This time, we do not have difficulty meeting our targets. Our members have become even more productive. In the past, a few of our members were often absent. With the pandemic, I observed that our members became very determined and hardworking. They tell me that they need to produce as many as they can, so they can earn more. Some appear at the sewing center as early 6:30 a.m. (laughs). I understand them because, first, the

price [of the face mask] is okay, and second, their husbands are jobless.

Every day, members of Igting produce at least 6,000 face masks. A piece rater may earn from Php 300 to 900 per day, depending on how fast he/she works. In the following weeks, CAMP Asia had two subsequent orders of about 60,000 and 45,000 face masks, respectively. Igting is also currently planning and learning to sew personal protective equipment (PPEs) as another product to offer their clients. However, the officers of Igting started to worry again as they are about to finish producing the face masks and no new job order is in sight.

Finally, the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) promised to give subsidy to Igting, to which members are grateful for. The DTI promised to give materials that can be made into disposable face masks. Wennie shared:

The DTI said they will leave it up to us to look for our potential clients whatever we can produce out of the materials they will

**Figure 3.3**

After a month of work stoppage, Igting members are back at the sewing center with more determination and courage than ever.



Photo by Igting

provide. Helping our marketing to look for clients will be another challenge for Igting. We cannot just make face masks or any product in advance because they might not be sold and just end up at the stockroom. We would be operating at a loss if we cannot sell them and we already paid the piece rater their wage.

For Bea, it is not enough for the DTI to send materials to Igting as a form of subsidy. She said:

The only way for Igting members to earn is for orders to keep coming in. I hope the DTI can link us to possible clients or buyers. I heard that [President Rodrigo] Duterte will be giving free face masks to Filipinos. I hope the government gets Igting to work on that.

Wennie seconded, “Yes, oh Lord. How I wish! (laughs).”

### **Preliminary recommendations**

Based on the shared experiences and insights of the key informants, the following recommendations may be considered:

- (1) Local government units and their personnel should follow and implement proper procedures on community quarantines and social amelioration measures in a way that is sensitive to the socio-economic conditions of vulnerable groups and communities.
- (2) Complementary to government relief efforts, private firms and employers should be encouraged to continue to provide their own relief program for their employees.
- (3) Family food packs must not be comprised of junk food, but should contain nutritious food.
- (4) For the DTI, while subsidies to social enterprises (e.g., providing materials for the production of goods) are helpful, it is also necessary to directly link social enterprises to potential clients and buyers.
- (5) For state agencies and private firms, one way to help social enterprises to survive is to buy their locally made products instead of relying on imports from other countries.

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# Indigenous Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic

## The Ayta Mag-Indi Community in Porac, Pampanga

Venarica B. Papa, Benny Capuno, Marivic Capuno, Indon Saguin, Indon Mayumo, Violeta Abuque, Norman Capuno, Lemuel Capuno, Belinda Mauricio, Jette Roldan, and July Sumayop

This is not the first time that the indigenous community of the Ayta Mag-indi in Porac, Pampanga had to face a difficult situation brought about by a natural calamity, a disaster, a failure of mainstream governance, or a combination of these. This case study is a product of a continuous engagement with the leaders, elders, and community members of the Ayta Mag-indi and attempts a proximate and substantial representation of their thoughts, sentiments, ideas, and perspectives in general on the current pandemic. It covers the experiences and accounts of the Ayta Mag-indi from two barangays in Porac, Pampanga, a province in the Central Luzon region. This report recounts the experiences of indigenous peoples of Barangays Camias and Planas, highlighting how existing pandemic-related policies further exacerbate the already marginalized status of indigenous peoples in Philippine society.

Barangay Camias is located in the ancestral domain of the Ayta indigenous people (IP) and is mainly governed by Ayta leaders through the most basic local government unit—the *barangay*. It is comprised of around 700 Ayta families. Barangay Planas, on the other hand, is where the post-Mount Pinatubo eruption relocation site is located, where about 400 Ayta families reside. The area they occupied was called the Katutubo Village, to delineate them from the non-Ayta residents (mostly Kapampangans or natives of Pampanga) of the barangay.

Communications were set up and donations were sent through the efforts of graduate students of the Master of Community Development (MCD) Program of the University of the Philippines College of Social Work and Community Development

(UP CSWCD) to both Barangay Camias (ancestral domain) and Barangay Planas (Katutubo Village/the resettlement area). Throughout the response, there were reports of discrimination against the IP communities. The Kapampangans alleged that the virus actually came from the Ayta because they eat bats (*paniki*), hence they are avoided when in the town proper/lowlands.

### **The declaration of community quarantine**

Marivic Capuno, tribal chieftain of the Katutubo Village in Barangay Planas, shared his family's experience when the community quarantine was first declared:

*May ilan sa amin na sa bundok inabot ng deklarasyon. Hindi namin malaman ang gagawin. Kasama pa naming mag-asawa 'yung dalawang batang anak namin. Para lang makauwi, inilagay namin sila sa sako, saka isinakay sa kulong-kulong. 'Pag nasita kami sa checkpoint, sasabihin na lang namin, baboy-ramo, hindi pwedeng buksan ang sako dahil matapang at nangangagat. Isang oras din kaming bumyahe nang may kaba na masita at may awa sa mga anak namin.*

**Figure 1**

Makeshift "checkpoint" signage at the boundary of Barangay Planas and Camias



Photo by Violeta Abuque

**Figure 2**

Ayta Mag-indi leaders and volunteers at the checkpoint



Photo by Violeta Abuque

(A few of us were in the mountains when the community quarantine was declared. We were caught flat-footed. We didn't know what to do. My husband and I even had our two younger children with us. We had to place them inside rice sacks and stacked them in the *kulong-kulong* [a makeshift three-wheeled vehicle], just so we can go back home and evade questions and scrutiny at the checkpoints. If we were asked, we would have told them, inside the sacks are wild boars, and it would be dangerous to open as the animals are ferocious. We travelled for an hour with fear of being stopped on the road and at the same time, felt pity for our children for what they had to endure.)

The community first learned of the declaration of the Luzon-wide community quarantine from mainstream news and social media outlets. They tried to build their understanding of the pandemic from the fragments of information they got from these sources. Nonetheless, the community leaders, upon hearing the news of the pandemic

and the declaration of the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ), took the initiative to put up checkpoints in both their communities to screen and monitor the entry of non-residents. They also discouraged the Aytas from leaving their communities unless extremely necessary. Health workers, both Ayta and *unats* (lowlanders), however, were allowed to go in and out of the communities and were depended on to be the first responders should there be cases of illness, such as COVID-19 or others. Just like in any other underprivileged and marginalized community, the declaration of the quarantine had adverse and tragic effects on their daily lives, much more than from the pandemic itself.

### Understanding the COVID-19 pandemic

Indon Saguin, an Ayta Mag-indi elder, shared his understanding of COVID-19:

*Ang intindi ko, 'yang COVID-19 virus, sakit 'yan na may kinalaman sa panghihina ng baga. 'Yang mga ganyang sakit, ang tawag namin ay "bungabong." Katulad 'yan ng tuberculosis, pneumonia, bronchitis. Ang tawag sa amin d'yan, "ipay"—sakit na mahirap gamutin. Pero ang sabi ng mga lola at lolo ko sa akin, ang lupaing ninuno, hindi kinakapos sa halamang gamot. Kaya hindi kami natatakot sa sakit na 'yan.*

(As I understand, COVID-19 is a virus that causes illness that has something to do with the weakening of the lungs. We call that “bungabong” in our language. That would be similar to tuberculosis, pneumonia, and bronchitis. These are illnesses that are hard to cure. We call them in general as “ipay.” But according to our ancestors, our ancestral lands will never lack herbal medicines. That is why we are not afraid of this virus.)

Without timely and relevant information on the pandemic, the Aytas were left on their own to understand the pandemic given their past experiences and knowledge that were passed on to them by their ancestors. To augment their indigenous knowledge, they have asked the younger generation adept with the use of modern technology to research on pandemics. According to Benny Capuno, culture master of the tribe:

*Natuklasan po namin na mayroon nang sampung uri ng pandemya na sumaklob sa mundo mula pa noong panahon ng mga Kastila. Kasama na rito ang Spanish flu. Sabi doon sa binasa [nina Norman (referring to a youth leader)], 'yung Spanish flu ay marami ring pinatay. Nahirapan din silang maghanap ng lunas dito. Pero nakita*

*niyo naman, nandito pa kami. Mayro'n pang Ayta. Kung hindi namin kayang labanan ang ganyang mga uri ng sakit, eh 'di sana naubos na kami. Lalo na nung panahon na 'yun, baka hindi pa nakakakita ng ospital ang mga ninuno namin.*

(We found out that there have been ten occasions of pandemic that became a worldwide problem since the time of the Spaniards. These include the Spanish flu, which according to what we read, was also a major health problem back then. But as you see, we are still here. The Ayta community continues to exist. If we were not able to resist such disease, then we would have vanished by now. Especially in those times, our ancestors have not probably seen a hospital in their entire lives.)

**Figure 3**

Showing their ingenuity in the midst of the pandemic, the Ayta Mag-indi community in Porac, Pamanga made face masks out of banana blossoms, which are fitted to cover the face and made of water-resistant material, to augment the lack of face masks



Photo by Marivic Capuno

By utilizing their indigenous knowledge coupled with efforts to gather further information from more mainstream sources, they try to find ways to prepare themselves against the ill effects of the pandemic to their community.

### **Health and medical support from the government**

The only support group the Ayta Mag-indi peoples can count on in their community are the Ayta Barangay Health Workers, who, however, are themselves not fully informed about the pandemic. “*Kaya naman nilang kumuba ng BP (blood pressure), saka temperature; saka papayuhan kang magpahinga at ‘wag magpakapagod sa trabaho ‘pag may sakit ka* (They can take your blood pressure and temperature; and they will advise you to rest and not work when sick),” said Benny. However, their ability to physically visit the community has been limited since the quarantine measures were imposed.

Prior to the pandemic, the higher-ranking health official in the community’s health center, a midwife, used to pay regular visits. But this has stopped upon the declaration of the lockdown. Visits to the community were only resumed after the province had been placed on general community quarantine (GCQ). When asked what service the midwife gave during her visits, the Aytas said that she simply distributed milk to identified malnourished children and gave Vitamin A supplements to both children and adults.

They have become aware of the health protocols being implemented related to the effort to stop the spread of the disease. And as much as they want to comply with these protocols when they are outside of their homes, they do not always have the resources or means to do so. In the context of a community quarantine where their mobility has been restricted and many establishments have been temporarily closed, sourcing protective equipment, such as face masks, has been a challenge. In response, leaders from both barangays innovated to produce their own face masks. Likewise, they have also begun to gather leaves from medicinal plants which, based on their indigenous knowledge and experiences, can serve as disinfectants. They admitted, however, that wearing face masks is not yet a popular practice among the community members, especially when they are inside their homes or in their ancestral domain, where they felt safe from the virus.

Further, based on their understanding of COVID-19, they have started to stock other medicinal plants that can help strengthen their natural immunity from diseases. They use these plants in several ways: ground and mixed with tap water as disinfectant; boiled and drunk as their indigenous tea; mixed with their daily staples; burned with firewood for the smoke to keep away the virus from coming into their homes; or even worn as a necklace (not as an amulet, though they agreed that it may seem so) to have them ready and within their reach whenever needed. They have also stored native fruits, which they know are rich with immunity-building nutrients, such as vitamin C

and other minerals. Many of these fruits are not sold commercially in local markets as these only grow in their ancestral lands.

### **Non-health support from the government**

According to the Ayta resource persons, the very first effort to mobilize resources to provide them non-medical/health assistance came from the graduate students of UP CSWCD's MCD Program, who are their longtime partners in community development projects and initiatives.

Despite pronouncements from the national government of sufficient and guaranteed *ayuda* (assistance) for communities under quarantine, it has proven to be elusive. Furthermore, there were firsthand experiences by some of the co-authors of this report encountering local officials withholding aid (such as rice). Apart from this issue, the delivery of aid was, in general, slow. In Barangay Camias, the assistance from the municipal government only came in mid-April 2020. But as the Aytas cynically expected, it came in the form of repacked rice and was distributed to the community members at a mere three kilograms for each household. No further information came as to when or whether more assistance would be sent. There were other forms of assistance that came from the government, albeit late.

### **Social Amelioration Program**

The Department of Social Work and Development (DSWD) gave out forms for the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) for vulnerable families. In Katutubo Village, only 27 forms (out of 448 households) were allocated for the IP community. The tribal chieftain tried to negotiate with the barangay captain to at least provide for half of the IP families in the barangay, but to no avail. This meant that over 90 percent of IP families in Katutubo Village were left out of the longed-for promise of assistance by the national government.

### **Program on communal farming**

In Barangay Camias, families were invited to join the Department of Agriculture (DA)'s program on communal farming. This initiative was welcomed as this was perceived as beneficial to the community. They were surprised, however, to be told that only 40 (out of 700) families qualified for the program. Thus, more than 90 percent of the Ayta families living in Camias were left out of the government's assistance program.

### **Additional support from DSWD**

In light of the many families that were left out in the two government programs mentioned above, the Ayta Mag-indi leaders were happy to hear that more assistance would come from DSWD. But this excitement soon died down when they received

**Figure 4**

Marivic Capuno showing the DSWD hygiene kit sent in July



Photo by Jette Roldan

only 70 hygiene kits from the agency. Mindful not to be accused of being ungrateful and hard to please, the leaders expressed appreciation for all assistance that were given. But since the hygiene kits came only four months after the lockdown was announced, their problems now went far beyond mere hygiene concerns. According to Benny Capuno, “*Maituturing mo na ring disaster itong nangyayaring ito. ‘Yung COVID-19 sakit ‘yan, ‘yan ang nagdala ng pandemya. Pero ‘yung ginagawa o kakulangan sa ginagawang tugon, ‘yun ang nagbubunga ng disaster.*” (You can liken this to a disaster. The COVID-19 virus caused the pandemic. But the responses to address the pandemic, or lack thereof, is what brings on the disaster to the people.)

Again, the Ayta refused to be rendered helpless amidst their dissatisfaction and grievance over the inadequate support and assistance provided by government institutions. Rather, they have sought means to collectively address these gaps to uphold and protect the interests and rights of their community. For instance, as had been done in past disasters, the Ayta Mag-indi community, through their leaders, have taken unto themselves the responsibility of appropriating, distributing, and using the funds mobilized by the UP CSWCD MCD students and other donors.

In Barangay Camias, they decided to buy only a minimum number of cavans of rice because they were aware that several cavans will soon be sent by the municipal and provincial governments. They have decided to purchase other basic necessities such as coffee, sugar, salt, and a few canned goods and noodles which they have distributed to the families. They also allocated a certain portion of the funds to be able to conduct a feeding program for the children of Sitio Patal, Liplip, Cuyucot, and Sentro for three days.

The beneficiaries of the 4Ps (conditional cash transfer) Program were also able to avail of their monthly cash benefit from the DSWD. There are 195 4Ps beneficiaries in Barangay Camias. After the benefits have been availed, the community leaders initiated a community effort to help non-4Ps beneficiaries. In the spirit of community solidarity, the 4Ps members contributed Php 100 each (in cash or in kind) and generated about Php 20,000 worth of basic commodities which they distributed to the non-4Ps beneficiaries. According to community leader Violeta Abuque, this may seem a very small contribution, but it definitely shows solidarity and the community's capacity to look after their own welfare.

Lastly, while only 40 families were officially listed to benefit from the communal farming program of DA, the Ayta Mag-indi collectively decided that the produce and harvest from the program will be made available to all IP families in the barangay.

In Katutubo Village, basic commodities, including rice, sardines, and instant noodles, were procured and were equally distributed to the community members. The leaders have also allocated some supplies for a children's feeding activity, which they thought was a way to show and keep solidarity despite prescribed social distancing. They have provided a counterpart to the whole initiative by providing for the transportation (for procurement) and the other ingredients and supplies needed for the feeding activity.

It is also fortunate that the community received assistance from other partner institutions and individuals, which include a program of the Ateneo de Manila University that gave cash donations endorsed to and handled by the tribal council and a town councilor and a private individual who also distributed rice (in small plastic containers, amount undetermined) to the IP community. Early on, the DSWD distributed water containers (of five gallons) to the IP families.

Finally, realizing the negative impact of the non-inclusive process of SAP implementation, the whole community of Katutubo Village decided and agreed among themselves to equally divide among all Ayta families the benefits they received from the program. While this meant each family receiving only a small amount of Php 1,625 (instead of the full Php 6,500), everyone accepted the redistribution of benefits, so each family somehow is able to avail of assistance no matter how small the amount.

### **Further marginalization and widening of societal divide**

The insensitivity to the needs of the Ayta Mag-indi community manifests in the government programs discussed above. This, in many ways, reinforces discrimination experienced by the indigenous community.

Further discrimination also occurred with the spread of misinformation on the pandemic. Early into the pandemic, the non-Aytas of Pampanga were reportedly spreading the rumor that COVID-19 came from the indigenous peoples as they too

eat bats, reported to be the origin of the virus that first spread in China. The Ayta Mag-indi felt the impact of this discrimination whenever they are in the lowland areas as non-Aytas openly avoid having close contact with them. On the other hand, they too also have reservations in making contact with outsiders as they believe they are more prone to the infection, which they do not want to carry back to their community.

They realize, however, that these tendencies towards ethnic and social divides will not be constructive neither to them nor to the *umats*. Hence, in the Barangay Council of Camias, they have adopted an inclusive approach to governance by inviting not only the Ayta leaders but other organizations and institutions they have worked with over the years in the process of policy and decision making. These include the church, non-government organizations, and representatives of local government institutions, such as the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR) and the Department of Education (DepEd).

In the case of Katutubo Village, however, despite the existence of a Tribal Council—an institution recognized by law through the Indigenous People’s Rights Act of 1997 (IPRA)—they cannot enjoy the same approach of governance. Being the minority within the barangay, other interests of the IP population are least prioritized if not altogether ignored or taken for granted, as shown in the cases discussed above.

### **On community quarantine, lockdown, and social distancing**

The Ayta Mag-indi community members expressed discomfort over the idea of a “lockdown,” as the concept is totally strange to them. To illustrate, their homes do not have locks on their doors; some homes do not even have doors. This, they say, is because they live in a community where they trust one another and are ready to come to the aid of another when help is called for.

Hence, instead of adopting the idea of lockdown and social distancing, they uphold the principles of solidarity and looking after one another. They do this by constantly engaging in discussions—sharing new information they have gathered to everyone and collectively assessing the needs of their community towards efforts to address them despite their limited resources.

Part of caring for their own is the initiative of the youth leaders to volunteer duties in the checkpoints. This ensured that the Ayta Mag-indi are treated fairly and with respect. As such, the community did not suffer maltreatment (e.g., unreasonable detention, public shaming and ridicule, etc.) from health protocol enforcers as widely reported in both mainstream and alternative media platforms.

### **Back to the safety of their ancestral domain**

Many Ayta Mag-indi families have decided to retreat to the mountains (“*umatras sa bundok*,” as they would say) believing that it is a safer place for them and because they

would be nearer to their source of staples such as root crops, among others. Where food security is a major concern of the national government in the lowlands, the Aya Mag-indi are confident that they will never go hungry in the land of their ancestors. Apart from food security, they also believe that the mountains are a safer place for anyone, having still the luscious forest growth which serve as barrier to any form of viral or bacterial infection. They believe that the leaves of the trees in these forests absorb the harmful elements even before they get in contact with humans.



# Lumad and Bakwit Schools amid the Pandemic

## Report from Teachers, Students, and Parents

Save Our Schools Network and Jose Monfred Sy

In the Philippines, indigenous peoples (IPs) continue to be sequestered to the fringes of society, receiving a minuscule share of the government's social provisioning despite their crucial role in preserving intact and enriching the environments of their ancestral domains. Historically, due to the shortfall of state services in their communities, IP groups have taken it upon themselves to cultivate alternative practices that cater not only to their needs but also to improving their lifeways, thus paving the way for their own vision of development.

As an example, the Lumads (as they call themselves in southern Philippines), which comprises of thirty-five (35) non-Muslim ethnic groups in Mindanao, have built clinics and schools to serve their communities in lieu of distant government hospitals and schools. Before, only one out of ten Lumad children knew how to read, write, and count. This induced corporations, in collaboration with state agencies, to deceive elders and leaders into signing contracts that vend parcels of the Lumad *yutang kabilin* or ancestral domain. To combat the alarming incidence of illiteracy and its dangerous consequences, religious groups, along with human rights organizations and IP advocates, built community schools where Lumad people of all ages could learn literacy and numeracy (SOS 2019b). Many of the Lumads welcomed these schools and soon helmed their establishment and development.

Contrary to allegations made by certain state agencies that Lumad schools teach its students to go against the government and rebel, academic subjects in these schools, in fact, follow the prescribed basic education curricula mandated by the Department of Education (DepEd). Unlike, however, in the mainstream educational system, all classes taught in these schools seek to respond to the needs of Lumad communities. Academic

subjects are only one component of their curriculum. Alongside are Agriculture and Health, which seek to help Lumad students and graduates contribute to the self-sustenance of indigenous communities. Through this setup, indigenous lifeways, ecological knowledge, and community organizing are syncretized as foundations of knowledge production. Ultimately, the Lumad schools operate on a liberatory model of learning that strengthens and harmonizes their spiritual attachment to land and their shared responsibility of protecting their communities (Sy 2020).

Unfortunately, the operation of these schools has been disrupted by heavy militarization as part of the Philippine government's counter-insurgency program (Belisario 2019). As reported by the Save Our Schools Network, a campaign network for the right to education of indigenous Lumad children, the rising number of attacks, child rights violations, and the use of schools for military purposes have effectively denied and continue to deny education for almost 4,000 Lumad children. These attacks forcibly evacuate Lumad communities from their ancestral domains.

To sustain the schooling of the Lumad youth, communities, parents, teachers, and supporters mounted the Bakwit School, a makeshift and mobile learning environment. Appropriated from the verb "evacuate," to *bakwit* is not simply to cope or to survive; it means "to fight another day" (Canuday 2009). More than 3,000 Lumad students dislocated by militarization study in these refuge classrooms

### Figure 1

Students attend class in a Lumad school. The classroom was built by members of the community mostly using local materials



Photo by Save Our Schools Network

in Metro Manila and other urban centers, which also allows them to expose and protest the situation of alternative tribal schools in Mindanao. Under the Save Our Schools Network, churches, seminaries, universities, and colleges open their doors to the transient bakwit school. From 2017 to 2018, and from April 2019 until today, around 700 Lumad students, teachers, and parents from all over Mindanao have already relocated to Manila, mostly by land, to seek justice for human rights violations against schools, communities, ancestral land, and resources. The evacuation centers in UCCP Haran Center in Davao City and at the Tandag Sports Complex in Surigao del Sur also house bakwit schools to enable the Lumad children to continue their studies.

The bakwit school holds classes with few human and material resources. There are only a handful of Lumad teachers in the school, so volunteers are enjoined to teach subjects the students need to take in order to move up to the succeeding level. To ensure the maximization of resources, students, teachers, and staff are grouped into committees that are assigned to household duties such as cooking, cleaning, and laundry. With the Save Our Schools Network, the bakwit schools across the Philippines also engage with local government units, civil society organizations, schools, and churches to share their stories of struggle and success.

The rest of this report details the experiences of the Lumad schools in Mindanao and the bakwit schools amid the pandemic. The report consolidates data gathered by the Save Our Schools Network through first-person accounts of teachers and administrative personnel of Lumad schools, who are also members of the Network.

### **Continuing the struggle through the Bakwit Schools<sup>1</sup>**

During the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) imposed by the Philippine government, the Lumads have been burdened by haphazard policies that limit their movements, disrupting their daily lives. This has been especially difficult for the Lumads whose communities are being militarized and those who are in evacuation. Securing food and other basic necessities has become a challenge to many tribal communities. The worst part is that the Lumads have been forced to return to their still militarized ancestral lands, lands which they have temporarily fled from due to state violence.

Despite the hostility and violence from armed state elements, the students, teachers, and staff of these alternative tribal schools continue to campaign for the Lumad youth's right to education. Constant dialogue with government units and

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1 This list of activities has been consolidated by the teachers of the bakwit schools, including the author of the report.

organizations and other forms of engagements such as protest actions have been and will be held when possible—following minimum health standards, of course. Lumad schools included in their public political campaigns issues faced by other sectors, such as the recent passage of the controversial Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020, whose vagueness renders the Lumad, being environmental and human rights defenders, as targets of (further) state hostilities.

Evacuees in bakwit schools in Metro Manila, who cannot go home to their ancestral lands in Mindanao because of both militarization and the community quarantines across the country, have been involved in activities in the recent months that contribute to their welfare as indigenous students and to their public campaign in general.

### Remedial classes

Before the pandemic hit the Philippines, preparations were being made for the moving up ceremonies in Lumad schools and the first ever graduation of Grade 12 students in the bakwit schools. These efforts were aborted when President Duterte ordered what became a five-month nationwide lockdown, barring students from finishing the school year and finally going home to the communities they hope to serve once they finish their studies.

Given that the school year has ended and that volunteer teachers cannot enter the school premises of the bakwit schools, remedial classes on literacy and numeracy and intermediate reading comprehension were conducted so that the students could enter the next school year all at the same level. Older students, mostly at the Senior High School level, are also assigned to assist younger learners in peer-to-peer storytelling and book reading activities.

### Donation drives

Faced with the difficulty of securing basic necessities, the Save Our Schools Network has been organizing donation drives to keep bakwit schools afloat. For the first few months of the pandemic, the drives focused on the provision of vegetables, fruits, rice, and other healthy foods for the evacuees. Toiletries, first aid, and medical kits were also solicited both from drives and institutions and public offices willing to donate. Since July, the donation of hobby materials like books and musical instruments were also encouraged.

### Cultivating skills and hobbies

The environment of isolation and the constant disturbing news about their families and communities being harassed have posed big challenges to the mental health and welfare of many of the students. Different activities that cultivate skills and hobbies were conducted not only to “distract” the children from emotionally taxing dangers

**Figure 2**

A student at the Lumad bakwit school in Metro Manila spends time doing beadwork craft amid the quarantine, which may be sold at a future time to gather funds for their education



Photo by Save Our Schools Network

outside the school but also to provide them temporary comfort. These include intramurals-like sports events, beadwork, art-related activities such as drawing and painting, and learning musical instruments.

### Psychosocial support

Some students suffered a more alarming deterioration of their mental and emotional health. Their anxieties are mostly directed at the safety of their families and communities, the possibility of going home, and the upcoming school year. To address this, psychosocial support from allied health and children's welfare organizations were conducted, equipping the children psychosocial knowledge to help themselves and their schoolmates.

### Alliance work

Besides psychosocial support, the organizations within and outside the Save Our Schools Network engaged in varied activities that seek to cull donations. These include free film screenings and arts and craft commissions. Students and youth formations also volunteered for the Network, providing writing and graphic design services for the campaigns of the bakwit schools.

**Figure 3**

Following strict social distancing measures, some students of the bakwit school in Metro Manila stand in solidarity with other sectors in protesting against the Anti-Terrorism Law in the Philippines, whose vague provisions may include environmental defenders such as indigenous peoples



Photo by Save Our Schools Network

### **The upcoming school year**

Criticizing the order of the Department of Education (DepEd) to push through with the upcoming school year, concerned students and teachers across the country raised the lack of COVID-19 testing mechanisms that can ensure the safety of schools, and the sheer inaccessibility of online learning facilities—including something as basic as a good internet connection—for many families in impoverished communities and far-off reaches in the countryside.

Teachers of alternative tribal schools for the Lumad face a different problem. Wi-Fi routers, laptops, and printed modules are the least of their worries as DepEd has ordered the closure of 163 Lumad school campuses in the last four years

(SOS 2019a). Despite having permits to operate legally, these schools face baseless allegations of rebellion, which warrant their closure. In the face of an order to proceed with the academic year, the chances of a Lumad student returning to class get slimmer.

Despite these challenges, the Lumad schools in Mindanao and bakwit schools across the country are exhausting means to reach out and spread awareness regarding the experiences of indigenous communities in Mindanao. This is in the hopes that more people will choose to stand with the Lumads in protecting, even reclaiming, their ancestral lands for the continued survival of their communities and youth.

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# Community Healthcare in the Time of COVID-19

## The Story of the Bantay Kalusugan Pampamayanan (Community Health Watch) of San Jose del Monte City, Bulacan

Nathaniel P. Candelaria and Bantay Kalusugan Pampamayanan

On March 17, 2020, the island of Luzon was placed under an enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) to manage the spread of COVID-19 (Office of the President 2020). Medical advisers of the Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID or simply IATF) initially announced that the ECQ contributed to the slowing of the spread of the virus causing the disease (*ABS-CBN News* 2020). However, they also pointed out that the lockdown was not enough to contain the pandemic. It was suggested that the Philippine government should increase its capacity in terms of mass testing, isolation, and contact tracing to further curb the spread of the disease (Magsambol 2020).

At the same time, the lockdown also negatively affected the Philippine economy, which is now officially under a recession. The Philippines' gross domestic product (GDP) shrunk by 16.5% during the second quarter of 2020 (Venzon 2020). However, the differentiated impact of the ECQ showed that the urban poor sector was badly hit despite the implementation of amelioration programs to assist them during the lockdown (de Vera 2020).

In this report, we look at Bantay Kalusugang Pampamayanan (BKP; Community Health Watch) of San Jose del Monte City, Bulacan, one of the partners of the Program on Alternative Development (AltDev) of the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS), as it dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic. Particularly, this report will stress the impact of the pandemic among the members of the BKP. The discussion will also present the activities that

they implemented, as well as their aspirations in the near future, despite being negatively affected by the pandemic.

### **Brief history of BKP**

The Bantay Kalusugang Pampamayanan traces its roots to the relocation of urban poor communities from Metro Manila to a relocation site in the City of San Jose del Monte, Bulacan Province in 2012 (Atacador 2018). Marivic Atacador<sup>1</sup> mentioned that CAMP Asia, Inc.<sup>2</sup> later arrived in their area for their community work. Through a partnership with CAMP Asia, the community was able to establish a health clinic in Barangay Gaya-gaya in 2013. Aside from the clinic, an emergency transport system (ETS) was also set up as a component of the health project spearheaded by CAMP Asia. The health programs, however, were closed due to the lack of funding in 2015 (ibid.). Attempts to revive the clinic as a social enterprise, however, failed. Eventually, the health program in Gaya-gaya was rescued by CAMP Asia, but the clinic remained closed.

In 2016, the health program in Minuyan was launched, and the clinic was reopened. The clinic continued its operations with funding support from the Minuyan health project (ibid.). Eventually, the Gaya-gaya health project entered into a partnership with the Bulacan State University (BulSU) for capacity building of health educators. Aside from the capacity building program, Al Obre<sup>3</sup> (2018) shared that it was followed by the organizing of a training program for teachers which was coordinated with BulSU and the Seoul National University (SNU).

In 2017, aside from catering to the health needs of the community through the clinic, organization of health volunteers also contributed in terms of awareness building. The funding for the health program is due to end by 2018 (Atacador 2018). Knowing this reality, “BKP tried to become eventually independent and maintain a “sustainable healthcare program through their own organizing efforts” (BKP 2020, 75). On June 30, 2018, BKP was formally launched as a community health organization (Atacador 2018). Starting with 88 members, the BKP now has more than a thousand members within the community (BKP 2020). The structure of the BKP had the following committees: health, monitoring, health education, rescuers, and an ad hoc committee acting as the secretariat.

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1 Ms. Atacador is a resident of Towerville in the City of San Jose del Monte, Bulacan and the president of the BKP.

2 According to its official website, “CAMP Asia is an international development NGO that builds sustainable and viable community through our projects (social enterprise, education, health care, agriculture, energy & eco-friendly) in Towerville, San Jose del Monte City, Bulacan, and agricultural area of ethnic group, San Jose municipality, Tarlac” (CAMP Asia, Inc. n.d.).

3 Mr. Al Obre works at CAMP Asia as a program manager.

### **BKP and their COVID-19 situation**

COVID-19 has brought disruptions to everyone. However, the impact of the pandemic is different across social classes. The Philippine government, through its National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA), has acknowledged such a situation. The BKP is not exempted from this reality. In earlier conversations with BKP members, they mentioned that their lives have become more difficult during the imposition of the ECQ (Tadem et al. 2020).

#### **Imposition of the ECQ and impact on BKP members**

During the ECQ, BKP members found it difficult to earn a living. Most, if not all, were dependent on their daily income to meet their basic necessities. At the same time, they also look for different ways on how to survive during the government-imposed lockdown to stop the spread of COVID-19.

Marivic shared the hardships her family experienced during the ECQ. She narrated that when President Rodrigo Duterte announced that no one should leave the house, this immediately raised concerns as not all in the community were able to stock food due to the lack of income (Atacadador 2020). In addition, the cramped and tight design of their houses was not conducive to stay in for long periods due to the unbearable heat; if they will not go out, they will get sick. In the meantime, in order to get by and address immediate food needs, her neighbors decided to sell commodities from their houses. This, however, was not sustainable as people in their community have no jobs to begin with.

As a beneficiary of the government's conditional cash transfer (CCT) program (or more popularly known as the 4Ps), Marivic was able to use the small amount she receives to buy one sack of rice. However, their primary source of income comes from her husband's itinerant selling of *taho*.<sup>4</sup> During the ECQ, her husband was not able to engage in this activity, and this became a cause of worry for the family. With the shift to modified enhanced community quarantine (MECQ), her husband was able to sell *taho*, but remains worried for his own safety. Other BKP members are also able to return to their work, but only for a number of limited workdays.

During the ECQ, Sherlito Conde<sup>5</sup> served as a barangay volunteer (Conde 2020). His task was to monitor the situation on the ground by checking and recording the temperature of the people who go in and out of the area. He also takes note of non-residents who enter their area, especially those who are not familiar to him. Despite

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4 Taho is a soy-based delicacy made from soft tofu, with tapioca pearls and syrup as additional ingredients.

5 Mr. Sherlito Conde is also a resident of Towerville, City of San Jose Del Monte, Bulacan and is the secretary of BKP.

-serving as a frontliner, he was not tested for the virus. Meanwhile, he is also an on-call electrician and carpenter. The income, however, is not stable.

Amparo Escovilla (2020)<sup>6</sup> said that the ECQ caused great distress to their family income. As a CAMP volunteer, she received an allowance of Php 2000 (USD 40) per week. On March 31, she received an additional Php 1000 (USD 20) from CAMP Asia. On April 15, however, she received her last pay of Php 1000 from CAMP Asia as the ECQ had been declared. Since April 15, CAMP has ceased its operations, thus she was not able to receive any financial support from the organization. She, however, received five kilograms of rice from CAMP Asia in June. Eventually, she was able to serve once again as a community volunteer, but on a reduced workload and pay. Nevertheless, the situation for Amparo's family during the ECQ was worrisome as her husband was not able to continue his job as a construction worker. She lamented the fact that while there were avenues for support to her husband through government projects, her husband's employer did not comply with the requirements, thus he received no financial support. To survive, she asked help from the program manager of CAMP Asia, as well as from her siblings. She also relied on the little support provided both by the government and partners of the BKP for their sustenance.

### Issues on the implementation of government programs

The Social Amelioration Program (SAP) is one of the programs initiated by the Philippine government to provide financial aid for the poor. However, there were many problems in its implementation, such as the preparation of the final list of beneficiaries, as well as the burden on the part of the local government units (LGUs) to release funds under SAP despite the budget coming from the national government (Aceron 2020). These problems manifested on the ground and were observed by BKP members.

Marivic agreed that there were missteps in the implementation of the SAP (Atacador 2020). For instance, people had to fall in line early in the morning, but some only got their assistance the next day. And despite people tirelessly falling in line, she added that not all were able to receive the cash aid from the government. She lamented the criteria of selection as she believes there were more deserving families who were not given any aid. For the second tranche, the LGU only distributed the forms to fill out.

The same issues were raised by Amparo. She lamented that despite their family's situation, they were not included as recipients (Escovilla 2020). However, her husband was included in the government's second round of aid. Nevertheless, she complained

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6 Ms. Amparo Escovilla is also a resident of Towerville, San Jose del Monte, Bulacan. She currently serves as the vice president of BKP and volunteer community health worker under CAMP Asia.

that her husband was not able to receive other government services he was entitled to such as from the Social Security System (SSS) and from the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), but she clarified that this was the responsibility of her husband's company.

Sherlito deplored his own experience with regard to accessing financial support from the government (Conde 2020). Like what Marivic has mentioned earlier, he also shared that there are those who deserved better government financial support but did not receive any. He also said that both of his relatives are already senior citizens and should have been prioritized by the SAP, but they never received any financial support.

### Issues on relief distribution

Aside from the distribution of cash aid from the government, there were also relief packages provided to residents. However, most of the interviewed BKP members identified that the relief from the government is too few to cover the large number of families.

As BKP President, Marivic said that members run to her to ask for relief from hunger (Atacador 2020). She asked for help from BKP partners to be able to provide temporary relief to members. Relief goods from the city government were not sufficient and arrived very slowly. The provincial government also provided relief, but she noted that these were provided in a selective manner. According to her, the provincial government prioritized giving relief to those who were not beneficiaries of the 4Ps program.<sup>7</sup> Being part of the 4Ps program, she herself was not qualified to receive help from the province.

Sherlito reported that he was able to receive government relief, but they are too few to make an impact (Conde 2020). He was able to receive food packs that contain sardines, instant noodles, and rice. Some food packs he received from the local government also contained coffee sachets. He, however, averred that in general, there are others who are more fortunate in that they were still able to get more government relief.

Amparo said she received relief from a number of efforts by external institutions (Escovilla 2020). The first one was provided from a fund drive organized by the University of the Philippines College of Social Work and Community Development (UP CSWCD) on March 31, 2020. This was followed by the distribution of gift

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<sup>7</sup> Started in 2008, and eventually expanded and formally institutionalized by law in 2019, the Pantawid Pamilya Pilipino Program (4Ps) is a conditional cash transfer (CCT) program implemented by the Philippine government that gives cash grants to the poor, provided that they will comply with the set of conditions mandated in the program (DSWD n.d.).

certificates worth Php 1,000 from a local church. On April 20, 2020, the BulSU College of Nursing provided food packs. This was followed by a distribution of food packs from the Office of the Vice President of the Philippines on June 5, 2020, and from CAMP Asia on June 10, 2020.

While thankful for the support, Amparo nevertheless shared that these were not enough for a family of five to survive for months. Other areas were able to receive weekly donations. She wondered why some donors asked for their names to be listed before the distribution of relief. But after they signed up, it takes at least two to three weeks before relief arrives. Aside from the slow relief process, she also expressed sadness that some of her neighbors were not given relief because they were accused of presenting fake food stubs, even if those stubs came from those who distribute the food packs to begin with.

### **BKP's activities amid COVID-19**

Despite the fears that they experienced since the start of the pandemic, the members of BKP were resolute in continuing their role as health service providers in their community. Moreover, their organization has remained steadfast in providing services to their community members during the pandemic. This portion of the current report highlights the activities that the BKP has conducted for their community during the COVID-19 pandemic.

#### **Health monitoring**

Marivic said that despite the ongoing pandemic, the BKP has nevertheless continued its activities of checking, monitoring, and documenting the health of its community members, particularly their blood pressure, sugar level, and temperature (Atacador 2020). Serious conditions are immediately referred to the nearby health center.

Aside from the usual monitoring, Amparo mentioned that they also give first aid in medical emergencies (Escovilla 2020). There was an instance when a person with disability (PWD) fell and sustained a head injury. Amparo responded to the said emergency. She also keeps tab and reminds BKP members to continue following health protocols such as the wearing of face masks, handwashing, and bringing of alcohol. She also emphasized to them that they should only go out when necessary and when they do so, to observe social distancing protocols. At the same time, she also reminds community leaders to monitor members showing any symptoms associated with COVID-19. If they exhibit such symptoms, the cluster leaders are to inform the health center immediately.

#### **Health education**

In terms of health education, BKP head Marivic said that upon the announcement of the COVID-19 pandemic, they were able to give out information flyers on what

**Figure 1**

BKP members attending to the medical needs of their community



Photo by Amparo Escovilla

to do as a precaution to both members and non-members of BKP in the community (Atacador 2020). But because mass gatherings were not allowed during the ECQ, they utilized Facebook Messenger's group chat function to coordinate and to contact BKP members. They also shared health tips in the platform for their members to read.

Sherlito added that in his area, they were still able to discuss health tips and practices, such as social distancing (Conde 2020). In those sessions, he shared that the BKP was able to discuss common diseases and what can be done to prevent these. At the same time, he also provided health information flyers for people to read. He also shares information through Facebook Messenger and asked other members that this be shared with other people as well. He added that he keeps on stressing the importance of information for people to avoid panicking.

Amparo says that they also utilize Facebook Messenger to share health information with their members (Escovilla 2020). BKP has an active Facebook page where updates are shared on what the organization is doing during the pandemic. However, she also mentioned that she is not that tech-savvy when it comes to using social media, so she seeks help from CAMP Asia staff on how to update the page.

### Relief operations

Aside from their usual health-related activities, BKP was also at the forefront of providing relief operations for their members during the government-imposed lockdown. In response, Marivic wrote letters of request to the partner organizations of BKP, including the Program on Alternative Development (AltDev) of the UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) and the UP CSWCD, coursed through Assistant Professor Karl Hapal. In that letter, she stated that the BKP needed their help, and fortunately, its partner organizations gave their support. Marivic mentioned that through this, the BKP was able to provide relief to their members, even if it only amounted to a kilo of rice in the beginning (Atacador 2020). In total, they were able to provide relief packs to their members at least four times, including disinfectant and face masks commissioned from the Gaya-gaya sewers.

### Livelihood projects

Since the beginning of the lockdown imposed by the Philippine government, the livelihoods of BKP members have been disrupted, and their well-being compromised.

#### Figure 2

BKP members repacking rice for distribution to their community



Photo by Amparo Escovilla

**Figure 3**

Members of BKP preparing to sell their products



Photo by Amparo Escovilla

To address this concern, Marivic reported that they pursued the continuation of the weaving project of the BKP to be able to help with raising incomes for their families (ibid.). Amparo explains that the weaving project is a joint undertaking by the BKP and CAMP Asia (Escovilla 2020). However, CAMP Asia asked them to cease all project-related activities due to the ECQ. Nonetheless, they continued the weaving production since the needs of BKP members have to be attended to. Eventually, the BKP members were able to sell their products in their local marketplace and the workers continued to receive their allowance.

Aside from selling clothes, the BKP also commissioned face masks from the Gaya-gaya sewers. She added that it was the BKP that shouldered the labor costs of this project. The masks produced by Gaya-gaya sewers were the ones distributed by the BKP to their members in one of their relief operations.

### **Aspirations amid the pandemic**

The BKP has sought to mitigate the negative impacts of the pandemic, and they have done so through collective action and through tapping into social networks that they have built prior to the crisis. Despite these achievements, the leadership of the organization admitted that they can only do so much to help their members. However, these limitations did not deter them, and instead, they reflected that there is

a need to strengthen their capability to better respond to crisis situations like the one presented by COVID-19. In the meantime, there is an urgent need to scale up their health monitoring activities. The BKP saw the need to get access to COVID-19 tests in order to guide and inform their health-related advocacies and interventions in the community. However, the cost of these tests remains a significant roadblock for them. The organization has also yet to maximize their social media accounts for information dissemination and to promote their health advocacies remotely.

The story of the BKP members during the pandemic serves as an eye-opener on how devastating the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic really is. While a necessity, the imposition of the ECQ has caused members of the urban poor communities to lose their sources of income and livelihood. Moreover, not all were able to receive help from the government in their most vulnerable situation. Nevertheless, the BKP persevered to continue its task of watching over the health of the community. It was also at the forefront of securing the needs of their community—in terms of health, relief operations, and livelihood. Despite these, they still need help in terms of accessing vital services to allay the fears of everyone in the community.

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# State and Philippine Society in the Time of the Pandemic

## Summaries, Conclusions, and Policy Recommendations

Eduardo C. Tadem

Eight months into the health crisis, the Philippines continues to struggle with the COVID-19 pandemic. As of October 21, 2020, the Department of Health (DOH) reports that the total number of cases has reached a high of 362,243 confirmed cases, the highest in Northeast and Southeast Asia, fourth in the Asian continent, and 18th worldwide. Among twelve Southeast Asian countries, the Philippines ranks second in number of deaths at 6,332 for a mortality rate of 1.85 percent, below the global rate of 2.85 percent but higher than seven other countries in the region. Furthermore, in the two-week period from October 8 to October 21, the country logged an additional 17,667 cases or a daily average of 1,262 reported cases.<sup>1</sup> The toll that these figures have taken on the economy and social fabric of the country has been tragic and fraught with difficulties and ramifications that will most likely linger long after the pandemic has abated.

### **Summaries of case studies of the marginalized**

The five case studies in this report represent the documentation and validation of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the marginalized and disadvantaged sectors of the Philippine population: an urban poor homeowners association, a health watch program of a relocated urban poor community, a women's micro social enterprise, an indigenous people's community, and a school for indigenous children and youth. The social and economic inequalities prevalent in Philippine society and the impact of

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1 All calculations were done from figures culled from the DOH's COVID-19 tracker (<https://doh.gov.ph/covid19tracker>) and from Worldometer (<https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/>).

COVID-19 on the sectors and communities most prejudicially affected by the crisis are best understood by looking at what is occurring on the ground and by generating the vivid stories narrated from the grassroots on how they confront and address the social and economic challenges accompanying the pandemic.

The Alyansa ng mga Samahan sa Sitio Mendez, Baesa Homeowners Association (ASAMBA), on their own, initiated concrete measures to safeguard their members from the pandemic: monitoring mobility, retrofitting their iron gates, establishing checkpoints, and initiating a community-wide information campaign. To address the food needs of members, ASAMBA leaders utilized a portion of their association's savings to provide food assistance to members and also secured assistance from partner organizations among social movements and civil society organizations and the academe.

Utilizing collective leadership, mass mobilization, and self-regulation principles that were honed from their years of intense struggles during the 1990s for the right to land and housing in urban areas, ASAMBA was able to set up a unified front against the COVID-19 pandemic. The measures they employed and their own organizational resilience, however, were insufficient to control the appearance of the virus in their community. Since Quezon City became a COVID-19 hotspot and the barangay where their community is situated did not have the organizational cohesion and social cooperation that ASAMBA enjoyed, the pandemic eventually reached the community once quarantine restrictions were relaxed.

With the prolonged lockdown and the loss of jobs and other income generating activities, ASAMBA eventually faced the same problems as other less organized communities. The response was for families to engage in selling cooked food and other goods from their doorsteps and even online selling. A positive result was that money was being circulated within the community and residents were exchanging tips on acquiring various livelihood skills.

The long-delayed food packs and financial assistance from the government finally came and eased some of the members' difficulties. It was noted, however, that not all residents were included as beneficiaries. ASAMBA is confident that their own social measures would be sufficient to contain the spread of the virus but laments that government has long been remiss in the provision of essential social services like universal health care and mass testing during the COVID-19 pandemic. If anything, the community's efforts to fight the virus has brought the members closer to each other and surfaced the inherent capacities of an organized grassroots to address their own human needs.

Located in a resettlement area on the outskirts of Metro Manila, Maigting na Samahan ng mga Panlipunang Negosyante ng Towerville Inc. or Igting is a women's social enterprise which produces quality garment and apparel products and provides custom sewing services. The Tagalog term *igting* or *maigting* can be translated into

“tightly-knit,” and this trait aptly characterizes the organization’s determination to confront the COVID-19 pandemic in their community.

Igting workers residing in the community have had their daily lives greatly disrupted by the lockdowns and quarantine measures while being subjected to a government social amelioration program (SAP) fraught with various issues. As in other areas, the lockdowns caused work suspensions and loss of earnings due to cancellations of orders from their regular clients, some of whom had to stop operations and shut down their own businesses. Quarantine measures were implemented in such a way that it had unintended consequences, leading some to perceive it as inattentive to humane considerations. This forces residents to employ creative methods to get around such measures. On the other hand, SAP implementation started only after several weeks had passed and when it finally got going, it has been observed to be inefficient, inadequate, stressful, arbitrary, and selective.

The social enterprise character of Igting’s operations has become the members’ momentary saving grace as a job order for 100,000 face masks came courtesy of a major partner, CAMP Asia. They are also thinking of producing personal protective equipment (PPE) should the opportunity arise. The government’s Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) has also chipped in with a promise of a subsidy for securing materials. Their situation, however, remains precarious as no other job orders have come and there is no telling how long the COVID-19 pandemic will last.

The indigenous Ayta Mag-indi community residing in two ancestral domain barangays in Porac, Pampanga had faced and endured natural calamities before, including seasonal typhoons, a major volcanic eruption, and a recent earthquake. They have also been subjected to human-induced calamities, like governance failures from the state and its agencies. Additionally, as a minority and largely neglected indigenous people (IP), they also suffer various forms of ethnic discrimination from non-Ayta majority lowland populations.

The two communities of Barangays Camias and Planas of about 1,100 families reacted quickly upon hearing news of the COVID-19 outbreak and declarations of community quarantine. A communications system was set up and donations were solicited with the assistance of graduate community development students at the University of the Philippines College of Social Work and Community Development (UP CSWCD). They set up checkpoints in their communities and strictly enforced lockdown rules. They also took the initiative of learning all they can about the pandemic and made do with the little knowledge acquired by their own barangay health workers. They also tried to reach out to non-Ayta communities to dispel damaging rumors spread about their alleged virus-causing eating habits. All these were undertaken in a self-reliant manner due to the lack of an information campaign from the local government units.

Government assistance came late—a month after the lockdown announcement—but only in sparse amounts and benefited a tiny percentage of the population, that is, only six percent in one village. The Department of Agriculture (DA) initiated a communal farming program which the Aytas considered ironic since they have been practicing this system all along. Hygiene kits from the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) were distributed but only for 70 residents or six percent of the population. The Ayta Mag-indi, however, refused to be rendered helpless by the dire situation and initiated their own self-help measures and tried to maximize and distribute equally whatever outside assistance they receive while at the same time paying special attention to the more vulnerable members of their communities. This assistance included donated funds as well as food aid. As a fallback, they also relied on their mountainous ancestral domain lands and resources to provide them with food security and physical safety from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Despite generally complying with lockdown and quarantine rules, the Aytas consider these concepts alienating and strange to their culture and traditional practices. Instead, they adhere to and uphold principles of solidarity and caring for one another—constantly engaging in community-wide discussions to assess their needs and address them despite their scant resources.

The next case study in this report concerns the Lumad Bakwit Schools for indigenous children and youth in Mindanao. The term “Lumad” refers to the 35 indigenous non-Islamic tribal peoples living in upland Mindanao areas while “*bakwit*,” is a localized version of “evacuate”—referring to communities or families dislocated by conflict situations. As with other indigenous populations in other parts of the country, the Lumads of Mindanao are often neglected and marginalized and public services such as basic education, health, and other basic services are wanting.

To address the lack of educational and health facilities, the Lumads established community schools and clinics in their ancestral lands using prescribed basic education curricula mandated by the Department of Education (DepEd). In addition, more relevant and practical subjects such as agriculture and health are added—distilled from their indigenous cultures and ecological knowledge systems.

In recent years, however, this ideal setup has been disrupted by military incursions in the Lumads’ areas as part of the government’s counter-insurgency campaigns. The Lumad school network has been targeted by a rising number of military and para-military operations forcing the closure of many of the schools and causing the evacuation of about 4,000 Lumad schoolchildren from their ancestral lands. The Bakwit School was thus created—a makeshift and mobile learning environment, some of which came to be relocated to Metro Manila. At the University of the Philippines campus in Diliman, Quezon City, about 70 Lumad children and youth make up one of the region’s Bakwit schools.

In COVID-19-affected Mindanao, meanwhile, the military operations in Lumad areas have continued unabated and the remaining indigenous schools, their teachers, and students and families continually intimidated and harassed. Between March and July 2020, many reports of such harassments have filtered in and documented during lockdown and enhanced quarantine environments.

Despite the heightened tensions and twin trepidations of the COVID-19 pandemic and military harassments, the Bakwit Schools have managed to continue with their learning programs and assert the Lumads' fundamental right to education. Dialogues with relevant government agencies and other organizations as well as protest actions have been conducted. Donation drives were undertaken to provide for the basic needs of the evacuated school children.

Remedial classes to offset the disrupted school calendar have been taking place. To respond to issues related to the emotional health and wellbeing of the students, skills and hobbies have been cultivated, such as traditional bead work, intramural sports events, learning musical instruments, drawing, and painting. Additional psychosocial and other types of support came from partner organizations and movements.

The immediate uncertainty confronting the Bakwit Schools is the DepEd order to reopen schools using distance learning and online methods—a move that is rife with added problems given the lack of COVID-19 mass testing and the absence of online learning facilities for poor families such as mobile phones, computers, and internet access. The bigger challenge, however, is the DepEd order to shut down 163 Lumad schools in Mindanao on the grounds that these have become breeding grounds for rebel anti-government activities.

The final case in this report tells the experiences of the Bantay Kalusugang Pampamayanan (BKP; Community Health Watch). In Towerville, City of San Jose del Monte, Bulacan, members of the BKP have been trained in community health practices since 2013 and had set up a health clinic and an emergency transport system (ETS) as a component. Since then, BKP has withstood funding problems that caused on-and-off operations and has evolved into an “independent and sustainable health care program” with more than 1,000 members and a secretariat that manages its health, monitoring, health education, and rescue committees.

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the BKP immediately mobilized its members and resources to respond properly—constantly monitoring the health conditions of the community, first aid in medical emergencies, and health education and information (particularly on COVID-19 and its protocols). Mindful of physical distancing regulations, the latter is being conducted through social media like Facebook Messenger and other applications.

Social and economic problems related to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, are a different matter. While some relief has been provided through donations from partner organizations like the Program on Alternative Development (AltDev) of

the University of the Philippines Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) as well as the government's Social Amelioration Program (SAP), these have not been sufficient and consistent enough to make up for the loss of jobs and livelihood and consequent widespread hunger that resulted from the overly long lockdown and quarantine imposed by official authorities. The implementation of SAP, for one, has been found wanting in terms of its extremely limited amounts, non-inclusiveness and selectiveness, slow and stressful processes, at times arbitrary distribution systems, and limited capacities of local government units. BKP also wished that free COVID-19 testing could be undertaken by government to ease apprehensions within the community.

On the other hand, the resumption of a cloth-weaving livelihood project provided some income for participants. These were sold in local markets. BKP also commissioned face masks from a nearby partner organization, the Gaya-gaya women sewers which were distributed to its members.

### **Policy recommendations**

While the experiences of grassroots organizations featured in this report illustrate the various ways by which the pandemic has adversely impacted their lives, as well as how government is challenged on how to alleviate the suffering of its people, the cases also demonstrate their productive capacities and resilience. Yet, it is undeniable that there is room for the improvement of policy and program implementation. Drawing from the five cases as well from groups representing marginalized sectors, we present seven policy recommendations. These recommendations are of an immediate nature—measures that the government can undertake at the shortest possible time provided the appropriate and applicable perspective on the crisis is adopted, the proper political will is asserted, and the sense of urgency is appreciated and internalized.

#### **Adopt a new paradigm at the national level of a “whole-of-society approach”**

The “whole-of-government” approach is inadequate for all aspects of addressing the pandemic crisis. It has also been proven to be less than efficient while breeding an authoritarian mindset and “top-to-bottom” practices among government leaders and functionaries. In some cases, this approach can work if the proper health environment exists, an efficient and timely mass information system is functioning, sufficient preparations have been made, and an early and quick response system is in place before the outbreak. All of these conditions were absent in the Philippine case.

The proposal therefore is for a shift to a “whole-of-society” approach which entails “partnership building between government and all stakeholders of society..., dialogue (and) formulation of a unified or common agenda on how the government and the broad civil society can collaborate and work together..., government engaging the

private sector, civil society, communities, academia, media, voluntary associations, families and individuals to strengthen the resilience of communities and society as a whole, (and) affirmative action (through) partnership building...at all levels of governance—global, national, local/provincial, and community...(that are) multi-sectoral and intersectoral” (Ofreneo 2020).

As vividly narrated by the five case studies in this report, communities at the local level are able to derive the proper understanding of the gravity of the crisis and are capable of carrying out the necessary measures to contain the spread of the virus in their own localities. But since they are hampered by a lack of resources, they need the support of government bodies in order to effectively carry out their own pandemic control systems.

### Develop a master plan for addressing the COVID-19 crisis

It has been observed that the government has, so far, yet to present a concrete master plan to address the continued rise of COVID-19 cases. This was expected to be unveiled during President Rodrigo Duterte’s State of the Nation Address on July 27, 2020. But other than urging Congress to pass a new SAP measure, asking economic players to make adjustments, vowing to set up more online systems to streamline bureaucratic processes, and a few long-term economic initiatives, no master plan was clearly laid out (Ranada 2020).

### Restructure and reorganize the management system of the health crisis

The issue of competence and governance has to be radically rethought. As had been pointed out above, the direction and administration of the government’s COVID-19 response has been largely placed in the hands of the military—mainly retired generals, most of whom occupy senior Cabinet positions. Not a single epidemiologist or public health care expert is in a major decision-making position. It would appear, therefore, that the pandemic is seen mainly as a law and order issue and only secondarily as a health concern. As narrated above, this militarized approach has, in some cases, been accompanied by human rights violations, particularly of poor and disadvantaged communities.

The National Task Force Against COVID-19 must therefore be reconstituted by bringing in public health experts (i.e., doctors, nurses, and midwives), academics from the social sciences, humanities, and basic sciences, civil society organizations, sectoral groups from organized labor, urban poor, informal sector, farmers/fisherfolk, women, students, indigenous communities, and representatives of other marginalized sectors.

### Address concerns about the reliability and availability of data

No less than Vice President Leni Robredo has pointed to the importance of sound and accurate data in making informed decisions in order “to determine who and what

are the places that we need to focus on for mass testing, contact tracing and support for communities and hospitals” (Cepeda 2020). Robredo lamented that existing data is “riddled with errors and inconsistencies” and that the DOH is slow in conducting contact tracing and data validation, thus causing backlogs in test results.

A former adviser to the government’s COVID-19 task force, Dr. Antonio Leachon, disclosed that “one of the biggest problems the Philippines is facing is managing data related to the virus,” citing timeliness issues, backlogs, transparency shortfalls, poor communication, and delays in validation due to lack of encoders and manual forms (Sabillo 2020).

### Spend more on poor and marginalized sectors of society

The government had claimed in early August 2020 that it does not have the funds to expand coverage and continue the implementation of the Social Amelioration Program (SAP), having used up the entire budget of Php 390 billion earlier allocated for that purpose (Geducos 2020). To this end, a second SAP law was passed on September 11 but with reduced allotments of only Php 165 billion, an amount that may still fall short of what is needed to mitigate the effects of the economic downturn on the poor and unemployed. Some legislators acknowledge the inadequacy of existing social amelioration funds and have filed additional bills to address the expected shortfalls.<sup>2</sup> The country’s economic managers, however, worried about the country’s financial and economic fundamentals and determined to keep to the projected 2020 budget deficit of no more than nine percent of gross domestic product (GDP), have opposed any more government spending via SAP for COVID-19 responses and rejected proposed bills in Congress that would do precisely that (Buensuceso 2020).

The government claim that the public coffers have dried up in August is disputed by an independent COVID-19 Citizens Budget Tracker Team (*ibid.*). The group calculates that, as of June 2020, only 63 percent, or Php 246 billion, of the SAP 1 budget had been spent; furthermore, the government’s own available cash sources showed an unspent amount of Php 998 billion as of that same month. The team, therefore, concluded that government has not been spending enough and has the capacity to spend more to ease the COVID-19’s effects on the people. There is a need to allocate more funds for testing and contact tracing which, though improving, are still below targets. Furthermore, senators have also criticized the slow pace of release of SAP 2 funds given that two months before the program expires on December 19,

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2 Pending bills in Congress include a Php 1.3-trillion Accelerated Recovery and Investments Stimulus for the Economy of the Philippines (ARISE) and a Php 1.5-trillion COVID-19 Unemployment Reduction and Economic Stimulus (CURES).

Php 34 billion in COVID-19 aid funds have yet to be released to the agriculture, labor, and tourism sectors (Domingo and Gulla 2020).

Seven senators (including administration allies) and labor groups such as the Bukluran ng Manggagawang Pilipino–Partido Lakas ng Masa (BMP–PLM) coalition are calling for an audit of SAP and other generated funds to determine whether these were properly and honestly spent and were availed of by the sectors and social classes most in need of assistance and not the favored clients of local political elites (Tamayo 2020; BMP-PLM 2020).

### Institute measures to rescue the agricultural sector

The government must institute emergency and medium-term measures to rescue the agricultural sector, primarily to alleviate the plight of small farmers and the rural poor and prevent the deterioration of their economic and livelihood conditions. Specifically, the government may take the following steps:

- (1) Reinstate subsidies for farmers by granting palay support prices, cheap credit, and incentives for organic and environmentally friendly farming;
- (2) A moratorium on 2020–2021 debt service payments for loans of small farmers from rural banks and financial institutions like the Land Bank of the Philippines;
- (3) Write off all pending amortization payments of agrarian reform beneficiaries and immediately grant unencumbered land titles to the same; accelerate the completion of the land transfer program under the agrarian reform law (i.e., CARPER);
- (4) Boost local production in food and other agricultural products for the domestic market in order to limit imports and save foreign exchange;
- (5) Prevent the conversion of agricultural lands for commercial and other non-agricultural use, strictly monitor land grabbing practices, and heavily penalize perpetrators;
- (6) Encourage and support local markets (*tambakan*) for farm products at the barangay level in order to support small traders and sellers/vendors;
- (7) Repeal the Rice Tariffication Law which has caused huge drops in farmgate prices and reduced farm incomes which have been a disaster for rice farmers;
- (8) Improve rural infrastructure and farm-to-market roads; utilize local labor for these construction projects; and
- (9) Involve farmers' groups, other rural organizations, and civil society rural support groups in decision-making of agricultural policies.

### Institute measures to support the workers and small businesses

Like the farmers, workers and small businesses have been severely impacted by the pandemic. The government, as well as employers, must adopt and implement a set of economic and social measures for the working class. Consequently, the government should also rescue micro, small and medium enterprises in order to promote economic recovery. The government may take the following steps:

- (1) Preserve regular jobs by prohibiting all contractualization schemes;
- (2) Prohibit wage cuts and ensure workers' full benefits for retrenchments;
- (3) To mitigate workers' risks, provide for hazard pay equivalent to double (or triple) their regular wages;
- (4) Reduce working hours and number of working days per week and at the same wage levels;
- (5) Continue compliance with labor standards and occupational and safety protocols;
- (6) Provide safe and reliable transportation for workers;
- (7) Distribute free face masks and other PPEs;
- (8) Encourage participation at all decision-making levels at the workplace;
- (9) Provide wage amelioration and cash assistance for self-employed, freelancers, domestic seafarers, and others who lost employment;
- (10) Provide cash assistance for overseas contract workers;
- (11) Guarantee income even when unemployed;
- (12) Provide unemployment insurance;
- (13) Create "green jobs" and accelerate the retooling and retraining of workers;
- (14) Give a one-time grant of up to Php 500,000 and provide soft loans to micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), provided they retain their workforce; and
- (15) Prioritize and support key economic sectors vital to the anti-COVID campaign and focusing on local markets, such as food production, garments, chemicals and pharmaceuticals, and construction in vital infrastructure activities.

### Final notes

There is much more that can be done to address the health crisis other than what is being undertaken now. But it will take a major rethinking of fundamental principles of governance and paradigm resetting for the responses to improve. What is essential is for all sectors of society to work together—government, the academe, health experts, local communities, private sector, civil society organizations, peoples' organizations, sectoral groups, and all other concerned parties—in order to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic. This is known as the "whole-of-society" approach.

On the other hand, the case studies presented in this report, though not enough to make definite conclusions, reveal that some local communities at the ground level, provided they are imbued with the principles of solidarity, social cohesion, organizational fitness, and sharing can undertake the proper measures to address a natural disaster such as a pandemic. But because their own resources are scarce, livelihood opportunities and basic public services are wanting and less than ideal, their capacities to cope with a health disaster of the COVID-19 magnitude are limited and inadequate. This is where the state and its agencies need to boldly step in, appreciate what the grassroots are undertaking on their own, and provide what the communities are in short supply of.

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