

Tess Bacalla

Philippines' COVID-19 Containment Strategy: Weighed but Found Wanting

Like many other countries, the Philippines has suffered enormously from the outbreak of the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV). From travel bans to community quarantine and one of the world's strictest and longest lockdowns, made possible by enhanced emergency measures, the Philippine government has enforced a series of dedicated measures targeted to contain the COVID-19 pandemic. The consequent and untold impacts of both the health crisis and specific policy measures are in part indicated by intensifying economic hardships that may be the undoing of a country that had been poised to overtake some of the biggest economies in Asia before the pandemic.

Keywords:

COVID-19 – lockdown – quarantine – emergency – human rights – militarized approach

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Introduction

The novel coronavirus outbreak that began in Wuhan, China and soon spread across the globe in late 2020 has been invariably described as a crisis of unprecedented proportions. Initially called novel coronavirus or 2019-nCoV, and subsequently dubbed COVID-19 by the World Health Organization, which declared it a global pandemic on March 11, 2020, it sent countries across the globe reeling from its impact. A year on, it is far from contained, with new variants of the virus having emerged and intensifying concerns that containment has become an even bigger challenge. To date, deaths resulting from the pandemic already number 2.6 million (BBC News, 2021) as of mid-March 2021, with 118.6 million confirmed cases worldwide.

Global Status of Coronavirus

| Total deaths | Total confirmed COVID-19 cases |
|--------------|--------------------------------|
| 2.6 million | 118.6 million |

As of March 12, 2021. Source: Johns Hopkins University, national public health agencies

The challenge is far vaster in developing countries with inadequate public health services and where public governance is beset by a host of challenges predating the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first few months of the pandemic, emerging and developing economies accounted for 60% of deaths and cases (Pazarbasioglu & Kose, 2020) worldwide.

More than a year since the spread of the coronavirus beyond China, there is yet no let-up in infections in many countries. On the contrary, the emergence of new variants is driving a spike in COVID-19 cases in many countries.

Conceptual framework for analysing the Philippines' COVID-19 strategy

Confronting a health crisis of unprecedented proportions poses enormous challenges to rich and poor countries alike. The experience of many nations, particularly in the West, which boast some of the highest GDP rates per capita, demonstrates this reality. A mere scan of the list of countries with significantly high numbers of cases relative to other countries – with the United States at the top of the list – bears this out.

An fundamental component of effective strategies in dealing with the pandemic is the ability of governments to act post-haste with a no-nonsense, well-thought-out, science- or evidence-based plan of action while marshalling the needed expertise and resources into a coordinated series of measures whose demonstrable impact is felt by and is visible to all.

The containment strategies of countries have shown varying degrees of success. It must also be acknowledged that the pandemic does not discriminate between rich and developing or poor countries in terms of its impact.

Policy issues and the state of public governance that goes beyond how healthcare systems are funded and managed underpin the effectiveness and, ultimately, the success – or lack of it – of overall coronavirus abatement strategies such as specific protocol measures, including mass testing, contact tracing, and quarantine.

In the Philippines, measures to quell the spread of the coronavirus have drawn mixed reactions, and are for the most part negative, highlighting what to policy experts and analysts are fundamental flaws in a number of state policies that reflect the country's capacity to step up to the challenge of dealing with a major crisis such as that which confronts the nation today.

A growing literature analysing government measures to flatten the curve has necessarily included an earnest examination of the country's governance system – with its concomitant challenges pre-pandemic. To be sure, further analysis will unfold in the weeks and months ahead as the current health crisis – and its complex dimensions – continue to play out. Yet, already, consensus has been building around the fact that the state response to COVID-19 has been wholly inadequate and fundamentally flawed. As the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIS), a government-funded research institute, has pointed out, “the pandemic has exposed important structural and governance issues” in the country (Tabuga et al., 2020).

From the initial steps taken by the government to the fraught policy and enforcement debates confronting its COVID-19 strategies, public policy think tanks and pundits alike have pointed to glaring inadequacies in the government's handling of the pandemic.

Based on existing literature, this paper looks into the government's initial response to the pandemic, the national plan of action, and the fallout from major policy measures.

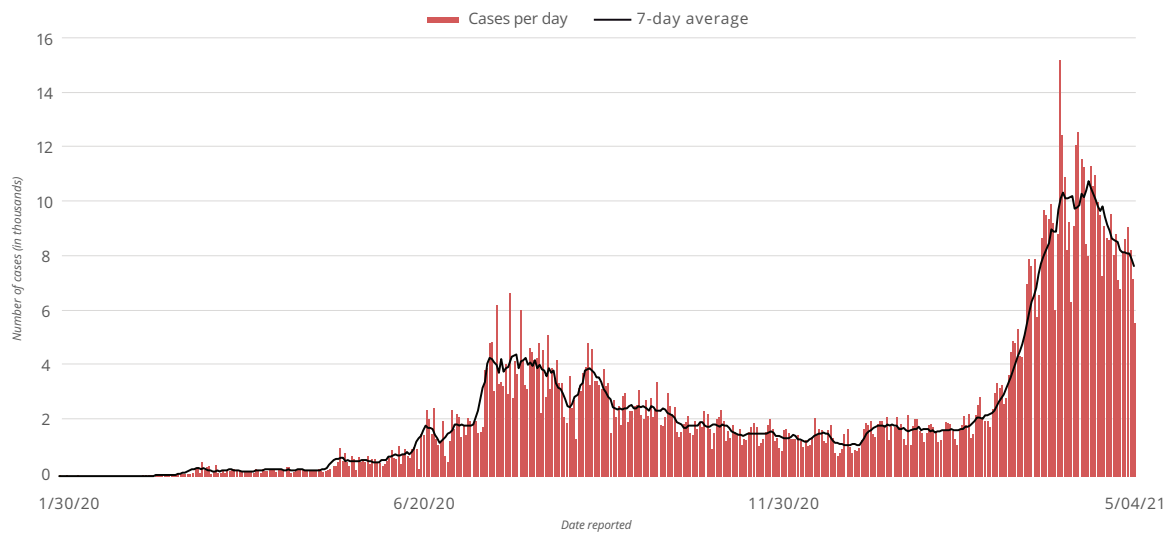
Understanding the Philippine response to the COVID-19 pandemic

The Philippines, a Southeast Asian country with an estimated population of 108 million, reported its first confirmed case of the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) disease on January 30, 2020. This involved a 38-year-old female Chinese national from Wuhan, Hubei Province in China, who, together with her male companion, travelled to the Philippines on January 21, 2020 via Hong Kong.

Wuhan was the epicentre of the novel coronavirus. The Chinese government locked down Hubei on January 24, 3 days after it officially admitted (Davidson, 2020) that there had been a human-to-human transmission of the virus in Wuhan.

In the Philippines, the female's 44-year-old male companion soon tested positive for the coronavirus and died on February 1, thus becoming the first COVID-19 fatality outside of China. A third confirmed case involving another tourist from Wuhan was reported less than a week later. Contact-tracing assessments based on these confirmed cases yielded no additional cases.

It would take about a month before the first local case (Magsino, 2020) was identified and confirmed by the government through its health department. What followed was a steady uptick (see chart: COVID-19 Cases in the Philippines, by New Case per Day) in the number of confirmed cases within the country. For instance, in less than 2 months, confirmed novel coronavirus cases in the country were pegged at more than 5,000 – the highest number at the time in Southeast Asia. More measures were set in place to control the spread of nCoV. The weeks following showed a steady spike in the number of confirmed cases in the country. The first biggest daily rise (Cabico, 2020) emerged on March 31, 2020, when cases spiked to 2,084. In early April 2020, its fatality rate was logged at 6.6% (CNN

Figure 1: COVID-19 Cases in the Philippines, by New Case per Day

Source: Department of Health

Philippines, 2020), eclipsing the global average of 6.4%.

By August 2020, the Philippines posted the highest number of cases (Ranada, 2020) in Southeast Asia (see Figure 1), overtaking Indonesia as it breached the 100,000 mark for the first time.

On August 3, there were 106,330 confirmed cases and 2,104 deaths in the country. Based on data from WHO, 25% of these cases belonged to the 20–29 age bracket, and 23.9% were from the 30–39 age group. At least half (53%) of the cases were from the National Capital Region, with Metro Manila registering the most cases.

The Philippines was ahead of Indonesia in terms of COVID-19 cases until October 15, 2020, when it was overtaken by the latter in terms of confirmed cases among Southeast Asian countries. As of February 24, this year, these two countries have maintained their respective positions – first and second, respectively – in COVID-19 cases per million population (see Figure 2) (Bueza, 2020).

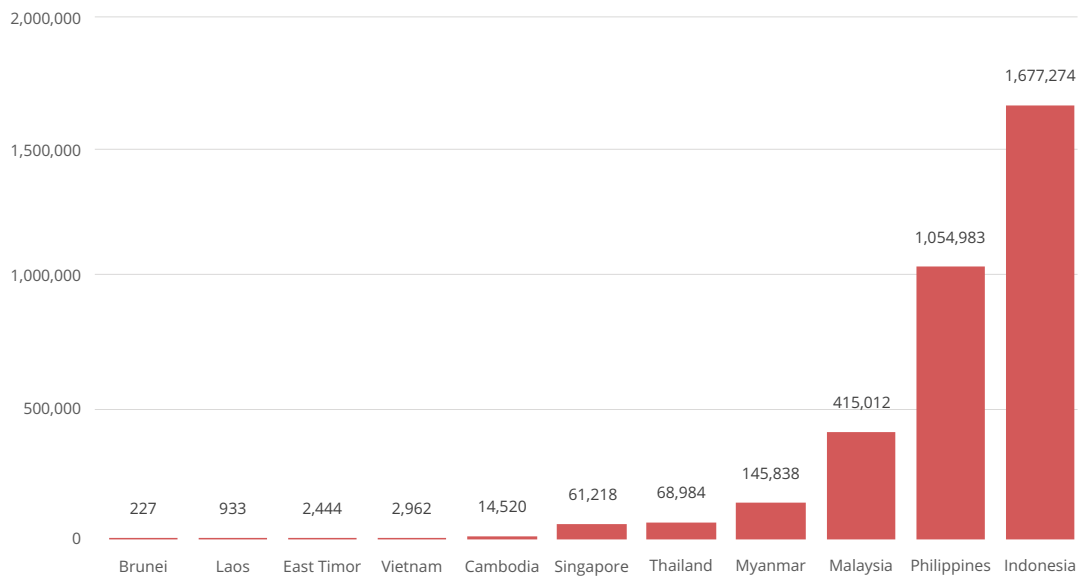
The sheer enormity of the situation overwhelmed the medical workforce, resulting in

many of them contracting the dreaded coronavirus disease. By mid-December 2020, some 13,000 healthcare workers (Sabillo, 2020) had been infected with COVID-19, based on data from the Department of Health. Of this number, nurses made up the most number of cases (at 4,596), followed by doctors, who in turn accounted for the highest number of fatalities, at 31.

A year on since a Metro Manila-wide lockdown was imposed by the government, the country finds itself confronted by a surge of coronavirus cases, including variants. As of the end of February there were 576,352 confirmed COVID-19 cases. Over a period of 4 consecutive days, from February 24 to 28, the health department reported a daily tally of over 2,000 new cases. The total death toll as of February 2021 was 12,318.

Reports have indicated that emergency rooms in hospitals were being overwhelmed with patients. Emergent cases include “family clustering” of patients, including children, belonging to the same family.

This raises anew concerns about the capacity of hospitals to handle these cases, both in terms of availability of beds and other necessary facilities and the number and capa-

Figure 2: Confirmed COVID-19 Cases in Southeast Asia as of May 2

Source: Johns Hopkins University, WHO

city of healthcare workers to provide the required care and treatment.

A private research organization, called OCTA Research Group, said (Manila News, 2021): “The priority now is to contain or mitigate the spread of these more contagious and lethal variants apart from preventing the surge in the region from becoming full-blown.”

In the meantime, hopes for vaccine procurement are hitting snags over unresolved issues such as the need for a law that will create an indemnity fund for individuals who experience adverse effects from anti-coronavirus inoculation. Such a law has since been passed and signed by President Rodrigo Duterte. The COVID-19 Vaccination Programme Act of 2021 allocates PHP500 million (US\$10.3 million) for the COVID-19 National Vaccine Immunity Fund to compensate people who may experience adverse side effects or die after vaccination.

Amid growing concerns around the deadly coronavirus, on January 31, 2020, President Duterte imposed a ban on all travellers from Wuhan City and Hubei Province – a day after the World Health Organization declared the novel coronavirus (2019-nCoV) a “Public

Health Emergency of International Concern”. The Philippine president’s call came almost a month after the Department of Health ordered tighter screening (CNN Philippines, 2020) in early January of all inbound travellers, particularly those who had come from or travelled to China. The ban was soon expanded to include travellers from the rest of China and its special administrative regions of Hong Kong and Macau.

In the face of confirmed cases of COVID-19 mounting in the Philippines, mirroring a global pattern, the Philippine government embarked on a series of more dedicated measures to curb the spread of the coronavirus. A national public health emergency, by dint of Presidential Proclamation No. 22, was declared on March 16, 2020, setting off a plethora of policies to contain the pandemic.

A major step in this direction was the convening of the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF), chaired by the Secretary of the Health Department, in early January 2020. The IATF, composed of government departments and retired military personnel, spearheaded efforts to fight the pandemic by making recommendations on the management of the coronavirus

health crisis. It created the National Task Force (NTF), headed by the Secretary of National Defence, to handle the operational aspects of the government's strategy in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic.

National Action Plan

On March 25, 2020, the IATF unveiled the National Action Plan, the overarching goal of which was “to adopt measures for containment and mitigation of the spread of the virus to reduce the spread of new cases and to facilitate the detection, identification, and isolation of COVID-19 carriers”. The IATF is the Plan's policymaking body while the NTF is its operational arm.

Among the essential components of the Plan were: the enforcement of a community quarantine in Metro Manila (and later the rest of the regional island of Luzon and other parts of the country); increasing the number of testing laboratories from one national reference laboratory under the Research Institute of Tropical Medicine; setting-up of quarantine facilities and financing of services and management of cases; and the provision of a social amelioration package to poor families, which is one of the major components of a comprehensive strategy to revive the economy.

The Philippine government crafted a Four-Pillar Socio-Economic Strategy COVID-19 (Department of Finance, 2020). On top of the above, the three other components are as follows: a) marshalling resources to fight COVID-19; b) monetary actions and other financing support; and an economic recovery programme to create jobs and sustain growth.

Such a strategy “covers the urgent need to boost the healthcare system and its frontliners in confronting the deadly virus, as well as cash assistance to citizens whose means of subsistence have vanished in the outbreak's fallout,” says one analyst (Galang, 2020).

Emergency powers

In yet another effort to deal with the ongoing coronavirus crisis, President Duterte certified as urgent a legislative bill granting him emergency powers. On March 24, 2020, the bill, Republic Act 11469, otherwise known as “Bayanihan to Heal as One Act”, was passed, coming into force the following day. Among its salient points (Manila Standard, 2020) were provisions granting the president the power to: control funds of at least PHP275 billion (US\$5.6 billion) under the 2020 General Appropriations Act; “direct the operation” of certain privately owned facilities as well as deal with “wayward” local government officials; and reprogramme, reallocate, and realign any appropriation in the 2020 budget so it can be used in the fight against COVID-19.

Based on the newly passed law, a social amelioration programme (SAP) was to be carried out to alleviate the suffering of low-income families. Under the first tranche, the government pledged to grant a monthly subsidy of PHP5,000–8,000 (US\$103–165), depending on the mandated minimum wage per region, to 18 million households for 2 months. Implementation of the programme was delegated to the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD).

By April, only PHP26.3 billion (US\$540 million) of the allocation (US\$5.6 billion) had been utilized. On May 29, 2020, however, the DSWD Secretary reported that 97.64% (Nagtalon, 2020) of the target households had received the promised cash assistance. Other reports indicate that as of the end of June 2020, after near completion of the second tranche of SAP distribution, close to 13 million low-income families had received emergency cash assistance through the scheme. Overall, between March and June 2020, many target beneficiaries had still not received any SAP assistance.

But according to the IBON Foundation (IBON Foundation, 2021), a private think tank, a

total of only 14.1 million families received two SAP tranches from the social welfare department at an average of PHP5,803 (US\$119) a month – “equivalent to just PHP12 [US\$0.25] per person per day¹ for the 106 days of the first long lockdown.”

Other forms of cash assistance, which were handled by other government agencies, were intended for farmers, public utility vehicle drivers, and displaced and disadvantaged workers, among others.

Government assurances notwithstanding, there were numerous complaints and reports of delayed distribution of cash assistance and other bureaucratic obstacles, allegations of corruption, and scores of families and sectors (such as indigent senior citizens and people with a disability) having been excluded from the list of target beneficiaries. Still other issues cited were the lack of a comprehensive list (Cuaton & Su, 2020) of potential beneficiaries, absence of clear guidelines and limited time in beneficiary selection, unreasonable quota of beneficiaries per barangay or village (the most basic political unit of the governance system in the Philippines); duplicate recipients, and absence of an updated information system that identifies poor and low-income households.

Lockdown in Metro Manila and rest of Luzon region – and ensuing recession

A month and a half after the World Health Organization’s declaration on January 30, 2020, of a global health emergency, President Duterte placed the 12-million-strong Metro Manila under community quarantine, coming on the heels of the health department’s announcement of the highest COVID-19 alert level in the country’s economic and political hub. Earlier, on March 9, 2020, President Duterte had declared a nationwide public health emergency by signing Proclamation No. 225.

The first month-long quarantine was announced less than 24 hours before its onset, and included a raft of sweeping measures such as bans on mass gatherings, suspension of classes at all levels, restrictions on all modes of travel (with mobility limited to basic necessities), and imposition of a curfew. When the lockdown was announced, many labourers found themselves stranded in Metro Manila, and unable to go home (since many of them hail from outside the metropolis), in the absence of public modes of transportation and owing to tightly controlled checkpoints manned by police and the military.

The resulting mayhem from the sudden imposition of a lockdown in Metro Manila and the apparent lack of a clear plan detailing how it was to be carried out drew criticisms from various sectors as well as international observers, as evidenced by the spate of articles published locally and internationally pointing to the manifest gaps and loopholes in the government’s initial handling of the pandemic.

The initial plan was for this measure to be in force from March 15 to April 14, but it was followed by a series of extensions, spanning almost a year, which in the process became one of the longest – and strictest – in the world.

The consequent impacts of the prolonged lockdown were severely felt by poor Filipinos as they struggled to survive the dire economic impacts of the crisis, with a record number (Palatino, 2020) of people losing their jobs, while countless others were unable to go to work because of lack of transportation, and therefore were left to contend with a no work-no pay policy. Businesses were forced to close either permanently or temporarily.

A study (Susantono et al., 2020) presented by the Asian Development Bank in a webinar held in September 2020 showed that 70.6% of business enterprises of varied sizes – from micro to medium – in the country were forced

to close temporarily. Such closures necessarily led to massive loss of livelihood.

Public sentiment towards the government's handling of the pandemic has for the most part been negative according to a survey (Ranada, 2021) conducted by the ASEAN Studies Centre, titled *The State of Southeast Asia: 2021*. More than half (53.7%) of the Filipino respondents expressed disapproval of the government's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Such a sentiment, however, has hardly affected the popularity of President Duterte, who remains popular with Filipinos. In September 2020, a nationwide poll (Pulse Asia Research, 2020) conducted by Pulse Asia, a private social research institution, showed a 92% approval rating for the president and his administration in the face of the pandemic (Regino, 2020).

Pre-pandemic governance and structural issues

The global health crisis has magnified structural problems and manifest inadequacies in public governance across countries. The Philippines is no stranger to this reality; from public health systems to education, to lawmaking and enforcement, the pandemic has shone a spotlight on fundamental flaws in how the government runs the affairs of the country.

At a micro level, the Philippine Institute for Development Studies (PIDS) pointed out the structural flaws (Tabuga et al., 2020) besetting the country, especially when faced with a crisis of grave proportions: information systems are outdated, resulting in unintended delays in data gathering, which in turn could inform decision making. The pandemic has also magnified the inability of the government to provide basic services to its citizens such as water, which is so vital to maintaining health protocols. A water service interruption (Rey, 2020) that gripped parts of Metro Manila about a month into the lockdown throws this reality into sharp relief.

The urgent need need for access to basic services such as healthcare was also magnified by the pandemic as these facilities were inundated with COVID-19 patients needing immediate treatment while patients suffering from other ailments were left to fend for themselves, not knowing where or when they could avail themselves of equally urgent medical attention.

PIDS observed similar findings in 2009; the country's social protection programmes were already severely inadequate long before coronavirus reached Philippine shores. The schemes were hampered by "low coverage and inadequate benefits, poor targeting, and operational constraints due to lack of coordination among program implementers," notes (Yap et al., 2009) PIDS in its earlier study. "This is a microcosm of the institutional problems that have constrained economic development in the Philippines over many decades."

Fast-forward to 2020. With 30% of healthcare facilities having no access to clean toilets, sanitation became an even bigger concern among poor Filipinos during the pandemic. In addition, 26% of the Philippine population themselves have no access to safe and clean toilets, according to PIDS.

The sorry state of the country's basic education system was also magnified by the pandemic, namely, the lack of access to basic education for many poor school children, lack of infrastructure, and poor school performance. "The Philippines ranked lowest out of 79 countries in the OECD's Program for International Student Assessment in 2018," according to a report (Tadalan, 2021).

As digital solutions were adopted by schools, millions of families were caught flatfooted by the shift from on-site to online classes, with many households lacking the necessary gadgets and the access to and costs of internet connection. Poor internet connectivity in many parts of the country, including the

metropolis and even more so in remote areas, proved to be yet another major challenge for families already struggling to make ends meet. The inability of parents, many of them uneducated, to assist their children with their lessons while on remote learning was yet another concern voiced by the former.

As of February 2021, 2.6 million Filipino children (Tadalan, 2021) have been forced out of school due to poverty. The enrolment rate dipped 10% year-on-year to 24.6 million.

Militaristic approach

Compounding the nation's struggles was the overall militaristic approach taken by the government in enforcing emergency measures, notably the lockdown or what was initially dubbed community quarantine. This led to a raft of reported human rights violations as punitive measures were imposed upon people disproportionate to their purported offences.

Two pieces of legislation provided the basis for this approach, both of which were passed before the pandemic struck, one as far back as 11 years ago: the Mandatory Reporting of Notifiable Diseases and Health Events of Public Health Concern Act of 2018, which authorizes the president to declare a state of public health emergency; and the Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act of 2010, which authorizes the president to declare a state of calamity. Based on the latter legislation, President Duterte issued Presidential Proclamation No. 929 in March 2020 to declare a nationwide state of calamity.

President Duterte was given additional “necessary special powers” to lead the country in dealing with the pandemic when the Bayanihan [meaning community spirit] to Heal as One Act of 2020 came into force on March 24, 2020, in response to the COVID-19 health crisis.

Use of these emergency powers entailed heightened visibility of uniformed personnel

in strategic locations, notably checkpoints. The sight of President Duterte surrounded by military men in a public address last year on his administration's pandemic response drove home the reality of the government's militarized strategy to ward off the pandemic.

This approach harks back to the “the decades-long tactics of the military on border controls in its fight against armed groups”. The stark difference this time, however, is that the government is “fighting a disease,” (Dizon, 2020) says a former adviser to the National Task Force, a medical doctor.

The ensuing human rights violations reported by the media and shared widely on social media amid the raging pandemic were widely blamed on the martial-law like lockdown that was denounced by both local and international human rights groups such as Amnesty International.

According to Human Rights Watch:

Tens of thousands of people were arrested and often detained in crowded jails and holding centers where they were at increased risk of contracting the virus. Police and local officials targeted vulnerable populations, including lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people and children, and in some cases using public humiliation and cruel treatment. (Roth, 2020)

Seeing the flagrant breaches of human rights in the Philippines – a pattern that was not lost on the international community, which similarly issued a call to the government – the International Coalition for Human Rights in the Philippines issued an urgent appeal to “the Duterte government to end its repression of civil society to enable the Filipino people to maximise their capacity to deal with the crisis” (Scoop, 2020).

Economic fallout

Following severe restrictions imposed on labour and mobility, and the consequent impact

on domestic economic activity, the country's gross domestic product shrank 9.5% – considered the worst since 1946, (Vera, 2021) the end of World War II, when the country began to record its yearly output. Like many other countries in the world, the Philippines was clearly in recession, and had the worst GDP decline in Asia. Based on current prices, IBON assessed that the Philippines lost PHP1.45 trillion (US\$29.9 billion) in 2020 or an average of PHP4.2 billion (US\$86.6 million) per day.

According to IBON's estimates, there are now at least 5.8 million unemployed Filipinos, some 18 million vulnerable poor and low-income families, and at least 33 million going hungry (IBON Foundation, 2021).

Data generated by IBON also showed that in terms of unemployment, millions of Filipinos lost their jobs, with the number of employed Filipinos falling to 33.8 million in April 2020, the lowest since 2008, which witnessed a global financial crisis that did not spare countries like the Philippines. In October 2020, employment dropped by 2.7 million people in work, from 39.8 million in October 2019 – “the largest contraction in employment in the country's history.”

Job losses occurred mainly “among those in full-time work (40 hours or more) with apparently very few finding alternatives in part-time work (less than 40 hours),” according to IBON.

In the past 5 years before the pandemic (2020), the Philippines' economic growth was averaging (Moss, 2020) at least 6% and was projected to grow 7% last year, poised to outpace some of the biggest economies in Asia, namely China, Indonesia, and India. The global pandemic – and its handling by the government – became the perfect foil for this rosy economic outlook in the Philippines.

What remained a bright spot in the Philippine economy was the only marginal decline in remittances from overseas Filipino work-

ers (OFWs), which perennially have been the backbone of the Philippine economy, accounting for 8% of GDP in 2019. The slight decline defied expectations, with remittances falling only 0.08% in 2020.

Philippines' COVID-19 response: weighed and found wanting

Observers and analysts alike agree that the Philippines' coronavirus response has for the most part been inadequate. Travel restrictions were not imposed soon enough – when acting with dispatch would have been the best course. Such foot dragging – blamed largely on what is widely perceived as the state's constant appeasement of China – would have far-reaching repercussions in terms of efforts to curb the pandemic. This reality takes on greater significance now that there has been a sharp rise (Magsambol, 2021) again in coronavirus cases.

Prior to the initial travel ban, and against a backdrop of pressure being exerted by both the public and legislators, President Duterte announced that he would not ban or restrict travel from China, to avoid fanning the flames of “xenophobia”. To many, this spoke volumes about his administration's priorities in dealing with an immense health crisis.

The lack of aggressive mass testing – dismissed as “unrealistic” (Esguerra, 2020) by an infectious disease expert advising the government – and contact tracing in the first 3 months of the outbreak in 2020 was likewise a fundamental flaw in the government's COVID-19 response.

The ensuing chaos and confusion among the public, once the first month of “community quarantine” had been announced also reflected poorly on the government's mitigation strategy and imposed an unnecessary burden on the people.

Poorly communicated and coordinated plans and strategies – with government

agencies issuing contradictory statements and demonstrating a lack of consistency in government policies – did nothing to help in guiding the public towards compliance and ensuring an efficient COVID-19 response.

More recently, officials appeared not to be able to decide conclusively whether a travel ban should be imposed on 20 countries. “The list went up on the airport’s Facebook page, then was taken down, then put back up again within a few hours,” reported the South China Morning Post (Robles & Robles, 2020).

Limited health funding, which had been cut in previous years under the Duterte administration, became all too apparent when government hospitals and frontline health workers had to appeal for personal protective equipment, worried that their supplies were running out and cases were on a steep rise.

Health budget cuts during Duterte’s administration are a disturbing signal of the government’s misaligned priorities, with funding for other basic services including education having been similarly slashed during annual budget allocations (Punongbayan, 2019).

The distressing plight of the country’s frontline health workers amid surging COVID-19 cases, together with the sorely inadequate government response, prompted 80 medical societies comprising doctors and nurses to write to the government “to issue a distress signal... (that) our healthcare system has been overwhelmed.... We are waging a losing battle against COVID-19” (Fonbuena & Farrer, 2020).

According to the Asian Peoples’ Movement on Debt and Development:

The Philippines has been in a vulnerable position since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. This vulnerability can be explained by social, economic, health and financial factors. As a result of these pre-existing conditions, the crisis has been acutely felt by the population of the country. (Asian Peoples’ Movement on Debt and Development [APMDD], 2020)

That the government needed to reassess its priorities, in steering the country towards an effective response to the pandemic, also became disturbingly manifest when Congress, pressed by President Duterte, passed the controversial Anti-Terrorism Bill in July 2020.

The newly minted law, which replaced the Human Security Act of 2007, criminalizes vaguely defined offences, notably incitement of terrorism (Sobel, 2020).

The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace describes the Philippines’ “Anti-Terrorism Act as the latest in a series of power grabs passed under the guise of national security amid the coronavirus pandemic, presenting a serious threat to Filipino democracy.”

To local and foreign observers alike, the inability of the Philippine government to flatten the curve a year after the pandemic first emerged in the country is but a symptom of bigger structural challenges facing the country.

Conclusion

Various groups and individuals have time and again sounded the alarm on the Philippine government’s policy and enforcement strategies in reversing the surging tide of coronavirus cases on the domestic front. Such serious calls have accompanied concrete proposals that, if heeded, may well spell the difference in terms of the kinds of impact that the Filipino public, already heavily burdened by the loss of jobs and other economic opportunities brought on by the pandemic, is yearning for.

Former adviser to the National Task Force on COVID-19, Dr Tony Leachon,² has proposed, for example, that the role of the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) on Emerging Infectious Diseases be redefined. As the country ramps up its vaccination programme, the IATF may well be converted into a Vaccine Launch Team, with streamlined functions that will allow the Cabinet-rank officials making up

the task force to focus on their immediate duties based on their respective mandates. This would then facilitate the delegating of local COVID operations at management level to the local chief executives.

The IATF's heterogenous composition (which includes economic experts whose voices, in the view of many people, often drown out those of health experts) must be revisited at the very least. Dr Leachon and other medical experts have highlighted the need for science to be the principal driver in the country's response to the pandemic, which many again see as having been political. "Medical experts are needed since you're dealing with a health crisis," not a war or an insurgency, he said.

Dr Leachon added that the government would do well to heed the lessons proffered by countries such as New Zealand, Germany, and the United States (under President Joe Biden's administration) in putting a premium on a strong healthcare team spearheading pandemic-related efforts.

Allowing the private sector to play a bigger role in the government's strategies would also ensure a more strategic and effective response to the crisis, Leachon says. This would go hand in hand with a measured communication strategy that promptly and clearly conveys to the public the messages that they need to hear.

To achieve long-term solutions, it is now time for the government to revisit its priorities and pass or amend legislation that will, among other laws, correct systemic and structural problems like poorly funded public healthcare systems and poorly paid healthcare workers, many of whom are forced to leave the country in search of the proverbial greener pasture. To this end, an omnibus health care law is required. A funneling by the government of the necessary funds into health and relevant infrastructure would also correct some, if not most, of the

ills identified in this paper, including ensuring an effective approach to disaster or crisis management.

To many Filipinos, however, what is far more urgent is addressing the widely perceived failure of leadership that has plunged the nation into its worst crisis yet. In this regard, Vice-President Leni Robredo's words couldn't be more apt:

A crisis of this magnitude calls for a massive, strategic response, and this can only be achieved by leadership that is able to pull everyone together towards a single direction. (Abad, 2020)

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FOOTNOTES

- 1 Assuming an average size of five persons per family, according to IBON.
- 2 Interviewed by the author on February 28, 2021.