

# Philippines: Advance the political-social-economic alternatives in confronting Covid-19 pandemic

Monday 30 March 2020, by [CORAZON Herido](#), [SANTOS Joshua](#) (Date first published: 29 March 2020).

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The Coronavirus-19 was early detected in Wuhan, China last November 2019. The Chinese government leaders tried to manage the problem by suppressing and withholding information from the world. However, medical workers in Wuhan, like Dr. Li Wenliang who later died from COVID-19 as a frontline medical worker, raised the alarm to the world in December 2019. Since then the number of cases and deaths caused by the virus soared rapidly even beyond the borders of China and its colonies. In early March 2020, the World Health Organization declared the covid-19 as a pandemic, since it already affected more than a hundred countries at various scale. As of March 26, 2020 there are already more than 500,000 confirmed cases with more than 23,000 deaths worldwide. Despite various drastic measures implemented by various governments, there is no sign yet that the virus is slowing down.

In Europe, Italy is the hardest hit, particularly Lombardy in the northern part. Known to be one of the richest regions in Europe with equipped hospitals and a better health care system, Lombardy is now vastly overwhelmed by the infection. The rate of new infections and deaths per day reach hundreds, that some observers describe the situation as depressing and chaotic.

It is notable however that prior to the coronavirus pandemic the health care system in Belgium, including that in Lombardy, has been attacked by neo-liberal policies such as privatization, reduction of fund allocation and has succumbed to the dictates of transnational corporations and pharmaceutical lobbies – like most of the health care systems of other countries.

In other parts of the world, including the United States of America (USA), governments are scrambling to deal with the Pandemic. While different countries, regions and governments have different approaches and mechanisms owing to their respective peculiar situations, but there seems a general pattern of inadequacy of response. This inadequacy ranges from the inadequate equipment and personnel, to poor planning, and to inefficient leadership and crisis management. This further aggravates the situation of the most vulnerable sectors of the society.

As an immediate yet glaring impact of the Pandemic, the wide gap between the “haves” and the “have-nots” or the rich and the poor is emphasized. While the rich may survive for a month locked inside their gated homes, the poor and the average worker cannot survive without social relief and assistance. The capacity to cope of a rich senior citizen is different from that of a poor one. Those living in the subdivisions and those living in slums differ in their access to basic services. And those multiple families living in small cramped houses in the slum areas will not have the same luxury of observing social distancing compared to those living in exclusive villages. These hard realities are common across countries, and is a result of decades of neglect and marginalization.

### **‘Obey First Before You Complain’: Draconian Measures Are Meant to Hide Ineptness**

In the Philippines, prior to the confirmation of the first COVID-19 case last January 30, 2020, various sectors have already called on the government to impose safety measures or travel restrictions from countries and foreign cities that are severely affected with the virus. However, the government dismissed the call in order not to hurt the diplomatic relations with China. The President then assured the people that “everything is well in the country” and that funds are available. In a classic display of arrogance, he said in national Television that he would “slap the virus” and that it will just die in its natural death. The Secretary of Health even went bragging in late February that the Philippines is a model country in containing the epidemic.

However, things began to crumble when the first local transmission of the virus was confirmed in the first week of March. The government’s response in the beginning was chaotic - there was no identifiable command center to specifically deal with the crisis. Vague orders and pronouncements were given by Malacanang, only to be interpreted in different ways by different officials. All these exposed their empty pronouncements of readiness and their complacency.

When the President finally declared a State of National Public Health Emergency, two (2) weeks after the recommendation of the Department of Health, it has become apparent that the Government is dealing the health crisis using the Peace and Order Paradigm and is ready to weaponize the law in order to compel obedience from all government branches, units and the entire populace, and quell criticism and dissent.

Among the first marching orders of the government to implement its paradigm is the Policy of Community Quarantine, which will be spearheaded by the Armed Forces and the Police. The goal is to drastically limit the movements of the population, especially in key cities. The policy was implemented by setting up check points, but are manned by AFP and PNP personnel with insufficient protective equipment against the virus. The people are told to stay home, and the use of private vehicles and public transportation were suspended. This is made without any ready guidelines on some basic factors, such as what will happen to the employment status of workers who cannot report to work? The national government did not even consider in the beginning how the medical frontliners will be able to report to their respective hospitals when public transport was suspended. This made doctors and other frontliners to walk across cities to reach their duty stations. Only upon mounting pressures on social media that these concerns were addressed.

The Local Government Units (LGU’s) were ordered to respond amidst confusing directives from the national government. Without immediate financial and logistical support from the national government, local governments were forced to use their respective calamity funds as they were threatened that any inaction will be dealt with lawsuits. There was a buzz circling around that an unwritten order from the highest office is “obey first before you complain, or else...”. The calamity

fund of LGUs is usually intended to be used to respond to regular occurrences every year, such as Typhoons and to such other emergencies such as earthquakes, the Swine Flu, the Bird Flu, long droughts and the like. With the tremendous amount that the LGUs need to spend against COVID-19, do they still have funds to use during typhoons for the rest of the year? It is noteworthy however that some LGU's are relatively quick and creative in formulating and implementing their local responses, especially those which are well-funded.

When the national government finally organized an Inter Agency Task Force (IATF) against COVID-19, and later on, after the President was granted with additional/necessary powers by Congress, constituted a group to implement its supposed National Action Plan (NAP), it is noteworthy that the Department of Health (DOH) does not have an active role in these bodies, despite a provision in the Administrative Code which mandates the DOH as the focal agency in a National Health Emergency. The IATF's most visible official is the Cabinet Secretary, who is not a medical professional. The implementers of the NAP are all active and retired military and police generals. The DOH is reduced to making announcements on the statistics of COVID cases and related concerns.

The government is also controlling the flow of information regarding its response to COVID-19. The Presidential Communication Operations Office (PCOO) required journalist covering the epidemic to secure accreditation from them in order to be allowed passage in the check points.

To ensure order and enforce submission of the populace, government officials and pro-administration social media influencers kept on calling the people to "just obey" and label those who criticize gaps in the policy as "hard-headed". Further, threats of physical violence, degrading punishments, and multiple law suits were made by different officials against those who may violate the Policy. Barely two (2) weeks since the implementation of the Enhanced Community Quarantine, various complaints of alleged abuses by authorities flooded the social media. It is reported that curfew violators in a barangay were locked up in a dog cage, which is not only an apparent Human Right violation but also a violation of the government's call for Social Distancing to arrest the spread of the virus. A video also surfaced with a police officer threatening to shot anybody who will go outside the house. The same police officer was also seen hitting by-standers with a stick. Another report was able to document how curfew violators were exposed to the heat of the sun for hours, in violation of the Anti-Torture Law. At least three (3) individuals were reportedly arrested, two (2) of which without a warrant, for posting their complaints in Social Media.

While all these things are taking the spotlight, along with the daily updates on COVID-19 victims, the root cause of all this chaos and unorganized response, which is government complacency, is being erased from the picture. Further, legitimate concerns such as the meager national support for the LGUs and the frontliners, the availability of the testing kits to the mass populace, peoples' participation, social protection and relief are sidelined.

### **Our Health Care System was Set-Up to Fail**

The Philippine Healthcare System has been very sick for decades. And it has not been receiving enough funds and attention to make it well. Tasked to serve a population of over a hundred million, the budget of the Department of Health (DOH) for 2020 has not received sufficient budget increase to be at par with the good health care systems in the world. Further, salaries and incentives in government hospitals are not competitive compared to those in private hospitals and abroad. Hence, the exodus of medical professionals abroad.

The insufficiency of funds of the DOH is exhibited in the shortage of basic supplies in government

hospitals and its incapacity to support frontliners in private institutions. The pictures of the frontliners circulating in social media who are using trashbags, plastics and other make-do materials as protection against the virus mocks, though maybe unintentionally, the government's capacity. Moreover, it puts across a very urgent and powerful message: our frontliners, responders, hospitals, rural health units down to the barangay health emergency response teams are all very committed to win this fight but they are in dire need of logistical support.

The recent call for volunteers by the DOH for hundreds of medical professionals which will be given a daily allowance of Php 500 (9 USD) is a testament of how the system values its workers. Further, the volunteers are required to sign a waiver exonerating the DOH from liability should they die from COVID-19 while on duty.

While there are those who argue that now is not the time to point fingers, but calling out gaps is not pointing fingers but ensuring accountability and demanding greater public service in order to improve the over-all response of the country against the Pandemic. It is true that even advanced countries are overwhelmed by this pandemic, but countries such as Vietnam were able to better manage the virus. Thus, a country such as ours could have handled this crisis better if not for the government's complacency.

Since the spread of the virus was not contained in the initial phase, the game plan of the government to hide its shortcomings by conditioning the public that positive cases will spike as soon as testing starts across the country. The Department of Health keeps on repeating this to condition the whole population to just accept if the situation will go from bad to worst in the coming days.

### **The Economic and Political Elite Will Always use their Power to Save Themselves First**

As the pandemic rapidly reached the advanced countries, including the United States of America (USA), Spain, the United Kingdom, major businesses are suddenly forced into a sudden halt. No less than the International Monetary Fund (IMF) chief declared that we are entering into a recession worse than in 2009. In the Philippines, humanitarian foundations backed by big businesses has called the government to consider easing quarantine restrictions in Luzon in order to have some economic movements to save the business sector. This means allowing certain businesses to operate and throwing workers into the open exposed to the virus. As history tells us, elitist governments will always succumb to the whims of the business sector, extend bail out packages to big business during crisis while leaving thousands, if not millions, of workers in precarious situation and without social protection. This makes one to ask, for whom should governmental powers primarily extend protection? For what end should this powers be used?

As the record of positive cases in the Philippines drastically increase in just a matter of weeks, and while people tried to stay home as ordered, political leaders and elites shamelessly and insensitively displayed their abuse of power and privilege.

In violation of government protocols, they got themselves and their families immediately tested for COVID-19 mostly at the comforts of their homes. This is despite the fact that the testing kits, the manpower and the daily capacity of the system is very limited. They announced their results in national television and in social media. The ordinary citizen, on the other hand, must have exhibited symptoms of the disease to qualify for a test, will have to queue and wait for four (4) to five (5) days for their result. Some patients already expired before their results were known.

While the government is so strict in imposing check point and quarantine protocols to the point of

arresting and prosecuting violators, some political leaders blatantly breached established protocols. Amidst the mounting pressure to prosecute these elite violators, the government appealed for compassion during this extra-ordinary times.

As the funds of LGUs started to dwindle and the ordinary workers started to ask for food aid, the government opted to appeal for donations and “bayanihan” instead of immediately slashing the President’s Intelligence Fund which is in billions of pesos to deal with the situation more swiftly.

The wealthy and the powerful will always mind their own survival in times of crisis than to take care the workers, toiling masses and the majority population. As a camouflage, they will keep the powerless and poor frightened into submission. As this Pandemic shows the elite is willing to step upon the carcass of the poor and the working class just to survive the crisis.

### **The Working Class and the Marginalized Communities Will Always Bear the Brunt**

As the global economy is taking a hit by the pandemic, the working class, especially those daily wage earners and those in the formal sectors are expected to take the most lethal blows. The Philippines, with its mal-developed economy, is susceptible to a collapse. The community quarantines and lockdowns means a stoppage of the flow of subsistence income to millions of poor Filipino families. Since not less than 10 Million Filipinos are working in advanced countries as Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), the flow of remittances which accounts for a third of the national income is also expected to be severely affected. This will negatively impact not just the economy as a whole but the OFW dependents in the home country, including the emotional and psychological costs.

Bus, jeepney, taxi, tricycle and padyak drivers who earns income on a per-trip or daily basis suddenly found themselves without any means of livelihood. They are now asking for help to survive the duration of the suspension of all kinds of transportation.

The crisis also threatens the availability of essential food supply of the country. Due to the enhanced quarantine protocols all over the country, the flow of food supplies and deliveries were necessarily delayed. Fish and seafood product suppliers complained that a longer delivery time means additional cost for fuel, product preservation cost and other incidental expenses. In the market, there is an observed increase in the prices of fish and corn products, among others, despite the existing price freeze order. With a vast number of the population suddenly lost its source of income, an increase of prices of basic necessities is unbearable.

Vegetable producers are also taking a hit. Accordingly, roughly 130,000 vegetable farmers in Benguet, northern part of Luzon, that supply highland vegetables to different markets nationwide, is experiencing difficulty because of the drastic drop in orders from markets, hotels, restaurants and resorts due to the COVID-19 lockdowns.

A bigger problem for the Filipinos is the availability of rice as its staple food. Being dependent to rice imports for years which fully culminated during the passage of the Rice Ratification Law, the country is at the mercy of the availability of rice from other countries who are also affected with the pandemic. With the pronouncement of Vietnam, one of the Philippines’ top source of imported rice, that it may halt rice exportation to secure the needs of its own population, the Philippine Government is now scrambling to find another country as a new rice source.

The working class women also takes the brunt. A lot of hospital frontliners, health responder teams and frontline service crews are notably women. The demands of their respective works makes them,

not just potential Covid-19 victims, but also potential carriers of the virus. Since the prevailing set-up of economically-average heterosexual families is that the mother takes care of the children, the burden upon the woman is therefore multiplied. For single mothers, the situation is more complicated. Access to healthcare is also problematic for pregnant mothers, as they are more vulnerable to the infection when exposed.

Racism and discrimination also emerged amidst the global crisis. Ordinary Chinese citizens are oftentimes automatically seen as COVID-19 carriers. In Mindanao, a City attempted to close its borders to a tribe whose member got infected with COVID-19. In USA, there are reports that Neo-Nazi planned to attack COVID-19 facilities to murder the patients.

Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) staying in evacuation camps are more at risks. In this scenario, self-isolation and social distancing is impossible. Access to services in evacuation camps is usually limited.

Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) reported that people trapped in unhealthy dirty camps at entry points for asylum seekers, and refugees in the islands of Greece, are highly at risk for coronavirus transmission.

In America, the US government decided to block asylum proceedings and closed the US-Mexico border. Doctors Without Borders/Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) documented that since 2019, the US has sent tens of thousands of asylum seekers to Mexico to await for their asylum proceedings in some of the most dangerous parts of the country. Many of these asylum seekers have created makeshift camp in Matamoros, Tamaulipas, a city on the US-Mexico border, right next to the international bridge. MSF added that the camps are unacceptable, with limited sanitation and access to health services—a situation which heightens the risk for COVID-19 transmission.

In Mindanao, there are still thousands of IDPs in temporary shelters due to the Marawi Siege and Mindanao Earthquakes. Also, there are Indigenous Peoples being displaced by armed encounters in Surigao del Sur, Maguindanao and Sultan Kudarat. The lockdowns added burden to their already difficult situation. Further, their cramped and sorry situation is a potential risk for a rapid COVID-19 infection.

## **The Working People will Save the World from the Pandemic - Not the Elite**

As the pandemic is sweeping across countries, it is the working class people that is at the forefront of the fight. They are the medical professionals and workers, the scientists, the rescue groups, the community volunteers, the ordinary members of the police, army, fire fighters and barangay peace keeping forces, the delivery personnel, the journalists, the food producers, the janitors and garbage collectors, the front line service crews, grocery store attendants and market vendors, among others. They are the ones putting their lives at risks while enduring the physical, emotional and psychological fatigues in combating the pandemic so we may all survive.

In the Philippines, at least nine (9) frontline health workers and medical experts have died due to COVID-19, while at least a thousand more are in quarantine. At the community level, barangay health workers and volunteers, with or without protective equipment, have to deal with the Persons Under Monitoring (PUM) and Persons Under Investigation (PUI). Local volunteers from various institutions also risk being exposed to the virus just to deliver essential goods to the house hold level in areas under lockdown and to hospital dealing with COVID-19 patients.

Since the pandemic is foreseen to take months before it can be effectively contained, our food



producers should be amply protected and supported to ensure continues production of food supply. Their continued activity is vital to our ability to sustain the fight.

When we survive this pandemic, may our common experience teach us that the working class can take control of its future and save humanity.

### **Solidarity and Struggle is a Social Responsibility**

The unfolding crisis is showing us that relying upon an elitist government to save us is akin to suicide. As proven by history in many historical junctures, the working people needs to self-organize, mobilize, assert and extend solidarity to one another in order to survive.

In this crisis, compounded by strict rules on social mobility, the ways to organize, assert and extend solidarity may be done through the use of technology. The pressure which compelled the DOH to rethink their policy in hiring medical volunteers was done with the aid of exiting communication technologies.

Using communications technology, people can exchange knowledge and wisdom on boosting immune systems and health care methods to ensure the health of the elderly, the pregnant and all that are at risk. The Indigenous Peoples, as well as the community people, are rich with knowledge and wisdom in this field.

Open online discussions as to how best to develop alternatives and put forward improvements to the present government paradigm must also be done. This will ensure that abuses are still checked, officials are held accountable and the people has remaining open avenues to participate. Further, this remains an effective venue to criticize the prevailing social, economic and political order and expose its inherent characteristics that contributed to the spread of the virus.

At the community level, people can initiate controlled exchanges and sharing of resources such as sanitation materials, food, medicine, water and even shelter for the homeless. Organized communities are also much more capable of surviving this crisis.

### **Humanity is at the Crossroads: Ecocide or Ecological Future?**

Experts have claimed that the past and present epidemics and pandemics are manifestations of a damaged environment. For centuries, human beings exploited the environment with insatiable greed for profit. Human activities created situations and conditions for viruses to evolve and mutate into other forms that human antibodies cannot fight. These activities are mining, logging, mono-cropping, agro-industry, employment of petro-chemicals, reliance to fossil-fuel energy source, among others. Scholars contend, that unless the framework of environmental exploitation for profit is not abandoned, the destruction of the environment would become irreversible.

With the sudden stoppage of mega factories, vehicle traffic and air flights it is observable that there was also a drastic decline of air pollution and a betterment of air quality. The Earth looks refreshed. This only goes to prove that essentially it is human activity that is causing imbalance in the environment.

The pandemic is forcing human beings to prioritize what is essential for the sustenance of life and of civilization. We are forced to plan and prioritize travel, consumption and goods distribution, and we learn that we can live without the luxuries. It is therefore high-time for humans to look back at how

people live and produced in the past in order to re-learn how our society will survive without destroying Earth and its finite resources, and human life itself as we know it. In this, the life and culture of Indigenous Peoples will be of great help.

This is the urgent call for all today. Should we continue to live under the present system or should we start building now our alternative? Would we settle for a society that promotes ecocide or do we build an ecological future? The situation is no longer a drill, as the threat is here and now. We have to decide.

### **What can be done?**

The working people around the world must rely on their own power. Hence, never stop organizing sectors for their political and economic empowerment and strengthen People to People cooperation, Community, Class and International Solidarity.

Let us continue to Share and Exchange knowledge, skills and wisdom in improving immune systems using available resources in the communities, essential food and medicine preparations. Let us also promote sharing of seeds for urban and rural gardening among peoples to dismantle the seed-control of multi-national corporations. This will help promote, support and practice Sustainable, Ecological and Natural Agriculture and production

Communities can organize Health and Emergency groups, and Paralegal and Human Rights bodies for their mutual aid and protection.

Allied medical experts and scientists can also elevate the discussions on the Pandemic as part of the over-all Climate Change problem. This can help promote participation in Climate Justice Actions

Rally unity across sectors and borders by promoting that the pandemic is calls for a global response.

Rally behind our frontliners. Let us call for the availability and accessibility of free health care services and prioritize a pandemic-resilient medical research.

Let us call for Mass and accessible Testing for all particularly the frontliners and the most vulnerable sectors. Let us call for public access for all of any vaccine and medicine that may be developed against the pandemic. This is in order to counter multi-national pharmaceutical corporations from monopolizing and profiting from any discovery.

Call for continued and wider social protection and relief to all workers, of any categorization, as well as to all economically vulnerable sectors of the society.

Reinvigorate the call for the scrapping of Laws which contributed to the sufferings of the mass populace in the midst of the Pandemic, such as the Rice Ratification Law

March 29, 2020

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