

Covid-19: Its Impact on the Philippines – Part III

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We publish below the third article of a series of five.

III. CURRENT STATUS of the COVID-19 Situation in the Country

Unlike the Housing, Real Estate, Financing and banking meltdown of 2008, COVID-19 is a contagion which has affected public health that has hit badly and swiftly the global economy. To date, this twin global pandemonium has already caused a tsunami of suffering for billions of peoples – but especially the poorest of the poor. It has halted the agricultural production activities which have already caused a food crisis. This development will be worst felt by countries especially those from emerging economies with liberalized and privatized food industry. This neo-liberal arrangement has made these countries dependent on importing agricultural products to survive. The pandemic caused by COVID-19 has closed the door of the food exporting countries in order to secure first the food needs of their own people.

The liberalization of Agricultural Industry has directly eliminated the capacity of the peasants and agricultural workers to produce their own food. Rice Tariffication for instance made the Philippines farmers unable to produce and compete with cheap imported rice.

The farmers and the toiling masses have continued to be buttered and are merely surviving from this neo-liberal offensive when they are hit by the COVID-19.

a. COVID-19 EFFICIENTLY Magnified Pre-Existing Conditions

The pandemic caused by this virus has closely magnified the pre-existing conditions affecting the most pauperized and peripherized sections of peoples. And while it is true that this kind of virus does not chose its victims, those who do not have regular food and the malnourished and those who cannot afford to access health care services have greater possibility to become COVID-19 victims. In many countries, the lifelines thrown to help the most needy by governments have become out of reach due to the pre-existing conditions.

But this time can be a rare opportunity for many ordinary poor people to make extraordinary struggles to reclaim their dignity with compassion like in keeping each others' safe by practicing forced distancing whenever and whatever the situations they find themselves in. These struggles include among others building and strengthening of solidarity by contributing and promoting global conversation which promotes understanding and sharing experiences in managing COVID-19 in order to help stop the contagion from spreading further. Such collective action and collaboration can

indeed help contribute in changing peoples' lives and values away from COVID-19.

Furthermore, COVID-19 can be an opportune moment for good and genuine characteristics of leaders to shine through.

In the period of almost five months (including the unofficial period) since the official announcement of the existence of the COVID-19, many of the world's leaders were caught with their "pants down" so to speak. Big factor of this kind of unpreparedness or the not so serious attention by the leaders about the novel coronavirus was the clear attempt of China (where the SARS-2002-3 and COVID-19 originated) to hide or downgrade the basic facts about the virus. A case in point here is that China through the China National Health Commission (CNHC) the official agency of China which releases the situation and development of COVID-19 had claimed in January 15, 2020 that the official number of cases caused by the virus as 15,205 while the University of Hongkong had publicized that during the same period the total cases in China was 75,815. The data of the latter was published in its LANCET Medical Journal.

Another reason for the reticent attitude of several leaders of countries has been the geopolitical situation during the period. China has been investing serious efforts and almost unlimited funds to put people in the leadership position in the different levels of multilateral institutions to further their global interests both economically and politically. China has also painstakingly built its Belt and Road Initiatives (BRI) that it has gained big and strong influence on politics and economies of various countries in the world including Ethiopia – the country of the current World Health Organization (WHO) Secretary General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus. Lately, it has shown its (China) global muscle by strongly lobbying and electing the new head of Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO).

Not a few global leaders have shown characteristics of running and changing characteristics from denial and being arrogant at the same time showing the "been there attitude". Such characteristics and attitude oftentimes underestimate the gravity of the situation on their people and later becoming panicky and resort to strong arm tactics and more repression. From these conditions, such leaders have become wishful thinkers and becoming further away from what science is telling them about the condition of their people and their countries. And the worst thing that these leaders would do when people have different position with them, they began to blame everybody except themselves.

Good and genuine leaders work selfishly and extraordinarily under stress while facing the developments unleashed by a disastrous condition. This is the positive attitude one needs in facing the unknown virus and the uncertainty it has brought about. They may become unrecognizable and even anonymous with their face masks and protective equipment in fighting the unseen enemy but their commitment, compassion and humanity have continued to shine through.

b. PRRD's Governance and COVID-19

The abovementioned characteristics are very important to profoundly understand the Philippine situation and how it has responded and managed the pandemic in the country. Just like in any country, the country's leadership has a pivotal role to play in the mitigation and suppression of epidemic to reverse the growth and maintain such level indefinitely. But the decisive role of the people to finally contain the contagion cannot be relegated to the back seat. Peoples' trust is crucial to any strategy adopted by the government. The more transparency and quickly but accurate information is shared with them the more the people will put their trust with their government. People will act swiftly and rationally for the good of their community in particular and the country in general.

In the 1st and 2nd series of this paper, it has been stated that President Rodrigo Roa Duterte's (PRRD) government has hesitated and faltered with their early moves. The very weak health system and infrastructures and the massive lack of medical protective equipment and capacity of human resources to face a disaster much more a pandemic have not really made PRRD's government, especially the Department of Health (DOH) to seriously pay attention and make massive and timely preparation to correct all these inadequacies.

The characteristics of PRRD and his manner of governance have a lot to do with such passive attitude to say the least. In the early stage, the President had played down the threat of the contagion saying that Filipinos have natural antibodies that would shield them from infections. This statement had been parroted by his spokesperson. The other branches of the government did not say a word. Then the President called the COVID-19 threat an idiot and ordered his doctors to work double time to find the cure.

In the second week of March before he ordered the lockdown of Metro Manila, the President had mentioned that in the event of the pandemic he would not hesitate to use the military and the police for order and obedience. Then, when signs of COVID-19 are becoming unstoppable and deadly, he had declared series of proclamations namely: Proclamation No. 922 placing the country under the State of Public Health Emergency, Proclamation No. 929 declaring the Philippines under the State of Calamity. Surely these are signs of buckling down and panicking so that the President has asked the Congress for emergency power thru the signing of Republic Act 11469 giving the President additional powers to handle the outbreak of COVID-19 for 3 months (March 25-June 24, 2020). During these times, PRRD already lockdown the biggest island of the country (Luzon), using the military and police to ensure obedience and order. And then, he made an order for the military and the police to shoot anybody who would violate the rules and policies of lockdown.

Placing more than 60 million in community quarantine has indeed limited the peoples' movement and giving strict instructions for social and physical distancing can physically stop the spread of the virus. The bigger problem, however, is how to feed and pacify the "quarantined" millions who had lost not only their jobs and livelihood but also their basic human rights. And the worst thing here is that you lockdown millions of people but the government has not done much for ensuring that the virus and the carriers have indeed been neutralized. The utter lack or absence of testing kits and machines and personal protection equipment of the medical workers have caused the snail pace response to identify, trace and isolate the COVID-19 patients or carriers. The much delayed actions of the PRRD government can even be the case of locking down the barn door after the horses are long gone.

c. MAXIMUM PROTECTION with MINIMUM DISRUPTION

With the absence of the vaccine at the moment, responsible steps of any government should be to implement the mitigative actions with the maximum protection and calibrated minimal disruption as a guiding principle in mind.

In the absence of such guiding principle not a few would think that PRRD's moves are just strengthening its authoritarian grip because of the serious implication of not doing much to brace the country and the people for the impending disaster inflicted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The principle of maximum protection and minimum disruption should not be seen as contradictory with each other. One had just to factor in the socio-economic political underlying and pre-existing conditions because only from these perspectives realistic and effective steps can be made to seriously combat the stinging effects of the COVID-19.

The locking down of the island of Luzon including Metro Manila is actually controlling the movement of more than 60 million people. This kind of physical control coupled with aggressive social distancing and hygiene instruction of properly washing one's hands should be taken as part of implementing the massive testing of people based on its prioritized sections scheme. The result of the testing should be the basis for tracing and isolating those proven positive with COVID-19.

The abovementioned points can have positive results if the social distancing will be done together with a thorough social investigation and social preparation. Having several millions of people staying in the urban poor areas when people are living very closely with each other (3-4 households in a small space) because of the density of population in a small area and surely with very poor sanitation as well. Many if not most of these people do not have health insurance because the country has been practicing the employee-based health system. If one does not have a regular work, they are not usually covered by health insurance (Philippine Health Insurance – paid by peoples' tax and contribution). More than 20% of the country's population is living under poverty's line (earning below 2/USD a day). This massive social inequality can be seen in these peoples living in the slums areas. One can just imagine what will happen if COVID-19 visits these areas.

In addition, basic social services in these areas are almost non-existence. The big challenge therefore aside from social or physical distancing is how to properly wash their hands when many of them do not have regular water servicing.

Another almost impossible mission is how to feed the millions of quarantined people. A month after the implementation of Enhanced Community Quarantine for Metro Manila and almost a month for the island of Luzon not a few people have not yet received the promise food aid. PRRD's government through the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) through its Social Amelioration Program (SAP) with hundreds of billions of pesos already released but have not reached yet many of its target beneficiaries. There are several factors for this much delayed food aid. The DSWD, the department tasked by PRRD to implement the most needed package has to first coordinate with the Local Government Units (LGUs), which comprised almost 1,500 cities and municipalities with around 150,000 barangays or villages. These LGUs have been considered as the part of government accordingly 'knows best' in identifying the poorest of the poor constituents. But this is after PRRD had stingingly told the LGUs that he could not trust them with money. The more than P200 billion allotted for the Social Amelioration Program is intended for 18 million families/households identified as the poor – this is almost 90 million people (each family with five members). From this 18 million families, 3.7 million or 18.5 million individuals are considered the poorest of the poor who are currently receiving monthly social subsidies from the government through the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program or 4Ps Program. But there must be serious review of these figures since DSWD has been using the 2015 census made by the National Statistics Authority or NSA. The Department claimed that they have adjusted the figure every year based on estimated projected growth rate of the country's population. But still the figures of the LGUs and the DSWD are not coinciding. A case in point here is the City of Manila. The Manila LGU has identified 500,000 families as their figure for the poor including the poorest of the poor while the DSWD has only identified 350,000 families and the same with Taguig, the city of the Speaker of the House (Allan Peter Cayetano). The LGU in the City of Taguig has more 200,000 families while DSWD has only more than 100,000 families. The massive difference in figures has resulted to widespread confusion because the DSWD had distributed forms based on their figures. The LGUs are helplessly facing their peoples and these discrepancies and confusions delayed the distribution in many areas. In most cases, people blame their local governments or favoring only their supporters because the available forms have only reached this section of the population. Other LGUs would just stop the form distribution because they could not afford the division among the peoples in facing the COVID-19 contagion. The Social Amelioration form would be filled-up so as they can claim urgently the needed food aid. Almost a

month of locking down millions of people and without food would surely create an excellent breeding ground not only for COVID-19 but chaos and instability as well.

Another point is that with the figures for the 18 million households (poor and the poorest of the poor) are national in scope, other areas in Mindanao and Visayas will surely have huge figures of discrepancies.

The sections of the Philippines' population, which are having regular employment and regular income have also been hit very hard. Others are calling this middle class - the "new poor" because they have all lost their jobs and small businesses. Their number is estimated to be around 7-8 million households or around 40 million. They too have asked the PRRD government for subsidies which will be around several billions pesos. In principle, the government has considered the plight of the "new poor" and the exact amount is being appropriated.

Another factor for the delayed aid in both Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) and the DSWD is that, responsible people in both agencies are hesitant to release the needed monetary aid because they have to be careful of the guidelines set by the Commission on Audit (COA). The guidelines and policies of COA were made in the situation when there was no crisis. The PRRD government should have considered this situation. The crisis should not only be the burden of the people but government agencies as well. New guidelines should be crafted which could answer for the new normal and not the old normal situation. The imposition of Emergency is not only to ensure the control of the peoples' movement but also the policies of government agencies should adopt to an emergency situation.

Obviously, as the developments are unfolding the pre-existing conditions of different government agencies are also magnified. For one, the utter lack of unified and updated baseline data for implementing different programs, are alarming. This means that in the pre-COVID-19 period, the data which the basic programs of the government (like 4Ps) were unreliable and outdated. The country have faced various disasters in the past with these outdated baseline data, how can one measure whether emergency aid packages have indeed reached the targeted victims or constituents. For another, each government agency wants to dip their hands on the billions budgeted and allocated for the intended victims. Again, the DSWD and the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) have their own implementing scheme of the emergency package and both have shown a much delayed action. One thing is common to these agencies that are to always want to fast track for the approval of their proposed budget from peoples' money but they are not as in a hurry to implementing them. Another common among the agencies will their uniform explanation of the delay. This is, they have to comply with the Commission on Audit policies.

The continued delay of the releases of the emergency aid packages and the confusion it has created, can obviously create chaos and direct peoples actions.

The abovementioned points should be addressed soonest otherwise the people will not simply obey with the rules of the community quarantine. It will be a choice between dying of hunger or by COVID-19.

There are other important considerations in order for the lockdown to relatively succeed.

d. BUILDING UP ISLANDS of Stability

The aim of the Enhanced Community Quarantine is to either mitigate or suppress the spread of the pandemic. Staying at home for everyone is a must. For those living in cramped and heavily populated homes, there must be actions taken so as to temporarily house them during the

quarantine period.

Aside from providing enough provisions for food, this staying at home steps should be an opportunity for testing people for COVID-19, identifying the patients and carriers so that those who will be isolated can be out into limited areas. It can be calibrated into setting up the localized lockdown.

During the month of March (2020), the testing were done to people who went to the hospitals because they felt that they have the symptoms of the virus. Not a few of them were from the legislative and executive branches of government. That is why some of them tested positive. With limited test kits at that time, they have prioritized and allocated for themselves the testing because of the limited supplies of the kits. Meanwhile, those who could not be tested (this figures can be in millions) have continued to be anonymous carriers of the COVID-19.

As mentioned earlier, the total number of confirmed cases for COVID-19 patients are mainly based on the record reported from those who were hospitalized and mostly coming from Metro Manila. But as supplies of testing kits, personal protective equipment(PPEs) and with additional testing centers, the number of confirmed cases began to increase and the geographical coverage of testing began to expand outside Metro Manila.

The sudden increase of number of reported cases and its mortality has drastically increased as manifested during the 1st week of April. The number of test kits, PPEs, face masks and testing centers have begun to arrive in the last week of March both from donations and government purchases. These numbers do not manifest the real picture of the COVID-19 infected people. Many have been infected but chose to remain at homes.

These development on reported cases has been shown in the following: The Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) was imposed in the middle of March and the number of cases in March 15 up to March 19, the average number of the increased of daily cases was around 38. The number of confirmed cases on March 30, 2020 has jumped to 2,278 from 142 cases on March 15, 2020. On April 2, 2020, the confirmed cases of 2,278 from which 1,395 from Metro Manila and 1,238 outside of Metro Manila. On April 5, 2020, with the total number tested of 22,958 around 15,000 came out negative and those tested positive were 3,246 and almost 50% of these cases came from outside Metro Manila. From April 6 to 10, the average daily increased of those confirmed positive were 134 compared to just 34 daily increased of positive cases when the ECQ was imposed. This is an increase of more than 400 percent. In terms of the average number of death cases from March 15 to 19 was 16 deaths and from April 6 to 10, the average number of daily death cases was 15. This seemingly flattening of the curve in terms of the daily mortality rate right after the ECQ was imposed vis-à-vis the first week of April's mortality rate which does not show the average increase was mainly due to the absence of the vaccine and only due to the current status of the health care system of the country.

The abovementioned figures do not include the number of cases from outside the country - or from overseas Filipino workers or OFWs.

Initial reports say that more than 500 OFWs have been infected and several dozen deaths caused by the COVID-19.

It should also be mentioned that almost 10% of the total number of deaths in the country is from the health care workers - a clear manifestation of how ill-equipped the frontliners and first responders as they are directly confronting COVID-19 especially during the early stage of the pandemic.

e. ECQ Extension without Unified and COHERENT ACTIONS SEEM to be Light YEARS

AWAY

On April 6, 2020, one week before the ECQ had to end (April 14), the PRRD's government had announced the extension of the lockdown up to the end of April (April 30). The basis of the extension was not based on the assessment of the first cycle (period of virus incubation-14 days). Some lessons could have been learned and could be concrete basis for the upscaling of the next level. It was mentioned thru the spokesperson of the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Emerging Infectious Disease or IATF that they have consulted the people of the extension and 90% of them had agreed. It turned out that 90% referred to was the business sector belonging to the big enterprises. The small and medium enterprises had reacted negatively to the extension. The government has allocated big subsidies to the big enterprises - including wage allocation for their workers while the medium and small enterprises with more than half a million workers do not have clear subsidies. And worst, the people who comprised the vast majority of the population has never been consulted, just like when it was first imposed on the middle of March 2020.

With the extension of the ECQ, the PRRD's government has instituted some changes. One of the visible changes is the appointment of the Chief implementor of the Task Force fight against COVID-19. This is in the person of Secretary Carlito Galvez of the Office of the Presidential Adviser on the Peace Process (OPAPP). With the entry of Secretary Galvez, PRRD has a complete set of his Marawi Generals to lead the fight against COVID-19. Gen. Galvez was the Western Mindanao Commander when the Marawi siege occurred. The Western Mindanao Command directly supervised the operation on the ground which at that time was commanded by General Rolando Joselito Bautista, who is the current Secretary of DSWD, one of the pillars in the IATF implementing department together with the DILG and its Secretary Eduardo Año, the Chief of Staff of the Armed Forces of the Philippines during the Marawi siege against the extremist Maute and Abu Sayyaf groups.

Definitely the three generals were not able to kill the virus which started the Marawi siege, more than 17,000 Maranao IDPs are still in their temporary shelters. They are now suffering doubly because of the COVID-19. We just hope that serious lessons and challenges can be learned from both wars, where peoples' participation had been relegated to the back seats. In both cases, peoples are seemingly referred to as mere numbers and statistics. They are not counted to be important and decisive part of building and protecting their own communities. We just pray that what we see in Marawi today will not be the future picture of our fight against COVID-19 on the whole country.

Further, all of us know that the ECQ and the massive use of Personal protective Equipment, face masks, washing of hands and use of ventilators are just efforts to stop or interrupt the chain of infections. Ventilators for instance are not the cure of the disease, they are just instruments to provide oxygen to our lungs and prevent their collapse and make the victims continue to fight the virus.

They are not the cure. It has been said that it will be 18 months away before the scientists can successfully have the vaccine against the virus.

Furthermore, it is a strong belief of many scientists that since the virus started as a zoonosis (disease from animals) and spread to humans, there is therefore no natural immunity for human beings. Immunity has first to be acquired so that it can be effective in fighting a virus like the COVID-19 from inside.

According to the IATF, there will be calibrated mass testing for the potential and active COVID-19 patients on 14 April 2020, a month after the ECQ was imposed. The IATF mentioned that the aim is to have 2000 tests everyday until it can reach 2,000 per day.

The testing centers are more than a dozen now but still many are in Metro Manila with one or two in both the Visayas and Mindanao.

The big increase of number COVID-19 cases in the 1st week of April was due to the massive testing done during those periods. But it was geographically limited to Metro Manila and Luzon areas. When regular and increase testing will be implemented in the Visayas and Mindanao areas, it is expected that there will be massive increased in positive as well as mortality rates. One can just hope that the ratio of recovery will also increase.

Meanwhile with the 2nd extension of ECQ in Metro Manila and Luzon, different provinces and cities in both Visayas and Mindanao have also declared their version of the ECQ.

For almost a month of ECQ, one thing has become clear. The Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP) and the Philippine National Police(PNP) have been very passionate and energetic in implementing the ECQ and act with dispatch for those who violated the ECQ policies and rules. But one cannot see the same passion and enthusiasm for the agencies of the government who are not delivering the basic needs like food of the quarantined people. For several weeks with very limited or non-delivery of this basic needs, the people are losing their patience and have become restless.

Islands of stability should be established now. This means to institute immediately the calibrated mass testing target with calibrated lifting of the ECQ and build localized quarantine.

In terms of pandemic caused by COVID-19 - when healthy people are put in quarantine, the target day for lifting it up, seems a light years away. And as what PRRD had said earlier, if the poor are hungry there will be surely chaos. It should never be a choice between Health and Economy because its both. The country and the people need a healthy economy nothing less.

It is reassuring to state what the United Nation (UN) General Assembly has approved on April 3, 2020, a resolution calling for international cooperation and multilateralism in the fight against COVID-19. This is its first statement since the outbreak and it stresses the need for full respect for Human Rights and that there is no place for any form of discrimination, racism and xenophobia in response to the pandemic.

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P.S.

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