

Citizens Monitoring COVID-19 Response Programmes: The Philippine experience

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To contain the spread of COVID-19, strict stay-at-home orders were imposed in Metro Manila and key regions of the Philippines from mid-March to end of May 2020, severely disrupting people's lives and business activities, causing huge economic losses as well as loss of jobs and incomes among millions of Filipinos. To support badly affected households and businesses, the government launched its COVID-19 Response Programme called PH-PROGRESO in three stages: Emergency Stage (March to May 2020), Recovery Stage (June to December 2020, and Resiliency Stage (2021 onwards).

The programme was to be financed largely through the realignment of the national budget and fresh borrowings and grants from international financial institutions. Social Watch Philippines (SWP) undertook the monitoring of key programs for COVID-19 and found some bright spots as well as weaknesses

in the implementation of the programmes.

Inclusion and exclusion, adequacy of funding

Covering 18 million low-income families, with a budget of 200 billion Philippine pesos (US\$ 3.9 billion), the Social Amelioration Programme (SAP) was by far the most comprehensive government social protection measure in mitigating the adverse socio-economic impact of the pandemic and nationwide lockdown. The distribution of the first tranche of the emergency subsidy monies benefited more than 17 million families. This number drastically declined to 14 million families in the second tranche owing to de-duplication and delisting of unqualified beneficiaries. More significantly perhaps was the fact that the second tranche was limited to areas under strict lockdown. This effectively excluded millions of first tranche recipients and more than 10 billion out of the 200 billion peso budget were left unspent at the conclusion of the programme.

The COVID-19 Adjustment Measures Programme (CAMP) for

formal workers was overwhelmed by the unexpected magnitude of 1.6 million applicants nationwide. Nearly a million worker applicants had to be turned away when its budget of 3.3 billion pesos was exhausted by mid-April 2020. The Small Business Wage Subsidy (SBWS) programme targeted one million micro, small and medium enterprises and 3.59 million workers, but reached only 15 percent of these.

The two-month duration of cash assistance did not begin to match the financial and job insecurities that people experienced. Community consultations showed that the people considered the aid inadequate for their essential needs during the months-long lockdown.

The distribution of SAP cash relief encountered tremendous delays, negating the urgency of the relief measure. The subsidy was supposed to be distributed in two tranches in the months of April and May but took nine months to complete. The lengthy and manual process of beneficiary profiling, de-duplication and validation of the list of beneficiaries were the major causes of the

¹ Based on the Social Watch Philippines 'Citizens' Monitoring of Financing for Covid-19 Response and Recovery: Focus on the Asian Infrastructure and Investment Bank Loan Project' Report with support from Oxfam Pilipinas.

delay. Confusion in interpreting overlapping guidelines also contributed to delay. Delays were also experienced in the distribution of SBWS subsidies to former CAMP beneficiaries due to verification of the amount of top-up that should be given to the latter.

The local governments and neighbourhoods (*barangays*) played a critical part in implementing the SAP programme. Their role in data collection and beneficiary identification and validation including in the distribution of cash aid has helped the programme achieve its targets. The local governments also provided local funds for COVID-19 programmes and services like testing, vaccination, support to local hospitals and financial and relief assistance to the residents.

Yet, the intrusion of discretionary politics at the local level, particularly in the identification of potential beneficiaries, as well as corruption in the cash subsidy distribution process marred the implementation of the SAP programme. *Barangay* captains were reported to have favoured relatives and political allies in the distribution of the social amelioration cards. There have been reports of *barangay* officials chopping up a single pay-out into several parts for different households, beneficiaries receiving very small amounts, and low-income households not receiving aid at all while better-off households do.

Citizen participation. Some citizens groups managed to create

access points for participation in the implementation of the SAP programme that helped ensure that it would reach and benefit the intended beneficiaries. This was evidenced in the experience of some *barangays* in Manila and Tacloban City. Women leaders and senior citizens in the community actively participated and led in closely monitoring and scrutinizing the beneficiary lists to ensure that qualified beneficiaries were included and in pointing out irregularities in the distribution of subsidies. In another instance, consensus building among *barangay* officials and beneficiaries helped diffuse a potentially contentious issue in the distribution of SAP subsidies.

Women and children were the first to suffer as the local health systems at the *barangay* level were forced to limit or suspend community services, for example, pre-natal consultation, family planning, free contraceptives, children's immunization due to the lockdown enforced by the national government. The pandemic exposed existing health issues, such as lack of water, sanitation and hygiene, that have long been felt by the community. Shifting to online classes of children entailed additional costs for internet connection, computers, cellphones and cellphone load. It also meant expenses for protective gears like face masks and face shields.

Women tended to feel and take on a lot more responsibility than men during the pandemic. As men were forced to stay home due

to job loss, women continued on with household chores and added responsibility of helping children with their online classes, caring for sick members and taking on casual jobs to earn some money.

Policy and programme recommendations

Harmonization and integration of different social protection programmes is desirable as it eliminates fragmentation, duplication and overlapping of mandates and target populations that is not only administratively costly but confusing as well to the targeted programme beneficiaries.

More strategically, it is advisable to adopt a policy of geographic universality for the provision of cash transfers, focusing first on the poorest villages and municipalities with a view to scaling up until the coverage is universal. This is because this not only promotes a right-based entitlement approach but also expedites the delivery process as it does away with the tedious and inefficient targeting of specific households which oftentimes excludes others who need the provisions too.

Women have multiple roles in family and society that are further put to challenge in times of crisis like the pandemic. Policy attention to women and their needs should inform the design of social protection programmes such as by strengthening institutions of care (e.g., public daycare centres, health centres, schools) which will allow them more

time for self-care or to look for opportunities for paid work.

Finally, it is important to provide substantive and meaningful spaces for citizens' participation in the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of programmes that aim to address the health and livelihood crisis spawned by the COVID-19 pandemic. This will also be necessary as the country 'moves on' from the pandemic and builds a more transformative future.