

ICSSR-PSSC WEBINAR SERIES

NARRATIVES OF COVID-19

**FROM THE SOCIAL SCIENCE COMMUNITIES
IN INDIA AND THE PHILIPPINES**

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FOREWORD

COVID-19 is not merely a disease. It has a sociocultural “life,” a context marked by great divides and inequities—socioeconomic and health status, social protection, respect for human rights and dignity, and access to health care and vaccines—which influence how the disease has spread, how it has been experienced, and what interventions have been undertaken to stem its threat to the health and safety of individuals, communities, and societies. These structural differences amidst the infodemic have further exacerbated existing vulnerabilities and risks across and within societies, communities, groups, and between individuals. The aforementioned complexities have become increasingly evident to me in the course of my work as a health sociologist (with training in clinical epidemiology and global health) and as a member of expert panels working on COVID-19.

In a 2020 commentary published in the *Lancet*, Richard Horton argued that “COVID-19 is not a pandemic. It is a syndemic. Approaching COVID-19 as a syndemic will invite a larger vision, one encompassing education, employment, housing, food, and environment.”

It has been nearly 73 years since the Republic of India and the Republic of the Philippines established diplomatic relations on 26 November 1949. The three webinars hosted by the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) and the Philippine Social Science Council (PSSC) showcase opportunities for further deepening the ties between India and the Philippines, between ICSSR and PSSC, and between Filipino and Indian social scientists even in midst of the challenges posed by COVID-19.

The rich discussions shared in this monograph highlight the important role which the social sciences and social scientists have played in capturing the collective and individual dilemmas, triumphs and failures; and the need for evidence-informed and compassionate policy responses at the global, country, and local levels in India and the Philippines. Transdisciplinary collaboration, research, advocacy, and action within and across borders need to be further enhanced to address the syndemic which is COVID-19.

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PREFACE

The Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) has a bilateral agreement with the Philippine Social Science Council (PSSC), which aims at developing a better understanding of social sciences and humanities in India and the Philippines through collaborative research, networks of social scientists, and free and open exchange of relevant information. The collaboration between ICSSR and PSSC also aims at enabling sustained and continuing partnerships in the social sciences, including more exchanges of researchers, methodologies, training resources, publications and results, as well as promoting high standards of research and excellence in the social sciences. Among the priorities under this collaboration are addressing current problems in society and promoting multidisciplinary and structurally oriented social science research instructions in areas of medium- and long-term interests.

To formally launch the collaboration, ICSSR and PSSC jointly hosted a series of webinars focusing on the works, stories, and experiences of social scientists during the COVID-19 pandemic. The webinar series named “Narratives of COVID-19 from the Social Science Communities in India and the Philippines” specifically aimed to encourage academic exchanges that inquire into perspectives and responses to COVID-19 by the governments and social scientists in India and Philippines and to support knowledge-generation sharing and collegial collaboration between and among academics from the two countries. An average of around 455 participants for each webinar attended virtually from different parts of the Philippines, India, and other Asian countries.

The objectives of the webinar series were: (1) to initiate a cross-country learning exchange between ICSSR and PSSC; (2) encourage knowledge integration, sharing, and collegial collaboration between and among social scientists to deepen the discourse on the role of social science especially during the COVID-19 pandemic; and (3) link the products of social science knowledge to context-specific public policies.

The first webinar was held on 15 October 2020 with the theme “Examining the COVID-19 Responses of India and the Philippines.” Dr. Michael L. Tan and Dr. Gregorio E.H. del Pilar were the presenter and reactor, respectively, from the Philippines while Dr. Sachin Chaturvedi and Prof. Bhushan Patwardhan represented India as the presenter and reactor, respectively.

On 18 November 2020, the second webinar was held with the theme “Social

Protection Policies and Mechanisms in India and the Philippines during COVID-19 Pandemic.” Dr. Judy M. Taguiwalo served as the presenter while Dr. Rosalinda P. Ofreneo was the reactor for the Philippines. Prof. Ramesh Chand and Dr. Arvind Virmani were the presenter and reactor, respectively, from India.

With the theme “Economic Stimulus during COVID-19,” the third webinar was held on 28 January 2021. Representing the Philippines were Dr. Stella Luz A. Quimbo as the presenter and Mr. AJ Montesa as the reactor. Dr. Nagesh Kumar and Prof. DK Nauriyal were the presenter and reactor, respectively, from India.

The COVID-19 crisis has exposed stark global inequities, fragilities, and unsustainable practices that predate this pandemic and have intensified its impact. Recovering better from COVID-19 is contingent on serious efforts to strengthen health systems, shore up social protections, protect economic opportunities, bolster multilateral collaboration, and enhance social cohesion. Given the scale of action needed, the socioeconomic recovery from the effects of COVID-19 also provides a historic opportunity to reimagine societies using a human rights lens and initiate the transformative changes needed to achieve a better and brighter future envisioned in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Insights from a full range of disciplines including the natural sciences, engineering, health sciences, social sciences, and the humanities are needed now more than ever. Faced with pressing challenges and limited resources, governments urgently need robust evidence to inform critical policy decisions. Research will become more relevant in order to learn from promising initiatives already in place around the world and to identify how solutions can be adapted and scaled up to meet local and regional needs. Creative, inclusive, and responsive research is also necessary for identifying drivers of change, assessing policy options, implementing choices successfully, and ensuring that the expected benefits bear out for all. More importantly, research can also help reveal who has been left out or left behind, and how best to include the voices and meet the needs of marginalized populations. Achieving the full potential of research will require investment in, and support for, the research ecosystem, which has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. These must also be built back better to avert, withstand, and respond to future crises.

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus the need for large-scale plans that reimagine and rebuild health, as well as social and economic systems, so that no one will be left behind. The imagination, curiosity, and solidarity of the global research community can carve a path to a better and brighter future outlined in the sustainable development goals.

COVID-19 has devastated communities and economies around the world and has profoundly transformed the ways in which we live and work. Although many of those effects will, no doubt, prove to be temporary, the pandemic has also created opportunities for us to “build back better” once the immediate threat recedes. While medical science has been at the front and center of the response to the virus itself,

social scientists have a powerful role to play in our recovery from it.

The social sciences do not produce much in the way of patentable widgets or, indeed, life-saving vaccines. However, the analysis and insights social scientists generate can and do underpin better-evidenced decisions and help guide and target insights from the “natural” sciences. There is no point in devising lockdowns that nobody will follow or in developing a vaccine that nobody will take. Social scientists can help policymakers develop solutions that people are able and, crucially, willing to follow through. Work by social scientists on the effective and acceptable delivery of mass vaccination programs, for example, might soon be highly relevant. Because they tell us the important things about human behaviors, relationships, and institutions, social scientists can help deliver these outcomes.

The social sciences also have an urgent role to play in ensuring that the voices of communities affected by the pandemic are represented in discussions, and that relevant stakeholders are involved in decisions that affect them. For example, we might usefully revisit lessons learned from anthropological work delivering rapid, real-time advice and guidance during the Ebola crisis, which saved lives and reduced the spread of the outbreak. These and many other examples of the impacts of social science demonstrate the importance of having local knowledge, which the social sciences can provide.

Enthused by the success of this webinar series, a monograph out of the proceedings of the lectures delivered in the webinars was planned to be published. Representatives from the Philippines and India have agreed to coordinate with their respective speakers and reactors for their comments and suggestions for any further improvement in the manuscripts before undergoing copyediting.

ICSSR acknowledges the contributions of speakers and reactors from both countries for this webinar series. All of us stand enriched by well-researched and highly informed presentations.

Prof. V. K. Malhotra

Member Secretary

Indian Council of Social Science Research

Part 1

Examining the COVID-19 Responses of India and the Philippines

15 October 2020

EXAMINING THE COVID-19 RESPONSES OF THE PHILIPPINES

Michael L. Tan

The best way to deal with one of the more important issues during the pandemic, that is, the response of the Philippine government is to talk about governance, culture, and COVID-19 management in the country.

One of the problems that the Philippines faces is that the management of COVID-19 in the country has been controlled by the military. Most members of the COVID-19 Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases are military men, which can be problematic because of the punitive quarantine rules that were enforced. For example, in some urban poor areas, residents were not allowed to even sit in front of their homes. Children and the elderly were the most affected, but so too were migrants and temporarily stranded individuals, people who were not from Manila, and those who could not go home in their provinces.

Combined with the punitive measures is the blatant impunity. There were double standards exposed by the mass media showing government officials, who were strict with violators, break their own rules.

What was particularly disturbing during this so-called “quarantine” was that, if there was anything being quarantined, it was the civil liberties of people. A new law, Republic Act No. 11479 or the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020, allows warrantless arrests and detentions. ABS-CBN, the country’s largest media network has been closed down, supposedly due to violations on foreign equity. Journalists and others who are critical of Rodrigo Duterte’s administration have been arrested, sued, or killed.

When you look at the COVID-19 discourse and what is happening elsewhere, there is a very tragic convergence. An urban poor activist, Reina Nacino, was pregnant when she was arrested in November 2019. Her child, River, was born in July and separated from her after a month. The child died of pneumonia in October 2020. Reina was granted a three-day furlough to be with the child at the wake and the funeral. But this was modified to three hours for the wake and another three hours for the burial. The scene at the wake of Reina Nacino’s daughter was



Figure 1. Detained activist and grieving mother Reina Mae Nasino only has six hours to be with her baby during her wake and burial (Metro Manila (CNN Philippines, October 14).

Source: <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/10/14/Reina-Mae-Nasino-Baby-River-wake-burial-furlough-appeal.html>

atrocious. The military brought her to the cemetery in personal protective equipment (PPE) and handcuffs. This is not the way you go about consoling someone who has lost a loved one. The requirement to wear a personal protective equipment might be understandable because the military said she might pick up the virus and carry it to the jail or detention centers and infect others. However, restraining her for even touching her child's coffin was brutal.

All of this, of course, had been in the name of addressing the COVID-19 emergency. Yet, despite the relatively early response, the Philippines has Southeast and East Asia's highest number of infections with 344,000 reported infections and 6,000 deaths, with a continued increase of 1,500 to 4,000 cases each day (as of October 2020).

What about the people's response? The recent nationwide public opinion survey from Pulse Asia revealed a 91 percent general trust rating for President Duterte. This is higher by four points from the last survey, leading many social analysts, including the polling firm itself, to wonder what exactly was going on.

There is an interesting comparison that, halfway across the world, another populist president, Jair Bolsonaro of Brazil ("tropical Trump"), whose COVID-19 policies have been as terrible as Donald Trump's, reached his highest approval ratings in August at 37 percent (still trailing far behind Duterte). Nonetheless, these figures are still considered very high for Brazil. Analysts surmised that people were satisfied because they had reserved financial assistance.

The case is similar to the Philippines. One of the explanations for the high approval rating of President Duterte was the release of the first tranche of social

amelioration program funds that took three months to be distributed, which may have boosted his ratings. Even if the distribution was accompanied by allegations of corruption—so much so that the national government itself decided to remove the second tranche of distribution from the discretion of local government officials—his high trust rating remained stable.

Populism puts people in power, and it has actually been fairly easy for such leaders to keep a country hostage using fear and promises of redemption through authoritarian governance, which is the reason why there is a need to interrogate some of the measures that have been bandied around.

There was a Global Health Security Index produced last year, which examined the preparedness of countries using biomedical criteria such as those regarding pathogens, epidemics, a robust health sector, commitment to improving national capacity and financing, and adherence to norms. These five criteria, unsurprisingly, are mostly applicable to the top countries in the Global Health Security Index and are countries that would be most prepared for health emergencies: the United States, the United Kingdom, Netherlands, Australia, and Canada. The United States, for a time, had one of the biggest problems with COVID-19; the United Kingdom was not that much better off.

These give us something to think about as social scientists. We have to look at the many factors about the rankings which are quite high where some do very well, but others are not doing well at all. Meanwhile, the Lancet COVID-19 Commission issued an interesting statement that enumerates 10 priority actions in dealing with COVID-19. Again, while these remain heavily biomedical, there are references to the need to protect vulnerable groups, long-term financial reforms, and justice in the access to tools to combat COVID-19.

Missing in the Global Health Security Index and in the Lancet COVID-19 Commission Statement are references to culture and governance, as well as the culture governance-interface, as we see in the interactions of populist leaders and citizens. This gives more impetus to formulate a qualitative research agenda in order to capture the full picture of the pandemic. Doing so will allow more voices to be heard, as well as offer analysis with an understanding of the power relations that affect, for example, survey or polling results.

It is time to bring back Raymond Williams' notion on the "structures of feeling." Mainly used in the arts and humanities, structures of feeling refer to the different ways of thinking that emerge at any one point in time. In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, we might want to talk more about gathering narratives that capture such ways of thinking. The "structures of feeling" appears in the gap between the official discourse of policy and regulations, the popular response to official discourse, and its appropriation in literary and other cultural texts. We should be looking at all the different representations of COVID-19 expressed through cartoons, jokes, and songs, among others.

There is a need to document examples of COVID-19 management that are both compassionate and scientific. Reports have come up about women's leadership. Throughout the world, countries that are headed by women seem to do much better. In the Philippines, despite our rather dismal situation, there have been local officials (e.g., mayors and governors) who are making a difference because they had the heart. For example, Pasig City mayor Vico Sotto supported the use of tricycles when public transport was unavailable. He looked for ways to help the poor. When they lost a loved one, he made arrangements for funeral parlors to provide free cremation. Such narratives are part of the structures of feeling that transform and are transformative.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER



Dr. Michael L. Tan is a medical anthropologist. He is professor emeritus at the University of the Philippines Diliman, a former chancellor and a clinical professor in the College of Medicine at the University of the Philippines Manila where he directs a graduate degree program in medical anthropology and lectures for graduate programs in genetic counseling and bioethics. He is also an affiliate faculty with the College of Science and the Tri-College Philippine Studies program at the University of the Philippines Diliman.

Dr. Tan has served in local and international health committees in the Department of Health and the World Health Organization and has been a consultant for various organizations including UNICEF, DANIDA, the European Union, the Ford Foundation, and the Rockefeller Foundation. In 2012, Dr. Tan was appointed as a National Academician and a member of the National Academy of Science and Technology, the highest advisory body to the government on science and technology.

REACTION

Gregorio E. H. del Pilar on Michael Tan's Presentation

Dr. Gregorio E.H. del Pilar supported Dr. Tan's comparison between Philippine president Rodrigo Duterte and Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro. Dr. Tan's reference to Raymond William's work on "structures of feeling" prompted Dr. del Pilar to cite Sigmund Freud, whose theory of the unconscious has been verified, in many of its aspects, by rigorous experimental methods. Dr. del Pilar pointed out that in particular, it has been established that a lot of psychological processing takes place at the subconscious level.

He continues: Intuitively, this makes sense, because for example, when people are preoccupied with a problem, quite often this can be resolved upon waking up. This is the reason why there is an expression "sleeping on a problem." Some important scientific discoveries have come about as a result of dreams. In other words, the mind continues to function at the subconscious level even without one's awareness, and even during sleep.

There are also familiar experiences of suddenly having a feeling that we cannot explain. At one time, a person may feel fine, then all of a sudden, he or she may feel blue or discouraged without knowing the exact reason. Psychologists have explained that there is actually an accumulation of events that do not fully enter one's consciousness. It could be a remark that somebody made, or a something that was seen, and registered at a low level of consciousness that people may not be aware of. But because of an accumulation of these perceptions that affect people negatively, the feeling of being discouraged builds up and reaches consciousness. These are consistent with Freudian theory, which could give us an insight about the influence of populist leaders in the Philippines and Brazil.

Another theory, this time from social psychology, is that of Carl Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory, a classic social psychological theory. It posits that opposing cognitions or behaviors produce tension. For example, the smoker's cognition or knowledge that smoking is bad for one's health produces tension. The individual is motivated to reduce the tension by changing either the cognition or the behavior. He or she can change his/her behavior and no longer smoke because of its adverse effects on his/her health. Or, the person may change his belief that smoking is not quite healthy and continue smoking. In either case, cognition and behavior are now consonant with one another, and as a consequence, the psychological tension is reduced. Further, according to Festinger, the larger the dissonance, the larger the change in cognition or behavior.

To test the cognitive dissonance theory using a classic laboratory setup, two groups are given a boring task. They are asked to fill out sheets of graphing paper, with their multitude of little squares, with random numbers. Or they are asked to stack cubes one on top of the other to find out how high the cubes can go before they fall. The two groups are treated differently: one group is given \$20 as a reward, and another group is given \$1. The groups are then asked to rate the pleasantness of the task. Most people would say that the group receiving \$20 would give a higher rating. However, it is often the case that the group receiving \$1 end up giving a higher rating. The difference in the rating can be explained by the higher dissonance produced in the group receiving \$1. Members of the group might think: “I’m doing this boring task even if I’m being given only a one-dollar reward.” Members of the group will then give a high rating because they have to resolve the dissonance: “I’m given such a lousy reward but it’s okay, because it is a pleasant task.” Meanwhile, the group receiving \$20 may find the task boring, but since “I’m being given 20 dollars, I’m doing it anyway.” The greater dissonance is produced in the \$1-group and as a consequence, they fool themselves more. They change their cognition about the pleasantness of the task.

Proceeding from his explanation of the cognitive dissonance standard experiments, Dr. del Pilar explained why populist leaders could be rated very highly particularly during times of crises: the build up of the various problems during the pandemic—friends losing their livelihood, people’s uncertainty about how their health will hold up, and how they will cope in case it doesn’t, given that hospitals are full to the rafters—are perceived at the subconscious level, and need to be resolved with the question of how to address all these. To recognize confusion and helplessness would be greatly dissonant with the threat that these problems pose. Cognitions that their leader is weak and does not know how to lead are dismissed. Instead, there is a tendency to think: “No, my leader is fine. He can deal with it,” thus resolving cognitive dissonance. This is why we find, puzzlingly, that leaders like Duterte and Bolsonaro have high ratings despite the fact that they have not really performed commendably.

Dr. del Pilar joined Dr. Tan in suggesting that more positive stories be told about the Philippine experience during the pandemic. Social scientists can put more effort into communicating with the public. For example, instead of just saying “You cannot go out without masks,” an explanation as to why this is so must be provided. Social distancing, if explained sufficiently, may dispel fears and may produce greater confidence in the population so that dissonances are lessened.

Dissonances at the subconscious level are perhaps the most dangerous ones. Bringing dissonant cognitions to the level of consciousness, and then examining whether these dissonant cognitions are valid or not, would enable one to find more valid conclusions. This would increase the confidence of people to confront the situation more realistically, and as a consequence, they would be able to better decide

and provide better input for policy making. Speaking out their minds, bringing their complaints to the authorities, and being able to reason as to why they should be attended to and how they can cooperate can advance correct and better solutions to the pandemic.



ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Dr. Gregorio E. H. del Pilar served as president of the National Research Council of the Philippines and chair of the council's Division of Social Sciences. He serves in the executive board of the World Association for Personality Psychology and is a fellow (Kadiwang Panghabangbuhay) of the Pambansang Samahan sa Sikolohiyang Pilipino and the Psychological Association of the Philippines.

Dr. del Pilar obtained his AB Psychology from the University of the Philippines Diliman (cum laude) and his Doctorate in Differential Psychology Mention Très Honorable avec Félicitations (with Distinction) from the Université de Paris Nanterre in 1998.

With roots from Bulacan in Central Luzon, del Pilar is popular among the scholarly circles as an advocate of the use of Filipino as a medium of instruction and in daily and professional communication. He has also supported the use of Filipino as language in research and translated many of his research works in Filipino. Del Pilar is related to his namesake, the Philippine hero Gen. Gregorio Hilario del Pilar y Sempio, his great granduncle.

EXAMINING THE COVID-19 RESPONSES OF INDIA

Sachin Chaturvedi

What exactly can social scientists contribute to supplement wider efforts to address the COVID-19 crisis?

The Indian government, in the last six months or so, has implemented an effective communication program on the exact nature of the crisis. This was led by Prime Minister Narendra Modi himself. The story of how COVID-19 is handled in India is an impressive account of effective communication centered around the use of face masks, as well as the observance of quarantine, isolation, and physical distancing. Capitalizing on the strength of India's film industry, the strategy includes leveraging Bollywood stars, social leaders, and industrial houses, among others, to communicate health protocols.

Effective communication has played a crucial role in implementing health protocols, as oftentimes, the use of force by the police has not been required. Furthermore, there was an effective communication between the Ministry of Finance and the Central Bank of India to tackle the crisis—a convergence between fiscal and monetary policy.

Impressive and seamless convergences have happened to address the pandemic. First, science and technology institutions came under a single leadership led by the principal scientific adviser of the Indian government. This was the single most important achievement for India, as all the scientific institutions worked together to solve the crisis brought about by the pandemic.

The second important convergence was the coming together of more than 30 states with the central government, the state government, and local governments to harmonize government response—a smooth flow of information across these administrative entities was observed.

The third notable convergence was the leveraging of traditional and modern medicines. Knowing how this came to be is in itself interesting, given that indigenous communities have been using medicinal and aromatic plants for decades, if not centuries. The practice of using indigenous medicines is cultural. Being a British colony, India, at some point, picked up several practices which were not part of its

culture, such as the handshake, which differs from India's traditional style of wishing people. Hygienic practices of traditional Indian societies, such as keeping shoes out of one's home, were muddled in the last 70 years or so. However, the pandemic has brought back a renewed cultural appreciation of traditional practices useful in combating COVID-19.

Apart from emphasizing evidence-based policymaking and the round-the-clock leadership by the Indian Council of Medical Research, there were more ways to respond to the crisis, such as collecting evidence and cooperative federalism with civil society organizations. More than government-led processes, communities contributed to the campaign. India's prime minister, since day one of the outbreak, has emphasized the importance of communities and people; hence, a people-centric COVID-19 strategy became the crux of India's response to the health crisis.

The millions of deaths recorded in India is not any different from the rest of the world. However, with India's huge population, the deaths and the losses it has experienced are miniscule in terms of the huge strata of the Indian society. Known in the past to have a stringent obedience to the caste system, India's development parameters in the last 70 years have remained completely beyond the strict adherence to the strata in Indian society. New developments and industrial models have emerged in such a fashion that migrations continuously occurred over the last several decades. When this crisis hit, reverse migration started toward the rural areas and the dramatic movement was huge, thus resulting in the likely possibility that these people would be affected.

Surprisingly, the village communities have emerged as the most brilliant communities in India, which helped avert the crisis. The villagers exercised restraint, and as a result, there was a decline in new cases. The peculiarities, distinctiveness, and strengths of village-level health strategies are now being heralded as a positive note for the future.

India's geographical size, population, diversity of cultures, democratic society, and the new faith that people have acquired in India's governance are factors to be considered in addressing the pandemic. Science, innovation, and technologies, such as informational, pharmaceutical, and biomedical technologies have also emerged.

India and the Philippines have a lot of similarities as both are democratic societies and use technologies for COVID-19 management. For instance, web-based portals connected to various applications guide individuals about the infection in their surroundings and keep people alert and aware of the various dimensions of the infection. Another similarity between the two countries is their gross domestic product (GDP) growth, which has largely affected their economies.

Awareness of the virus came early in India: all travels from China were banned on 2 February 2020. The Indian government acted quickly and started observing the sequence of events in China and the failure of Chinese quarantine agencies. Early mapping of the impact of the virus helped India to cope with the crisis and ensure medical supplies. Led by the Prime Minister's Office, state governments and

the Ministry of Health brought in civil society, health workers, citizens, science technology-innovation centers, the media, and even village heads (*panchayats*) to be connected and to participate in the process. The prime minister addressed two meetings with village heads— an example of effective communication, which emerged as a major connection or link to the people. The eGramSwaraj portal was used by the prime minister to provide timely and detailed information about COVID-19 and settle issues related to the pandemic. In fact, when the parliament was not in session, India used this system to legislate ordinances.

The National Institute for Transforming India (NITI), formerly the Planning Commission, provided inputs for getting ordinances cleared. Dr. Ramesh Chand, a member of the agriculture sector in the NITI Aayog exerted efforts to ensure that agricultural products from farmers were free from all quarantine or lockdown restrictions. Despite the lockdown, farmers have emerged as winners, being contributors to India's GDP growth. They were allowed to freely transact their business and subsequently, more legislations were passed to enable more farmers and village society's participation in the process of recovery from the pandemic.

The pandemic also has a huge impact on education. Government initiatives focused on school teachers because all educational institutions were closed down. Moving forward, the educational system should continue to work and cope through the e-learning system that has emerged as a success story for India.

Easing market anxieties was equally important and, to this end, the Reserve Bank of India constituted teams in which more than 200 people were logged in a hotel to run a 24/7 operation of all the e-transactions needed to keep moving. Without any disruption, financial and digital technologies worked with billions of transactions that transpired during the pandemic months. These 200 people were locked inside a hotel in Mumbai (India's financial hub) to facilitate these transactions. Strong information technology support and the commitment of dedicated workers have eased up the problems related to the pandemic. Added to this is the government's tax concessions, the interest rate deferment, and the delayed filing of penalties, among others, that unburdened many Indian citizens.

In some cases, the Supreme Court has intervened to waive penalties and other tax obligations. Moreover, the Reserve Bank of India allowed long-term operations in support of a mutual fund and several other schemes for micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs). New classification and specific measures were announced for MSMEs, which could address the requirements of daily wagers, as well as the requirements for microfinancing MSMEs. The direct benefit transfer program, which distributed 6,000 Rupees to all the farmers in the previous fiscal year, has been a success for the government. The government also announced several fiscal stimuli—Stimulus 1.0 and Stimulus 2.0—to provide wherewithal to the industrial and economic community. It is expected that in the next year, India would bounce back and its economy would likely get the necessary traction that it needed, according to the Reserve Bank of India.

As solving the COVID-19 crisis involves innovation, India could reduce the whole cost of operations, with science and technology playing an extremely important role. For example, the mobile app Arogya Setu, as part of the Global Vaccine Development Initiative, saw some success.

There are also clinical trials under the AYUSH's (Ayurveda Yoga Unani Siddha Homeopathy)-related initiatives with protocols have already been introduced. Due to the influence of Western countries, people completely forgot the strength of India's own medicinal and aromatic plants. However, that this time around, India tried new leaves and herbs, which it used in the past to cure COVID-19, and were proven effective. The prime minister publicly came out in favor of AYUSH, and as a result, a sequence of meetings, discussions, and media reports featured the advantages of plants, which can be leveraged for giving immunity, vitality, and protection among the people.

Civil society organizations played an important role in fighting against COVID-19. Grassroots organizations stepped up and implemented cooperative federalism of sorts, with states supporting them. This could not have been achieved without the clarity on the development initiatives of the government itself.

Among the other successful initiatives that India instituted include: the digital payment platform BHIM and the Clean India Drive, a national bio-pharma mission, which maintained the hygiene and cleanliness of areas. Other concepts employed by the government were: people-centric development, civil society, and traditional knowledge, among others, which altogether played a crucial role in responding to the pandemic.

Finally, the participation of the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) leaders in the overall pandemic response also proved important. Although members of the regional association were not always very cooperative, they extended help in this hour of crisis. India pledged \$10 million to the SAARC and also sent out several million doses of hydroxychloroquine, and also extended full support to Africa, Mozambique, and other places. Several SAARC leaders personally congratulated India for these initiatives. South-to-South cooperation and partnerships with fellow developing countries were affected: the distinction between the North and South became blurred, with vulnerabilities of both the North and the South thoroughly exposed.

The COVID-19 crisis has shown that interdependence and global partnerships are of great significance, similar to the partnership between the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) and the Philippine Social Science Council (PSSC). With the pandemic still lingering in the lives of many people worldwide, there is a need to watch out, unfortunately, on the vulnerability of other countries, which is extremely high when it comes to the irresponsibility and reckless infusion of technology in solving the global crisis.

A pandemic network among countries is needed. Social scientists are needed to bring more clarity and understanding to issues related to the pandemic. As the

public health crisis unfolds, there is a need to see how social scientists can cope with the crisis, particularly, the economic and public health crises, as well as issues related to social distancing and communication. The bottom line here is: How do we encourage governments and other agencies to communicate to their constituents?

ABOUT THE SPEAKER



Prof. Sachin Chaturvedi is director general at the Research and Information System for Developing Countries, a New Delhi-based policy research institute supported by the Indian government. He works on issues related to development economics involving development finance. He is also on the board of the Reserve Bank of India.

He has authored and edited 10 books, apart from contributing chapters in edited volumes and publishing several research articles in various prestigious journals. He is a member of the Editorial Advisory Board of IDS Bulletin based in Sussex.

Prof. Chaturvedi was a global justice fellow at the MacMillan Center for International Affairs at Yale University. He has served as a visiting professor at the Jawaharlal Nehru University. He was a developing country fellow at the University of Amsterdam (1996), a visiting fellow at the Institute of Advanced Studies, Shimla (2003), and visiting scholar at the German Development Institute (2007).

REACTION

Bhushan Patwardhan on Sachin Chaturvedi's Presentation

There is a very active bilateral collaboration between the Indian Council of Social Science Research (ICSSR) and the Philippine Social Science Council (PSSC). The purpose of the Memorandum of Understanding between the ICSSR and PSSC is to develop a better understanding of social sciences and humanities in India and the Philippines through collaborative research, free and open exchange of relevant information, and several activities including this webinar series. The series is appropriately named as stories from social science communities in India and the Philippines are told.

India and the Philippines have so much in common in our civilization, culture, customs, business, food, traditions, medicines, health practices, and spiritual practices, among others. We can learn from each other and work together to find solutions to our common problems, as well as for the rest of the world.

As mentioned by Dr. Sachin Chaturvedi, India has successfully used traditional medicine, including Ayurveda, yoga, and simple home remedies, such as spices, herbs, medicated hot water, and different kinds of oils, especially sesame oil. The steam inhalation and gargles using turmeric is being extensively consumed in India. Yoga has been found to be useful in improving respiratory efficiency and mental health. Simple and safe interventions have been found to be important in improving immunity and in facilitating shading or reduction of viral load in controlling the progress of COVID-19 and in preventing further complications.

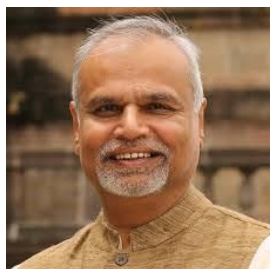
Recently, the Indian Ministry of Health and Family Welfare has added a section on Ayurveda and yoga protocols for the prevention and management of mild cases of COVID-19. This, of course, is in addition to the non-pharmacological measures such as physical distancing, wearing of face masks, washing hands, and sanitizing homes, the environment, among others.

In contrast to the existing medical protocols for moderate to severe cases of COVID-19, there is some kind of integrative approach wherein best practices from both traditional and modern medicines are brought together for the interest of the people. Such an approach has provided very practical, affordable, and safer solutions for the population.

Over 60 clinical trials on traditional medicine, which are called the AYUSH (Ayurveda Yoga Unani Siddha Homeopathy) systems of medicine, are put together by this independent ministry of Traditional Medicine. AYUSH has developed a unique and integrative protocol where modern and traditional aspects of medicine are endorsed by the Government of India.

Modern medicine or medical care alone is not sufficient in the treatment of any illness because health has a social dimension. The social sciences, thus, have an equally important role to play in managing health effectively.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER



Dr. Bhushan Patwardhan is presently the vice chancellor at the Symbiosis International University and a distinguished professor at the Interdisciplinary School of Health Sciences in Savitribai Phule Pune University.

Prof. Patwardhan has over 40 years of experience in higher education, scientific research, and institutional governance. He is one of the top cited biomedical scientists and is a fellow of the National Academy of Sciences and the National Academy of Medical Sciences in India. He was vice chairperson of the University Grants Commission and Chair of the Indian Council of Social Science Research.

Currently, he serves as the chairperson of the Interdisciplinary Ayush Research and Development Task Force on COVID-19. He holds a membership in the following: the advisory committee constituted by the Ministry of AYUSH, the National Board of Examination, the Lancet Citizens' Commission, and the task force for the proposed World Health Organization Global Center for Traditional Medicine.

He has worked on several policy making committees and task forces for the National Knowledge Commission, Planning Commission, NITI Aayog, and the Lancet Citizens' Commission on Reimagining Indian Health System. He was a temporary consultant to the World Health Organization. He has made original contributions in evidence-based Ayurveda especially in Ayurvedic biology, ethnopharmacology, natural product drug development, and integrative approaches to improve the public health system.

Part 2

Examining Social Protection among Vulnerable Groups during COVID-19

18 November 2020

EXAMINING SOCIAL PROTECTION AMONG VULNERABLE GROUPS DURING COVID-19

Judy M. Taguiwalo

The Philippines is a rich country with vast economic and social inequality. It is rich in natural resources, fertile agricultural land, abundant mineral deposits on land and offshore, fish and other aqua food from fresh and seawater. Unfortunately, economic and income inequality continues to plague the country. The Philippine income inequality (measured by the Gini coefficient or index) is at 45 percent, one of the most unequal in the world.

Income inequality is also evident in the income gap between the top 500 income earners in the Philippines who earn an average of 400 million pesos a month or approximately 800,000 US dollars a month, based on the income tax filing of the top 500 income earners in the country. Meanwhile, the minimum wage for daily laborers is only 537 pesos (an average of 11,814 pesos per month or roughly 300 US dollars). However, income-based poverty measures are not sufficient in capturing the multidimensional character of poverty in the Philippines. Access to social services (e.g., health, education, and housing), political participation, quality of employment, vulnerability to violence, and social security are some elements of well-being that are not captured by income-based poverty measures.

The Philippines has a high unemployment and underemployment rate. Official government statistics placed the unemployment and underemployment rate in July 2019 prior to the pandemic, at 5.4 percent and 13.6 percent, respectively. It would get worse with the lockdown starting on March 15.

Nevertheless, there is a social protection program in place. The National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) Social Development Committee defined social protection as: “policies and programs that seek to reduce poverty and vulnerability to risk, and enhance the social status and rights of the marginalized by promoting and protecting livelihood and employment, protecting against hazards and sudden loss of income, and improving people’s capacity to manage risks.”

Who are the vulnerable groups? The same committee defined vulnerable groups as: “the inherently vulnerable who are the poor and transient poor, children, women,

persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, overseas Filipinos and their families, and older persons.” Even non-vulnerable groups also face economic risks such as low and irregular incomes, and financial or economic crisis, with other risks brought about by environmental and natural hazards or governance and politics. Currently, an additional risk, brought about by the global pandemic, looms large.

What are the key social protection programs of the government? There is the social assistance program known as the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) or the conditional cash transfer program and the social pension program for the older persons, 60 years old and above. There is social insurance from retirement pension from both the private and the government sectors. Another insurance system is the PhilHealth (Philippine Health Insurance Corporation) Insurance Program which is both a social insurance for employed Filipinos who pay monthly contributions and a social assistance for citizens aged 60 and above and indigents who get free coverage. Official government documents recognize that, while social protection mechanisms are in place, these remain inadequate. Programs like conditional cash transfers, health insurance, social security systems, and income and livelihood support have been existent, but have limited coverage and benefits.

Under the conditional cash transfer program, there are around 4.4 million household beneficiaries, who are considered poor. It is conditional, in the sense that the beneficiary family must attend family development seminars, have regular health check-ups, and send their children to school. The program provides households of three children around 1,400 pesos every month during the school year or a total of 15,000 pesos for 10 months. The children should be below 18 years old to qualify for this. It is not enough that the family is poor. It should have school-aged children.

As for social insurance programs, government data show that 75 percent of private sector pensioners and almost 25 percent of public sector pensioners receive monthly pensions below 5,000 pesos or around 100 US dollars per month, which is not even enough for maintenance medicines of the elderly.

The social pension program only provides 500 pesos per month and is limited to frail and sickly persons or those with disability. Receiving any amount of financial compensation (even as small as 10 dollars) are grounds for disqualification. Problems associated with the program include a major delay in the distribution of the monthly pension.

The PhilHealth program is presented as a platform for universal healthcare. It is supposed to have a 90.5 percent coverage. However, a household survey revealed that only 67 percent of those interviewed were covered by the program. Aside from the limited coverage, it also has limited subsidies. A study revealed that out-of-pocket costs of health beneficiaries for their health expenses is around 54 percent for the patient.

Aggravating the already precarious situation is the COVID-19 pandemic that has impacted people’s health and livelihood. The Philippines has undergone varying forms of lockdown and intensities of restriction which were put in place

on 15 March 2020 and are still being practiced, giving the Philippines the dubious distinction of having the longest COVID-19 lockdown. The country also continues to have new cases of COVID-19 infection every day, although it dropped from an average of 2,517 in October 2020 to 1,887 (additional daily cases are still in four digits). As of 16 November 2020, the Philippines was second to Indonesia in the number of COVID-19 cases among members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN). However, the country has a higher number of cases per million population compared to Indonesia, partly because there is less testing in Indonesia than in the Philippines.

The economic impact of the pandemic includes joblessness, poverty, and hunger. The government placed joblessness at around 4.6 million last July, with the all-time high at 17.7 percent or 7.3 million jobless Filipinos recorded last April. The underemployment rate is also significantly high. Regarding poverty, data from December 2019 by a self-rated poverty survey conducted by Social Weather Stations (SWS) showed 54 percent of respondents (or around 13.1 million families) considered themselves poor. Like the figures on self-rated hunger in May 2020, this number is also the highest since September 2014. Therefore, the optimistic projection of the Philippine poverty rate falling below 20 percent by 2020 is not feasible. Meanwhile, another survey by SWS recorded a 30.7 percent hunger rate (7.6 million households) in September 2020. This is the highest hunger incidence since the previous record of 23.8 percent in March 2012.

The official COVID-19 response is described as late and limited. While the Philippines recorded its first case on 31 January 2020, the prohibitions and restrictions were only put in place on March 15 or roughly two months since the global pandemic started.

Government response can also be described as militarized. News reports revealed that, between March 17 and June 8, 193,779 arrests were made by the police due to quarantine violations. Of this number, the police charged 58,848 individuals and detained 15,307. As of October, 200,637 persons remain in congested jails. ABS-CBN, a major media network believed to be critical of the government was ordered closed, while the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 (Republic Act No. 11479) was legislated at the height of the COVID-19 epidemic.

To respond to the economic crisis, the Philippine congress passed the Bayanihan¹ to Heal as One Act (Republic Act No. 11469), which took effect on 25 March 2020. The law authorized the President to exercise powers necessary to carry out urgent measures to meet the current national emergency and to reallocate, realign, or reprogram a budget of almost 5.37 billion US dollars from the estimated 8.55 billion dollars national budget in response to the pandemic.

There were several components of social assistance provided during the pandemic. First was the social amelioration program under the Department of Social Welfare and Development, which extended 5,000 to 8,000 pesos to qualified households for

¹ *Bayanihan* means “to work together” in the Philippines

two months. Second was the assistance of displaced workers under the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE). Cash-for-work involved minimum wage for ten (10) days of disinfection or sanitation work of their dwellings and immediate vicinity. The department also initiated the Abot Kamay ang Pagtulong (AKAP), a one-time financial assistance of 10,000 pesos to land-based and sea-based overseas Filipino workers who were repatriated. The COVID-19 Adjustment Measures Program (CAMP) provided financial support for workers (regardless of status) employed in private establishments nationwide, whose operations were affected due to the corona virus. Third, under the Department of Agriculture, a financial subsidy of 5,000 pesos to rice farmers who till one hectare of farmland and below was provided. Finally, there was a small business wage subsidy of between 5,000 to 8,000 pesos based on the regional minimum wage per month for employees of micro, small, and medium enterprises who had to close down their operations during the pandemic.

The Philippines has been able to roll out a massive emergency social protection response to the COVID-19 lockdown, with near-universal coverage of possibly more than 90 percent of the population. However, the actual cash assistance of around 100 to 160 dollars (minimum wage of one to two weeks) was clearly not enough for households without sources of income because of the strict lockdown, which lasted for so many months.

The IBON Foundation calculated the Department of Social Welfare and Development's social amelioration program at 17.7 million beneficiaries for the first tranche, and 13.9 million beneficiaries for the second tranche. DOLE's CAMP program had almost 700,000 beneficiaries. The cash-for-work program provided minimum wage to 300,330 informal workers for 10 days. DOLE's grant for returning overseas Filipino workers amounted to 10,000 pesos. Around 600,000 rice farmers received 5,000 pesos each. An average of 2.1 million was provided to employees of micro, small, and medium enterprises for two months. Although these figures seem a lot, not all targeted recipients received the aid: approximately 5 to 9 pesos per family member per day was distributed from March 15 to October 22.

In critiquing the social protection packages, Dr. Taguiwalo averred that the pandemic has further aggravated the already serious problem of economic and social inequality in the country, and the inadequacy of the country's healthcare system. Under this condition, immediate, sufficient, and humane assistance from the government—whether social protection or social amelioration—is a necessity. Such an assistance would provide some level of economic relief to the millions who were already poor prior to the pandemic, as well as those who lost jobs and livelihood because of the lockdown. However, social protection in itself should only be a stopgap measure. By addressing structural inequalities, a majority of Filipinos would have sources of livelihood and social services, (e.g., health, housing, and education) that will allow them to live a decent life.

There are several issues related to the social protection programs in the Philippines. One of them is administrative, which was raised before the pandemic

and spotlighted given the health and economic crises. This issue revolves around targeted social protection, which requires a system of identifying the poor and separating them from those who are not. For example, the 4.3 million poor with school-aged children under the conditional cash transfer program does not comprise the universe of the country that has social inequality. In fact, the 18 million families (which was later raised to 21 million families), as beneficiaries of the social amelioration program, require a new system of identification, which further delayed the distribution of much needed cash assistance during the pandemic. This targeted distribution and intended beneficiaries prevented social workers from providing house-to-house assistance, because those who were not the intended recipients (therefore, no aid) would go after them. This spurred violations in social distancing during the distribution. This is also true for other forms of *ayuda* (aid), such as the social pension assistance of older persons, which requires assistive targeting and excludes those with pension, no matter the amount.

Social protection is also a political issue. In identifying who would receive what and how much would be given, is decided by a process vulnerable to political intervention and leads to a politicization of social protection programs. The targeted beneficiaries are not limited to get assistance from the village level, where local officials can decide on the location and manner of distribution. At the very top, national officials at the executive and legislative levels decide on the allocation of assistance to various sectors and groups. Targeting, which is vulnerable to manipulation, results in inclusion and exclusion, which may be unfairly determined by politicians.

Social protection is also about the failure of economic and development programs to truly address the vast economic and social inequalities in the country. The National Anti-Poverty Commission in a policy paper pointed out that, social protection measures have limitations in that many of these are residual because they may mitigate some of the worst impacts of macroeconomic policies but without the benefit of interrogation particularly of the main development strategy that led to increased poverty. A case in point is the 2018 Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion (TRAIN) Law which, reduced individual and corporate income taxes that benefitted large corporations but increased indirect taxes, which the country's poor shouldered as consumers.

What alternatives can be done then? As an incoming Social Welfare Secretary in June 2016, Dr. Taguiwalo shared her thrust for the Department of Social Welfare and Development. The first one was to continue and improve social protection programs that aim to provide immediate relief and timely assistance to marginalized and vulnerable sectors of the country. These include the conditional cash transfer program, complemented by initiatives that will help the poor stand on their own through jobs, asset reforms, and other economic and social reform initiatives. A shift from targeted social protection to universal provision of social services needs to be studied and endorsed.

The Philippine Development Plan 2017–2022 actually adopted a universal and transformative social protection program. It listed, as one of the strategies, “the adoption and institutionalization of a social protection floor,” which the International Labour Organization described as, “typically including, but not limited to cash transfers for children, maternity benefits, disability pensions, support for those without jobs, old age pensions, and access to essential healthcare.” While the Philippines’ legislative and executive initiatives would include all these categories, the coverage is far from adequate and universal since this exclude the majority of the population, especially those in the informal sector.

The second was an alternative to targeted social protection, which would be a progressive taxation system that targets the wealthy more than the middle class and the poor. The economic thrust should give priority to the domestic economy and markets in order to create local jobs. There should be an increase in social spending that will enable the realization of universal social services accessible to the poor.

The proposed 2021 national budget does not respond to the call for a progressive taxation system and increase in social spending. This budget provides for corporate taxes to be further reduced through the Tax Reform for Acceleration and Inclusion (TRAIN 2) or the Corporate Recovery and Tax Incentives for Enterprises (CREATE) bills. Indirect taxes will be increased; allocation for health and social welfare programs will be reduced; and priority spending will still be on infrastructure and on military spending.

In conclusion, the quest for social protection cannot be separated from the quest for social justice, which includes a progressive taxation system and prioritization of social services. As past social justice victories have shown, it is through organized and collective action in the people that changes are realized. Academics have a role to play as we join our scholarship and advocacy with grassroots initiatives and demands for social justice.



ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Dr. Judy M. Taguiwalo is a professorial lecturer at the College of Social Work and Community Development, University of the Philippines Diliman, where she was a full professor until her retirement in 2015. She has previously served as the secretary of the Department of Social Welfare and Development from June 2016 to August 2017 and director of the University of the Philippines Center for Women’s Studies. At present, she is a member and one of the spokespersons of the Citizens’ Urgent Response to End Covid-19 (CURE COVID-19), a network of grassroots organizations, professionals, and individuals involved in addressing the health, economic, and rights impact of the pandemic. Dr. Taguiwalo also works with various civil society organizations as a board member of the IBON Foundation, as a convenor of the Campaign Against the Return of the Marcoses and Martial Law (CARMMA), and a member of the Asia Pacific Forum on Women, Law and Development (APWLD).

REACTION

Rosalinda P. Ofreneo on Judy M. Taguiwalo's Presentation

Dr. Rosalinda Ofreneo began her discussion by citing the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) People's Forum, where social protection was the main topic and COVID-19, along with recommendations on how to solve it, were the focus of the discourse.

She also commended Dr. Taguiwalo for her comprehensive and up-to-date presentation, the content of which she agreed with. Drawing from the perspective of civil society-based data, she contributed to Dr. Taguiwalo's presentation by sharing her experience in monitoring the responses and initiatives of vulnerable groups to COVID-19 at the grassroots level. She provided some descriptive dimensions of social protection as it is understood now. She said it should not only be universal, but also comprehensive, state-led and state-financed, gender responsive, sustainable, adaptive and participatory. Being universal entails thinking about the healthcare system and looking at the experience of countries which succeeded in controlling the spread of COVID-19. These countries are typically characterized by good health care systems that are publicly run and financed, and good monitoring systems are present that go all the way to the village (i.e., local) level.

In other countries, there were enough incentives and resources to control the COVID-19. These were initiated by the government and were fully supported by the people through very effective information systems and campaigns. This was not happening in the Philippine context, where the government went on its narrow way to impose lockdowns, to punish citizens with inadequate resources to wear face masks, or who were forced to go out so that they can work and feed their families.

Along with her agreement for a universal response to COVID-19, Dr. Ofreneo argued that the vaccine, healthcare for COVID-19 patients, medicines, testing and everything needed to safeguard people's health and safety should be free. According to a private source, swab tests in the Philippines can go as high as 150 US dollars, thus raising debates as to the spending limit for COVID-19 testing.

Dr. Ofreneo also said that the Philippines can learn from India because of the latter's rural employment guarantee program that the Philippines does not have. Although social protection in the Philippines has this segment on labor market interventions, which is supposed to provide decent work and more regular employment to people, this did not merit government support. Only a minority of workers in the informal economy, who comprise about two-thirds at least of the employed, received about 3,000 pesos in cash assistance. At least 25 million households needed that kind of cash support, no matter how meager.

The impact of COVID-19 is not only on physical and mental health, but also on violence against women and children, which skyrocketed during the pandemic. Even reproductive health has suffered because hospitals have focused mainly on COVID-19, neglecting all other medical services meant for regular citizens, such as reproductive healthcare for pregnant and teenage mothers. A comprehensive healthcare system should be holistic and should not neglect people in the margins, such as persons with disabilities and senior citizens, who do not receive any kind of support from the government.

According to sources, at least half of all older persons in the Philippines have no pension at all. During the pandemic, their pensions were delayed and not much was reserved for them. In the 2021 budget, spending for health and social services was reduced, while military and infrastructure spending increased.

There is a need to adopt a human rights-based approach to social protection as provided for in the ASEAN Declaration on Strengthening Social Protection. Clearly, the approach is for the state to be the principal duty bearer, while citizens are the claim bearers and holders. However, the state refuses to fund what is essential, such as universal health care, social protection, education, and housing, among others. Instead of realizing the importance of human rights by adding more resources to social, economic, and cultural rights programs, the reverse is happening. For example, in the Build Build Build Program of the government, the construction of facilities for water sanitation and hygiene—facilities essential for COVID-19 control—are absent. Despite the fact that many households in the Philippines do not have such facilities, there is no clear item in the budget that addresses this deficit.

Moreover, social protection should be sustainable and adaptive. In an article that Dr. Ofreneo wrote for the National Economic and Development Authority and the Department of Social Welfare and Development, she argued for the need to climate-proof social protection and encourage communities to be resilient against typhoons. In the past, communities survived because of their capacity to take care of themselves. However, in the midst of around 24 major typhoons every year, there is an even more urgent need to address climate change as there seems to be only 10 years to go before the planet becomes uninhabitable. Thus, there is some urgency in allocating more resources and focus on resilience and disaster risk reduction management, as well as adapting social protection as an essential component of social protection systems globally.

Finally, social protection systems should be participatory. What is the role of citizens in all these initiatives? How are they engaged or empowered? Some major initiatives are the so-called “social solidarity economy initiatives,” which consist of the cooperatives, self-help groups, fair trade groups, and social enterprises. Participants of these initiatives should be provided with the support they deserve from the government to be able to produce food and herbs as medicines and provide for their own needs. Apart from this, there is also a need to provide gender-responsive child and elderly care.

In summary, Dr. Ofreneo rounded up her comments by saying that the government is not doing enough to improve social protection systems—even the best social protection systems in the world are not at par with the magnitude of the problems that confront the Filipinos. These problems can only be resolved if social protection is reimagined as universal, comprehensive, state-financed and state-led, sustainable, adaptive, participatory, and based on an overarching human rights approach.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER



Dr. Rosalinda Ofreneo is professor emeritus of the University of the Philippines and continues to teach at the College of Social Work and Community Development, University of the Philippines Diliman, where she handles a course in the Doctor in Social Development Program. She has a bachelor's degree in Home Economics (major in Family Life and Child Development), a master's degree in Communication, and a PhD in Philippine Studies (focusing on Sociology, Psychology, and Literature) from the University of the Philippines Diliman.

She has conducted research and published books on topics such as social protection, social solidarity economy, globalization and women's work, subcontracting and home-based work, child labor, women workers in the export processing zones, migrant women, rural women, women in the informal economy, debt and poverty, women and literature, gender and the environment, gender and microfinance, and prostitution and development. She has been active in the women's movement for half a century, and is currently in the board of the Homenet Producers Cooperative and the Advisory Committee of Homenet Philippines. She also serves as co-coordinator of the Asian Solidarity Economy Council (ASEC) Philippines.

EXAMINING SOCIAL PROTECTION AMONG VULNERABLE GROUPS DURING COVID-19

Ramesh Chand

Like the Philippines, India has a large set of social protection programs. After the outbreak of COVID-19, two important social protection programs have played a significant role in addressing vulnerability, poverty, availability of food, and work for unskilled laborers.

The first social protection measure relates to India's system of food security which has four pillars: (1) remuneration for the farmer, (2) procurement, (3) buffer stock, and (4) a public distribution system. This system has been in place since the mid-1960s and has rescued and protected India from any serious production setback on food security. The program can be of two types: either local/regional or global. Any food shock that is local/regional can be addressed by relying on other countries and by aligning with the global market and global resources. However, if a food shock is of a global nature, the country has to rely on local capacities and institutions.

In a paper published by the Food and Agriculture Organization, which was later on disseminated in an ASEAN conference, Prof. Chand revealed that in order to address the shocks of global nature, a country needs to have a buffer stock of food grain, similar to India. Because countries cannot rely on the global supply chain, each one should create a reasonable (not excessive) buffer stock before the emergence of any crisis (i.e., COVID-19).

India's buffer stock policy proved effective in ensuring the country's food security amidst the global food shock from 2007 to 2010 as evidenced by the lower food inflation rate compared to previous decades. In addition, due to India's adequate food stocks and a very well-established network, the country is able to provide food up to every habitation. This has been of great help to protect India's population especially those falling into severe hunger.

Normally, Indian citizens are given 40 percent of their staple food requirement through the public distribution system at a throwaway price of 2 Indian rupees (74 Indian rupees is equal to one US dollar). One kilogram of staple food costs around

two (2) or three (3) rupees availed of by two-thirds of the rural population. Due to adequate buffer stock, staple food has been increased from 5 to 10 kilograms for a certain period—those who were entitled for this food safety net received 80 percent of their total consumption of food staple. Through the public distribution system, the government supplied 10 kilograms of rice and wheat, plus a little bit of grain and legumes. India therefore met almost 80 percent of the staple food requirement of half of its population.

This first safety social protection measure during the pandemic has protected India from falling into a global hunger trap, due to its buffer stock policy. The country was able to reduce the largest short-run migration with residents from urban areas returning to their home provinces. Despite the lack of work in rural areas, they were promised adequate food supply under the public distribution system.

The second safety social protection measure is the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, an entitlement based on self-selection. Anyone who was interested to receive a hundred days of wage at some specified wage rate can register with the local *panchayat* (self-governance bodies). In some states, 70 to 80 days of wage assistance is all that is needed. Among well-to-do states in Punjab and Haryana, this was not needed anymore.

The third safety measure relates to the kind of policy that should be instituted. People should not rely only on the programs for social protection but also look for some policies for social protection similar to the actual program. For instance, laborers staying in one state or other states went mainly from their rural routes to the town. Mainly, the labor class went back to their rural places where 60-70 percent of employment is in agriculture. India ensured, through proper policies and advisories issued to all states, that all kinds of exemptions are given to agriculture. Exemptions were provided due to the nature of agriculture as an industry: there is natural social distancing and people are not in close contact, thus the chances of spreading the infection in this industry is less compared to the industrial or service industry. By ensuring that agricultural activities were not disrupted, India's growth rate of its overall economy became better.

Incidentally, Dr. Arvind Virmani—the founding chairperson of the Foundation for Economic Growth and Welfare—is the first person who wrote a paper on what will happen to India's economic growth, economic production, and gross domestic product because of the pandemic. He calculated that despite a 24 percent decline in India's nonagricultural sector in the first quarter after COVID-19, the growth rate in the agriculture sector was better than what it usually used to be. At 3.6 percent growth, it neither declined nor became stagnant. Thus, the timely lockdown exemptions to the agriculture sector and the continuity of agricultural activities were important social protection measures that saved India from severe effects of the COVID-19 pandemic.

While there are so many other social protection programs in India, the three measures (a public distribution system with buffer stock, the National Rural

Employment Guarantee Scheme, and special exemption granted to the agriculture sector) have been important government initiatives during the pandemic.

Generally, there is a tendency among developing countries to collaborate and cooperate with developed countries. However, looking at the experience of India with developed countries, this may not be of much benefit to a developing country. The Indian Council of Social Science Research's collaboration with the Philippine Social Science Council should be further expanded.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER



Prof. Ramesh Chand is currently a member of the NITI Aayog, with the rank and status of a Union Minister of State. Prior to joining NITI Aayog, he was the director of the National Institute of Agricultural Economics and Policy Research in New Delhi. He is a fellow of the National Academy of Agricultural Sciences and the Indian Society of Agricultural Economics.

He has been involved in policy formulation for the agriculture sector for the past two-and-a-half decades. Prof. Chand is also a member of the Board of Trustees of the International Maize and Wheat Improvement Center in Mexico and the Policy Advisory Council of the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research in Australia.

He has a PhD in agricultural economics from the Indian Agricultural Research Institute in New Delhi. He has authored seven books and published more than 150 research papers in national and international journals in different areas of agriculture such as production, growth, development policy, farmers' issues, markets, and trade.

REACTION

Arvind Virmani on Ramesh Chand's Presentation

It is important to understand that the current India as we know it now came from India four to five years ago, wherein it was identified as a low-income country. Meanwhile the Philippines was a middle-income country for a much longer time than India. Therefore, for both countries, the focus has been on poverty alleviation. India was the first country in the world in the 1960s to talk about poverty alleviation, prompting the country then to create programs for poverty mitigation.

In 2009, a study showed that while the three largest poverty alleviation programs in India had enough funds to eliminate poverty, a new approach was needed. The problem was that India kept on building these programs for different aspects, categories, and geographies of poverty, which kept piling up. Thus, a new perspective should be employed.

Another paper published in 2009 emphasized that India should start thinking of poverty elimination rather than alleviation, based on the belief that growth will take a long time to eliminate poverty and therefore India needed to alleviate it initially, thus a shift in strategy was important. Highlighted in the paper was Dr. Virmani's proposal that India needed a universal ID for all its welfare programs. This stems from the presence of multiple programs designed to achieve similar goals and thus should be integrated. The only way to harmonize the programs was to have a unique ID linked to all these programs. The committee headed by Dr. Virmani approved and put into operation the proposal, which was initially called the unique ID system but was later renamed into Aadhaar. After its full implementation in 2014, there were efforts to use the ID for peoples' inclusion in financial packages or benefits.

Prior to this financial inclusion program, roughly 30 percent of the adult population had a bank account. With the integration of financial inclusion, more than 95 to 98 percent of the public got bank accounts. Linking Aadhaar numbers to bank accounts was a massive effort and led India to jumpstart the so-called direct benefit transfer. An example of a direct benefit transfer was the scholarship program that used to go through multiple bureaucratic channels before it reached individual beneficiaries. All these were integrated into a direct benefit transfer, and similar programs were instituted in different parts of this enormous welfare system.

India's goal now is to successfully implement a direct cash transfer system. The same committee that Dr. Virmani headed proposed to integrate all these programs and combine these into a direct cash transfer, which proved important during the pandemic.

The pandemic sowed fear of contagion believed to be higher in the urban areas because of the concentration of people. Migrants, who lost their jobs or did not have one, started thinking of going back home to the province. Since jobs and economic activity decreased, if not phased out, people turned to the provinces. This was a unique feature of the pandemic never seen before in the 70-year history of India, which then gives enough incentive to accelerate the direct cash transfer system because this problem of migrants would have been taken over by those in the bottom 50 percent of the population—a direct cash transfer system with the UID Aadhaar would then be beneficial to the poor. For example, migrant families will not encounter issues of mobility because the direct cash transfer system can give money to each of these migrants with ease. More concretely, a direct cash transfer system linked to the mobile or a mobile wallet can transfer funds right into the hands of the recipient, regardless whether he or she was residing in an urban or rural area.

Regarding empowerment, the direct cash transfer is the biggest form of empowerment among the people because of the lack of a bureaucratic intermediary. The recipient receives the money directly and does not have to run around the ration shop, which is sometimes out of food and money.

At times there would be a delay in receiving authorization for the program as there was a whole bureaucracy. Implementing a direct cash transfer program integrating the use of mobile phones is a good direction for India and the Philippines to pursue.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER



Dr. Arvind Virmani is the president of the Forum for Strategic Initiative and the Chintan Environmental Research and Action Group. He served as a member of the Technical Advisory Committee on Monetary Policy of the Reserve Bank of India from February 2013 to August 2016 and was a mentor of public policy (2015–2017) for the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce and Industry. He was the executive director at the International Monetary Fund representing India (as ambassador), Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, and Bhutan.

He has been an adviser to the Indian government at the highest levels for 25 years, including as chief economic adviser, minister of Finance, and principal adviser for the Planning Commission. During this period, he was an adviser on a host of economic policy reforms, as chair of committees on public debt management and customs duty reform and member of numerous committees. He also served as a member of the Telecom Regulatory Authority of India and the Appellate

Tribunal for the Securities and Exchange Board Act, chairperson of the Board of Trustees of the SBI Mutual Fund, and a board director of several financial institutions. He has published 33 journal articles and 20 book chapters in the areas of macroeconomics, growth and finance, international trade and tariffs, and international relations.

Part 3

Understanding Economic Stimulus Packages during COVID-19

28 January 2021

UNDERSTANDING ECONOMIC STIMULUS PACKAGES DURING COVID-19

Stella Luz A. Quimbo

In January 2021, the Philippine Statistics Authority released the fourth quarter gross domestic product (GDP) figures and announced that for the entire 2020, the Philippines' overall GDP contraction is estimated at 9.5 percent. In light of this bad news, a conversation on economic stimulus packages of the Philippines becomes timely.

In the House of Representatives, Congresswoman Stella Luz Quimbo serves as one of the three co-chairs of the Subcommittee on Economic Stimulus and Response Package and actively participated in the consolidation of bills regarding economic stimulus. These packages need to be understood in light of the health context brought about by the pandemic and in comparison with India.

Shown in Figure 2 are the cases of COVID-19 for both India and the Philippines. The graph shows that, it would seem like the Philippines is in a much better situation

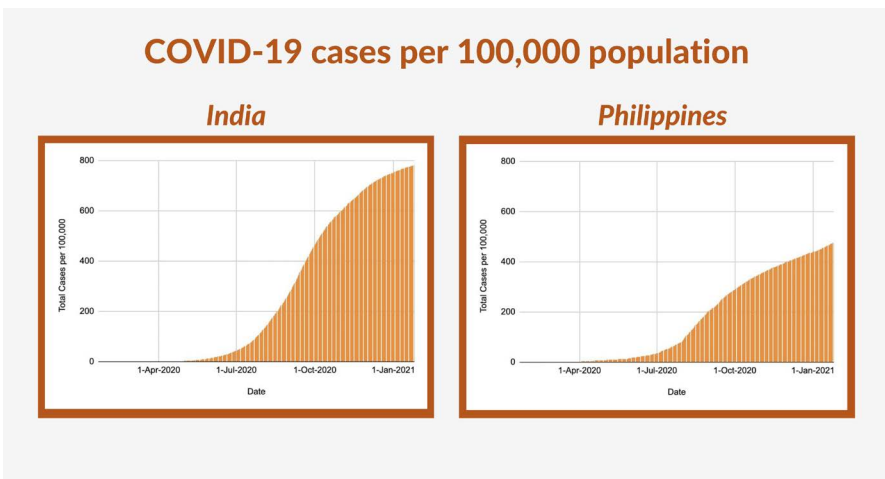


Figure 2. COVID -19 Cases in India and the Philippines

than India because the curve is just one-half the height of India's. One plausible reason that might explain India's curve is the number of tests conducted by the country. However, one needs to consider the data in the table below, which compares the COVID situation across members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and India.

Table 1. COVID-19 Cases in ASEAN+ (as of 27 January 2021)

Country	Total Confirmed Cases	Total Deaths	Total Recoveries	Active Cases per 10k Population	Total Deaths per 100k Population	Hospital Beds per 10k Population	Total Tests	Tests per 10k Population	Cases/ Tests (in percent-age)
Malaysia	190,434	700	6,104	56.815	2.166	13	4,431,316	1,371	4.30
Indonesia	1,012,350	28,468	820,356	5.958	10.373	12	5,883,540	214	17.21
Philippines	516,166	10,366	475,423	2.770	9.478	5	7,624,444	696	6.77
Myanmar	137,957	3,069	122,116	2.289	5.501	9	1,683,744	302	8.19
Thailand	14,646	75	10,892	0.528	0.108	21	1,286,671	185	1.14
Singapore	59,366	29	59,066	0.463	0.496	18	6,315,357	10,793	0.94
Brunei	176	3	169	0.091	0.686	28	90,111	2,060	0.20
Cambodia	460	0	412	0.024	0.000	8	150,000	75	0.31
Vietnam	1,551	35	1,430	0.009	0.036	26	1,469,955	151	0.11
Lao PDR	44	0	41	0.007	0.000	15	102,017	233	0.04
India	10,689,527	153,724	10,359,305	1.292	1.13	5	190,148,020	1,392	5.92

Based on the active cases per population, the Philippines (2.77) has much more active cases than India (1.29). A comparison of positivity rates indicates that the Philippines has higher figures at 6.7 cases per test, compared to India's 5.62 cases per test. In terms of hospital beds, both countries are the same per population at 5. However, the number of deaths per 10,000 population is higher for India, which is double that of the Philippines. Among ASEAN member states, Indonesia overtook other Southeast Asian countries in terms of active cases per population.

Given the health crisis and its effects on the economy, the Philippines' official estimate of its quarterly GDP contractions showed that the country has been in recession since the second quarter of 2020. Overall, the total average of contraction is -9.5 percent for the entire 2020 (i.e., 3.2 trillion Philippine peso or 64 billion US dollars). In addition to losing 9.5 percent in 2020, this figure is due to losses that the Philippines hoped to grow in 2020 before the pandemic, which was about 6.5 percent. Adding up 6.5 percent and a contraction of 9.5 percent boils down to a total of 3.2 trillion pesos in terms of damages.

In terms of timeline, the Philippines likewise implemented a stringent lockdown policy similar to India. Hours before the announcement of the first lockdown on 13 March 2020, Representative Quimbo filed the first economic stimulus bill in

Congress. The first Bayanihan¹ Bill was signed into law on 24 March 2020 and focused mainly on health response and social amelioration. Shortly after, the Sub-Committee on Economic Stimulus and Response Package started to consolidate several versions of the economic stimulus packages proposed by the House of Representatives. By June 4, Congress approved the Accelerated Recovery and Investment Stimulus for the Economy of the Philippines (ARISE) bill that would have authorized the expenditure of 1.3 trillion pesos over three years. Unfortunately, as soon as it was approved on third reading by the 18th Congress, the executive department, particularly Secretary of Finance Carlos Dominguez III, declared that the bill was not fundable.

By September 11, Congress passed the second Bayanihan law (Republic Act No. 11494), considered to be the first economic recovery legislation that was put into place. It authorized the spending of only 1.65 billion pesos or about 13 percent of what Congress wanted the government to spend. This was partly in response to the country's economic managers' reaction to the ARISE bill. Bayanihan 2 authorized spending for social amelioration and vaccines.

By November, government spending proved insufficient in terms of responding to the economic losses caused by the spread of COVID-19. Consequently, Representative Quimbo, along with two other representatives, filed the Bayanihan 3 bill, which sought to authorize the spending of an additional 400 billion pesos (to at least approximate the proposed spending under ARISE for 2020). However, the national government stood by its position that there was no need for a third Bayanihan bill. Instead, it wanted to wait for the passage of the 2021 national budget on December 16. The national budget of 4.5 trillion pesos was eventually passed into law. However, the allocation for COVID-19 response embedded in the budget was nonetheless very small.

The Philippine government positioned its idea that, in addition to Bayanihan 1 and Bayanihan 2, there should be other pieces of legislation that would help foster economic recovery, including a tax measure, such as the Corporate Recovery and Tax Incentives for Enterprises (CREATE) bill that would reduce corporate income tax rates from 30 percent to 20 percent and rationalize fiscal incentives. While both the House of Representatives and the Senate have already approved the CREATE Bill, there was still a need to process and consolidate the different versions approved in both chambers. In December, the Financial Institutions Strategic Transfer (FIST) bill was signed into law. The legislation gives incentives to special purpose vehicles so that banks would be encouraged to give out loans, which basically cushions the financial risks faced by banks when providing loans to businesses.

Of all the packages mentioned above, Bayanihan 1 was focused on health response and management, as well as social amelioration, which got the lion's share of 200 billion pesos. The law provided a straightforward subsidy to the poorest 75

¹ *Bayanihan is a Filipino practice where neighbors help each other carry houses—a symbolism for social solidarity.*

percent of all households. Although there were problems in distribution, the aid was the only thing that households received during the entire lockdown.

The ARISE bill proposed wage subsidies with the intention of saving jobs. The subsidies were aimed to help businesses pay for or shoulder the payroll of their employees. Similar to the case in India, businesses (except for essential businesses) in the Philippines were not allowed to operate during the lockdown, particularly in the first three months of the implementation of the lockdown. Although about 80 percent closed down, businesses nevertheless continued to pay their payroll costs, loans, utilities, and lease, among others. By the time that the stringent lockdown was lifted, many of the businesses incurred substantial losses. The ARISE bill hoped that businesses would be assisted in terms of at least paying for their salaries of employees and, at the same time, prevent people from losing their jobs. As the bill was not approved in the Senate, wage subsidies of this magnitude were not given. The ARISE bill also identified sectors that were critically impacted. Like India and other countries, sectors that required transport of goods and services across borders were the most affected. Tourism and the export sector, which were also considered priority sectors, badly suffered, along with the manufacturing sector, which heavily rely on imports.

In light of the need to help and prioritize critically impacted sectors, a significant amount was proposed that would provide access to loans, particularly for micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). However, the problem in the Philippines is that 77 percent of its population do not have any bank accounts, a barrier to financial inclusion. Amidst proposals of allotting a significant amount of funds for loans to MSMEs, there was a necessity to include in the proposal a mechanism for credit mediation. The handling of credit services should ensure that MSMEs unfamiliar with banking services are included in the system so that they are connected to the financial scheme.

Education was also critically impacted because COVID-19 prevented face-to-face classes. Hence, the ARISE bill included some amount for infrastructure, particularly digital infrastructure for schools. Given that the country has one of the slowest internet speeds and the most expensive internet services worldwide, provisions for internet connection were incorporated. Prior to the pandemic, only 25 percent of public schools had internet connection. It thus became a huge problem when, all of a sudden, face-to-face classes were no longer allowed. Compared to developed countries which only needed to shift to online classes, the mandate to shift to online classes in the Philippines became inequitable because many poor families still do not have access to the internet.

While the ARISE bill authorized a total of 708 billion pesos in government spending, the approved Bayanihan 2 law only had a 165-billion provision. Bayanihan 2 became a smaller version of the ARISE Bill only because many provisions of Bayanihan 2 actually came from ARISE. Additionally, the support for priority sectors was somewhat adapted from the ARISE provisions. Under Bayanihan 1 and

Bayanihan 2, an estimated 483 billion pesos or about 10 billion US dollars was spent by the government—this translates into a measly 2.5 percent of the country's GDP, far less compared to India's four (4) percent.

For Bayanihan 3, Representative Quimbo would be pushing for wage subsidies for workers, educational subsidies for internet connection, and gadgets for both families and teachers. Continued social amelioration, particularly for COVID-19 patients to whom families may rely on for livelihood, should be pursued.

As if the pandemic's wreaking havoc was not enough, it is worth mentioning that the Philippines was hit by six typhoons in 2020. Another important issue in this time of pandemic are the food prices which have gone up so much. In 2020, a kilo of pork was around 400 pesos largely due to the spread of African Swine Flu; in 2019, a kilo of pork would only cost 200.

In response to the national government's position that there was no need for another Bayanihan law, owing to the passage of the 2021 national budget, Representative Quimbo submitted a formal query to the Department of Budget and Management and asked, "How much did you set aside for COVID response?" The answer to the formal query was, "We will be spending 838.4 billion pesos." Although it would seem that the amount was over and above Bayanihan 1 and Bayanihan 2, one of the biggest items is the 590-billion expenditure for the Department of Public Works and Highways to take care of public infrastructure. Notably, the 590-billion expenditure from the six-year infrastructure program of the president had already been planned even before the outbreak of COVID-19 and therefore should not be considered part of COVID response. If the amount is taken out from the COVID budget, only 247 billion pesos would be left. Government spending is therefore small and insufficient.

Just like our Indian colleagues, who discussed how funding for COVID-19 response would happen, the Philippines has actually done a good job of raising funds through loans. Having learned from the dismal bad debt situation in the 1980s, the Philippines' past and current economic managers have succeeded in securing a very good credit rating. Currently, the government has been able to access a lot of funds and loans. For example, the Department of Finance has released about 668 billion pesos (13 billion US dollars) from foreign loans, as well as grants, for COVID-19 response. Furthermore, based on the Treasury Report, the Philippines is not also doing badly in terms of liquidity. As of the end of November, there was about 1.3 trillion pesos in its coffers; Bayanihan 3 then (amounting to 400 billion pesos) is something that may be worth considering.

Moving forward, the Philippines should make sure that it performs a great job rolling out the vaccine program. Compared to India's 85 percent, the target coverage for the vaccine program (36 percent or 39 million individuals) in the Philippines seems small. Vaccine hesitancy is shown to be a problem as a survey conducted recently revealed that only 25 percent were willing to be vaccinated. Being unable to roll out an effective vaccination program would prevent economic recovery.

The pandemic was a big wake up call for the Philippines. There was a realization that economic structures are not providing enough social stimulus packages. Social provisions are very restrictive in terms of foreign investments. There is a weak social protection program, particularly for workers, and an absence of an unemployment insurance program, unlike our neighbors in Southeast Asia. Digital infrastructure is dismal given that the Philippines has the slowest internet speeds in the region. Financial inclusion is low because of the inability to acquire bank accounts. Although the capacity of the health sector to respond efficiently to health issues in the country is the biggest problem, medical frontliners have shown world-class competency.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER



Representative Stella Luz A. Quimbo is the duly elected representative of the second district of Marikina City and deputy minority leader of the 18th Congress of the Philippines. She is an academician who served as professor and department chair of the University of the Philippines School of Economics. In 2016, she was appointed Commissioner of the Philippine Competition Commission, where she served for three years. From 2011 to 2013, she was a Prince Claus Professorial Chair Holder at Erasmus University of Rotterdam in the Netherlands. She is a former president of the Philippine Economic Society and a treasurer and former member of the Board of Trustees of the Philippine Social Science Council.

Dr. Quimbo has an extensive research portfolio in the field of health economics, industrial organization, microeconomics, education, poverty, and public policy and regulation. This includes authorship of numerous scientific and technical publications, one of which was acclaimed the 2015 Outstanding Scientific Paper Award by the National Academy of Science and Technology (NAST). Later, NAST also conferred on her the Outstanding Youth Scientist Award. She was also a Freedom Flame Awardee of the Friedrich Naumann Foundation for Freedom and a recipient of the University of the Philippines President Edgardo J. Angara Fellowship and the University of the Philippines Diliman Centennial Faculty Grant.

She obtained her bachelor's (summa cum laude), master's, and doctoral degrees in economics from the University of the Philippines. She holds an MA in Economics for Competition Policy (with distinction) from King's College London.

REACTION

AJ Montesa on Stella Luz A. Quimbo's Presentation

Mr. AJ Montesa started by saying that there are not many economists in the House of Representatives and he welcomes Congresswoman Quimbo's contribution as a lawmaker who is adept in the field of economics. The points raised by Dr. Quimbo regarding real gross domestic product (RGDP) figures seem to indicate as if the worst is already over for the country, at least in terms of a recession. It was the worst in the middle of the year but the long-term impact of the pandemic on poverty and inequality has yet to be seen. Such impacts of the pandemic could be addressed by stimulus packages, not just for short-term recovery but also in the long run. The Philippines' GDP growth rate in 2020 for the full year was -9.5 percent, the worst recession. In comparison, the martial law period under former president Ferdinand Marcos Sr. saw the worst contraction at seven percent in 1984. Thus -9.5 percent is unprecedented for the Philippine economy. Because the RGDP (i.e., national income) is now lower than it was in 2018, this means that for 2021, the Philippines would have to experience a GDP growth of 10 percent to at least return to the levels of national income observed in 2019.

However, there is some growing optimism. According to surveys conducted by the Social Weather Stations, the net economic optimism has recently recovered to a positive 24 percent (from 9 percent in July and 5 percent in September). The last time the Philippines was generally this pessimistic was during the midst of the global recession in 2008 when net optimism fell to -39. A consumer expectation survey by the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas or BSP also reflects this trend. According to the BSP, the recent consumer optimism is spurred by several factors—Filipinos, in general, anticipate better availability of jobs, more working family members, additional and high income, an end of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the reopening of businesses. Filipinos have lately become more optimistic with regards to their prospects in 2021. In theory, the country's stimulus packages will create jobs and increase demand, while the additional social security nets (e.g., cash transfers) will help mitigate the impact of intergenerational poverty effects.

The hope is a V-shape trajectory of the Philippine's recovery, that is, after a dip caused by the recession, it will be followed by a quick upward recovery. However, we have to be cognizant of the pandemic and know that there are trade-offs. For example, reopening businesses may be in conflict with stay-at-home and social distancing measures. Enforcing longer quarantines means that many small businesses will remain closed and that the economy will remain sluggish. We are at the point in history when Filipinos are trying to recover from an economic recession

that is quite unique. It is unlike the last major pandemic that we had a century ago in 1918—the economic effects of which were mitigated by World War I, which ramped up government spending.

During the pandemic, no matter how much money was pumped into the hands of the consumers, demand will not organically or substantially increase if they are afraid to go out and spend money. The effectiveness of government spending and stimulus packages will actually depend on underlying economic structures. For one, the labor market is still experiencing a skills shortage, which in the case of the Philippines, is unable to respond quickly to the digital infrastructure and digital economy. The Philippines is also highly dependent on tourism. However, with the closure of borders, the tourism industry cannot be relied on.

There is a lack of digital infrastructure that affects employees' ability to work from home, as well as the job prospects of students in the future. Another factor is the strength of Philippine institutions and the people in charge of the rules of the game who are responsible for the safety and care of the people. For example, while COVID-19 vaccines have started to be introduced globally, with many countries celebrating this development, the Philippines is not likely to immediately benefit from it. The best-case scenario is that the government will start procuring and inoculating the population to achieve herd immunity during the latter half of the year. The logistical and financial requirements for mass vaccination are huge: to achieve herd immunity, 60 to 70 percent of the population must be immunized, far greater than the 36 percent target that was presented earlier.

The approved vaccine budget should not just be allocated for procurement, but should likewise address logistical constraints. For example, there is a need to train enough health workers on proper vaccine protocols. Storage facilities and health facilities should be expanded and upgraded. The approved 2021 budget was quite lacking, particularly for health. Therefore, the government should invest more in human resources, such as the health workers.

Additional social preparation should be undertaken since less than a third of Filipinos are willing to take the vaccine. Vaccine hesitancy is further exacerbated by concerns over the weakness and incompetence of government administrators, which has plagued the country's initial response to the pandemic and also in handling the vaccination program. The program, therefore, needs better leadership in terms of informing the public about the safety and efficacy of inoculation.

The principal problem of COVID-19 should be first addressed for the country to recover its economy. As COVID-19 has introduced unpredictability into the economy, there is a necessity to spend on contact tracing, testing, vaccination, health workers, and health facilities.

The bulk of the stimulus has to be targeted, especially for the most vulnerable: the poor and near-poor, low-wage workers, and micro and small enterprises. To do this, as Dr. Quimbo mentioned, cash transfers, wage subsidies, loans, and access to social services are needed. Thus, the effect of lower spending on healthcare and

education will adversely affect not just parents, but also their children. If they have less healthy children, who are not able to have access to quality education, they will have less opportunities to get good jobs and to earn higher income in the future.

Spending must not only be efficient and equitable but also timely. There has been a lot of concern lately that the government is not spending enough on health and social amelioration, but spending too much on intelligence and confidential funds of the government. The administration has emphasized the war on drugs and reduction in crime, instead of giving weight to addressing the COVID-19 pandemic.

We have to ensure that stimulus packages are well-implemented because in times of crisis, the opportunity for corruption is much higher. The government should not be wasteful with the money that it spends; literally, because there are lives at stake.

As 2022 is an election year for the Philippines, government spending will be highly politicized. Understanding how the budget is deliberated and disbursed to local governments will be important for transparency and accountability. On one hand, the government should report on how these funds are spent and on the other, Filipinos need to make sure that the use of the funds are maximized.

The stimulus packages and the government's response in general must prevent two causes of death: COVID-19 and hunger. This health crisis should not go to waste either because it is an opportunity to reshape our institutions for the better in the long run. The government should focus not only on short-term recovery but for a long-term opportunity to make the country better for a better new normal.

The Philippines needs to implement a universal health care system in order to strengthen disaster preparedness to address typhoons and other environmental concerns, as well as to create institutions that would encourage public investment by the state. It should continue to improve the education sector and make sure that there are no students left behind. The government should make sure that the workforce is better trained so that they can be competitive. Furthermore, the agricultural sector should be improved along with the economic structures for a better post-COVID-19 economy.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER



Mr. Adolfo Jose Montesa is a researcher and program officer of the Action for Economic Reforms (AER). He graduated magna cum laude with a bachelor of science degree in economics from the University of the Philippines School of Economics in 2015. Since 2017, Mr. Montesa has been a member of AER's fiscal policy team, which is primarily focused on the country's comprehensive tax reform program. In 2019, Mr. Montesa joined the AER's rice tariffication and liberalization team, which advocates for enhancing the competitiveness of the rice industry in the country. His areas of interest include macroeconomics, public sector economics, and fiscal/tax policy.

UNDERSTANDING ECONOMIC STIMULUS PACKAGES DURING COVID-19: THE CASE OF INDIA

Nagesh Kumar

Lockdowns and Its Socioeconomic Impacts

India has implemented one of the most stringent lockdowns since 25 March 2020, when all transport activities were suspended. Since mid-May 2020, there have been some phased reopening of economic activity, but a number of restrictions still remain in place. The lockdown has caused a significant disruption in India's numerous economic activities (e.g., construction, tourism, hotels and restaurants) that were severely affected.

Millions of people were rendered jobless, especially informal sector workers who did not have access to any social protection or security. Hundreds of thousands of migrant workers who came from villages to work in cities were trapped because transport modes suddenly stopped operating. These workers were then stuck in remote locations without any livelihood. Meanwhile, micro, small, and medium-scale enterprises (MSMEs), which formed the backbone of the Indian economy have been among the worst impacted. All these disruptions caused a severe blow to the economy, which already slowed down even before the outbreak of the COVID-19.

With the collapse of international trade, export orders were canceled. Tourism was all dried up and remittances from abroad started to decline. In fact, a number of Indian migrant workers who worked in other countries especially in the Middle East were returning, and the Indian economy, which had been growing at rather robust rates in the past 10 to 15 years and was one of the fastest growing economies for a number of years, is going to shrink for the first time in four decades. Socioeconomic impacts—in terms of the loss of jobs and livelihoods—could possibly push up 108 million people into extreme poverty, according to CGE simulations conducted by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific. Despite all these, there is hope that the impacts to poverty are temporary and could be averted through stimulus packages.

Economic inequalities are widening as vulnerable and marginal groups (e.g., women, whether as medical workers or garment factory workers) have been

affected more adversely and disproportionately. Similarly, people living in urban slums (e.g., migrant workers, older persons, and persons with disabilities), where the COVID-19 infection spreads at a more rapid pace, have been affected more than the other sectors of society.

Government Actions and Stimulus Packages

Government strategies have focused on saving the lives and livelihood of people. On 24 March 2020, the first major announcement was made declaring an emergency health investment of over \$2 billion for augmenting testing facilities, providing personal protective equipment (PPE), isolation beds and other medical equipment and facilities.

The government then began to roll out fiscal and monetary stimulus packages including the announcement on 26 March 2020 of a \$23-billion package to cover food and cash transfers, insurance coverage for health care workers, and wage support for low-wage workers. This included cash transfers to the poor and vulnerable sectors through direct benefit transfers for 200 million women and 87 million farmers. Free rations of food were provided to about two-thirds of the population for three months, which was subsequently extended for additional months.

In May 2020, the government came up with a massive \$270 billion relief package or roughly 10 percent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP)—this however was not a new expenditure because 40 percent was in the form of liquidity support or credit expansion. The focus of the billion-dollar package was on supporting and infusing funds or liquidity into MSMEs; nonbanking financial companies, which provide funds to MSMEs, among others, and the power utilities were also assisted. A revision of insolvency and bankruptcy code to prevent triggering of many insolvency proceedings and moratorium on credit downgrades was also implemented.

On 14 November 2020, another big package of about \$35 billion was launched, specifically targeted to boost economic recovery through self-sufficient or self-reliant economy ("Atmanirbhar Bharat"), and resilient infrastructures. This included production-linked incentives (PLI) to 10 manufacturing industries in the hopes of creating more local manufacturing and jobs nationwide. It also included RS 9000 million for developing a COVID-19 vaccine. Housing was also a very prominent part of this package for both rural and urban households. Infrastructure development was given a big push through an infrastructure pipeline in order to support the creation of jobs and the boosting of employment in the informal sector and rural economy. Through Prime Minister Gareeb Kalyan Yojana, a credit guarantee line support to other industries (e.g., tourism, hotels and restaurants), including collateral-free and guaranteed loans, was provided.

All of these packages add up to quite a lot and it is expected that this process will continue and be incorporated in the 2021-2022 Union Budget that will be presented on 1 February 2021.

Economic Contraction and Recovery

Regarding the impact of stimulus packages to the economy, there was a deep contraction of the Indian economy of about 23 percent in the first quarter of 2020–2021 (April to June 2020). However, since then, there has been a considerable recovery, especially in some sectors.

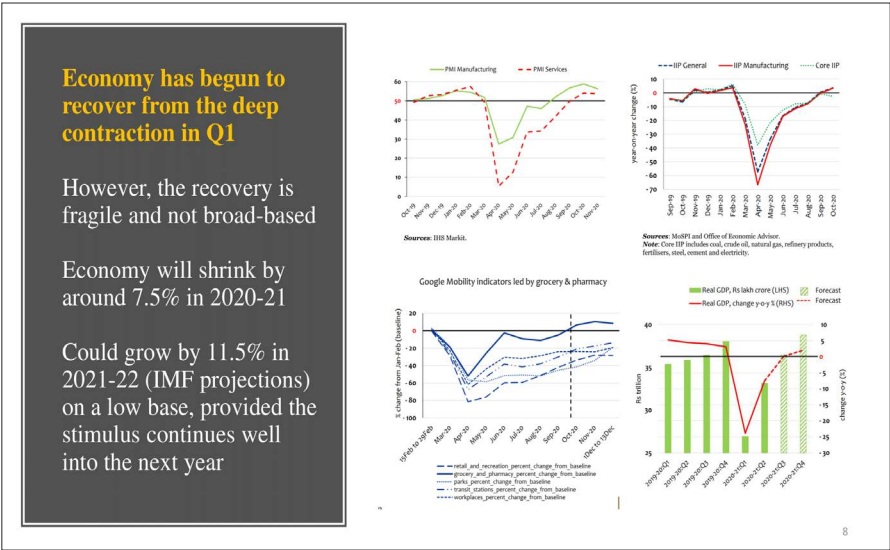


Figure 3. GDP Growth, Contraction, and Recovery

Some high frequency indicators, like the Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI) in manufacturing and services, the Index of Industrial Production (IIP), and the Google Mobility indicators suggest that there was a sharper recovery in grocery and pharmacy; other sectors, however, were not witnessing that same kind of rapid recovery. The green color in the corner bottom of the Figure 3 shows the real GDP growth.

While there appears to be a V-shaped recovery, this is still fragile and not broad based. The economy overall for this year would be shrinking by about 7.5 percent. Compared to the first quarter contraction of 23–24 percent, India was able to contain the damage through stimulus packages. The projections made by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) for the year 2021–2022 indicate that the Indian economy could be growing at 11.5 percent; this, however, is from a low base and assumes that the stimulus packages would continue.

Downside Risks to the Recovery

The key challenges and risks to this economic outlook for the next year is the rising oil prices and the threat of inflationary pressures. Although oil prices were in a

benign and low state until recently, these have started to rise, thus creating a number of challenges.

Another risk is from the potential instability associated with short-term capital flows. The short-term capital inflows or foreign portfolio investments (FPIs) by foreign institutional investors have a huge liquidity expansion in the western markets and that expanded liquidity is finding its way to some emerging markets that investors think have the potential to give good returns. India is one such country that is attracting massive short-term inflows, which tend to create asset bubbles, exchange rate appreciation and affect export competitiveness and volatility. Rising inequalities also have implications on the sustainability of growth and social cohesion.

Sustaining the Recovery and Enhancing Resilience

In order to strengthen the recovery process, India needs to sustain the stimulus packages and to make the recovery more solid and more broad-based (i.e., not limited to certain sectors). This is also dependent upon the success of COVID-19 vaccine rollout that has started in the country beginning 16 January 2021. With the domestic production capacity (unique among the developing countries), India should be able to quickly expand the coverage of vaccination across the country to boost the confidence and preempt the second wave of the outbreak.

India's upcoming Union Budget 2021–2022 will be a great opportunity to deliver a much more resilient and sustainable recovery of the Indian economy through a large, people-centered, inclusive, and sustainable stimulus package. The CGE simulations made by the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific suggest that the Indian economy will need a stimulus package equivalent to 14 percent of the country's GDP for it to recover from the kind of damage pandemic-related lockdowns and other disruptions have caused. In 2021, the government has already spent around seven (7) percent of its GDP on stimulus measures. The plea is that a similar kind of momentum of stimulus should be sustained in the 2021–2022 Union Budget.

Spending can make recovery much more balanced, sustainable, and resilient by emphasizing several priorities. One priority is to close the gaps in public health infrastructure through enhanced spending in the medium term and moving towards universal health coverage. This is an important sustainable development goal (SDG); by moving in that direction, India would also be achieving the other SDGs. In light of India's investment on employment guarantee programs, such as the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (MGNREGA), another priority, in the short term, is to extend social protection schemes to urban areas, and in the medium term, to move towards universal social protection, another SDG target.

Creating decent jobs through industrial transformation is necessary because a large proportion of India's workforce is trapped in low quality and low social protection, informal sector jobs. The government has to create more decent jobs

through industrial transformation. Another priority is addressing multiple and intersecting deprivations through green, inclusive, and gender-sensitive programs, which help to enhance labor force participation of women and decarbonize the economy while creating jobs. Combining these massive programs of job creation with reforestation, waste recycling, waste-to-energy, micro-hydel, home-solar, and others are among many such possibilities.

Other ways of making the economy more resilient include replacing urban slums with inclusive and sustainable urban spaces and re-skilling the workforce in light of the new economy and technology sectors such as Industry 4.0.

Financing of the Stimulus Packages and International Cooperation

There are concerns on how to sustain stimulus packages given limited fiscal space. However, there is a consensus to put aside fiscal prudence targets in the short term and return to fiscal prudence once the crisis recedes. The fiscal space needs to be expanded by using new and innovative taxes. Exploiting the potentials of corporate social responsibility and international cooperation, including large new Special Drawing Rights allocation that would hopefully be approved through the IMF (with the support of the new US administration) are some other opportunities for addressing the financing challenges.

There is also a huge potential for regional cooperation to support and complement the national strategies for recovery and resilience building. Besides cooperation for addressing health emergencies through trade-in vaccines and pandemic-related medicines and equipment, countries in the region could harness the potential of intraregional trade to expedite economic recovery. Strengthening regional freight corridors and connectivity is useful in this regard. Financial cooperation including regional swap arrangements can be an important dimension of regional cooperation. Other areas of regional cooperation including food security and climate-resilient agro-ecosystems, fast tracking clean energy transition, digital transformation and sharing of experiences in digital delivery of services may all be helpful for enhancing resilience for future pandemics.

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed a mammoth development challenge for India and other economies, threatening to reverse hard-won development gains of more than a decade. Given that this is an extraordinary challenge, extraordinary response is required. However, the objective should not be to go back to the status quo ante, but to build back better through large, inclusive, and sustainable stimulus packages that decarbonize the economy while creating jobs and incomes. Regional cooperation has a potential to complement national strategies. India and the Philippines have many opportunities to cooperate to build back better and provide a more inclusive, sustainable, and resilient future to their people!

ABOUT THE SPEAKER



Prof. Nagesh Kumar is the director and chief executive of the Institute for Studies in Industrial Development (ISID), a public-funded policy think-tank based in New Delhi. Prior to taking up this role in May 2021, he served as the director of the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP), holding several senior management roles in 2009 to 2021: chief economist, director of the Macroeconomic Policy and Development Division, director of the Social Development Division at the UNESCAP headquarters in Bangkok, and head of the South and South-West Asia (SSWA) Office based in New Delhi, which he established. He is also a nonresident Senior Fellow at the Boston University Global Development Policy Centre.

Prof. Kumar has served on the board of directors of the Export-Import Bank of India and on the governing boards of the International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development in Geneva; the South Asia Centre for Policy Studies in Kathmandu, and the Institute of Studies in Industrial Development in New Delhi. He chaired the regional study group set up by the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation Secretariat that prepared a blueprint for the liberalization of trade-in services in South Asia leading to signing of the South Asian Agreement on Trade in Services in 2010 and an Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia study group on infrastructure development in East Asia in 2008.

REACTION

D.K. Nauriyal on Nagesh Kumar's Presentation

Prof. Nagesh Kumar has very rightly pointed out that there are two major challenges that the Indian economy is facing at this juncture. The first is to save the country from the spread of corona virus, with saving lives as the most important and the prime concern of the government of India. The second is to save the economy from an unfolding economic uncertainty due to the dual effects of the coronavirus pandemic and the global and national lockdown. Prof. Nagesh Kumar had talked about fiscal support measures which can broadly be divided into two categories: (1) above-the-line measures, which include government spending for gone or deferred revenues and expedited spending and (2) below-the-line measures designed to support businesses and provide credit probation to several sectors, which constitute roughly around 5.2 percent of the gross domestic product (GDP). In the early stages of the pandemic response, above-the-line expenditure measures focused primarily on social protection and health care.

Recent measures which the Indian government announced in October–November consisted of the injection of additional public investment, comprising more of higher capital expenditure by the central government, and interest-free loans to states of about 0.2 percent of GDP. It also announced support schemes that targeted certain sectors.

Two additional announcements were made: (1) a higher fertilizer subsidy allocation benefiting the agricultural sector, which roughly comes to 0.3 percent of GDP, and (2) support for urban housing construction. Agricultural sector support for infrastructure development would mainly be in the form of providing constitutional credit to farmers. The government also came up with business support packages, with key players being the various financial sectors like micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs) and nonbanking financial companies.

In comparing India's stimulus package with the rest of the world, the estimate given by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) should be considered. The value of fiscal measures taken by all countries amounts to roughly around \$11.7 trillion, which is close to the 12 percent of the global GDP as of 11 September 2020. According to the estimate, India's fiscal package (until 11 September 2020) reached seven (7) percent of its GDP, with above-the-line measures or actual spending amounting to 0.8 percent and an additional 5.2 percent for below-the-line measures. This package compares very well with most other emerging economies.

The Indian economy's main challenge is fiscal imbalance. The projection is that India's fiscal deficit as a percentage of GDP would expand to 13.1 percent in 2020 and would continue to remain elevated at 11.8 percent in 2021. Given the impact of

the growing deficit on bond yields and inability to monetize the deficit, India has to be mindful of its spending. In comparison, the fiscal deficit of countries like the US and the UK is projected to expand beyond 15 percent of GDP in 2020, but is expected to range in single digits by 2021. India is expected to experience difficulty in controlling the deficit given the lack of cluster revenue growth in 2021.

Another issue that requires attention is the debt-to-GDP ratio. Rating agencies have kept a hawk eye on public debt and had already flagged India's growing debt as a concern in 2019. India's government debt as a percentage of GDP was expected to rise to 89.3 percent in 2020 and would remain elevated by 2021. This high borrowing is likely to crowd out other corporate borrowers, increase supply of spike, and eat spike yields while the Reserve Bank of India uses various tools to keep building checks. It has its task cut out for the next couple of years.

There are certain gaps which the policy on the relief package has failed to address or has not adequately addressed. One issue is that of demand in which the package is too liquidity centric, despite the lingering problem with the Indian economy of liquidity and not of demand. For example, small and medium-scale sector employees (roughly around 110 million workers) are out of the country and there has been a massive loss of job opportunities during this pandemic. Therefore, low income means cutting expenditure by millions of households (more in rural areas and a little less in cities). This is what translates into declining demand that economists often talk about; meaning, an estimated 140 million people lost their jobs after India locked down its economy in March to stop the COVID-19 outbreak, while many others saw their salaries drastically reduced. After the lockdown, although many returned to work, more than six (6) million people who lost their jobs were not able to find new employment. In a survey conducted by the All India Manufacturers' Organization in June, one-third of small and medium-sized enterprises indicated that their businesses are beyond saving and they are struggling to survive due to low demand.

Unemployment rate has also been very high. Based on unemployment data, unemployment has skyrocketed in March to December 2020. Therefore, the Indian economy faces major challenges such as how the government can provide jobs and create demand for goods and services.

The government had to borrow money with the budget deficit. It is expected that the fiscal deficit-to-GDP ratio for India would have some deeper revenue shortfalls at roughly around four (4) percent in 2016, and would likely increase to around 11 to 13 percent as projected.

There is another problem with this deficit in demand, which is, the decline in demand would store fresh investment proposals of businesses because even if the government provides them with enough liquidity, the absence of demand would not let them be in the best shape. Further, if they curtail investment for example, fresh jobs will not come and the government will again face this same problem.

Recently, an estimate from the National Council of Applied Economic Research indicated that India may need an economic package equivalent to three (3) percent or more of GDP, on top of what has been already provided for in the Union Budget. Measures have been taken by the Reserve Bank of India to keep the Indian economy in the green zone and rise from the COVID-19 shock. India's recovery may be there but it is not broad based; it is fragile. As predicted, India's economy would shrink by around 7.5 percent, but may register a growth of 11.5 percent, albeit, this is a low growth base and not a remarkable or commendable achievement.

Prof. Kumar has rightly highlighted certain challenges and risks associated with economic outlook and also talked about a few measures that probably would help India to recover. However, this is not going to be easy. The government, the public, and India as a whole are going to have a bumpy road in both 2021 and 2022.

ABOUT THE SPEAKER



Prof. D. K. Nauriyal is professor of economics at the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences in IIT Roorkee. He started his career as a lecturer in HNB Garhwal University, Srinagar. He has published over 50 research papers in national and international journals and supervised many PhD scholars. He has delivered expert lectures in different domains of economics in universities and educational institutions across India. Nauriyal has been the academic advisor to the Japan International Cooperation Agency and Japan Bank for International Cooperation for the “Dedicated

Freight Corridor Project,” one of the most ambitious projects of Indian Railways supported by the two organizations alongside the Asian Development Bank

CAPSTONE

Navigating the Quest for New Approaches

Wilson C. Villones

Recovering better from COVID-19 pandemic depends largely on serious efforts of governments to strengthen health systems, shoring up social protections, and safeguarding economic welfare and opportunities, particularly for the vulnerable sectors of the population. This is what the webinar series attempted to navigate. The first webinar installment of the series, held last 10 October 2020, assessed the COVID-19 responses of the governments and social scientists in India and the Philippines. Meanwhile, the second webinar, held last 18 November 2020, showcased the experiences of the vulnerable populations from the two countries during the pandemic and examined the areas of social protection afforded to by policymakers. And the third webinar, held last 28 January 2021, discussed the COVID-19 economic stimulus packages of India and the Philippines.

The six speakers in the webinar series have provided a much-needed reading and analysis of the response taken by social science communities in India and the Philippines in addressing the effects of COVID-19. They were in a chorus calling for new approaches in handling and responding to the pandemic, implementing social protection measures and economic stimuli in view of building back better from the pandemic.

A New Approach to Government Pandemic Response

Setting the overall tone of the webinar, Tan described the management of COVID-19 in the Philippines as highly militaristic. This is problematic owing to the very punitive quarantine rules that were enforced. He also lamented the double standards as the media exposed officials being very strict with violators from the public, but not with people from within their ranks. What was particularly disturbing, according to Tan, was that the civil liberties of people were also being quarantined.

Taguiwalo, during the second webinar, added:

Between 17 March and 8 June, there were arrests by the police of a total of 193,779 people for quarantine violations. Of this number, the police charged 58,848 individuals and detained 15,307. As of October, 200,637 persons remain in congested jails. There has also been the closure of a major network (ABS-CBN) believed to be critical of the government as well as the passage of an Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 during the height of the COVID-19 epidemic.

Even if we look at the government spending during the pandemic, Montesa during the third webinar, noted that the government spending was dismal on the health budget and social amelioration, but spending too much on intelligence and confidence funds of the government. This obsession with the war on drugs and reduction in crime during the time of a pandemic, instead of giving emphasis on addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, is misplaced.

Clearly, the Philippine government urgently needs robust evidence to inform its critical policy decisions. This is why Tan argued that there is a need to document examples of COVID-19 management that are both compassionate and scientific. Del Pilar joined Tan in suggesting that more positive stories should be told and that social scientists can put more effort into communicating COVID-19 facts with the public. Facts would increase the confidence of people to confront the situation more realistically, and as a consequence, would be able to decide better and better input into policy making. It can be argued that, in the first few months of the pandemic, communicating COVID-19 facts to the public was not the strong suit of the Philippine administration.

The situation is the opposite in the case of India. The story of how COVID-19 has been handled in India was an impressive account of an effective communication strategy, emphasizing the use of face masks, suggesting quarantine and isolation, and keeping physical distance. According to Chaturvedi,

India capitalized on the strength of its film industry, and the communication approach includes leveraging the Bollywood stars, social leaders, industrial houses, etc., to communicate health protocols such as physical distancing etc. Unlike in the Philippines, force was not exactly required with the police having to act on enforcement, but effective communication with the people has been a very important dimension to impose the requirements.

India also leverages the strength of traditional medicine with modern medicine. It is important to know how these two are fused because indigenous communities have been using these medicinal and aromatic plants for decades, if not centuries. Clinical trials on the Ayurveda Yoga Unani Siddha Homeopathy (AYUSH) were introduced to give immunity, vitality, and protection to the people. This has also provided practical, affordable, and safer solutions for the Indian population. Patwardhan added that simple and safe interventions, such as steam inhalation and

gargling with turmeric, are essential in improving immunity and facilitating the reduction of viral load in controlling further progress of the disease and preventing other complications of COVID-19.

Chaturvedi added that a pandemic network among countries is needed and that equally important are the social scientists to bring clarity and understanding of the pandemic issues. The bottom line, Chaturvedi said, is how we encourage governments and other agencies to communicate with their constituents.

Faced with pressing challenges and limited resources, governments in India and the Philippines needed robust evidence to inform critical policy decisions and manage the pandemic's impact in many sectors. Tourism, the export sector, the manufacturing sectors, construction, airlines, public transportation, foreign investments, credit services and MSMEs, education, agriculture – all these sectors suffered badly during the pandemic.

Rethinking Social Protection

The COVID-19 has disrupted not only the flow of goods and people, but has also reintroduced the longstanding flaws and issues in the social protection programs in India and the Philippines. In both countries, as recounted by Tan and Chaturvedi, monetary assistance was provided to citizens: the Philippines, its Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) distributed Social Amelioration Program funds, while India distributed direct benefit transfer to farmers amounting to 6000 rupees or approximately 70 US dollars.

Other social protection programs were carried out in India, and these centered mainly on food security and employment. According to Chand, the public distribution system with a buffer food grain stock has been a great rescuer and protected India from any serious setback in food security. Plus, India has a National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme, which makes the right to work a fundamental right. Ofreneo commented that this is something that the Philippines can learn from India to provide decent work and more regular employment to Filipino people.

In the Philippines, considering how the pandemic exacerbated the already serious problem of economic and social inequality, Taguiwalo added that immediate, sufficient, and humane assistance from the government is a necessity to provide some level of economic relief. Issues on the selection and politicized inclusion and exclusion of beneficiaries were also highlighted by the former DSWD Secretary. She also emphasized that social protection in itself should only be a stop-gap measure and that structural inequalities should be addressed. Most people should have sources of livelihood that will allow them to live a decent life; social services, such as health, housing, and education, should be accessible to all. She said that such programs

shall be complemented by initiatives that will help the poor stand on their own through jobs, asset reforms, and other economic and social reform initiatives. A

shift from targeted social protection to universal provision of social services shall be studied and endorsed.

Virmani also echoed the same sentiment by quoting that in 2009, a study showed that India's three largest poverty alleviation programs had enough funds to eliminate poverty. As such, a new approach was needed. Historically for both middle-income countries, the focus has been on poverty alleviation. According to Virmani, India should start thinking of poverty elimination rather than alleviation alone.

Clearly, several areas of social protection should be scrutinized. During the third webinar, Kumar emphasized that the pandemic further widens inequalities as vulnerable groups and marginal groups are affected more adversely. Similarly, people living in urban slums wherein the disease spreads very fast, migrant workers, older persons, and persons with disabilities have been affected more than the other parts of society.

It is perhaps in this context that Taguiwalo emphasized that the quest for social protection really cannot be separated from the search for social justice. For instance, the new tax system should be looked into as it reduced individual and corporate income taxes that benefitted many big corporations but increased indirect taxes which the country's poor shouldered as consumers. Ofreneo agreed with Taguiwalo's observation and added that there is a need to adapt to a human rights-based approach to social protection as provided in the ASEAN Declaration on Social Protection. Ofreneo rounded up her comments by saying that the government does not have enough social protection systems, considering the magnitude of the problems confronting the Filipino people. According to Ofreneo, these problems may only be solved if social protection is reimagined as universal, comprehensive, state-financed and led, and based on an overarching human rights approach.

Retargeting the Targets of the Stimulus Packages

The pandemic exposed a developmental challenge not just in the area of social protection but also in terms of production in emerging economies. The possibility and risk of reversing decades of development gains in India and the Philippines are immediate. Hence a new approach is also warranted in programming economic stimulus packages, especially when you factor in the rising oil prices and the threat of inflationary pressures.

For the last installment of the webinar series, Kumar set the tone by saying,

millions of people were out of jobs, especially the informal sector workers who did not have access to any social protection or security. There were a number of hundreds of thousands of migrant workers who came from their villages to work in the cities, and they were trapped because transport modes were all suddenly stopped. They were stuck in their remote locations without work and livelihood

security...MSMEs (Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises), which formed the backbone of the Indian economy have been among the worst impacted, leading to the loss of jobs and livelihoods.

Kumar added that socioeconomic impacts in terms of the loss of jobs and livelihoods could possibly push up 208 million Indian people into extreme poverty. Nauriyal validated this point by saying that based on the Mumbai-based Center for Monitoring of Indian Economy, an estimated 140,000,000 people lost their jobs after India locked down its economy in March to stop the outbreak, while many others saw their salaries drastically reduced. This is where comprehensive economic stimulus packages can become game-changers.

Quimbo then recounted how legislative bills in Congress were deliberated and passed to provide several economic stimulus packages for the Filipinos during the height of the pandemic. Bayanihan 1, among other bills, provided a straightforward social amelioration given to the poorest 75% of Filipino households. This program got the lion's share of 200 billion pesos or approximately 3.6 billion US dollars. Meanwhile, the Indian government also rolled out fiscal and monetary stimulus packages: a 23 billion US dollars package in March 2020 to cover food and cash transfers, insurance coverage for health care workers, and wage support for low-wage workers, 270 billion US dollars in May, and 35 billion US dollars in November. According to Kumar, the objective here is to deliver a much more resilient and sustainable recovery of the Indian economy through a large people-centered inclusive and sustainable stimulus package.

Montesa complemented this by saying that the distribution of the economic stimuli (cash transfers, social amelioration, wage subsidies, loans, and access to social services) has to be better targeted at the most vulnerable: the poor, the near-poor, low-wage workers, and the micro and small enterprises. Earlier, Taguiwalo called this the "politicization of social protection programs," wherein the process of targeting and distribution is highly vulnerable to manipulation, resulting in unfair inclusion and exclusion as determined by politicians. There was a multi-sectoral demand for transparency and accountability structures, especially by civil society, to prevent abuse and financial mismanagement.

It is worth mentioning that the Philippines was hit by six typhoons in 2020 – the same year the pandemic was wreaking havoc. Many cities and municipalities in the country were heavily affected. As such, Montesa argued for the necessity of strengthening disaster preparedness to address typhoons and other environmental concerns along with the economic structures for a better post-COVID economy. There was a need to spend as allowable on contact tracing, testing, vaccination, health workers, and expanding and improving health facilities. These are all but necessary to build back better to be able to avert or withstand looming economic crises.

Ways forward

The pandemic was indisputably a big wake-up call for the Philippines and India, and the pandemic created shock ripples in these two emerging economies. And the question is, what do we do now? The speakers have successfully taken a hard look into the government response, social protection, and economic stimulus packages during the height of the pandemic, what was going on in these critical areas and what areas could be improved. More importantly, using social science perspectives, they explained the approaches through which its surrounding issues could be better navigated. And we were invited to interrogate and deliberate in this quest to build back better. Certainly, we did not choose how this pandemic began, but we have the choice of what solutions and approaches the pandemic will leave behind.

Moving forward, what should be the future direction of social sciences given the already existing structural issues that were brought into higher resolution by the pandemic? Collectively, how should we prepare for other pandemics, how can human behavior adapt in times of uncertainty, how do we understand risk, how should we evaluate the cost of different approaches, how should we deal with the mental health burden of a pandemic, and how should we narrow health gaps and structural inequalities? These are questions for the social sciences, and perhaps, the answer lies in understanding the evolving role of politics, social protection, psychology, and economic stimuli. Such understanding, I believe, will be instrumental in and can unravel how the next pandemic can be better managed or prevented.



Mr. Villones is the Head of the Program Development Section of the Philippine Social Science Council. He earned his master's and bachelor's degree (magna cum laude) in Philosophy from the University of the Philippines – Diliman.

