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THE EXTENDED COVID-19 CRISIS

AN ISSUE OF GOVERNANCE AND
HEALTH SYSTEM MANAGEMENT

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THE COVID-19 RESPONSE

The response to COVID-19 is at least a two part equation. The imposition of lockdowns to restrict movement and slow the spread of the virus was the first part of the equation. The planning and implementation of mass testing, contact tracing, and vaccination initiatives make up the second part. In the Philippines, like in other countries, the government plays a key role the execution of this equation. Hence, this paper seeks to discuss the country's COVID-19 response as both a governance and health systems management issue.

A lockdown, or Community Quarantine, was implemented in Metro Manila and other major Philippine cities on March 17, 2020, to slow the spread of COVID-19 and give the government time to put together its response plan. Almost a year after, the lockdown is still in place and has led to the loss of jobs, cutbacks and closure in business operations, and the slowdown of investment, effectively crippling the Philippine economy.¹

The Philippine government's response however, whether in terms of testing, contact tracing, or vaccination has been noticeably slower than in other countries.² Despite this reality, it appears that the cost of these inefficiencies has been greater on the economy than it has been on the administration's approval and trust ratings.³

In this month's Stratbase ADR Institute Occasional Paper, we seek to bring the policies and plans of the Philippines into focus –what they are, how they ought to have been implemented, and ultimately, how their failure contributed to the present slump in our economy and continued public health crisis. At the same time, it seeks to juxtapose this with the public perception of the government and its plans with the hope of sparking conversations on data-backed policies and improved response systems.

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CRIPPLED PHILIPPINE ECONOMY

Due to the measures imposed by the Philippine government to counter the COVID-19 pandemic, the country's traditional growth drivers such as consumption, remittances, and services declined in 2020. According to the Philippine Statistics Authority's (PSA) latest data, the Philippine gross domestic product (GDP) continued to contract in the fourth quarter of 2020, although at a slower pace. The GDP recorded a growth rate of -8.3% in the fourth quarter—a slight improvement from the record-low of -16.9% in the second quarter as the country was put under a lockdown in response to the pandemic—resulting in a growth rate of -9.5% for the full-year 2020. This is the lowest recorded annual growth rate since 1947.

Unfortunately, the Philippines continues to lag behind its neighbors in Southeast Asia, as its peers have already shown signs of recovery from the declines that they all experienced during the second quarter.

Another significant impact of the pandemic was massive unemployment. Due to the longest continuous lockdowns globally, thousands of businesses in the country were forced to either temporarily or permanently shut down their operations. In October 2020, the unemployment rate was recorded at 8.7% (or 3.8 million unemployed Filipinos aged 15 years and above). While this was an improvement from the record-high of 17.7% recorded in April 2020, this figure was still higher than the 4.6% (or 2.0 million unemployed Filipinos) in the same period in 2019. Likewise, the underemployment rate was recorded at 14.4% in October 2020, which was higher than the 12.8% recorded in October 2019. Expectedly, a survey by the Social Weather Stations (SWS) in November 2020 found that 62% of Filipinos said they got worse off in the past 12 months.

Given this, it comes as no surprise that the Philippines is considered one of the worst affected and most unlikely to recover quickly, not only in the Southeast Asian region but also in the world. Analyst group S&P Global Ratings went as far as to say that the Philippines would likely see not only a loss but a permanent loss of 12.6 percent should its economic recovery continue to stall for six months or more.

Should this permanent loss occur, the output will not return to pre-COVID levels until May 2022, if not later. Furthermore, it would cut a full 2.5 percentage points from the S&P 9.6 percent baseline growth projection for the country in 2021. Given rising unemployment, dips in household earnings, and price spikes, this spells a disaster for the Philippines' consumer-driven economy.

THE LOCKDOWN EQUATION

The sluggish economic performance can be attributed to extended lockdowns that adversely affected our consumption-driven economy.

The lockdowns themselves were not outwardly negative, especially since they were put in place to allow the national and local government to formulate and implement plans toward long-term COVID resilience. At the onset, it was believed that these stringently enforced lockdowns would stem the initial spread of the virus and buy time for the local governments and national governments to scramble to meet immediate needs and services.

Other countries also used lockdowns to assist with anti-COVID plan implementation. For example, Vietnam used its extensive lockdowns as a time-buying mechanism to execute their contact tracing and mass testing plans.⁴ Ultimately, their initially strict and even “draconian”

efforts combined with intelligent planning gave them a sound foundation for future long-term measures such as a gradual re-opening of the economy and vaccines' acquisition.

Unfortunately, the Philippine response only possesses half of this two-part equation. The first signs of an impending COVID-19 pandemic appeared in January of 2020.⁵ Despite this, no adequate travel bans and movement restrictions were put in place.⁶ It wasn't until almost two whole months later that a strict lockdown was put into place and it has continued to this day.⁷

As previously stated, these lockdowns at the early stage of the Philippine COVID-19 crisis were unavoidable, however unfortunate the economic and social repercussions. Nevertheless, instead of implementing crucial plans such as mass testing, contact tracing, supply chain repair, and vaccine procurement, the equation seems to have stayed at the lockdown stage and has fallen short of implementing response plans.

REASSESSING THE RESPONSE

This section of the paper seeks to briefly review the Philippines' various COVID-19 response initiatives and assess the efficiency and effectiveness of their implementation. Among the responses covered by this section are Bayanihan I and II, testing, contact tracing, and vaccination initiatives.

THE BAYANIHAN TO HEAL AS ONE ACT

One of the first major response measures taken by the Philippine government was the passage of the Republic Act No. 11469 or the Bayanihan I law on March 25, 2020. The law allotted P275 billion worth of public funds for the novel coronavirus response efforts and placed the country in a state of emergency.

Bayanihan I also granted the President thirty special powers, among them was the power to re-allocate the national budget in order to provide emergency cash aid for two months to 18 million low-income and vulnerable families worth PHP 5,000 to PHP 8,000 under the Social Amelioration Program (SAP). The law directed concerned agencies to give cash assistance to public and private health workers who would contract severe coronavirus disease, worth PHP 100,000. While for the families of health workers who died of COVID-19 in the line of duty, they will receive PHP 1 million, which has a retroactive application from February 1, 2020.

The rolling out of SAP, however, was criticized due to several lapses, alleged discrimination, and slow phased distribution. In April 2020 the month the original lockdown was set to end, it was reported by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) that only 21% of the allocated cash subsidies were successfully distributed to beneficiaries. Then in May 2020, many hopeful recipients were further disappointed after the government announced that only those still under enhanced community quarantine (ECQ), the strictest lockdown level, would still get the cash subsidy.

Thankfully, many private sector initiatives cushioned the blow for many low-income Filipino communities that were economically affected by the lockdown. During the early months, while the government

was slow to implement their financial aid programs, business groups actively mobilized resources and networks to raise funds to distribute food packs and supplies to low-income communities.

In June of last year, several Senators brought to light their dismay that not a single health worker affected with severe COVID-19 disease has been able to receive the sickness and death benefit that was indicated in the Bayanihan I Act.

BAYANIHAN TO RECOVER AS ONE ACT

Signed into Law on September 11, 2020, Republic Act No 11494 or the Bayanihan to Recover as One Act (Bayanihan II) granted additional authority to the President to combat the COVID-19 pandemic in the country.

Bayanihan II provided a total of PHP165.5 billion stimulus fund, of which only PHP 140 billion is readily available while the remaining PHP 25.5 billion was considered as “standby fund” since at that time, the government has yet to identify its sources. Under this standby fund, PHP 10 billion is intended for the testing and procurement of medication and vaccines for COVID-19.

Under the same Law, the requirements under the procurement law have expressly been made inapplicable in the purchase of goods, including vaccines in the fight against COVID-19. Section 4(u) of Bayanihan II states that the procurement of supplies, goods, and equipment constitutes “exemptions from the provisions on bidding process required under Republic Act No. 9184 or the Government Procurement Reform Act.”

In line with this, last December 14, 2020, National Action Plan Chief Implementer and Vaccine Czar, Gen. Carlito Galvez Jr. (Ret.), declared that the Procurement Law does not allow advance market commitment.

TESTING CAPACITY

Despite provisions in Bayanihan II that should allow the government to fast track the procurement of goods needed to fight COVID-19, it has time and again struggled to swiftly scale-up the country’s response capabilities.

In the initial stages of the outbreak, the demand for additional testing capacity became apparent. At that time, there was only one laboratory in the entire country that could test samples, with a woeful capacity of 300 tests per day. It took several weeks after the declaration of the Luzon-wide lockdown for the government to announce that it was going to ramp-up its testing capacity.

In the effort to immediately increase the testing capacity, one bottleneck identified was the Philippines is dependent on imported technologies and test kits. These resources became scarce at the global level when the pandemic was declared, and only a handful were initially registered under the Food and Drug Administration. Other medical devices needed to undergo the approval process before it could be widely used. Given that, there was an effort for the utilization of a locally manufactured test kit. However, it also took months before it was fully developed and finally validated by the regulatory authority.

In addition, in the early stages to increase testing capacity, there were several local government units (e.g., Marikina, Valenzuela, etc.) that signified their intentions and invested resources to have their own testing centers. At that time, these initiatives received little or no support from the Department of Health (DOH), citing rigorous standards, including compliance to certain biosafety levels, in order to gain accreditation.

Apart from ramping-up the testing capacity by increasing the number of accredited testing laboratories, the government also later realized that another challenge to face was the lack of trained personnel who will manage these laboratories' continued operations. There were instances that testing sites were forced to stop operations because the virus has already infected the concerned personnel.

Moreover, following the complaints of exorbitant price rates on the RT-PCR (real-time reverse transcription-polymerase chain reaction) tests, the government set a price range at the end of November 2020. This was more than eight months since the lockdown was implemented. Initially, the Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth) had announced in June 2020 that there would be a new rate for the benefits package for COVID-19 testing. At that stage, the DOH and PhilHealth could have aligned the price ranges of testing if these agencies had an earlier coordination.

At the height of the pandemic, the Philippines' testing capacity was not comparable with the capacities of other neighboring countries that, even during the initial stage of the pandemic, had quickly scaled-up their capacities.

It wasn't until April last year that the country's testing capacity gradually increased. That month, a multi-sector called Taskforce T3

(Test, Trace, Treat) was formed with the support of business groups, NGOs, and the Philippine Government. The focus of the task force was to help strengthen the country's anti-pandemic capabilities through the construction of isolation centers, donation of testing equipment and PPEs, and played a central role in increasing the country's testing laboratories from 17 to 162 testing labs throughout the country.

WEAK CONTACT TRACING PROGRAM

The purpose of an effective contact tracing system is to alert people who may have been exposed to someone infected with COVID-19 and prevent them from spreading it to others. However, the country's current contact tracing program is still below standards, leaving a huge gap in the test-trace-treat program that health experts are constantly advocating as a strategy to contain COVID-19.

Way back in April 2020, the national task force launched an online platform (mobile app) to trace people who were experiencing symptoms of COVID-19 and provide them remote and instant consultations with health workers. Unfortunately, the use of the app was delayed due to the lack of compliance with important data privacy laws. Critics of the app say these laws should have been considered in the initial stage of the app's development.

In July 2020, a representative from the World Health Organization (WHO) pointed out that despite the increase in capacity to test more samples, the country's contact tracing efforts as a "little weak." The President's reaction was to appoint a contact tracing czar, retired police general and Baguio City Mayor Benjamin Magalong.

According to the recommendations by the WHO, the ideal contact tracer to population ratio is 1:800. Given that recommendation and the country's population of 108 million, the ideal number of contact tracers nationwide should be 135,000. But back in August, the Department of Interior and Local government reported only having 91,000 contact tracers, 44,000-short of the WHO recommendation. Thankfully, this number has increased since then and as of January 2021 reported stands at 255,854 nationwide.

MISSTEPS IN THE PROCUREMENT OF COVID-19 VACCINES

In November 2020, as part of the government's efforts to revive the pandemic-battered economy, President Duterte approved Sec. Galvez's proposed "Philippine National Vaccine Roadmap" for the purchase and distribution of COVID-19 vaccines.

At that time, the government was expected to fully organize the National Task Group on COVID-19 Vaccination, expand the vaccine panel of experts, analyze, select, and buy vaccines, start clinical trials, complete bilateral and multilateral engagements and arrangements, and complete immunization logistics and services support plans. All of these efforts were projected to be finished by December 2020.

However, in the middle of December 2020, the government announced that the country was only able to acquire a commitment from China to provide the COVID-19 vaccines and that no similar commitment was attained from other vaccine manufacturers such as Pfizer, AstraZeneca, or Moderna. The government's reason was that the expected arrival of these vaccines is in the second and third quarter of 2021.

In hindsight, back in September, President Duterte publicly said that he preferred China and Russia in the procurement of COVID vaccines. At the time, he said that it was because that some pharmaceutical firms demanded advance payment from countries wanting priority access to the vaccine.

Meanwhile, the vaccines that were guaranteed under the COVAX facility – a joint-purchasing framework under the leadership of the WHO and expected to provide for the 20 percent (around 22 million) of the Philippine population – was supposed to be delivered if not for the pending requirement on the indemnification agreement.

According to the WHO, this particular requirement was common to all countries and not only specific to the Philippines. This raises the question on how the government did not anticipate the delay of vaccines when the requirement on the indemnification agreement was already raised prior to the end of last year.

The government, through the Food and Drug Administration, has granted emergency use authorization (EUA) to three COVID-19 vaccine manufacturers, namely Pfizer-BioNTech, AstraZeneca-Oxford University, and China’s Sinovac. Supposedly, the EUAs were given to expedite the process of acquiring vaccines to jumpstart the country’s vaccination program. However, the Philippines is still waiting for the first doses of the vaccines to arrive while other countries in the region have started inoculating their citizens.

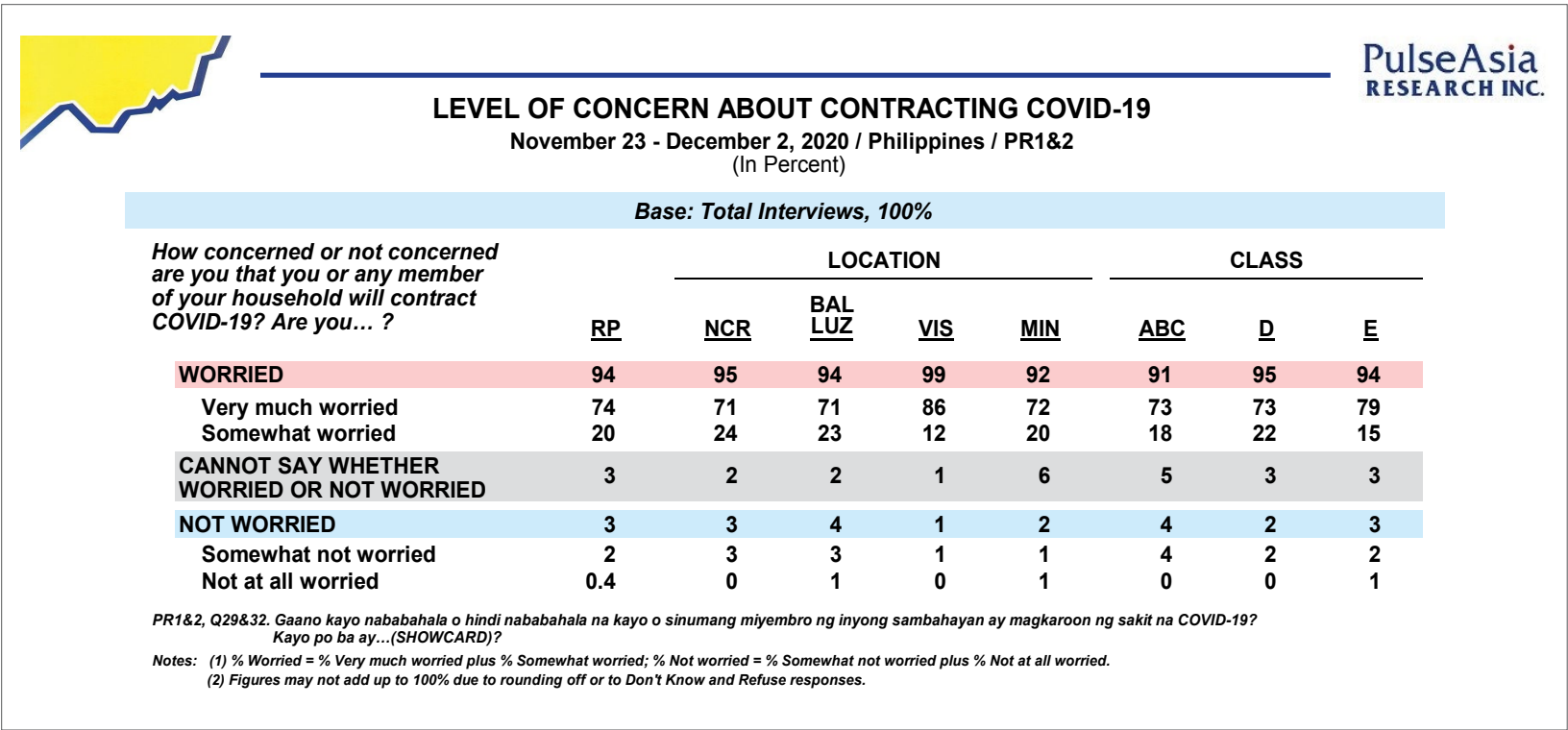
Despite these plans, the Philippines is just expecting to receive its first delivery of the COVID-19 vaccine this month. According to Presidential spokesperson Harry Roque, a batch of 600,000 doses of Sinovac Biotech’s vaccines, donated by China, will arrive on February 28. This makes the Philippines the last South-east Asian country to receive its initial set of vaccines.

DISCONNECTED FROM POLITICAL REPERCUSSIONS

While government response plans are delayed and hampered with controversy, the political cost these have had on our country’s political leaders pales in comparison to the economic impact the lockdown has had on Filipinos. In this section, we look into Pulse Asia Survey’s findings on Filipinos’ level of concern with COVID-19, agreement on the country’s prevention efforts, and the President’s trust and approval ratings. Furthermore, it posits some possible explanations for this seeming disconnection.

According to Pulse Asia’s Ulat ng Bayan report released in January 2021, the predominant sentiment among Filipino adults is one of concern about getting ill COVID-19 (94%) and that only 3% are not worried at all. The report also shows that these levels of concern are consistent across socio-economic classes and geographic areas.

However, while the figures show that concern among Filipinos of catching the virus is clearly there, it would appear that majority do not see the country’s response and prevention plans as the cause of their concern. When asked if respondents agreed or disagreed with the statement that COVID-19 was better prevented in the Philippines



AGREEMENT/DISAGREEMENT THAT THE SPREAD OF COVID-19 WAS
BETTER PREVENTED IN THE PHILIPPINES COMPARED TO OTHER COUNTRIES

November 23 - December 2, 2020 / Philippines / PR1&2
(In Percent)

Base: Total Interviews, 100%

How much do you agree or disagree that
compared to other countries, the spread
of COVID-19 was better prevented in the
Philippines? Would you say you....?

	LOCATION					CLASS		
	RP	NCR	BAL LUZ	VIS	MIN	ABC	D	E
AGREE	65	76	64	49	72	67	66	57
Strongly agree	15	22	11	14	20	19	14	15
Somewhat agree	50	55	53	35	52	48	52	42
CANNOT SAY IF AGREE OR DISAGREE	25	16	29	32	15	18	25	29
DISAGREE	11	7	7	19	13	15	9	14
Somewhat disagree	9	6	6	15	11	11	8	13
Strongly disagree	2	1	1	4	2	5	2	1

PR1&2, Q34a&37a. Gaano kayo sumasang-ayon o hindi sumasang-ayon na kung ikukumpara sa ibang bansa ay mas napigilan ang pagkalat
ng COVID-19 sa Pilipinas? Masasabi ba ninyo na kayo ay... [SHOWCARD]?

Notes: (1) % Agree = % Strongly Agree plus % Somewhat Agree; % Disagree = % Somewhat Disagree plus % Strongly Disagree.
(2) Figures may not add up to 100% due to rounding off or to Don't Know and Refuse responses.

compared to other countries, a majority (65%) agreed. Furthermore, 25% said they could not say if they agreed or disagreed and only 11% disagreed.

Hence, in spite of the success of swift and science-based response plans of neighboring countries, such as the earlier cited example of Vietnam, and despite the Philippines' own failure to scale-up testing capacity, weak contact tracing, and slow vaccine procurement, Filipinos still believe that the country has responded to the virus comparably better than others have.

In addition, despite his administration's poor response to the pandemic, the issue seems not to have affected President Rodrigo Duterte's popularity. In Pulse Asia's most recently released approval survey, President Duterte received a 91% approval rating. Not only was this a high rating, but it was also in fact an improvement from the 87% he recorded in December 2019. Only 5% disapproved of Duterte, while 5% were undecided.

In terms of trust, the survey also found that 91% of Filipinos said that they continue to trust President Duterte. This figure is even 8 percentage points higher than in December 2019. Furthermore, only 3% said they did not trust the President, while 5% said they were undecided.

Some may find it inconceivable that in the middle of a health crisis, the leader of a government with so poor a response could garner such high approval ratings. Sociologist and columnist Randy David offers one possible explanation — fear.

In his column written soon after the results of this survey were released, Prof. David noted that "One need not go to the country's remotest barangays to find people who would readily give "safe" answers than say something that could expose them to unwanted drug raids or to being denied "ayuda." To people who have felt vulnerable and powerless all their lives—and they are the majority in our country—nothing could be more dangerous than expressing their true opinion about their leaders at the wrong time."

Prof. David argues that respondents could be choosing to give safe answers for fear of violent retaliation from political leaders. He also points out how many Filipinos are economically vulnerable and reliant on financial aid or *ayuda* from the government and would not want to risk being denied of it.

Indeed, this economic vulnerability and reliance on government aid are top of mind for many Filipinos. In Pulse Asia's Top National Concerns survey, many of the top concerns —controlling the price of goods, increasing pay, creating jobs, and of course continued financial aid— are economic in nature. Could it be that that the high trust and performance ratings of the President and his government's response are just the result of the number of Filipinos that rely on financial aid from the government?

On the other hand, another possibility is that Filipinos genuinely believe the government is responding appropriately to the pandemic. A reason for this, as Stratbase ADR Institute President Dindo Manhit has pointed out, are the regular briefings that President Duterte and his officials give on the national TV.

As pointed out by Prof. Manhit during an interview, “we (the media) quote government first thing in the morning, there’s a press briefing at noon and also in the evening. Maybe what the public needs is more critical thinking, which we should disseminate more because we might have a false sense of success against COVID.”

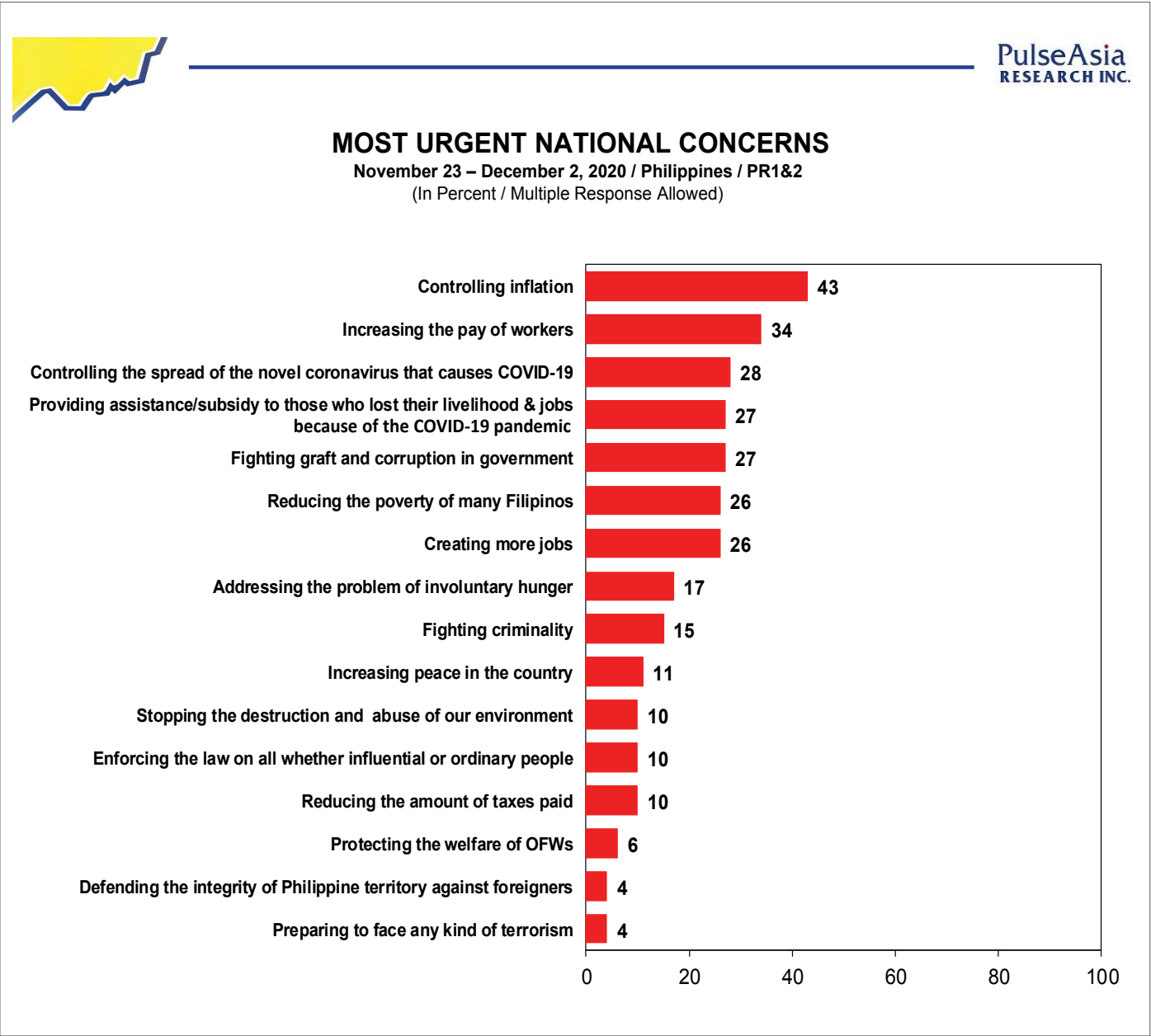
“That’s scary because we need accountability from government, we need government to be transparent because we will face more difficulties in solving the pandemic if we are happy with our response but it’s not the truth at the ground level” he added.

Prof. Manhit argues that due to the daily briefings and constant coverage of these briefings, the public only hears and sees reports from the government instead of what is actually happening on the ground. This in turn gives Filipinos a false sense of security.

MOVING FORWARD

TRANSPARENCY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

If anything, the last year has shown us that the Philippines must improve its COVID-19 response plans in order to combat this health and economic crisis. The delays and the controversies in the distribution of SAP illustrate the need for more transparency and accountability in the government’s COVID-19 spending. The extraordinary amount of public funds being mobilized to respond to the pandemic creates opportunities for corruption that can lead to discrimination and political patronage. It is necessary that government audit bodies, as well as civil society groups, remain vigilant to ensure that public funds are used appropriately and for the benefit of all Filipinos.





PROACTIVE POLICIES

The country's weak contact tracing program, which certainly contributed to the community transmittal of the virus also reminds us of the importance of proactive rather than reactive policies. It was not until towards the end of 2020 that enough contact tracers were hired to meet WHO recommended standards. The success story of Vietnam, where targeted testing and three degrees of contact tracing for each positive case were conducted early on, highlights the value of quick and efficient mobilization of resources, both human and financial. Management of resources is thus essential in this battle against COVID-19.

MULTI-SECTORAL COLLABORATION

Furthermore, the Philippines' long road towards improving its testing capacity is a reminder that the whole-of-society approach is needed to address this pandemic. Looking back at the past year, the capacities only picked up once the government fast-tracked the accreditation of LGU sponsored labs and when the multi-sectoral initiative Taskforce T3 was launched. Indeed, no single entity can combat the pandemic alone, even if that entity is the National Government itself.

EVIDENCE-BASED DECISION-MAKING

However, all these improvements are predicated on leadership that does not peg its end goal to approval ratings and political maneuvering, but rather to improving the state of the Filipino people's public and economic health.

Instead of political narratives and dynamics, this crisis requires science and evidence-based responses. Hence, it is also integral that

our leaders base their decision on the best available science rather than political strategy. It must mobilize the knowledge and skills in partnership with different sectors for a truly collaborative and whole-of-society response framework. In this way, what little available resources there can be maximized and made to benefit those most in need.

OPPORTUNITY IN THE VACCINE ROLL OUT

While there have been challenges along the way, the pandemic is far from over. More must still be done and our country’s vaccine rollout is the next opportunity to get the country’s pandemic response on track, even if we are the last in the region to do so.

The Philippines is currently still in the process of acquiring vaccines. One policy that has held up this acquisition of vaccines is the indemnification agreements for the manufacturers. For example, the government’s deal for the Pfizer vaccine, which has a reported efficacy rate of 94% after the second dose, had encountered delays as both parties contemplated their final mutual agreement for indemnity.

Under normal circumstances, vaccines undergo a three-phase testing process. However, in urgent public health situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic, unlicensed vaccines may be granted emergency use authorization or EUA to allow the government to conduct an immunization program.

Currently, legislation is already in the works to create a COVID-19 National Vaccine Indemnity Fund worth P500 million. This fund would augment the funds of the Philippine Health Insurance Corporation for treating Filipinos in case they develop “adverse effects” from the COVID-19 vaccine. The passage of this measure must be prioritized by both Houses of Congress.

In addition to securing reliable vaccines from trusted sources, the Philippines must be efficient in its vaccine distribution once they have landed in the country. The distribution must be immediate, safe, secure, equitable and strictly in compliance with the vaccination and deployment plan of the government.

Vaccine distribution is also an opportunity to take advantage of technology to improve distribution. Similar to how mobile apps and mobile data can assist with contact tracing, cloud technology and artificial intelligence (AI) can be used to help authorities make informed decisions and improve the efficacy of the vaccine roll out by forecasting demand and managing vaccine logistics.

USE TRUST TO BUILD CONFIDENCE

However, in addition to the logistics involved in the nationwide distribution of the vaccine, we also face another problem in terms of Filipino’s vaccine confidence. The truth is, many of us are still having doubts of getting vaccinated. According to a Pulse Asia Survey, only 1 in 3 Filipinos are willing to be inoculated against COVID-19.

One way the government can help address this is by leveraging the high trust Filipinos have in the President. As early noted, 91% of Filipinos said that they trusted President Duterte, a clear and science and evidence-based message on vaccines, backed by sound policies and programs that strengthen the Philippine public health care system would go a long way towards building the Filipino public’s confidence in the vaccination program. In this way, we could achieve herd immunity and revive our ailing economy.

The ongoing lockdown alone will not solve the country’s public health and economic crisis. Almost a whole year now under lockdown,

business owners and the country’s economic managers have been calling for the lifting of the lockdown for the sake of the Philippine economy.

However, while the country’s worst-in-the-region response programs have allowed opportunities due to inadequate testing and tracing, the vaccine roll-out represents an opportunity to get back on track.

The Philippine response must possess both parts of the equation. The lockdown was only the first, a plan, well thought out and efficiently implemented, is the second.

ENDNOTES

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