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Transformative Social Work and Social Development: Responding to the Pandemic, Disasters, and Human Rights Issues

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Foreword

The theme of the PJSD Volume 15, *Transformative Social Work and Social Development: Responding to the Pandemic, Disasters, and Human Rights Issues,* seeks to capture social work and social development practices that exhibit the meaning of being transformative amidst the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic. The sudden onset and global reach of the pandemic caught social work and social development practitioners by surprise. The pandemic revealed and the weaknesses of structures in dealing with containing the spread of the virus, in implementing measures such as social distancing and self-isolation and brought out the best and the worst in people, the creativity in adaptation and frailties of individuals. The pandemic truly changed the ways people lived and helping professions all over the world had to deal with this volatility and uncertainty and find new ways to respond. Social workers and social development practitioners sought ways to transform lives despite the pernicious taking over of the effects of the pandemic.

The term "transformative" has been defined as having the characteristics of a long lasting, important, radical, and positive change in such a way that it makes one's life, outlook, or condition different and better. Yet, this composite definition from various dictionaries may still be applied using a wide array of perspectives. As such, transformative social work and social development may be viewed in various ways.

WAYS ON HOW TO VIEW TRANSFORMATIVE PRACTICE

There are two sides as to how transformative social work may be viewed. Firstly, it may be viewed as a state of social work that has always been there from the start because social workers are naturally considered as agents of change. "Transformative" here therefore becomes a catch phrase with the assumption of it being innate in the social work profession. Some members of the helping profession may argue that the term "transformative social work" is redundant, because after all, given its values and principles, would there be a form of social work that is not transformative?

The other view is that transformative social work is emerging. For instance, the Social Work Action Network (SWAN) credo "Another Social Work is Possible" forwards the idea that social work may be a driving force to fight oppression and injustice thus reject structures that may cause oppression. The meaning of being transformative emerges from narratives of practice from dialogues among practitioners and the community.

In social work there are three ways to view transformative social work practice:

1. The advance generalist view;
2. The critical and anti-oppresive view, and
3. The critical-creative view

The advance generalist view of social work posits that transformative social work is the outcome of what advance generalist social workers do: "The ability to travers various domains and levels of practice simultaneously is what makes the social work profession unique among the helping professions, and it is how we can make a sustained impact in society and the world around us (Schott & Schott, 2016, p. 9).

The idea comes from the improvement of the health care landscape where social workers' utmost concern is the health of individuals, families, and communities. This combines a multidisciplinary approach towards achieving innovations in practice. Schott and Weiss (2016) echoes Dran (2014, p. 569) in defining the advance generalist practitioner as a social worker who "works patiently in multiple dimensions at once, alert to new patterns that emerge. In a complex situation, the advance generalist creatively responds by discovering new interventions to apply in new ways" (p. 3). This view of transformative social work emphasizes the importance of evidence-based practice (EBP) and empirically supported treatments (EST).

On the other hand, the other notion of transformative social work is a product of "critical habits of questioning" (Medina, 2013, in Schroder, 2022; Munford and Sanders, 2021) define transformative social work practice as that which "involves challenging injustice and marginalization" (p. 721). Further, Schott and Weiss (2016) outlined common characteristics of a transformative social work practice:

1. A practice that occurs at various levels and therefore will involve the participation of individuals, and at the wider community and societal levels in identifying factors that facilitate social change (Schott & Weiss, 2016).
2. A partnership between social worker and service user that is not limited to attending the immediate needs but more so in "developing an understanding of the connection between personal troubles and the broader social and political issues and contexts that contribute to disadvantage" (Irizarry et al., 2016; Van Breda, 2019 in Schott & Weiss, 2016).
3. Purposively having an "'emancipatory ethic' which 'addresses the removal of structural barriers' and 'encourages the deconstruction of privileged discourses that frame human suffering as an individual experience resulting from personal deficits' (VanderPlaat, 2016, p. 198 in Schott & Weiss, 2016)
4. Promotes a critical analysis of the structural issues and social conditions that exclude individuals from fully participating in community life (Brookfield, 2009; Hingley-Jones & Ruch, 2016; Nelson et al., 2017; VanderPlaat, 2016 in Schott & Weiss, 2016).

Moreover, Schröder (2022; New ecosocial world Leaving No one Behind (2022) explains that transformative practices in social development emanate from having an open space to share a common strategy for collectively dismantling the neoliberal framework. Nicolas (2022) argues that transformative practice is borne from a transformative social work education framework which maximizes transformative potential by combining critical and creative thinking. In turn, "critical thinking and creative thinking produce innovative ways on how to shape a liberative education and critical-creative practice in social work" (Nicolas, 2022).

RESPONDING TO PANDEMIC THROUGH A TRANSFORMATIVE SOCIAL WORK LENS AND PRACTICE

The country's response to the pandemic was headed by the security sector (Lim & Imbong, 2021), a sector not so much trained with epidemiology or other health sciences as combat strategies. With the security sector at the helm, the direction of the pandemic response was expectedly militaristic (Lim & Imbong, 2021). Medical experts as well as social workers have offered insight in the handling of pandemic and alternatives in light of fast and early recoveries of nations such as Vietnam (Lim & Imbong, 2021). Despite such informed opinions,

the Duterte administration chose to ignore this advice and rather continued with the militaristic solutions of the Inter-Agency Task Force on the Emerging Infectious Diseases [ATF-EID] (Lim & Imbong, 2021).

The distinctive character in the time of pandemic is the normalization of repression itself. In the normalization of repression, fundamental and constitutionally guaranteed rights such as of those those of assembly and speech are curtailed if not altogether denied (Lim & Imbong, 2021). Yet the state forces legitimized such a repression based on supposed health protocols, implying the idea that it is abnormal to exercise fundamental freedoms amid the pandemic (Lim & Imbong, 2021). They lost sight that low social transfers support amid joblessness and rising hunger (CNN Philippines Staff, 2021) is also likely to weaken compliance with mobility restriction policies (Mendoza, 2021).

The delivery mechanism of the social amelioration program (SAP) also suffers from the phenomenon of "squeezing the balloon". In accountability studies, the term called "squeezing the balloon," refers to how government at a certain level, passes on the blame or responsibility to the other levels of the government to evade accountability (Aceron, 2020). In the delivery mechanism of SAP, local government units (LGUs) were delegated many tasks that are dependent on the central government's work (Aceron, 2020). If the listing and validation takes long, if the listing and corresponding benefits are wrong, if the national government does not download the funds and goods on time, if the benefits do not get to the intended beneficiaries, local governments will be forced to explain to their constituencies (Aceron, 2020). Local governments bore the brunt of citizens if those qualified were not provided with corresponding assistance or those who were not qualified got access to services.

Recounting our professional values (service, human rights and social justice, dignity and worth of people, privacy and confidentiality, the importance of human relationships, and integrity), which COVID-19 has undermined and, in some instances, overturned, it has become increasingly notable that if any profession is most hurt by the pandemic, it is the social work profession (Amadasun, 2020). Starkly, social work is under threat today because the value of social justice is challenged by the deleterious impact of the pandemic on powerless groups. More so, the value of human dignity tanks in the face of resource and economic deprivation among many citizens who are unable to gain access to medical care (Amadasun, 2020). Our creed to ensure the entrenchment of human rights tenets in human relationships appears to teeter on the brink of defect in the high of flagrant human rights violations (Amadasun, 2020). The critical questions that should be posed in our practice during the pandemic are the following (Finn & Jacobson, 2018):

- How do people give meaning to the experiences and conditions that they share in their lives?
- How do we comprehend and appreciate the contextual nature of human experience and interaction?
- What forms and relations of power shape social relations and experience?
- Who has the power to have their interpretations of reality values as "true"?
- How might a historical perspective provide us with a deeper understanding of the context, help us grasp the ways that struggles over meaning and power play out, and enable us to appreciate the human consequences of these struggles?
- How do we claim a sense of the possible as an impetus for justice-oriented social work practice?

Given the "rampaging onslaught of the pandemic on individuals and families", different initiatives coming from individuals, institutions, and communities in responding to the pandemic that have sharply changed the contours of the country that falls under what we call transformative social practice lens and practice. It situates seemingly individual problems within social and material conditions and alienating social structures (Lundy, 2011). At the same time, it emphasizes the importance of human agency while offering help to individuals and families. Moreover, it can also be viewed as a practice that acknowledges the role of social structures in producing and maintaining inequality and personal hardship and the importance of offering help to those in need or difficulty (Lundy, 2011).

It is also about social work as not being neutral, caring profession caring profession but an active political process especially when we are trying to meet client's needs in the context of injustice at the local levels (Baines, 2011). Every action we undertake is political and ultimately about power, resources, and who has the right and opportunity to feel positive about themselves, their identities, and their futures (Baines, 2011).

The articles in this volume

The articles in this volume are grouped into three forms of responses during the time of pandemic: 1) structural social work and working with communities; 2) institutional social work practice and frontline social workers; and 3) social development strategies and working with social movements.

Structural social work and working with communities

The first four articles in this volume contribute to the discourse of transformative social work by delving more in explaining the nature of structural social work practice in the Philippines during the pandemic. This group of articles features research in remote community organizing field instruction with farmers, engagement with women in urban poor communities, human rights issues among the homeless, and an essay on structural social work during the time of COVID-19. The first article *COv2 – Community Organizing in a Virtual World: Lessons from a Student's Field Experience* during the Pandemic attempts to frame a version two of community organizing (COV2) through a firsthand field instruction experience of a student and faculty supervisor. Nazal and Tungala discuss attempts made by the academe to collaborate with a non-government agency field instruction partner to implement virtual platforms to assist communication among community organizers and the farmers whom they were assisting. The article details how a student intern used technology mediated platforms as a communication tool throughout the CO process. The authors used Structuration as a theoretical lens to the explain how human agency produces technology but in turn is influenced by technology. The authors explain how human agency and technology shape forms of participation in the community. They used the pun COv2 as both referring to CO version 2 and its application during the time of sars-Cov2.

Sina-on and Dagooc's article is entitled *Fighting for their Right to Food and Education: The Case of Lakas Women Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic*. In this article, Sina-on serves as the researcher while Dagooc or Nanay Precy as representative of the community knowledge keepers and member of the women's organization LAKAS, Inc. situated at Purok Aguinaldo, a community inside the University of the Philippines Diliman. Sina-on recounted stories shared by Nanay Precy

on how the women of LAKAS responded to issues during the pandemic such as food security, job loss, and school closures, through community-based approaches. The article shares insights from strategies employed by the women such as urban farming and community learning hubs to assert their right to food and employment and their children's right to education. Sina-on and Dagooc share important insights in community organizing and collective action.

The third article *Re-Examining the Phenomenon of Homelessness during the COVID-19 Pandemic in the National Capital Region* analyzes cases of human rights violations among families in street situations during the pandemic. Prondosa uses a structural social work lens to analyze how homelessness as a human rights issue was aggravated during the pandemic. In this beginning analysis, Prondosa leaves important reminders to structural social work practitioners regarding tasks related to working with families in street situations.

The essay *Structural Social Work Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Look into Authoritarianism in the Philippines, the Duterte Administration, and the Country's Pandemic Response* is a fearless critic of how government mishandled the pandemic situation from its onset in 2020. Cristobal explains the meaning of structural social work and how such practice should lead to emancipation of disadvantaged groups and vulnerable sectors during the time of COVID-19. In the end, Cristobal highlights the need to abolish oppressive structures and the importance of consciousness raising in structural social work. This article summarizes the importance of structural social work as a response to the pandemic, disasters, and human rights issues.

Institutional social work practice and frontline social workers

The next three articles are all collaborations that discuss experiences of social workers in direct practice during the pandemic. The articles attempt to show how social work practice in institutions such as child caring agencies and hospitals, have been transformational during the time of COVID-19. Institutional social work practice is consistent with Weiss & Schott's (2016) argument that transformative social work shows the ability to maneuver between different levels of practice and facilitate lasting outcomes through evidence-based practice and empirically tested treatments. Moreover, the articles also support Pyles and Adam's (2016) stand that in aiming to achieve transformative social work, the social worker ventures into critical view of practice and reflects on one's own practice to ensure holistic engagement which involves the whole body (body, mind, heart, culture, and spirit) in implementing interventions that transform traditional practices into critical ones through participatory pedagogies to co-create narratives of transformative practices. The articles in this section seek to contribute to the stories of transformation by highlighting the roles of direct practitioners in uplifting the lives of others during the time of pandemic despite the limits and challenges they faced.

The fifth article in this volume, *Philippine Child Caring Agencies amidst COVID-19 Pandemic: Operational Challenges, Responses, and Reflections* is a collaboration among academics who had had to some degree practice in child protection and who are advocates of children's rights. Lamberte, Arellano, Jontaciergo and Sina-on provide an overview of their research on child-caring agencies (CCA) during the time of COVID-19. The authors challenge social workers to contribute to transformative social work by advocating change in Residential Care Facilities for Children and in developing new models of practice.

In the sixth article, *Medical Social Workers' Social Wellbeing: Tales from the Frontlines*, Uclaray et al. employed a phenomenological approach, in discussing the experiences of five Filipino medical social workers who were found to be "physically and emotionally exhausted, discriminated against, and fearful due to the COVID-19 pandemic." The medical social workers practiced self-care to overcome loneliness and fear. Their connection with a support system also helped maintain their social well-being. More importantly, despite the risks, the Filipino medical social workers continued to be dedicated in their work as frontliners during the COVID-19 pandemic. The article promotes the value of the social work profession and the key role of social workers during the pandemic. The authors echo the call for a deeper appreciation of the social work profession.

The seventh article, *Social Workers' Roles, Challenges, and Lessons Learned During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Albay, Bicol*, explored the roles assumed by social workers in Albay, Bicol during the time of pandemic. The authors also described the lessons and challenges that came with fulfilling the identified roles. Mainly they assumed roles as resource provider, facilitator, service brokers, coordinators, and educators. The social workers' involvement in personal and professional development and self-care to overcome physical, psychological, and social challenges in working during the time of COVID-19, also led to stronger commitment to the profession's principles and ethics.

Social development strategies and working with social movements

The last three articles are contributions from academics and social development practitioners who mostly discussed strategies involving creative modalities, engaging labor unions, and developing solidarity and disaster response through the social media and digital platforms. The articles discuss transformative social change, transformative policy and transformative innovations in relation to social development.

The eight article, *Dance Movement Exploration (DME) with the Filipino Children during the COVID-19 Movement Restriction Period: An Exploratory Study on Focus DME Model* discusses how Dimarucut and his colleagues applied dance as a creative modality in drawing out emotions of children affected by pandemic shocks. Dimarucut et al. position Dance Movement Exploration (DME) as a supplementary form of transformative social development which provided emotional approach coping as an intervention for children during the time of COVID-19.

The ninth article, *Social Movements as Enablers of Transformative Social Protection and Building Back Better: A Case Study of the Nagkaisa Labor Coalition's COVID Advocacy* highlights a labor coalition as part a social movement advocating for change during the time of COVID. Velasco discusses his concept of transformative social protection using the building back better framework through social movements, specifically through the Nagkaisa labor coalition. The author recommends a human-centered and transformative recovery from the effects of COVID-19 by transforming its advocacies into electoral programs. These recommendations include ensuring delivery of social services, establishment of universal basic income, and institution of a wealth tax.

The tenth article, *Rethinking Resilience: An Analysis of the Online (Re)presentations and (Re)definitions of "Community Resilience and Cooperation" in Typhoon-related Relief Efforts in the Philippines* analyzes articulations of bayanihan and community resilience in social media and other digital platforms. Deocampo matched her own experience with mined data from social media and digital platforms to trace new meanings of community resilience and practices of bayanihan during the two typhoons while there was a pandemic. The author also explored forms of resistance in social media against appearances of authoritarianism.

Concluding statement

During the People's Global Summit 2022, two questions were asked to the participants: What vision should social work have? and What transformative practices should social work have to realize that vision? Instead of providing a definition of transformative social work, social workers and social development practitioners should get together and discuss through different venues such as the global social movements to learn from the transformative practices of others. Christian Schöder (2022) invites social workers to continue questioning their own practice and participate in open spaces such as the World Social Forum to learn from the stories of other transformative practitioners. He echoes Garett's (2021) call for dissenting social work and forming a neo-social work that eschews any form that limits social work to its normative functions, continuously pushing boundaries of the profession through knowledge creation (Nicolas, 2016). Cristobal (2022) in this volume agreed with Longres (1986) and George and Marlow (2005) explaining that 'Complete transformation therefore requires the abolition of oppressive systems followed by a comprehensive overhaul of social and economic structures.' As such, achieving transformative practice in social work and social development is a process. Perhaps the term 'Transformative Social Works' is more appropriate in relating to various applications of transformative social change, more so in responding to issues of uncertainty, social inequality, and injustice. Schöder (2022) argues that social work derived its methods from the context of social movements. Social work therefore should find its way back to creative practice, embracing social movements, and constructing itself through constant reflection, towards a truly transformative practice.

Justin Francis Leon V. Nicolas, PhD, and Gil I. Espenido

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COv2 – Community Organizing in a Virtual World:
Lessons from a Student's Field Experience during the Pandemic

Suzanne Magalona-Nazal
Teonel F. Tungala

ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted education in the Philippines prohibiting in person classes since March 2020. Social Work field education was conducted using virtual platforms in engaging with clients. This paper chronicles a social work student's experience in online community organizing (CO) among agrarian reform beneficiaries in Passi, Iloilo. Recognizing that community participation is essential in transformative development, the study describes how participatory approach is applied using virtual platforms.

The student's experience shows that the greatest challenge in virtual CO is related to digitalization and connectivity among farmers. Most farmers can be contacted only through SMS and phone calls. Internet connection is not stable and many areas in the community have very weak connectivity. Farmers who have access to digital technology were able to participate more actively and meaningfully community activities. The uneven level of digitalization creates a serious barrier between those who have access to ICT gadgets and community, as compared to those who did not.

The study recognizes the benefits of virtual community engagement to facilitate real-time exchange of information about community needs particularly during pandemic and in disaster situation. If not careful, however, the digital divide may result to a dilution of meaningful participation that is requisite to empowering and transformative social change. The paper surmises that there is no substitute for in-person community engagement to develop a professional helping relationship between the organizer and community members, which is a prerequisite to building the foundation for genuine community participation.

Keywords: community organizing; virtual organizing, online CO, community participation, participatory development, digital divide, agrarian reform beneficiaries

Background

Social workers served at the frontlines during the 1918 influenza pandemic. Not only did they address the needs of the sick, social workers also attended to the children whose parents were ill, and helped families who had lost their livelihood. More than a century later, they are again called to respond to the overwhelming demands posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. It is widely believed that the scope of the current pandemic is an "unprecedented disaster" due to the nascent and inadequate planning undertaken (Rosoff, 2008).

The pandemic has likewise unexpectedly disrupted Social Work field education in many countries, including the Philippines. On 16 March 2020, President Rodrigo Duterte declared a state of calamity throughout the country and imposed an Enhanced Community Quarantine which prohibited mass gatherings, including face-to-face classes. It was especially challenging for Social Work field education, which is an important component of the Bachelor of Science in Social Work (BSSW). The supervised field instruction (FI) program is an essential medium of professional training which allows students to integrate theory and practice while acquiring an understanding of Philippine realities from exposure to existing economic, political, and socio-cultural situations. The FI program further aims to develop commitment to the people served (individuals, groups, communities) as well as beginning skills engaging with all types of clienteles—individuals, groups, families, and communities.

While most countries have partially or fully reopened schools to in-person classes, the Philippines has kept them closed beginning in March 2020. From the confines of their homes, faculty members from the University of the Philippines (UP) revised and adapted course syllabi and requirements as they shifted to remote learning modalities, both synchronous and asynchronous (Simbulan, 2020). The UP College of Social Work and Community Development (UP CSWCD) continued to offer Social Work 151 (Field Instruction II) even while the campus was closed for in-person classes. Social Work students shifted to virtual methods in their field education by utilizing a combination of online platforms to engage with clients. Students enrolled in Social Work 151 were expected to conduct community organizing (CO) using virtual methods of engaging with members of the community, the most useful of which were Facebook Messenger, mobile phone calls, and text messaging. The Zoom application was used only during the conduct of selected meetings and training programs.

Research Question and Objective

The study aims to illustrate the experiences of a BSSW student during his placement as a virtual community organizer in an agricultural community in Passi, Iloilo. It chronicles his experiences in undertaking CO in a purely remote setting, devoid of any face-to-face interaction. While such experience is unique as it happened at the time of the pandemic, it offers important insights on the importance of information and communication technology (ICT) in engaging with communities to ensure the continuity of development interventions. The use of ICT helps ensure that communities remain connected and that their needs are being addressed through online engagement. Importantly, the article explores how principles of participatory development have been applied in online community engagement. In addition, the article attempts to probe into the role of online platforms in CO, and discuss their potential in facilitating meaningful discourse and community participation.

This article also describes the challenges and opportunities of purely virtual community organizing. It will attempt to probe answers to the question, "Will ICT, or the use of laptops, smart phones, social media and other online communication platforms eventually replace public spaces such as parks and community centers as a venue for open discourse about issues important to the community?"

The objectives of this article are to: (i) chronicle a social work student's field education experience in purely online community organizing (CO) work at the time of the pandemic; (ii) discuss insights about how community participation is applied in a virtual CO setting; and (iii)

explore the potentials of online platforms using ICT in promoting community participation.

Methods

The study examines the experiences of a BSSW student's placement as virtual community organizer who worked with Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries (ARBs) in Passi, Iloilo from 19 January 2022 to 25 May 2022. Using the case study method, the study relied on multiple sources like the student's daily journals, process documentation, weekly accomplishment reports, and transcripts of online meetings and training sessions with community members. Detailed observations and reflections of the intern with regard to his CO experience were drawn during the weekly field supervisory meetings and trialogue involving Center for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (CARRD) and the faculty supervisor. These were valuable in bringing to light the processes, activities, and dynamics in conducting virtual CO. Data analysis was carried out by weaving together emerging themes and identification of key ideas or units of analysis.

Literature Review

Community organization is a "process" which begins with integration with the community, identification of the problem or objective, to the solution of the problem or attainment of the objectives identified by the community. It calls upon the organizer to develop a positive and purposeful relationship with the people in the community. It should be noted that, with the advancement of ICT, communities are no longer limited to those formed by locational or geographical boundaries. Within and outside spatial communities are other nonplace groupings. These communities are bonded by identity, profession, religion, ideology, interests, and other social bonds that represent a more amorphous type of community (Hardcastle, 2015).

Cambridge Dictionary defines the word "virtual" as "created by computer technology and appearing to exist but not existing in the physical world." It is "done using computer technology over the internet, and not involving people physically going somewhere" (Cambridge Dictionary, 2023). Together with other social development practitioners and helping professionals, COVID-19 has pushed social workers into virtual, or partially virtual, interactions with clients and communities. It is worth noting that the experience has also exposed the important fact that human beings are wired to make connections and relationships using virtual platforms which include e-mail, telephone contact, chat and text, and video conferencing (Potter, 2020).

The emergence of online tools has likewise expanded the use of social media in community organizing, particularly in social action and advocacy. An article discussed lessons on utilizing social media technologies in community organizing practice particularly in promoting workers' rights. A highly virtual community-organizing effort led to the boycott of Hyatt Hotels in San Antonio, Texas in 2013. The conclusions of the study noted that, while social media may not be a replacement for community organizing, it provides organizers with useful new tools for practice. The study further recognizes that social media has the potential for many more benefits than drawbacks in practice (Brady, 2015).

It is a known fact that social work is a relationship-based profession. The relationship between a social worker and the clients is recognized as the basis from which sustainable change can occur (Pascoe, 2021). In community-based field education, developing a relationship

between the social work intern and members of a locality is essential in building partnership. By taking part in the social and economic activities of the community, it is expected that a social work intern can conduct an evidence-based social investigation, as an important aspect in the CO process. Developing rapport with the people is key in promoting genuine community participation.

As a field placement in a community setting, Social Work 151 aims to apply various models of community organization in practice. A major reference is Jack Rothman's locality development model also known as the "community development" approach. The locality development model puts emphasis on development of indigenous leadership, local initiative, self-help, and participation by large numbers of community members. The roles of the change agents usually include those of enabler, coordinator, and teacher of problem-solving skills (Rothman, 1974 original article 1968). On the other hand, Rothman's social action model is highly influenced by the work of Saul Alinsky, which presupposes a disadvantaged segment of the population that needs to be organized, perhaps in alliance with others, in order to make adequate demands on the larger community for increased resources or treatment more in accordance with social justice or democracy. The social action approach is characterized by the use of contest strategies; change agent roles include: activist-advocate, agitator, broker, negotiator, and partisan (Stockdale, 1976).

In this context, community organizing is also viewed as a process in which local people, united by concern for renewing their own small territory, plan and act together from an organizational base that they control. It involves collective human effort centered on mobilization, advocating, planning, and the negotiation of resources (Murphy & Cunningham, 2003). As a method of promoting social justice and transformative development, CO empowers the ARBs to become catalysts and facilitators in setting up their respective landholding-based organizations that would advance their agrarian reform agenda and other development concerns.

At the core of community organizing is the principle of participatory development. The definition of participation is varied, depending on the user describing it. In social work, participatory approaches are geared towards effecting transformational change among communities. In this regard, participation is also viewed as a way of harnessing the existing physical, economic, and social resources of rural people in order to achieve the objectives of development programs and projects (Oakley, 1991). The concept of participation has been depicted by Arnstein (Arnstein, 1969) as a ladder which has eight steps (see Figure 1), each representing a different level of participation. At the lowest end of the ladder—manipulation and therapy—are forms of non-participation used by powerful segments of society to impose their agendas. Tokenism occurs when participants may say something about an intervention denoted as "input." However, the voices of participants are not heard and thus, participation does not lead to change. At the higher end of the ladder are forms of participation where citizens have more power to negotiate and change the status quo.

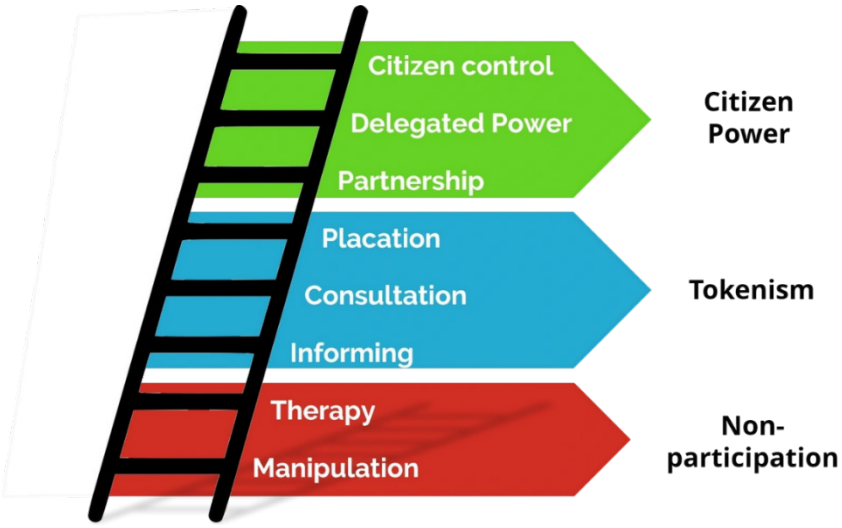

Figure 1. Arnstein's Ladder of Participation

In recent years, the concept of participation has been seen as an exercise to empower the poor and marginalized. Participatory processes help to break the mentality of dependence, promote self-awareness, and help people to examine their problems and to think positively about solutions (Oakley, 1991). Through these transformative processes, people develop a sense of control and power over issues which affect their lives. Participation has also been viewed as an interactive process where the social work intern plays the role of enabler and facilitator for community change.

The purpose of this article is to present lessons in virtual community organizing, based on the experiences of a BSSW student intern. It will also explore how principles of participatory development have been applied in online community engagement. In addition, the article attempts to probe into the role of online platforms in CO, and discuss their potential in facilitating meaningful discourse and community participation.

Conceptual Framework

Orlikowski's Structurational Model of Technology (Orlikowski, 1992) provides scholarly insights into the role of ICT in development. Based on Giddens' Structuration theory, the model describes the interplay between digital technology and human agents or institutions. Structuration is understood as a social process that involves the reciprocal interaction of human actors and structural features of organizations. Orlikowski describes the role of technology in terms of a mutual interaction between human agents and technology, and hence as both structural and socially constructed. Technology is created and changed by human action, yet it is also used by humans to accomplish some action.

Figure 2 presents the conceptual framework of the study, based on Orlikowski's Structurational Model of Technology—particularly how ICT influences quality and levels of participation. Three important components come into play to understand how community members adapt to virtual forms of engagement and participation.

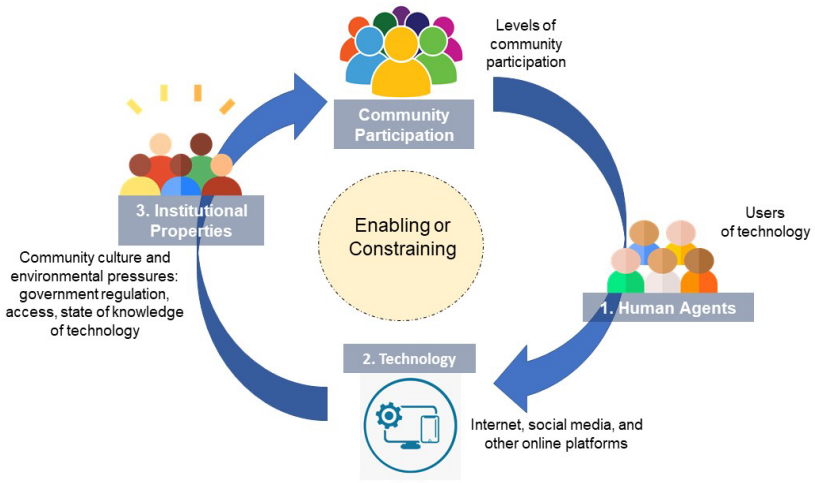

Figure 2. Conceptual Framework

Firstly, the ARBs, as human agents, are technology users and decision-makers. Human agents use ICT in assigning shared meanings. Secondly, technology is the outcome of coordinated human action, and at the same time used by humans in carrying out social activities. Community members' access to ICT reinforces and shapes the institutional dynamics of organizations. In this case, technology is an important factor which influences community engagement and ARBs' level of participation. Lastly, it should be acknowledged that the institutional properties of organizations include not only organizational dimensions and community culture, but also environmental pressures, such as government regulation and the state of knowledge of technology (Zheng, 2015). Here, cultural factors and adapting to ICT as well as access to gadgets influence how ARBs participate in the organizing process. In addition, government policies on digitalization and the quality of Internet connectivity are important considerations. Human agents, technology, and institutional properties can be enabling or constraining factors in achieving a high level of community participation.

Referring to Arnstein's participation ladder, which was developed many decades before ICT started to dominate the way people interact, it is important to determine which level of participation can be achieved using purely ICT platforms. How does the interplay between human agents, digital technology, and institutions enable or constrain community participation?

Field Experiences: Virtual Community Organizing among ARBs

The Field Assignment

The community comprises of Agrarian Reform Beneficiaries (ARBs) from Barangay Santo Tomas in Passi, Iloilo. ARBs are farmers who were granted lands under the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law. The Center for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (CARRD) has been empowering ARBs by improving their security of land tenure and advancing their agrarian reform agenda. Through CO, CARRD has been supporting ARBs to expedite the process of parcelization and securing individual transfer certificates of land.

A landholding is classified as private or public agricultural land for redistribution under the country's Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Program. The nine landholdings were

properties previously owned by Santibañez Efraim and became part of the agrarian reform program through the laws[1].The guidelines on the parcelization of collective Certificate of Land Ownership Awards (CLOA) are reflected in Section 25 of R.A. No. 6657, as amended by Section 10 of R.A. No. 9700 mandating the Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) to "immediately undertake the parcelization of CLOAs over lands that are not collectively farmed or operated in an integrated manner" (DAR speeds up parcelization of collective CLOAs, issues guidelines for individual land titling, 2021). In addition, the DAR is mandated to fast-track the parcelization of Collective Certificates of Land Ownership Award (CCLOAs) and the eventual generation, registration, and issuance of individual Computerized Titles to the ARBs.

CARRD has been working with farmers in forming grassroots organizations or NGOs and developing community leader-organizers that will genuinely represent the interests of the ARBs. The NGOs follow the framework which utilizes action-reflection praxis, by acknowledging the ARBs themselves as the primary agent to achieve transformative social change. The framework brings to mind Paulo Freire's popular education approach centered on dialogue as "the encounter between men [sic], mediated by the world, in order to name [that is, to change] the world" (Freire, Pedagogy of the oppressed, 1990 Original work 1970). While working with the peasants in Chile, Freire wrote *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in which he insisted that dialogical encounters develop critical consciousness of social, political, and economic contradictions so that they can take action against them. The goal of the problem-posing method is praxis, which is "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (Freire, Pedagogy of the oppressed, 1990 Original work 1970).

There were 368 ARBs in the nine landholdings covering 794 hectares of land, planted to rice, sugarcane, and pineapple. For many years, ARBs in Barangay Santo Tomas, have been waiting eagerly to get their Transfer Certificate of Title (TCT), which is an official document that serves as proof of ownership of the land granted to the beneficiary by the DAR. Most of the lands in the nine landholdings under study have yet to be parcelized. The following table shows the distribution of the nine landholdings to the 368 ARBs.

Table 1. Land distribution per ARB

CLOA Title No.	Number of ARBs	Size of land in hectares
CT – 806	58	115.1796
CT - 1475	56	143.6984
CT-805	51	128.995
CT - 990	47	110.8386
CT - 1477	41	66.7591
CT - 989	39	87.8265
CT - 1473	31	62.4187
CT - 6336	30	45.4187
CT - 13704	15	33.4678

Source: Center for Agrarian Reform and Rural Development

[1]The guidelines on the parcelization of collective Certificate of Land Ownership Awards (CLOA) are reflected in Section 25 of R.A. No. 6657, as amended by Section 10 of R.A. No. 9700

This article chronicles the FI experience of a social work student in organizing an agricultural community in Passi, Iloilo, using virtual forms of engagement. Based in Manila, the student intern was assigned to organize the ARBs into grassroots landholding-based organizations in the nine landholdings in Barangay Santo Tomas, in Passi, Iloilo.

With virtual CO as the interim approach during the pandemic, it was vital for the student to determine the connectivity of community members. From among the 74 ARBs interviewed, only 54 owned mobile phones, only 21 of which were smartphones. The rest of the 33 ARBs relied on basic mobile phones and could only be contacted through SMS or phone calls. Among the 54 ARBs who owned mobile phones, 11 shared the phones with other members of the family particularly with children who attended remote classes. Internet connection meant using either prepaid data or one-peso Wi-Fi which was not always stable. While pre-paid mobile data signals were not always reliable especially in bad weather. Overall, many areas in the community have very weak connectivity requiring residents to travel to another place to access internet connection.

Together with CARRD's area coordinator who is physically based in Iloilo, the student engaged with landholding representatives to encourage, organize, and mobilize the ARBS towards the parcelization of their collective title.

The CO Process

For the first time due to the pandemic, BSSW students from UP CSWCD were assigned to a purely virtual CO placement. Figure 3 presents the specific activities undertaken by the student intern, following the CO process.

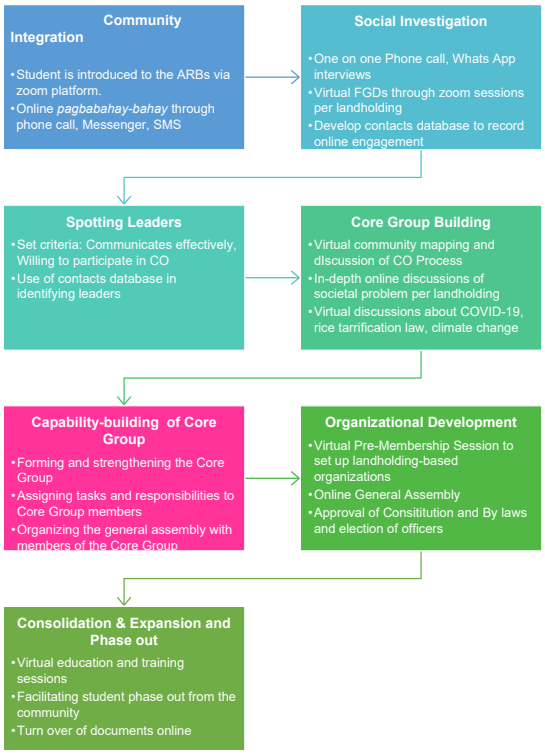

Figure 3: Virtual CO Process

Source: Student Intern

The following explains the online CO process undertaken by the student intern in the five major steps:

1. Community Integration

As the primary step of community integration, CARRD introduced the social work intern to the ARBs who represented the nine landholdings using a Zoom video conference facility. The landholding representatives were called to gather at the CARRD office where a screen was set up to stream video conference with the student who was based in Manila. The online session was meant to replicate community entry and was facilitated by a CARRD staff who was based in Passi. Recognized as community leaders, the landholding representatives presented themselves, speaking in a mix of Tagalog and the local dialect, Hiligaynon. As the discussions progressed, the intern noticed that some of the ARBs were inhibited in expressing their thoughts and opinions. It may have been the language barrier, or the unfamiliar remote set up requiring them to speak in front of the camera. It may also be attributed to the common Filipino trait of being *mahiyain* (feeling shy), which is an expected behavior during first meetings. The student was conscious that it was essential for him to establish rapport and build mutual trust and cooperation as part of community integration.

Subsequent activities between the intern and the ARBs involved one-on-one interaction through phone conversations and small group discussions. These clarified expectations about the relationship between the student as CARRD community organizer, and the ARBs. Termed as *sama-aralan*, the small group learning sessions allowed landholding representatives to share their personal experiences and understanding about the parcelization of their collective CLOA or CCLOAs. The DAR defines CCLOAs as existing and registered certificates of land ownership award issued by the Department to farmers' cooperatives, associations, other organized groups, or group of ARBs who are not yet formally organized.

In each interaction with community members—one on one or in small group sessions—the social work student needed to conduct a preliminary assessment with regard to the farmers' capacity to engage using online platforms. This was necessary to help him identify the level and quality of participation of the ARBs. Obviously, it was not possible for the intern to be part of everyday activities as in traditional CO where the social worker participates in economic activities, household work, group discussion, and social functions of the community.

A series of *sama-aralan* (learning together) sessions were organized to build awareness of the ARBs about the importance of becoming a leader-organizer in their respective landholdings. The virtual discussions helped ARBs recognize their strengths and appreciate the importance of communication and meaningful participation that will lead to forming grassroots organizations. A few times during virtual focus group discussions (FGDs), the intern struggled to understand what was being shared by the farmers due to the unsteady Wi-Fi connection. He had to ask the same question several times, which compromised the quality of the meeting outcomes. The onslaught of Typhoon Odette in December 2021 disrupted electricity in the area which resulted in the postponement of a few *sama-aralan* sessions.

2. Contact building and Social Investigation

Contact building done virtually was an essential part of building rapport with the ARBs. The traditional *pagbabahay-bahay* (home visits) took the form of phone conversations and text messaging. Organizing FGDs among ARBs required thorough preparations on the part of the student, together with the landholding representatives who were acknowledged as leaders in the community. As soon as the intern and landholding representatives agreed on the date and time of the meeting, the latter assembled other ARBS in one place where the student could facilitate the online interview while streamed from Manila.

The social investigation (SI) was undertaken through a series of one-on-one online interviews with community members. The student intern developed the following process for undertaking virtual interviews:

1. Prepare and pre-test SI guide;
2. Through SMS, agree on the date and time of the phone call. Specify the items to be covered;
3. Begin the phone interview by clarifying the objectives of the activity;
4. Ask the questions from the SI Guide noting not everything may be covered; and,
5. Post – Thank the ARB through SMS and provide a summary of agreement/s if there are any.

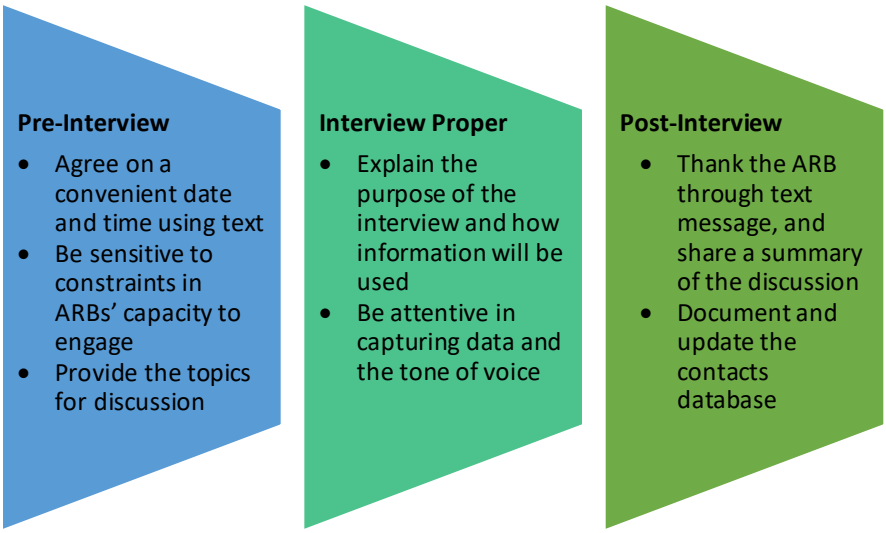

Figure 4. Process Flow in Undertaking One-on-One Interviews with ARBs

Despite the obvious difficulties in online interviews, the SI activities helped the student understand the life and struggles of the ARBs. It was evident that the most urgent concern of the ARBs was the parcelization of the collective CLOA. There were also boundary disputes with other ARBs which needed to be clarified. In addition, ARBs felt lack of government support for agricultural development. In all these, the landholding representatives who were recognized as community leaders played an essential role in getting the ARBs to participate in the interviews.

The intern recognized the need to reach out to as many ARBs as possible to gain more in-depth understanding of the situation and needs of the community. Out of the total 368 ARBs, the intern targeted 110 ARBs to engage with through interviews. However, out of 110, the student was successful in reaching out to 74 ARBs. The diagram in Figure 4 illustrates the process for organizing interviews with ARBs.

During most interviews, the ARBs sounded excited as they shared their experiences in working on the farm. Their voices would shift into a low and serious tone when they talked about the decrease in the price of rice believed to be the consequence of the rice liberation law. The farmers were also significantly affected by the pandemic. Crop production was affected due to restrictions to mobility in buying input products. They also had limitations in selling their products in the markets.

Overall, one of the serious constraints in conducting the virtual SI phase was the difficulty to develop rapport and facilitate reflective discussions with the ARBs. As the interactions were highly dependent on ICT, the quality of the phone conversations was often poor and tended to sound broken due to connectivity issues and the type and model of the mobile phones. Without face-to-face interaction, the bodily gestures of the ARBs which are important in effective communication were not visible to the student. The inability to be physically integrated with the community and to participate in social and economic activities served as a major hindrance in virtual CO.

3. Spotting potential leaders and core-group building

As a method, community organizing can serve as a tool for human development. It is a "process of unfolding the potentialities of persons to the level where they can exercise the faculties that will enable them to create, act and manage resources to live a decent life" (Dela Costa-Ymson, 1993). The series of online meetings and phone conversations helped the intern to observe the leadership potentials and capacity of the ARBs. The sense of volunteerism was evident in many instances. One of the ARBs offered his home as venue for the meetings and was willing to provide the device needed for the video conferences. Others offered to reach out to fellow ARBs in their homes to provide updates on the virtual CO process and solicit their participation. These simple voluntary efforts were crucial to reach out to a wide range of ARBs and promote more meaningful participation.

As part of building the farmers' leadership, the student intern assigned specific tasks to promote shared responsibilities in forming the landholding-based organization. Some ARBs were assigned to help coordinate the small group sessions and ensure that fellow ARBs were able to join the discussions based on an agreed targeted number of ARBs per landholding. The ARBs' involvement helped develop their self-confidence to lead. From the start, it was clear that the leader-organizer would represent the interests of the farmers in advancing their agrarian reform and development agenda through democratic processes. Building leadership translates to genuine participation from a wide range of ARBs.

4. Capability building of core group and organizational development

The student worked closely with the CARRD area coordinator and the landholding representatives in organizing capacity-building activities. The target number of ARB participants

for small group discussions was placed at at least 20% of the ARB population per landholding, or 74 ARBs in all nine landholdings. The focus was on encouraging the ARBs to participate meaningfully in forming a landholding-based organization. The sessions helped ARBs to identify important concerns and social problems particularly as these relate to the parcelization of land. Potential leaders together with fellow ARBs exchanged knowledge and insights towards finding a collective solution.

One of the group activities that helped participants to reflect about key issues was the preparation of a community map of their respective landholdings. Using the Zoom platform, the intern asked the ARBs to illustrate a map of their landholding by plotting their respective land areas. The farmers actively took part in the exercise by reflecting on the issues and problems in their respective landholding and illustrating these in the maps. The problem-posing approach allowed participants to reflect using their knowledge and experience as the starting point of learning and organizing. It served as a venue to share insights about the effects of the pandemic, the rice tariffication law, and issues in relation to climate change. In addition, the activity helped facilitate a more open and in-depth sharing about their collective goals as ARBs. In this way, the ARBs clarified the direction and goals of creating a landholding-based organization.

Conscientization, or the process of demythologizing reality and awakening critical consciousness among the poor (Freire, 1998), is essential in transformative CO. The student intern consciously made an effort to ensure that ARBs participated in the online discussions to the extent possible. This was necessary to progress to the next phase, which was the preparation of an initial plan of action. Using participatory processes, the ARBs were being prepared to set up a formal organizational structure and mobilize community effort/action to solve community problems (Dizon, 2012).

5. Consolidation of the landholding organizations, expansion, and phase out

After the series of group activities covering each of the nine landholdings, the student intern organized an online pre-membership session, which aimed to produce draft constitutions and by-laws that would serve as the legal basis and guide of each of the landholding-based organizations to be formed. A total of 99 ARBs signified their willingness to become members of their respective organizations. Together with the CARDD staff, the ARBs organized the general assembly where the constitution and by-laws were presented to the members. The members were informed about their rights as ARBs and their responsibility in developing their lands. The ARBs led the election of officers and the creation of committees in each of the landholding-based organizations. The success of the general assembly was made possible through the active participation of the ARBs, a number of whom then stepped up to become leader-organizers in their respective landholdings.

Key Lessons on Virtual CO

The following table presents key observations and insights made by the student in each phase of virtual CO. Typical activities in conventional in-person CO are presented in column 1. The second column outlines the activities undertaken by the student in implementing virtual CO, while the last column presents his insights and observations.

Table 2: In-Person and Virtual CO

1 **In-person CO Activities**	2 **Online CO Activities undertaken by the Student**	3 **Observations and Insights**
1. Community integration		
The student intern is introduced in person to the community as CO by the CARRD representative.	ARBs gathered in a venue in Passi where the student in Manila was introduced online by CARRD using the Zoom platform.	It was not easy for the student to develop rapport using online platforms. ARBs also struggled to use ICT during the meeting.
The student conducts house-to-house visits and participates in the community's social and economic activities.	The student gathered the mobile numbers of the ARBs and contacted them one by one. He introduced himself usually through SMS and explained his role as a CO.	In-person community integration allows COs to interact more openly with ARBs. The student would have optimized the professional use of self during face-to-face interaction with community members. In virtual CO, it was challenging to contact the ARBs using mobile phones due to connectivity issues. Some ARBs communicated through phone calls while others did so through SMS. The student did not get a chance to see the physical environment and observe the ARBs' body language. The language barrier caused misunderstanding between the student and ARBs. To ensure that the information exchange was clear, the intern would summarize conversations using SMS.
2. Contact building and social investigation		
The CO carries out informal conversations with community members to establish contact. Social investigation may also be conducted through face-to-face interviews, FGDs, and participant-observation methods.	The SI was undertaken through a series of virtual one-on-one online interviews and FGDs with community members. A detailed SI guide was developed to ensure that important information was covered during the SI.	In-person SI would have made it easier for the student to validate information and ensure its accuracy. Misunderstanding would be minimized and data more accurate. Observation of the actual situation of ARBs was not possible in a virtual set-up. It was difficult to facilitate reflective discussions with the ARBs using online methods.

3. Identifying potential leaders and core group building		
The student deepens professional relationship with community members in the process of spotting potential leaders and forming a core group.	The CO set a simple set of criteria in identifying potential leaders such as ability to communicate effectively and willingness to participate. The intern relied on the online exchanges which were stored in the contacts database.	The virtual method does not allow for a more thorough identification of leaders. It is highly likely that potential leaders were missed out due to the fact that they were unreachable online. ARBs who lacked ICT gadgets missed out on the opportunity to be part of the core group.
4. Capability building of core group and organizational development & management		
Capacity building is done through close in-person mentoring of the core group and participation in face-to-face training activities.	The student organized virtual capacity-building activities. The sessions helped ARBs to identify important concerns particularly as they relate to the parcelization of land. The ARBs exchanged knowledge and insights towards finding a collective solution.6	It is more challenging to facilitate reflective and in-depth discussions using online methods. It was likewise more difficult for the virtual CO to monitor participants' learnings. Through ICT-enabled online training sessions however, video materials were presented to the participants which were very useful. Another advantage of a virtual training program was that subject experts were easily tapped as resource persons.
5. Consolidation, expansion, and phase out		
The CO continues to work closely with the community leaders to strengthen and consolidate the organization. At this stage, the organization would have been established formally with elected officers and members.	After the series of group activities, the student intern organized the online pre-membership session, which aimed to produce draft constitutions and by-laws that would serve as the legal basis and guide of the landholding-based organizations. The ARBs led the election of officers and creation of committees in each of the landholding-based organizations.	The usual challenges in facilitating meetings online were present even during this phase. Through ICT, however, community leaders are able to contact the CO and other experts whenever guidance is needed.

Based on the student intern's experience, the greatest challenge in virtual CO was the struggle to ensure quality online engagement due to issues related to digitalization and connectivity among the ARBs. One out of four ARBs did not own mobile phones. Among the 54 ARBs who had mobile phones, only 21 (39%) were using smartphones. The rest of the 33 ARBs (61%) relied on basic mobile phones and could only be contacted through SMS or phone calls. Many areas in the community have very weak connectivity requiring residents to travel to another place to access internet connection.

Despite the difficulties, the student intern together with CARRD did not cease to fulfill the mandate of helping improve the lives of smallholder farming households in their pursuit of agrarian reform. While trying to adapt to the unexpected shift to online community work, agrarian reform remained a priority issue for CARRD. While based in Manila, the social work student provided the needed human resource to CARRD at the time of the pandemic. After the field placement, eight grassroots organizations in the nine landholdings were formed using virtual CO, with on-the-ground support from a CARRD staff. Active participation of landholdings representatives was essential in mobilizing ARBs to be part of the organization.

Using the conceptual framework, it can be surmised that human agent, technology, and institutional properties influenced the quality and levels of community participation, as discussed in the following sections.

Human Agent and Participation

Looking back at the conceptual framework, it can be surmised that the uneven level of digitalization among the ARBs, as users of technology, had created a barrier between those who had access to ICT gadgets and those who did not. Those who had better access to technology were able to participate more actively in online meetings pertaining to parcelization of land. They were able to express their views more openly and were able to take part in important decision-making activities. On the other hand, ARBs with poor access to ICT had difficulties communicating their thoughts effectively. Worse, many failed to attend meetings simply because they are unable to go online, or failed to receive any notice.

Technology and Participation

The reliance of virtual CO on technology also meant that the student intern was highly dependent on the quality of the mobile phones which were available to the ARBs. As mentioned, of the 54 ARBs who owned mobile phones, 33 ARBs (61%) relied on basic mobile phones and could be contacted only through SMS or phone calls. In addition, internet connectivity in the community was not stable especially during rainy days. This underscores the observation that the digital barrier may have unduly deprived some ARBs of having a voice to articulate their needs and aspirations in the organizing process. It is likely that farmers may have been left behind in the transformative CO process. The student's virtual CO experience has also shown that available technology has impacted the ARBs' level of participation.

Institutional Properties and Participation

Lastly, with the ARBs' average age of 57, it was challenging for them to shift to ICT-enabled methods of meeting with the organizer and fellow ARBs. In terms of the quality of engagement, in-depth reflective discussions were difficult to achieve due to the numerous technical challenges in virtual engagement. On occasions where Zoom platforms were used in meetings, the ARBs' obvious discomfort in speaking before a computer screen was observed. Culturally, farmers tend to be timid to speak in front of people, especially when there is a language barrier between the Filipino and English-speaking student and the ARBs who spoke mostly in Hiligaynon. A purely online community engagement may lead to marginalization of people without access to such technology, particularly in a country like the Philippines where the digital divide is a serious

concern. In fact, more than half of total households in the country lack Internet access. In addition, fixed and mobile internet penetration in the Philippines fares relatively low, compared to its Southeast Asian neighbors (Conoza, 2021).

Levels of Participation

The above-mentioned factors, namely human agents, technology, and institutional properties, shaped the quality of and level of participation of ARBs in the CO process. Overall, the level of participation was high during the consolidation phase of the landholding organizations. This took place after a series of learning workshops and an online pre-membership session. Here, the community leaders organized the general assembly where the constitution and by-laws were presented to the members. The organizers also led the election of officers and creation of committees in each of the landholding-based organizations. From partnership with the student intern and CARRD staff, the level of community participation escalated to citizen control, referring to Arntein's ladder of participation.

The improved level of participation may also have resulted from a series of *sama-aralan* sessions which helped raise awareness among the ARBs about the importance of becoming a leader-organizer. The online discussions aided in recognizing their strengths as leaders in forming grassroots organizations. In particular, the preparation of a community map of their respective landholdings helped them reflect on the issues and problems in land tenureship and other developmental concerns. It also provided an opportunity to share insights about the effects of the pandemic, the rice tariffication law, and issues in relation to climate change. The discussions likewise helped clarify the direction and goals of creating landholding-based organizations.

However, given the enormous connectivity challenges experienced by most ARBs, it can be surmised that participation was "tokenism" for users who lacked access to technology. Combined with cultural factors, the advanced age of most of the ARBs, and the language barrier, it is certain that the voices of many community members were not heard. Environmental factors such as unstable connection and lack of government support for digitalization were contributory factors for the uneven participation among ARBs. This limited form of participation cannot lead to meaningful change. In sum, those with better quality gadgets and access to the internet had more opportunities to be at the higher end of the participation ladder, where they have more power to negotiate and change the status quo.

Conclusions and Moving Forward

Sir Tim Berners-Lee, the creator of the worldwide web, says that COVID-19 has exposed the importance of internet connectivity as a basic right, saying that, it "has proven to be a lifeline that allows us to adapt and carry on" (Cellan-Jones, 2021). Similarly, virtual CO offers opportunities to engage communities and promote participation especially in situations where face-to-face interaction is not viable, such as during a pandemic or disaster situation. Using online platforms for community engagement allows exchange of information in real-time and offers opportunities to facilitate the delivery of social services to far-flung communities.

As more people use the internet, however, access to its use is uneven. This is especially true in the Philippines where nearly 60% of households do not have access to internet, and

therefore are unable to reap the benefits of digitalization which include information, telehealth, among others (World Bank, 2020). Yet, the use of the internet has expanded rapidly in the country from 23 million internet users in 2010, to 73 million in 2020 (Digital 2020: Global Digital Overview, 2020).

In the context of the ARBs' experience and given the available technology, as well as environmental and cultural considerations, the field placement has shown that, in the current situation, there is no substitute for in-person community integration to build rapport and mutual trust with community members. In-person participation in socio-economic and political activities develops a professional helping relationship between the organizer and community members. These are prerequisites to building the foundation for genuine community participation that is empowering and transformative. In addition, a purely virtual community engagement may result in uneven participation and dilution of meaningful participation. If not handled carefully, online platforms may be used as forms of social tyranny in which one or more elements of the community can impose their own beliefs and interests on others in that community (Gournay, 2002).

By experience, rural communities, like the ARBs in Passi City, are not prepared for a purely virtual CO. It is emphasized, however, that online forms of engagement should be encouraged in carrying out selected community activities, using a blended approach. The benefits of ICT in development include facilitating real-time exchange of information about community needs particularly during crisis situations such as a pandemic or a natural disaster. Digitalization has also made medical and other social services more accessible through telemedicine, online registration for vaccination, and availability of important sources and knowledge products. The judicious use of ICT opens up access to information, freedom of expression, and participation. In the case of the ARBs in Iloilo, legal experts were available virtually to provide education to ARBs on important topics related to agrarian reform. Social workers should therefore adapt to new forms of online community engagement, learn to maximize their use, while also exercising caution against undermining genuine community participation. The question remains: Is the social work profession prepared to adapt to a new and blended community organizing approach, or CO version 2 (COv2)?

Social justice-oriented social work should be centered on transforming those forces within society which cause inequity and oppression (Espenido, 2020). At the macro level, social workers should advocate to narrow the digital divide which continues to perpetuate unequal development. Digitalization is largely constrained by the country's poor high-speed broadband penetration, which lags behind neighboring middle-income countries. Interestingly, the United Nations General Assembly passed a non-binding Resolution in 2016 that "declared internet access a human right" (Barry, 2020). The right to internet access is an important advocacy to the profession which puts a premium on freedom of expression, dialogue, and participation.

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Structural Social Work Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic:
A Look into Authoritarianism in the Philippines, the Duterte Administration, and the Country's Pandemic Response

Phylane N. Cristobal

Abstract

As the Philippines approached its second-year anniversary since its first lockdown on March 15, 2020, the current conditions of millions of Filipino families show one bleak and austere picture of a country's drastic descent into hunger, poverty, and unemployment. For two years, the country has cycled through multiple versions of lockdowns with minimal differences in each and without lifting any at least once. In those two years, the Duterte administration has failed to reopen schools, ensure job security for all working Filipinos, and address the immediate concerns of many who have fallen into hunger and homelessness following mass loss of jobs due to the pandemic.

President Duterte's highly militarized response to the public health emergency was expected. From the very beginning of his administration, President Duterte has continuously championed his populist tactics in framing each and every national emergency as needing authoritarian intervention. It has further curtailed civil liberties and currently exacerbated the situation of pandemic-stricken families.

Through the structural social work approach, social workers are called to recognize the existing oppressive structures that not only provide band-aid or short-term solutions for Filipinos but help sustain President Duterte's authoritarian rule. This paper examines the relationship between the emergence of authoritarianism and the spread of infectious diseases, the Philippines' history with authoritarianism, and how structural social work can help address the root causes of not only the pandemic, but also the pervasive economic inequality in the country.

Keywords: authoritarianism, COVID-19, President Duterte, inequality, structural social work, emancipatory practice

Introduction

The year 2020 marks one of the most momentous yet devastating events in the 21st century with an easily transmissible virus that essentially brought the entire world to a total halt. The first case of SARS-CoV-2, more commonly known as COVID-19, was recorded in December 2019 but was only declared a public health emergency towards the end of January 2020. The healthcare system all over the world was quickly overwhelmed and, by March of the same year, lockdowns were imposed to contain the spread. At a time where mobility has been at its highest, especially in highly urbanized areas, quarantine and social distancing measures have engendered a complete adjustment on almost all sectors. The COVID-19 pandemic has completely redefined what can be considered normal now. It was only when physical interactions

and going out had been banned, that people realized the importance and invaluable role of physical day-to-day interactions in almost every industry and institution.

What was known about the virus was minimal at the time. Vaccines had yet to be distributed and misleading information had been widespread as well. This led to a constant feeling of stress, anxiety, and panic that drove many into a kind of conduct that further exacerbated the situation (Bochicchio et al., 2021). A rise in Asian hate and panic buying or hoarding were some of the common news headlines all over the world. The lack of clear and definitive information further fueled feelings of anxiety as the gravity of the disease and the end of lockdowns seemed to be vague and ambiguous. The lack of clarity simultaneous with an onslaught of varying rules or guidelines eventually set the stage for authoritarianism to take hold given these unprecedented situations.

The urgent need for immediate control of the COVID-19 pandemic to mitigate its effects became a gateway for authoritarian governance which, if left unchecked, would have also lent it the opportunity to cement itself further, especially in countries with weakening democracies. Seeking control, order, and swift responses from institutions are to be expected in times of calamities and public emergencies but if such is not rooted in the protection of the rights and welfare of the people, long-standing issues such as unemployment, poverty, abuse, and more will continue to subsist even long after the pandemic.

In this article, the Philippine's history of authoritarian regimes strengthened by neoliberal policies and heightened militaristic intervention will be examined, as such appeared more strongly during the COVID-19 pandemic. Various literature on the emergence of authoritarianism during global catastrophes will also be presented to further explore linkages between nationwide crises and autocratic rule. Within the context of President Rodrigo Duterte's pandemic response during its first two years, the ways in which structural social work can be used as a guiding principle for social workers in addressing the impact of the pandemic as well as the worsening political climate will be discussed as well.

The COVID-19 Pandemic, Authoritarianism, and the Parasite-Stress Theory of Authoritarianism

In 2020, the novel coronavirus posed great danger especially to the elderly and immunocompromised, already claiming 11,300 lives around the world by the end of March 2020 (Pharmaceutical Technology, 2021). COVID-19 was highly transmissible and, without a cure or vaccine in sight, different countries and states eventually had to impose stay-at-home quarantine measures to contain the spread (AJMC Staff, 2021). Many had to transition their school and work online and while some were able to do so successfully, there were still a myriad of occupations that simply could not shift to the digital world. This resulted in a mass loss of jobs and a sharp increase in unemployment (Aaronson & Alba, 2020). Multiple business establishments had to close down and social services became even harder to come by.

Studies have shown that, when faced with the risk of unprecedented threats, individuals will tend towards policies that highlight control and conformity (Zmigrod et al., 2021). This is due to the fact that unprecedented risks or threats to health such as an infectious disease can engender feelings of panic and distrust which can lead people to seeking control and deference to authority.

> For instance, upon sight of a potentially contaminating substance, humans typically experience the emotion of disgust, which fosters aversion and avoidance. Similarly, ecological conditions characterized by high levels of infectious diseases can promote behavioral adaptations associated with conforming to established traditions and avoiding foreign and potentially-infectious stimuli. (Zmigrod et al., 2021, p. 457)

A surge of panic arose in different parts of the world that directly and indirectly led to people panic buying and emptying shelves at grocery stores (Imbong, 2020), to protests against wearing masks (Aratani, 2020), and to intensified and racially charged hate crimes against Asians in multicultural areas (BBC News, 2021). This panic and other subsequent behavioral responses of fear, distrust, and anxiety due to the virus were revealed to be part of what has been termed as the Parasite-stress theory of authoritarianism. The theory posits that "the costs of being infected by outgroup human members would motivate authoritarian behavior" (Zmigrod et al., 2021, p. 465) where outgroup generally refers to those to avoid. In Zmigrod's study, a positive correlation between the disposition for authoritarian attitudes and the prevalence of non-zoonotic infectious diseases (diseases which are spread by human-to-human transmission) in particular areas was found. This means that, in order to protect oneself or one's community from such communicable diseases, seeking heightened order and control becomes a typical response and such may even lead to authoritarian tendencies.

It therefore comes as no surprise that, as the virus rapidly encroaches into different parts of the world, the reactions of each individual can vary and even clash against each other. What may bind these people together is the relatively uncontained panic and anxiety due to this unprecedented threat to their lives and livelihood. While others may want to approach the pandemic the way they have mostly responded to other national crises, according to Zmigrod et al. (2021), there is however a significant number of people who would strongly demand for a more authoritarian approach, bringing forth conformity and obedience in their societies. The study also states that "recent investigation demonstrates personality traits interact with the social context to shape citizens' social distancing behaviors during the COVID-19 pandemic" (Ludeke, Vitriol, Larsen, & Gensowski, 2021, as cited in Zmigrod et al., 2021, p. 468).

Avoidance is inevitable in the face of infectious diseases. Logically, one would think that if everyone wanted to avoid the same problem or threat, then everyone must work together methodically in order to effectively evade such dangers. This would then necessitate strict adherence to the rules and guidelines imposed by those in authority. On the surface, this seems sensible as living through a pandemic requires widespread compliance and cooperation whether through strict mask wearing, maintaining proper distances, or being transparent in one's test results and whereabouts. However, fear and the need for widespread control are two of the principal requisites of authoritarianism which makes the COVID-19 pandemic an ideal channel for its complete entrenchment into public governance.

> …a serious threat like COVID-19, which demands controls of the movements of individuals, intensive contract tracing, the diversion of major industries to the manufacture of medical supplies and radical top-down economic measures, also set ominous precedents for would-be authoritarians and accustoms citizens to the erosion of civil liberties and enlargement of executive power. (Simon, 2020, p. 110)

To refer back to "parasite stress," people develop new behaviors and values as a way to survive and authoritarianism appears to be becoming more appealing. In attempting to establish community-wide conformity and obedience, people begin to associate authoritarianism with order–the kind of order that can effectively contain the adverse impact of the pandemic. Those who are found to defy or dismiss such order become prone to stigmatization or discrimination. On one end, this manifested as short videos of celebrities and influencers going viral on social media as they complained about Filipinos who "refused" to stay home (Madarang, 2020) while on the other was a series of executive orders and policies that were hinged on suppression and punishment (Simon, 2020).

The level of distrust, anxiety, and stress reached alarming levels during the first few months of the pandemic and was eventually taken advantage of by authoritarian leaders. When healthcare sectors were becoming overwhelmed, resources were growing scarce, and fear of contracting the virus was increasing, authoritarian rule swept in, branding itself as nationwide and direct interventions. Many of the measures that arose during the pandemic were blatant violations of human rights and, moreover, enabled heightened surveillance that in certain contexts, spelled great dangers for particular groups.

> Authoritarian governance in the name of public health intervention is understood in the present context as being characterized by diverse combinations of governmental and administrative overreach, the adoption of excessive and disproportionate emergency measures, override of civil liberties and fundamental freedoms, failure to engage in properly deliberative and transparent decision-making, highly centralized decision-making, and even the suspension of effective democratic control. In a nutshell, the pandemic has served as a powerful justification for authoritarianization—the process by which state authorities 'slowly undermine institutional constraints on their rule,' through various combinations of the above—and populations have largely responded with obedience. (Frantz, 2018, as cited in Thomson & Ip, 2020, p. 4)

Thus, authoritarian attitudes succeeded in taking hold of public health responses across some states and metropolitan regions in the United States of America as well as in other countries. The above-mentioned study was able to establish a correlation between authoritarianism and the frequency of nonzoonotic infectious diseases in certain regions or countries. Once again, this proves that individuals, in the face of unprecedented risk, will conform to authoritarian governance if it can assure them effective mitigation plans that can protect them.

Rodrigo Duterte's Authoritarian Reign

The combination of a highly transmissible virus and the presence of authoritarianism in democratic countries can spell a further decline of resources, access to social services, and even violation of the rights among marginalized groups. While varying degrees of discrimination and exploitation have always been present among these groups, the COVID-19 pandemic is especially poignant as it not only worsens their plight but also unearths the reality of state institutions and systems. Such have been responsible for the hardships of these marginalized groups before, during, and possibly still after the pandemic. The Philippines in particular has long suffered a turbulent history of inaccessible healthcare and insufficient funds for hospitals, equipment, and medical staff (Chanco, 2019; IBON Foundation, 2020).

Despite such, acceptance and even support for authoritarianism and military intervention, dubbed as "real change" (*tunay na pagbabago*), grows steadily among Filipino citizens as evidenced by the acceptance of President Duterte's strong-man approach to national issues that had led to the war on drugs (Curato, 2016) and to the crackdown of activists through red-tagging and the anti-terrorism law (Esguerra, 2021). As he is now followed by the 17th president of the Philippines, Ferdinand "Bongbong" Marcos Jr., the return of the Marcoses raises questions of how the Southeast Asian country that championed and subsequently became the touchstone of democracy and peaceful protest in past decades (Thompson, 2016; Jayasuriya, 2020) turned into a reemerging authoritarian nation.

Then dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr. was ousted from his seat by millions of Filipinos during People Power I (Garrido, 2021), and more than 30 years later his own son returns. It brings about the question of how national-scale crises can bring about change to a country, so much so that its citizens may switch their political leanings completely. How did authoritarianism seep back so easily into the country that valiantly fought for its democracy?

Historically, the political battle between democracy and authoritarianism posed significant problems in multiple countries and the Philippines is no stranger to such (Jayasuriya, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic appeared to be the catalyst for decision and if the past six years under the Duterte administration were anything to go by, it would have seemed aberrant for President Duterte to respond to the pandemic in any way other than the latter. He had once asserted his inclination for authoritarianism during his presidential campaign, even warning Filipinos of such, and has continued to do so during his regime from his notorious war on drugs (Curato, 2016) to today's COVID-19 pandemic response which had been handed off to military control from the very beginning (Beltran, 2020; Imbong, 2020).

Given Duterte's history of misleadingly catastrophizing the country's problems to the point of necessitating police and military intervention, it was foreseeable for the administration's pandemic response to be wholly centered on the military's role, leaving little to no room for professional insight from medical health experts (Beltran, 2020; Imbong, 2020). Even before his presidency, he had propositioned drug users and drug dealers as the downfall of the country that urgently needed police intervention (Thompson, 2016; Curato, 2016; Bello, 2017). He has spent much of his regime framing liberal politicians with their associated oligarchs as failures and enemies (Thompson, 2016; Bello, 2017; Jayasuriya, 2020; Garrido, 2021), while bouts of criticism and opposition he branded as anti-government and communist propaganda (Salamanca, 2020). He has even insulted members of international bodies such as the United Nations and the International Criminal Court (ICC) whenever they bring to light the human rights violations committed through the drug war ("Duterte Attacks Rights Officials," 2018; Ranada, 2021). Disillusioned by the liberal takeover during the post-Marcos Sr. era, Duterte championed a nationwide frustration of the Filipinos (Thompson, 2016) by reinstating a new brand of authoritarianism concomitant with a strong military presence and a seemingly purposeful derision of human rights. Curato (2016) stated as well that "his currency is his promise of certainty, anchored on the rhetoric of violence and machismo" (p. 149).

This new brand plagued vulnerable groups for almost six years and had set the tone for the country's pandemic response. Its consequences, alongside that of the war on drugs, the anti-terrorism law, and other anti-democratic policies, will certainly have a long-term impact that might even be deemed irreversible. Bello (2017) referred to Duterte as "fascist sui

generis" (p. 42), characterized by his strong antagonism towards liberalism and his immutable predisposition towards violence and military intervention when it comes to the country's most pressing concerns. These are necessary conditions to a strongly bolstered authoritarian rule that exploits a historical struggle for democracy and genuine reform.

Rehashing such is however incomplete without the role played by other pivotal events in the Philippines' political history which were the repercussions of the liberal reformism heralded by the two Aquino presidencies. Thompson (2016) writes, "Duterte's victory and the neo-authoritarian narrative of his campaign can be best understood not in contrast to the successes of the latter Aquino administration but as a product of its failings" (p. 220). In other words, Duterte weaponized the Filipinos' vexation at the post-Marcos era's empty promises for a better, more democratic future. It allowed him the perfect avenue to reinstate his new take on authoritarianism that parades impunity and the subjugation of his constituents. Peralta (2021) terms it as "authoritarian nostalgia," and Duterte successfully managed to achieve this by repurposing a sense of order and stability founded during Marcos' dictatorship about 30 years ago.

It was therefore terrifying and demoralizing to realize that the COVID-19 pandemic would be treated the exact same way even though this should have been considered a public health crisis, and preferably put under the advisement of medical professionals in lieu of retired military officials. This fear, however, was dwarfed by the panic over the COVID-19 virus itself, particularly during its first year as there were no vaccines yet at the time and the Philippines had failed to flatten the curve in all those months—with the highest number of cases peaking at 83,109 on August 15, 2020 (Gonzales, 2022). That fear was especially instrumental in justifying an authoritarian pandemic response as it could easily be weaponized to weaken opposition in order to prioritize and direct all focus towards health and prevention of the virus. In his 1941 book *Escape from Freedom*, Erich Fromm wrote about the connection of fear and authoritarianism: "When people perceive an increase in disorder, they feel tremendous anxiety. Inevitably this anxiety leads to a quest for security. To bring a sense of safety back into their lives, they latch on to authoritarianism and conformity" (Gelfand, 2020). The country is no stranger to government administrations trading off people's freedom for an illusion of conformity and control. In addressing the country's biggest socioeconomic and sociopolitical issues, an authoritarian route has always been taken.

The Effects of Duterte's Failed Pandemic Response

The Philippines began its nationwide lockdown on March 15, 2020 (Atienza, 2021) and two years later the current conditions of millions of Filipino families show one bleak picture of a country's drastic descent into hunger, poverty, and unemployment. In those two years, the country has cycled through multiple versions of quarantine measures (See, 2021). Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ), Extreme Enhanced Community Quarantine (EECQ), Modified Enhanced Community Quarantine (MECQ), and General Community Quarantine (GCQ) were some of the early levels of quarantine during the first year of the pandemic. These levels alternated among each other and not once have been completely lifted in any region (See, 2021).

The national government has failed to reopen schools, ensure job security for all working Filipinos, and address the immediate concerns of many who have fallen into hunger and homelessness following the mass loss of jobs due to the pandemic (Beltran, 2020). While

progress has been made in the two years since the first community quarantine, such progress quickly comes to a halt and then declines when ineffective policies continue to be made and many have yet to receive sustained and tangible aid from the local and national governments. The exponential increase of human rights violations, expansion of neoliberal policies, and the stagnation of the national minimum wage are just but a few ways the current administration has failed to prioritize and safeguard the needs and welfare of Filipinos. As news of a highly contagious virus was emerging around January 2020, questions arose as to how the Philippines would respond to an impending pandemic without having universalized healthcare and free or affordable access to other basic services, as well as having a history of vaccine hesitancy (Vergara, 2021).

The first misstep of the administration was to delay closing its borders to international flights, except from Wuhan, China. The reasoning behind this was even more disconcerting as "Department of Health (DOH) chief Francisco Duque, attributed to a reluctance to upset relations with China" (Beltran, 2020). Soon enough, the first case of COVID-19 in the Philippines was detected from a tourist hailing from Wuhan, China (Rappler, 2020). Two months later, the country tallied more than 600 cases (Siena, 2022) and, all over the world, panic ensued as more and more individuals became infected with the virus.

The conditions of marginalized groups in the Philippines had not changed at the onset of the pandemic but their plight has been exacerbated. In the same study from Zmigrod et al. (2021), authoritarian tendencies in an event as devastating as the COVID-19 pandemic set the precedent for vertical laws or laws that are hierarchical in nature. This means that there are laws and policies enacted that unfairly affect select groups over others. These laws isolate marginalized groups and allow heightened surveillance, mass incarceration, unequal access to resources and opportunities, and blatant silencing to run rampant (Simon, 2020). As part of the need to strengthen conformity and obedience, vertical laws impose excessive control over marginalized groups while simultaneously allowing ruling classes to break such laws whenever they deem fit (Zmigrod et al, 2021).

All through the pandemic, Duterte has enacted vertical laws that unjustly make the working class bear the brunt of the pandemic and police those who express criticism heavily. Even cash grants, subsidies, and other social protection measures were unevenly distributed across groups and regions (Umil, 2020). These policies range from the "no vaccine, no ride" and "no vaccine, no work" policies (De Santos, 2022) to approving the anti-terrorism law which dangerously conflates criticism against the government as terrorism (Amnesty International, 2020). As a show of silencing journalists, the country's biggest entertainment franchise ABS-CBN was shut down in 2020 laying off over 11,000 workers (Rey, 2020) over allegations of tax evasion and political bias in news coverage (La Viña, 2020). The country's press freedom remains repressed as the targeting and killing of journalists remain strong until today.

While these vertical laws continue to intimidate and further marginalize the vulnerable, public figures and officials remain unchallenged and unpunished by the quarantine restrictions meant to be complied with by all. Back in 2020, Senator Aquilino "Koko" Pimentel III, for instance, went to a hospital to visit his pregnant wife despite being aware that he was COVID-19 positive (Beltran, 2020) and Major General Debold Sinas attended a large gathering despite restrictions banning such activities (Talabong, 2020).

More than enough research into authoritarianism has shown implicit connections between such kind of governance and high levels of intolerance, most especially of minorities. Conformity and obedience, although proclaimed as acting equalizers for all groups in society in order to reach a common goal, mostly just apply to minorities and marginalized groups. Control over these groups entails the safeguarding of the status quo—the widening of socioeconomic class gaps, the ruling classes' monopoly of resources, and the subsequent exploitation of the working class. The connection of authoritarianism and intolerance can be surmised in this way: "research into authoritarianism began as an effort to find the roots of widespread intolerance for Jews in Nazi Germany, and the powerful relationship between authoritarianism and intolerance for minorities of virtually all kinds has well been established then" (Adorno et al., and Stenner, 2005, as cited in Solt, 2012, p. 710).

In pure Duterte fashion, anchored by a resignified fusion of theatrics and violence (Curato, 2016), the country has been led to erroneous sanctioning of continuous human rights violations and suppression of constitutional freedoms—all in the name of saving the Filipinos from this virus. In the six years under the Duterte administration, his military intervention did not shy away from declaring martial law in Mindanao, assigning cabinet seats to retired military officials, as well as red-tagging independent organizations and individuals through unfounded claims of associations with the Communist Party of the Philippines and the New People's Army, the party's armed wing. Those who do not conform to Duterte's authoritarian response to the pandemic join the roster of "public enemies" and, in their dissent, are divested of their individual freedoms.

Structural Social Work for the People with the People

Marginalized groups suffered the most during the pandemic due to restrictive lockdown measures and inadequate resources. Already impoverished by the prevailing political and economic conditions in the country, the pandemic made it even more clear that individual aid can only go so far if existing systems that enforce inequality are retained by the state and private institutions. To genuinely make possible positive changes in one's life, there is a need to acknowledge how systems, though outside the control of the individual, can still altogether impact them in significant ways. Social work's goal towards social change and development is realized not only at the individual level but through the complete transformation of society where the emancipation of the people and social justice are at its core (Hick & Murray, 2009). Complete transformation therefore requires the abolition of oppressive systems followed by a comprehensive overhaul of social and economic structures. Structural social work is centered on this kind of radical approach with its ultimate goal of transforming society to emancipate disadvantaged groups (Longres, 1986, as cited in George & Marlow, 2005).

Structural social work first emerged in Canada during the 1970s as a challenge to social work's chief approach, casework, defined as the "pseudo-medical methodology for diagnosing and treating individual behaviors that came to incorporate Freudian psychoanalytic principles" (Hick & Murray, 2009, p. 90). To some degree, casework was a vital methodology to the social work practice. However, it has become clear that what has been negatively affecting its clients' social functioning stem from even larger social problems that are rooted in widespread oppression and exploitation (Mullaly, 1997). It seemed as though social workers and the profession itself were acquiesced into accepting the present conditions, helping individuals as much as they could but would have eventually met the limitations of their aid and support.

This drew criticism that pointed to the entire profession as just another entity that ended up sustaining the inequalities of society. Hick & Murray (2009) wrote that "radical authors criticized social casework as ineffective, elitist, forcing adaptation to injustice, pathologizing social problems and valuing self-interest over client needs" (p. 91). Structural social work was a response to these criticisms, thus creating its primary objectives that put equal emphasis on the individual as well as the collective sphere.

> The two-fold goal of structural social work is to alleviate the negative effects on people of an exploitative and alienating social order while simultaneously working to transform society through social reforms and fundamental social change (Galper, 1980; Gil, 1998; Payne, 1997). "Social change is not a part of social transformation unless it represents one step in a long-range strategy for more fundamental change" (Mullaly, 2002, p. 193, as cited in George & Marlowe, 2005, p. 7).

This means that, through this approach, social work will not only continue to assist and aid the individual but further examine and identify the root causes of his/her plight. Moreover, "structural social work aims to assuage people's immediate needs while simultaneously engaging in consciousness raising and direct action to dismantle a system of domination undergirding unequal life chances" (Mullaly, 2007, 2009, as cited in Chan, 2018, p. 28). By doing so, social workers put forward the concept that the "personal is political" where individual problems and issues are symptomatic of a much larger political aim—to further marginalize, exploit, and oppress the vulnerable. Working within, outside, and beyond social institutions mark the dual capabilities of social work to address multi-level and intersectional concerns until the attainment of the profession's ultimate goal of social change hinged on radical and liberating practice. From lending a hand to the individual to challenging society's essential social institutions, "structural social work facilitates both personal change and structural change" (Mullaly, 1997, as cited in Chan, 2018, p. 29). The Philippines' history, encumbered with decades of land monopoly, authoritarianism, imperialism and now, the global agenda of neoliberalism, justifies the need to dismantle the systems founded upon such systems.

One of the lockdown measures imposed during the pandemic was named *granular lockdown* which "typically covers just a few streets or certain barangays of a given city, as determined by LGU officials" (Luna, 2021). However, these restrictions managed to impact a huge segment of the population that heavily depends on hourly or daily wages. Simply a day without work can mean possibly weeks to months of unpaid bills, insufficient funds to continue medication, and ultimately hunger and homelessness. A minimum wage worker in the National Capital Region (NCR) earns Php 512 per day which is already the highest across regions and yet still not enough to raise the standard of living (IBON Foundation, 2018). Taking just one day of work away from these groups can dramatically change their situation in the midst of a raging pandemic.

The Philippines has always faced growing inequality and exploitation of the working class. Access to basic social services remains inequitable and investments in human capital such as education, health, and training seem nonexistent as more and more Filipinos are unable to attain higher education and train for high paying jobs (International Labour Organization, 2020). According to Rutkowski (2015), the country's glaring problem with unemployment and poverty stems not from the lack of jobs but from scarce job opportunities for many Filipino workers. A

good portion of these jobs can only provide minimum, or just slightly above minimum wages. If most families are only living paycheck to paycheck, there are less chances for their upward social mobility and, more often than not, this pattern continues on for generations. Rutkowski (2015) also demonstrates this by illustrating it as a "vicious circle" wherein lack of investments for human capital continue to produce low-skilled workers with minimal pay thus decreasing the incentive to hone and advance their skills (p. 2). At the same time, there are not enough skill-intensive jobs which pay higher salaries, which means many Filipino workers are bound to take on low-skilled jobs that do not pay much. Simply put, unemployment in the Philippines is rooted in little to no investments in human capital and little to no job opportunities that pay above minimum wage. Contractualization is still practiced as well in many workplaces despite legislation prohibiting it, causing many workers to be exploited by employers, laid off unreasonably, and deprived of regular employment benefits.

Due to these issues in the employment system, millions of Filipino families are struggling to make ends meet and social protection measures are mostly distributed unequally. Neoliberal policies exacerbate these conditions by privatizing basic needs. This increases their costs and, by deregulating the market and lessening state intervention, local production loses to its foreign counterparts (Watson, 2021).

Alongside these issues, indigenous groups are continually displaced from their ancestral lands due to heightened militarization and land-grabbing by foreign corporations. Many families in urban cities are homeless or living impermanently, moving from area to area as they are forced out with demolition threats in order for private condominiums, buildings, malls, etc. to be built. These consequences of a growing neoliberal market coupled with authoritarian rule can only bring about unforgiving conditions for many which may become even more dire in the future. In summary:

> It is an eclectic mix of market reform and state intervention that favours certain domestic firms. It is a specific form of authoritarian neoliberalism that—in contrast to the governance reform agenda—provides a dose of state intervention with deepening market reform and with a strong nationalist and religious hue. (Jayasuriya, 2020, p. 51)

When the pandemic came, these inequality issues were exacerbated. These structures that were flawed and monopolistic from the beginning were highlighted even more as they failed to mitigate the sharp increase in unemployment, hunger, and need for healthcare. The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) was quick to launch the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) in multiple regions as part of the provisions of the Bayanihan to Heal as One law (Bisenio, 2020). However, these emergency cash grants proved to be inadequate as the pandemic and lockdowns persisted. Public transportation drivers could not work, street vendors were removed from their usual stations as part of social distancing measures, service industries had to lay off their employees, and those who could not transition their work to online platforms were left behind. These emergency cash grants were not even able to reach the reported goal of providing for roughly 18 million families (Bisenio, 2020). It was also predicted that in 2022, the unemployment rate would still be high, at about 6.7% to 7.6% (Nicolas, 2021). As of this writing, the unemployment rate declined to 4.5% in October 2022 which was attributed to the reopening of businesses and schools (National Economic and Development Authority, 2022).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic is not over yet. In a series of unjust policies that infringe on human rights and impoverish the masses further, accompanied by aggressive counter-insurgency tactics and indignities against opposing officials, Duterte has made it clear that his authoritarian rule is well on its way to staying more permanently. As Bello (2017) explains:

> This spells great danger for Philippine democracy, since Duterte will find that, to pursue his authoritarian project amidst rising opposition, he will have to resort to a curtailment of civil liberties and other repressive decrees. This will not be difficult to do since he has already committed the maximum violation of liberal democracy, the taking without due process of over 7000 lives, so that curtailment of civil liberties and declaring a dictatorship can be carried out as "mopping-up operations." (p. 43)

What can be done to begin reversing the damage from the first two years of the pandemic is to redirect funds from the national budget to public healthcare and widespread economic aid for Filipino families. However, this has not come into fruition despite proposals from the Department of Health (Buan, 2021) and the intense lobbying to pass the Bayanihan 3 bill that prioritizes increasing the financial aid allotted for vulnerable sectors (Suzara et al., 2021). These provisions have yet to be considered as a priority, given the excessive spending on counter-insurgency tactics such as increasing the budget of the National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC) (Ramos, 2021). This has only led to baseless red-tagging and intimidation of progressive organizations, as well as continuing the Build Build Build program—Duterte's ambitious infrastructure project that would only benefit foreign investors and the country's own elites and oligarchs (Guzman, 2021).

The Duterte administration exploited this public health crisis to forward his fascist and authoritarian rule. The COVID-19 pandemic underscored the causality between neoliberal policies and the worsening economic inequality in the country and "societies with higher levels of economic inequality are concomitantly more hierarchical, making experiences that reinforce vertical notions of authority more common and so authoritarianism more widespread" (Solt, 2012, p. 704). Public health is therefore political. Zmigrod et al. (2021) states in their study that "public and personal health can therefore have fundamental repercussions for regional politics, decision-making, and governance" (p. 466). Therefore, it is important to not separate the personal and political, rather acknowledge the ways in which both intersect and where the true problems lie (Mullaly, 1997). For the Philippines, the feudal model of land ownership that began during the Spanish colonization was retained, fostering "a massively unequal class system" (Simon, 2020, p. 108). The arrival of imperialism and neoliberalism later on, tacitly supported by the state, further aggravated the situation of the Filipinos but also bolstered progressive social movements and the resistance against oppressive powers.

Through a structural social work lens, oppressive structures are not ones to repair and mend but rather ones that must be abolished entirely. Many of these progressive social movements move toward this goal, championing radical approaches that evoke consciousness raising through public protests that bring to light the kind of restructuring the country gravely needs. Consciousness raising is a crucial aspect in structural social work as it is what leads to genuine solidarity with oppressed groups. Existing structures that continue to widen gaps of inequality are able to advance and persist due to proliferating hegemonic beliefs that culturally

alter the perceptions of society towards social classes and inequality. This hegemony that is centered on capitalist structures can be described as [a] "seamless cloth [that] covers all the contradictions and gaps in capitalist society, making glaring conditions seem like rational, natural occurrences understandable and agreeable to everyone" (Siebers, 2008, as cited in Chan, 2018, p. 28). Duterte, for instance, was able to sway the public into fostering anti-poor sentiments beginning with his war on drugs. It was able to cement further authoritarian policies as many have come to perceive the poor as problem areas of the country, thus needing what many international organizations have dubbed "'de facto programme of social cleansing,' and a 'war on the poor'" (Hadro, 2017, as cited in Ramos, 2020, p. 488).

The role of social workers then is hinged on genuine emancipation from these oppressive structures by way of dismantling them. This means standing in solidarity with oppressed groups (Chan, 2018), working in alliance with progressive movements (Madland, 2020), and undertaking continuous consciousness raising both in society and within social work agencies. The latter is crucial as bureaucratic management and the traditional processes in social work have laid the substantial groundwork in the practice, thereby making this part of the discipline for a significant amount of time. In the structural social work approach, social workers are called to move past traditional practices that were solely focused on individual problems to a more radical stance that champions structural changes, even if it means a restructuring of how social work agencies operate and distribute social services from now on.

> If social workers and managers of social service agencies become conscious and critical of themselves as actors in this struggle, they can share their awareness and analysis with their clients, and they can resist treating the problems of individual clients as only private troubles rather than systemic dysfunctions. (Hardcastle, 2011, p. 55)

The economic structures that have left Filipino workers in inhumane working conditions and the political climate that is deeply entrenched in authoritarian rule have undoubtedly impoverished the country further. And alongside a raging pandemic, a descent into far worse conditions can befall the Philippines. Without this strong radical stance to abolish these structures, social work will become a center for band-aid solutions—offering temporary fixes for symptoms of a much larger crisis. To alleviate the country's present issues, social workers must work and build alliances with grassroots movements to put forward their demands and resolutions. The structural social work approach is strengths-based (Chan, 2018) and, because of that, communities, labor unions, movements, and other mass-lead coalitions must be put at the forefront of these structural changes. They lead this change and lead other service practitioners such as social workers as to how they can all work together politically, economically, and culturally in creating more people-oriented systems.

By viewing the current situation of the country through a structural social work lens, a social worker's duty to serve the people rests on an uncompromising stand against authoritarian regimes—a staunch and unwavering opposition alongside the masses. Shoulder to shoulder with the people, social workers should be at the frontlines of the struggle towards universal health care, free education, increased minimum wages, genuine agrarian reform, and access to basic social services and opportunities. Moving forward calls for critical class analysis that allows social workers to distinguish oppressive systems, quash them, and provide "an alternative system of politics and welfare" that positions the needs and welfare of the masses first (Chan,

2018). In the long run, there will be no reforms powerful enough to strike a balance between authoritarianism and democracy, as the former directly contradicts the principles of the latter. A core principle in social work is social justice (NASW, n.d.) and therefore social workers should take "a strong value position on systemic discrimination" (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2020). They must be at the side of the people at all times.

Conclusion

Authoritarianism has bred intolerance towards those of lower classes and marginalized groups as though they, rather than the structures that preserve and exacerbate inequality, are the root causes of the country's social issues. While it had been easy for the state to subject them to cruel, discriminatory, and inhumane policies, the situation with the pandemic is no better than when it started. When authoritarian leaders and elites are able to hegemonize a myopic view that frames marginalized groups as the root problems of society, rather than the structures that have marginalized them in the first place, oppression will continue and inevitably worsen—with homelessness, starvation, unemployment, and poverty reaching exponential heights in the near future.

After almost two years of living in a pandemic under the Duterte administration, it has become clear that the authoritarian rule he began his regime with can take an even more despotic form. Resorting to violence and anti-poor policies has been to the country's detriment, not the masses themselves who he has needlessly neglected, exploited, and even unjustifiably tagged as terrorists. As the country continues to face and manage the impact of the pandemic on the public health sector, the economy, and employment, the need for conformity and obedience has been underhandedly bargained for the dispossession of our individual freedoms. Fear, distrust, and anxiety have ultimately been exploited to reinforce an oppressive, authoritarian rule. As Hamid (2020) states, "After all, that's the implicit social contract imposed upon citizen-subjects: they may have to forego their freedom, but at least they get something in return" (para. 12).

Despite all these, there is hope to be had. A tyrannical government, without meaning to, becomes the greatest push for the people to build a forceful solidarity against all kinds of oppression. The masses, despite at some point being immobilized by their current material conditions and the dominant hegemony that acquiesced them to such (Chan, 2018), will inevitably gain "critical consciousness" to which Paulo Freire believed to be how the people will come to recognize and then challenge the structures that oppress them (Hick & Murray, 2009, p. 94). Social workers are called to focus now on the praxis, bringing to life the theoretical work and the body of knowledge that had been cultivated under the profession (Hick & Murray, 2009; Chan, 2018).

The pandemic had struck fear and brought irreversible damage to the country. Globally, authoritarian rule swept into many nations and took advantage of the situation to further suppress the masses' needs and neglect their welfare, particularly those in marginalized groups. However, authoritarianism did not appear solely as a result of the pandemic. Its oppressive systems have long been felt by the indigenous peoples whenever their ancestral lands are stolen from them, by street vendors, minimum wage workers, and the urban poor who are continuously alienated and treated inhumanely, by women who have yet to possess their own bodily autonomy, and by activists and revolutionaries whose deaths are debased as nothing more than military trophies. If there was anything to learn from the Philippines' history of authoritarianism, it is that the

masses will continue to repudiate authoritarian rule, no matter how hard dictators and fascist leaders try to sunder their united fronts. The weakening of democracy seems to be the clamor of the elites and authoritarian administrations, but the unwavering resistance of the masses has yet to be unmoored.

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Fighting for Their Right to Food and Education:
The Case of Lakas ng Nagkakaisang Kababaihan Amidst the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Precy D. Dagooc

Abstract

This paper presents the experience of Lakas ng Nagkakaisang Kababaihan sa Barangay UP Campus (Lakas, Inc.), an all-women people's organization based in Pook Aguinaldo, Barangay UP Campus, Quezon City. This paper utilizes the story of Lakas, Inc. to inspire other women-led people's organizations in addressing food insecurity and education-related challenges, brought by the COVID-19 pandemic, which are experienced in the household and community levels. Lakas, Inc. built an urban vegetable garden and a community learning hub as solutions to their problems. Further, this paper reveals the following: a) Structural Social Work and Feminist Social Work provide the realization that the problems of women in Pook Aguinaldo in Barangay UP Campus in education and food are best understood if social structures that produce and maintain inequality and personal hardships are analyzed; b) Food security is attainable when there are food and land sovereignty, whereas, community learning hubs can be sustained when the land where they are built is secured; c) Feminist Social Work and Empowerment Theory tell us that the key to the Lakas women's success in organizing is when they recognize that women are capable of making decisions and of utilizing each individual member's strengths to start a collective action and d) that Community Organizing can take place in the middle of a pandemic.

Keywords: pandemic, right to food, right to education, digital divide, neoliberalism, Feminist Social Work, Structural Social Work, Empowerment Theory, Community Organizing

Introduction

Background of the Study

The Philippine economy shrank significantly after the country was recognized as one of the fastest growing economies in the world in 2019 (Mendoza, 2021). No less than 12 million people from the National Capital Region (NCR), people from different walks of life, most specifically those belonging to the vulnerable sectors, were immediately affected. The Philippines' economic model itself was found to be particularly vulnerable to disease outbreaks. It is built around the mobility of people, yet tourism, services, and remittances-fed growth are all vulnerable to pandemic-induced lockdowns and consumer confidence decline (Mendoza, 2021).

In the 2021 year-end report of the Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA), the country's unemployment rate grew at 6.6% from 6.5 as reported in November 2021. In other words, there were 3.27 million unemployed persons in our country in December 2021, up from 3.16 million during the preceding month.

Less than half (33.9%) of the Philippines's unemployed persons belong to ages 25 to 34, followed by age group 15-24 at 28.9% and most are males (PSA, 2022). Both age groups are believed to be an individual's prime years in terms of economic productivity. However, the statistics showed that people who belonged to these age groups mostly comprised the unemployed sector during COVID-19 pandemic.

From November to December 2021, five sectors experienced employment shed-off (PSA, 2022). First in the list was (1) the fishing and aquaculture sector. This was followed by (2) other service activities, (3) education, (4) public administration and defense, compulsory social security, and (5) information and communication (PSA, 2022).

Transportation services which fall under the service sector were severely hit during the pandemic. As soon as most modes of public transportation were suspended early on in the pandemic, jeepney drivers were seen begging on the streets, trying to ask for help to make ends meet. Some even had to live in their jeepneys (Simeon, 2021). As of October 2020, more than 100,000 jeepney drivers were jobless, as the Land Transportation Franchising and Regulatory Board (LTFRB) was yet to reopen their routes (San Juan, 2020). Within the University of the Philippines (UP) Diliman community, the UP-Transport Group—an alliance of four different jeepney routes in the UP Campus—took the initial hit when their vehicles were immediately grounded as public transportation was barred from plying their daily routes. Jeepney drivers in UP were seen appealing for help along the campus' streets like C. P. Garcia, right outside their residences in Pook Aguinaldo in Barangay UP Campus, Barangay Krus na Ligas, and other adjacent barangays. Since jeepney services were forced to stop, workers and commuters had difficulty in finding vehicles for daily transport. "This is no longer just a matter of our livelihood but the role of public transportation to help our dying economy," said Mody Floranda, national president of transport group Pinagkaisang Samahan ng mga Tsuper at Opereytor Nationwide (PISTON) (San Juan, 2020). In addition, being banned from operation was just one problem. Jeepney modernization was yet another challenge—one that was even more unimaginable during the pandemic where drivers lost P500 to P700 of their daily income (Cabrera, 2020).

The jeepney drivers in UP, most of whom were males with roles as husbands and breadwinners, could not put food on their family's table during the months-long lockdown. Consequently, their wives had to find strategies to fill this gap. Again, women came to the rescue of their respective families—women who already carry most of the burden in sustaining the household needs particularly food and nutrition, as well as the monthly water and electricity bills and house rental. Food and financial aid from the government came late, forcing some to break health protocols in order to earn money, or demand immediate aid from the Barangay UP Campus for the 14,000 households within their locality. The Barangay itself had to find other means to provide for the community as the mayor's office was also stockpiling food supplies to provide for the entire Quezon City population.

Ranked third among the sectors that experienced employment shed-off was education (PSA, 2020). This was the result of banning children and youth as well as school employees from coming to school during the pandemic lockdowns. UNICEF (2021) reported that 214 million children globally had missed more than 75% of their face-to-face learning for an entire year. By mid-2022, the Philippines was one of the remaining countries worldwide that had not resumed in-person classes since the pandemic began, affecting the right to education of more than 27 million Filipino students (UNICEF, 2021). How could Filipino children even maximize

the benefits of remote learning when 57% of the households or roughly 23 million Filipino households, according to the World Bank (2020), did not have internet access?

In 2015, those aged 14 and below, who made up 28.56% of the population (N= 47,127 as of 2020 Census) of Barangay UP Campus (PhilAtlas, n.d.), were among those expected to be enrolled even during the pandemic. However, many of them were forced to stop studying despite the shift from in-person classes to blended and remote learning. This was because they had no gadgets, they had to help earn money, their homes were not conducive to learning as they were in crowded places, while some suffered from mental and health issues. This validates the observation of the UNICEF Philippines representative Oyunsaikhan Dendevnorov that "learning loss, mental distress, missed vaccinations, heightened risk of drop out, child labour and child marriage are associated consequences of school closures" (UNICEF, 2021, para. 6, lines 3-5).

As narrated above, the predicament of both women and children during the pandemic was evident globally and nationally, even down to the level of the barangay. This paper shall present how the women leaders and members of Lakas ng Nagkakaisang Kababaihan ng Barangay UP Campus or Lakas, Inc., an all-women people's organization, responded to their issues on food insecurity worsened by job loss as well as the negative consequences of school closure that directly affected their children.

Statement of the Problem

This study focused on answering the following questions:

1. Why did some women in Pook Aguinaldo in Barangay UP Campus choose to organize themselves to address the issues surrounding food insecurity and remote education?
2. What processes took place in the formation of Lakas?
3. In what ways does the experience of Lakas affirm Empowerment Theory, Feminist Social Work, Structural Social Work and Community Organizing (CO)?

Research Objectives

The authors deemed it worthy to document the experience of Lakas as an all-women people's organization (PO) that was born right when the COVID-19 protocols were reinforced at its strictest. The authors believe that studying the experience of Lakas would shed light on the application of Empowerment Theory, Feminist Social Work, Structural Social Work and Community Organizing. Overall, this study aims to:

1. Present how some women in Pook Aguinaldo in Barangay UP Campus addressed their problems regarding food and their children's remote education by organizing themselves to become Lakas, Inc.
2. Discuss the processes which Lakas, Inc. went through from its establishment to its present circumstances.
3. Show how the actual experience of Lakas affirms Empowerment Theory, Feminist Social Work, Structural Social Work and Community Organizing (CO).

Significance of the Study

What is in the story of Lakas for the Social Work profession? One of the values of Social Work could inform the readers why the authors would like to showcase how Lakas women responded to food insecurity and remote education. Social Work upholds that "*Each person has the obligation, as a member of society, to seek ways of self-fulfillment that contribute to the common good*" (Mendoza, 2022, p. 115, para. 3, lines 1-3). It will be discussed below how the women came to their families' rescue when their husbands could no longer bring food to the table during the height of COVID-19 pandemic. Later in this paper, it will be shown that the women formed Lakas, Inc. as their own way of improving their conditions. They proved that women understand their *"obligation to seek ways of self-fulfillment that contribute to the common good"* because they did not only act on the needs of their respective households but thought of the struggles of their community as a whole during the pandemic.

The story of Lakas women is here to remind social workers the *"need to shift emphasis from the one-on-one mode of helping people to more mass-oriented, community-based practice in order to reach a greater number of disadvantaged people*" (Mendoza, 2022, p. 489, par. 1, lines 6-10). Lakas as a people's organization started with individual mothers who felt problems at the household level. The traditional Social Work methods are casework, group work and community organization (CO) (Mendoza, 2022, p. 230, par. 1, lines 3-5). During a pandemic, the case of a stay-at-home mother of five kids with a husband who suddenly became a victim of retrenchment due to COVID-19 is typically considered for casework by social workers. One most immediate casework intervention for the mother is to check whether she and her family is qualified for the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) of the Philippine government where she could receive cash and in-kind assistance amounting to 5,000-8,000 per month for two months (Aceron, J., 2020, par. 3., lines 1-2). While resource provision is necessary during times of crises, using one Social Work method and providing only a one-time financial assistance, might not be sufficient to solve the problem.. This is because a client that qualifies for SAP is a multi-problem client. The multi-problem client is usually in need of economic assistance, skills training, informal education, psychosocial services including counseling, nutrition and healthcare services. Therefore, it is best if a social worker applies a wholistic approach in problem solving, particularly by working as a Generalist Social Work Practitioner (GSWP). Ensuring that a family has food while under strict community quarantine due to COVID-19, by receiving SAP for instance, may be a social worker's task during casework but ensuring that a whole community has available and accessible sustainable food, through a productive urban garden for instance, is a social worker's task during community organization (CO). The GSWP does not stop at problem-solving in the individual and/or household level but even works at mobilizing and organizing community members who eventually realize that their household-level concerns are caused by unequal distribution of resources and power in the society. This paper appreciates "total problem solving" as one of the concepts underlying the GSWP. The *"generalist practitioner sees the client as part of the social system which causes/affects his/her problem and recognizes that he/she cannot be of real help if he/she ignores such system(s)"* (Mendoza, 2022, p. 217, par. 2, lines 1-6). Food insecurity and an education of questionable quality during COVID-19 pandemic are not individual/household problems but are community/societal problems, hence, a social worker must work as a GSWP, in other words, work at all levels - micro, mezzo and macro. In summary, Lakas, like any other people's organizations, is one of the many client systems that social workers in the Philippines work with. More than a client system as an organization itself, Lakas is also composed of individual clients struggling during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The formation and experience of Lakas amidst the pandemic, though they lack a professional Social Worker that guides them all throughout and despite that what they only have is a full-time Community Organizer from Kaisa Ka Youth (more details are presented below), makes a great contribution to Community Organizing (CO) as one of the primary fields and settings of Social Work. On top of this study's affirmation of the Social Work values and the Generalist Social Work Practice (GSWP) as mentioned above, another purpose of writing the story of Lakas, Inc. is to document the experience of an all women-led people's organization to further contribute to the literature regarding organizing during the pandemic, the adverse effects and gendered impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as to explore what social workers and social development practitioners can do to help sustain POs such as Lakas, Inc.

Lastly, this study is intended to be disseminated to the public because the women-residents of Pook Aguinaldo, Barangay UP Campus believe that sharing their organization's story would allow them to somehow be heard especially by the UP Administration, the government, social development practitioners who can be potential partners and sponsors, and by their fellow budding POs. They believe that the story of Lakas, Inc. could be another organization's learning.

Review of Related Literature and Studies

Hunger and the Right to Food during COVID-19 Pandemic

Since 2020, millions of Filipinos had been forced to reduce their food consumption due to job loss and financial troubles (Simeon, 2021). The hunger rate reached an extraordinarily high of 21.2% during the pandemic but IBON Foundation reported that food insecurity was already being experienced by roughly 46 million Filipinos even before COVID-19 hit. (Simeon, 2021). Ironically, the UN claims that the right to food is vital for the realization of many other rights, such as the rights to health and life (ESCR-Net, n.d.) The World Health Organization (n.d.) presents that, when discussing the right to food, a country or state must take note of two concepts: (1) food security, which means the sustainability of food access for both present and future generations, and (2) food sovereignty, which means the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture systems. Further, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR) noted, during their 20th session in Geneva on the 26th of April until 14th of May 1999, that the right to adequate food includes the following interrelated and essential features which serve as guide for States in fulfilling their obligation to respect, fulfill and protect the people's right to food (UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights report, 1999, pages 3-4). A simple and straightforward description of the four essential features of the right to adequate food is presented on the International Network for Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ESCR-Net) website. The network wrote the features as follows:

- Adequacy. The food available for consumption must be appropriate in the prevailing social, economic, cultural, and environmental context (ESCR-Net, n.d. para. 4, line 1).
- Availability. Everyone should be able to obtain sufficient, quality food either through market systems or directly from land and other natural resources (ESCR-Net, n.d. para. 4, line 3).
- Accessibility. Access to food involves three key elements:

non-discrimination, economic accessibility, and physical accessibility (ESCR-Net, n.d. para. 4, line 8).

- Sustainability. States must ensure, through the development of appropriate measures and regulation of private actors, that practices impacting on food, land or natural resources do not jeopardise the long-term availability and accessibility of food (ESCR-Net, n.d. para. 4, line 15).

This literature gives us an idea that the majority of households and communities in the country are most likely experiencing food insecurity. Assessing whether people are able to enjoy their right to food is accompanied by answering the questions below:

1. Is food adequate?
2. Is food available?
3. Is food accessible?
4. Is food sustainable?

Digital Divide and the Right to Education During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The term digital divide refers to the growing gap between the underprivileged members of the society who do not have access to computers or the internet and the wealthy, middle class populations living in urban and suburban areas who have access (Stanford University, n.d.). This digital divide became even more pronounced in the Philippines during the pandemic. Pre-pandemic, internet access was a luxury, while during the pandemic, it became vital. However, 40% of Filipinos found mobile broadband rates expensive, according to the USAID Better Access and Connectivity Project; and a wide gap was observed between internet users in NCR and in Mindanao, with 65% and 32%, respectively, being internet users out of the total surveyed respondents (Ibrahim, 2022). The digital divide depends on several factors like location, income, household size, age, gender, physical ability, and education but in the case of the Philippines, the biggest factor would be affordability and availability of internet access points (Ibrahim, 2022).

Since the digital divide is a problem, the right to education was barely fulfilled, especially during the pandemic. According to UNICEF, at least 29% of primary students were not reached despite plans to provide remote learning, due to a lack of the needed technology. In 2020, the schools in other countries were closed for only an average of 79 teaching days (UNICEF, 2021), but Philippine schools were closed for almost two years to date. Research shows that a positive school experience predicts a child's future social, emotional, and educational outcomes and that the number of years a child spends in school directly affects his or her future earnings (UNICEF, 2021). One of these studies is that of Badri, M., et al. entitled, "The Effects of Home and School on Children's Happiness: A Structural Equation Model" (2018). This study reiterated Al-Yasin's (2001) findings that "the lack of happiness and joyfulness has a significant influence on students' personality growth and might affect their intelligence, thinking skills, creativity, and educational achievements" (Badri, M., et al., p.1, para. 1, line 9). Further evidence that backs up UNICEF's statement that "the number of years a child spends in school directly affects his or her future earnings" is Patrino and Psacharopoulos' blog entitled "Strong Link Between Education and Earnings" published on World Bank Blogs in 2018. They said that "education is generally associated with higher earnings due to productivity" (Patrinos and Psacharopoulos, para. 8, line 2). However, due to the implementation of lockdowns due to COVID which led to school closures which, in turn, made the digital divide much more evident, the right of

children to education—attending physical classes, gaining positive school experiences, face-to-face learning with teachers and peers, and not falling behind—was being further violated.

Furthermore, the lockdown triggered a confusion among parents regarding their roles as teachers during the pandemic. "They [parents] have a hard time forcing their children to answer modules because the kid isn't intimidated by their parents. The way a teacher encourages is very different from how a parent would," teacher Johnnalie Consumo said in an interview with Time (De Guzman, 2021, para. 15, lines 1-3). Despite the Department of Education (DepEd) adopting a blend of remote-learning options, i.e., online platforms, educational TV and radio, and printed modules, social inequalities and the lack of resources at home to support these approaches posed extreme challenge to both students and teachers (De Guzman, 2021, para. 11, lines 1-4.).

In summary, related literature and studies inform us that indeed, food insecurity and education-related challenges were the biggest monsters that further "mutated" into worse forms during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Community Organizing during the COVID-19 pandemic

The case of George Floyd who was murdered by a police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota on May 25, 2020, which was allegedly due to extreme racial discrimination, brought millions of activists to the streets (McClure, 2021, para. 1-3). Eventually, COVID-19 impeded the activists because they could not do in-person meetings, but they took advantage of digital organizing. Tenants United, a collective which is based in Chicago, had a similar experience. They were inspired to take on new ways to inspire change despite the coronavirus. They conducted digital organizing using Zoom. They realized that synchronous meetings were convenient. COVID-19 did not stop them from organizing to address the fact that many tenants suddenly found themselves unable to pay rent (McClure, 2021, para. 6, lines 1-3). Moreover, #LetUsBreathe Collective, one of the people-led organizations that emerged in Chicago during the height of the pandemic, repurposed one of its spaces, called the Breathing Room, to serve as a food-distribution hub and expanded its garden and farm on the site, one of their ways to address the struggles of their community members who could not afford to buy groceries and pay rent (McClure, 2021, para. 53, lines 1-5).

Like the United States' experience of economic downturn during the pandemic, the Philippine government eventually became "strapped for cash" because the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) was not enough to cover 17.7 million Filipinos living in poverty as we all as the more than 4.5 million homeless individuals. But contrary to the popular notion that the urban poor families are "only waiting for *ayuda*", many residents managed to create ways of mobilizing to respond creatively to the pandemic. A paper in Southeast Asian Community Responses by UP Center for Integrative and Development Studies (UP CIDS) Program on Alternative Development shows evidence that the urban poor are "not idle players" waiting for government support or subsidy (Luna, F. 2021, para. 7, lines 1-2). In fact, there are community-led efforts organized by civil society organizations and people's organizations (PO) like Alyansa ng mga Samahan sa Sitio Mendez, Baesa Homeowners Association, Inc. (ASAMBA) which conducted their own relief operations within their community from their own funds, Kabalikat ng Kaunlaran sa Baseco which has an urban garden since 2010 that made the group able to distribute vegetables to families even during quarantine, Nagkakaisang Mamamayan ng Legarda

that used hydroponics for communal gardening which became their main source of food, and Save San Roque Alliance in Sitio San Roque, North Triangle, Quezon City that established its Eskwela Maralita project, a community learning center that had the intention to ease the challenges that Filipino parents encounter with modular lessons (Luna, F, 2021, para. 8-17).

Women Leaders in the time of COVID-19

Oxfam International (2023) reported in their website that there are five ways how women and girls have been the hardest hit by COVID-19. First, women are overrepresented in the sectors of the economy that have been hardest hit, such as the accommodation and food services. Second, women are excluded from quality healthcare and education. Third, women comprise 75% of all unpaid care work in the world. Fourth, women are typically the ones responsible for the purchase and cooking of food for their own households and yet food insecurity is higher for women than for men. Fifth, there is a 33% increase in intimate partner violence in some countries and in gender-based violence as a whole. Despite these, Oxfam International stands by the belief that women's rights organizations must be supported to advance women and girls' rights and that women should lead the way. (Oxfam International, 2023, para. 1-16). In the Philippines, women are hardest hit during calamities like the COVID-19 but according to UP CIDS, the community of ASAMBA (Alyansa ng mga Samahan sa Sitio Mendez, Baesa Homeowners Association, Inc.) saw that women spearheaded their social protection initiatives. Women were responsible for monitoring the observance of physical distancing in their community. Women watch village portals to control who goes in and out. It's the women who know how to deal with the authorities. "Women know how you have to maneuver around authorities because that's women's role in a very patriarchal way", according to Mary Racelis, a research scientist from the Institute of Philippine Culture (Luna, 2021, para. 44-49).

Theoretical Framework

Feminist Social Work

The main subject of this study, Lakas, Inc., is an all women-led organization. The birth of the organization came upon the women-members' realization of their rights that were being challenged during the COVID-19 pandemic. The women realized that they had been having difficulties on where and how to secure food to put on the family table. They had been having a hard time thinking how to make sure that their respective families survive the pandemic, especially when their husbands lost their jobs, and their children needed the necessary nutrition to get through the daily demands of remote education. These were the daily struggles that the women were faced with. At the end of the day, they had the right to feel secure. Feminist Social Work asserts that women are capable of making decisions for themselves in all aspects of their lives (Dominelli, 2002). This paper is anchored on Feminist Social Work which asserts that women are capable of looking for collective solutions to individual problems (Dominelli, 2002). How the Lakas women devised "collective solutions to individual problems" is presented in detail under the Discussion and Analysis of Results section.

Empowerment Theory

It is inevitable to touch on empowerment theory when discussing feminist Social Work. Empowerment has long been incorporated into most practice approaches (Lundy, 2011). In

feminist Social Work, empowerment is both a goal and a process and has an action component. The creation of solutions by the Lakas members exactly demonstrates how empowerment was both a goal and a process for them. This is discussed in detail below.

Structural Social Work

It was repeatedly mentioned above that Lakas, Inc. was a product of the struggles of, essentially, mothers in a community that was badly hit by the COVID-19 pandemic—particularly with regard to health, food security, livelihood, and education. The lead author believes that, in order to understand why the Lakas women resorted to creating solutions to address food insecurity and challenges to their children's education, Structural Social Work concepts and assumptions are to be borne in mind. Structural Social Work tells us that a person's life circumstances and problems are connected to his/her economic and social standing in society and that social work intervention at both the level of the individual and social structures is necessary (Lundy, 2011). The lead author, as a social worker, believed that the Lakas women's needs could only be met if the latter came to recognize the institutional formations and existing relationships that may be serving as barriers. Later in this paper, the experience of Lakas, Inc. is explained using Structural Social Work.

Community Organizing (CO)

Community Organizing or CO is one of the primary methods of social work that needs to be revitalized and re-thought especially that it has been suggested that the very survival of social work needs a reclaiming of community practice or CO (Lundy, 2011, p. 260, para. 2, lines 2-3). Community Organizing has the following characteristics.

1. It brings people together who directly or indirectly have common interests.
2. It utilizes a democratic process for decision making and participation.
3. It engages in an educational process that builds on existing knowledge and skills of members.
4. It brings about "change, to reduce or eliminate exploitation, oppression and alienation (Lamoureux, et. al., 1988 as cited in Lundy, 2011, p. 262, para. 1, lines 1-7).

This definition of CO by Lamoureaux, et.al. is what informed the authors' narration and analysis of the organizing experience of Lakas. Below, the authors gave particular attention on the story of how some women in Pook Aguinaldo engaged their fellow women who have been systematically disadvantaged especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 shows that this study aims to present how some women in Pook Aguinaldo in Barangay UP Campus addressed their problems namely (i) the need to satisfy their right to food and (ii) the need to satisfy their children's right to education while at the height of COVID-19 pandemic. COVID-19 pandemic caused job losses especially among breadwinners as well as challenges that Filipino parents had to face regarding the abrupt shift from their children's face-to-face classes to remote learning e.g., modular and online education. In the Introduction above, it was established by the authors that most family breadwinners are husbands. Since the husbands were mostly the ones who lost jobs and livelihood during the implementation of community quarantine, the wives were left to think and act about the family's survival during

the pandemic.

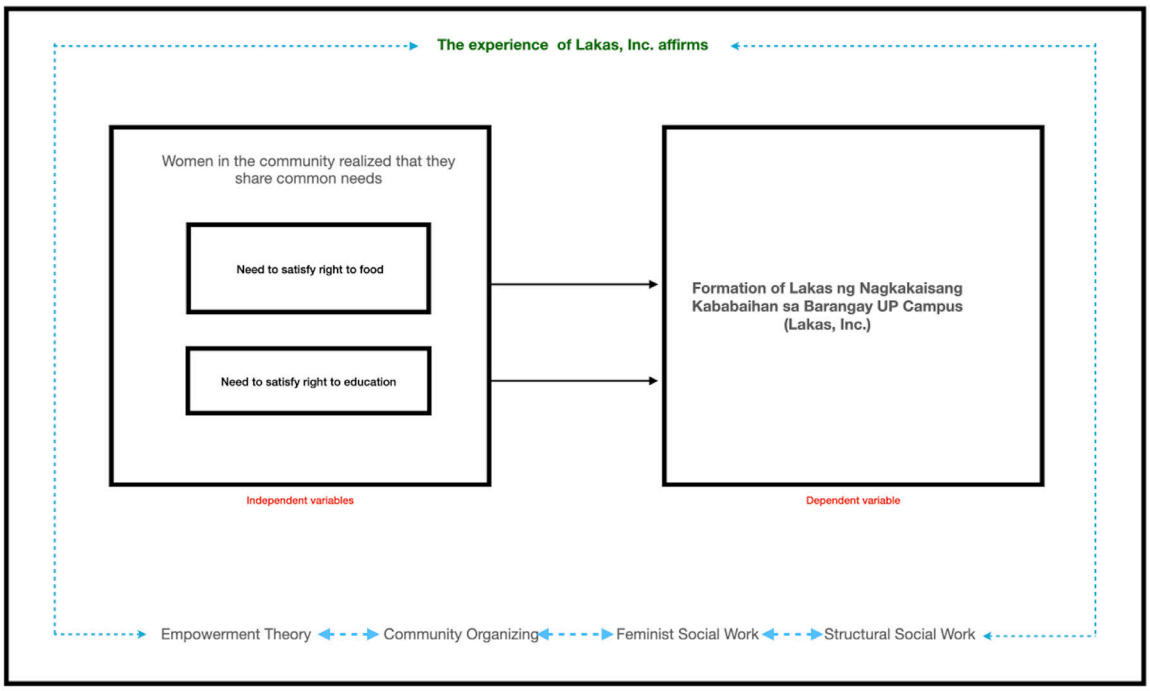

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Further, the figure above shows that it is still the mothers who problematize their children's challenges regarding the shift in learning modality in their schools. These independent variables are being examined in this paper because women saw that they share common needs and problems which led them to organize as an all-women people's organization named, Lakas, Inc. As illustrated above, this paper shows how the experience and practice of Lakas affirm the principles and assumptions of Empowerment Theory, Feminist Social Work, Structural Social Work and Community Organizing. *The four theoretical perspectives are connected by double headed arrows because the theories are not just affirmed by the story of Lakas, but the theories can also inform the analysis of the organizing story of Lakas, Inc.*

Methodology

Research Design

This research utilized case study as the primary research design to explore and analyze the experience of how the women-residents of Pook Aguinaldo organized and mobilized themselves to collectively address the lack of food and the challenges around their children's modular and online education. A case study refers to the collection and presentation of detailed information about a particular participant or small group, more commonly including the accounts of subjects themselves (Becker, B. et.al, 1994-2023, para. 2, lines 1-3). Case studies are considered as a design of inquiry that includes in-depth analysis of a case, usually a program, event, activity, process, or one or more individuals (Creswell, 2014). The case study as a research design is the more often selected strategy when how and when questions are asked.

Locale of the Study

The study was conducted in Pook Aguinaldo, Barangay UP Campus, Quezon City, particularly with the members of an all-women people's organization named Lakas ng Nagkakaisang Kababaihan sa Barangay UP Campus also known as Lakas, Inc.

Data Collection

There are six types of data collected in case studies - documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation and artifacts (Becker, B. et.al., 1994-2023, para. 42, lines 1-7). The authors of this study collected two. First, the authors collected documents such as Accomplishment Report on the Barangay UP Campus Community Learning Hub, Kaisa Ka Youth Organization Briefer that contains: (1) initial information on how Kaisa Ka Youth organized Lakas, Inc.; (2) background on Lakas, Inc.'s first General Assembly in which the women identified their priority issues, and the challenges of remote education that were being faced by the children and their mothers; (3) the story behind the development of the Community Learning Hub and the *gulayan* (Filipino translation of the term 'urban garden') and (4) encoded narratives or *salasaysay* of some Lakas members namely Nanay G, Nanay C, Nanay B and Nanay D. The *salaysay* was one of their exercises in the PO and these were submitted to their community organizer. The *salaysay* is entitled *"Ang Kwento ng Aking Buhay Nang Dumaan ang Pandemya"* (Story of My Life When the Pandemic Happened). The second data collection method was in-depth interviews. The lead author interviewed (1) the Community Organizer of Lakas named Precy Dagooc (co-author of this article) on February 15, 2022, and (2) two officers of Lakas on February 19, 2022. Only those who were available joined the in-depth group interview. During that time, most of the Lakas members were either scheduled to do *Bayanihan* clean-up at the Parish of the Holy Sacrifice in UP Diliman Campus or go to work as some of them belong to the service industries that had recently resumed the face-to-face work scheme.

Moreover, the accounts of the research participants regarding the gulayan (urban vegetable garden) and the Community Learning Hub were validated through the lead author's actual visit to the sites.

Profile of Participants

Shown below is the brief profile of the participants of this study:

1. Nanay A, aged 29, is a daughter of a UP employee who had been serving as a utility personnel for three decades up to the present. Nanay A was serving as the President of Lakas, Inc. as well as Vice President of the Volunteers Barangay Public Safety Outpost (VBPSO).
2. Nanay S, aged 33, was serving as the Treasurer for Lakas, Inc. and was working for Barangay UP Campus as the Area Coordinator for Pook Aguinaldo.
3. Precy Dagooc, aged 33, has been serving as Lakas, Inc's Community Organizer (CO) since 2020. In addition, she used to be an organizer for UP Manila, DLSU, DLSU-CSB & St. Scholastica Friends of Hanjin Workers, Kaisa Ka, Kilusan Para sa Pambansang Demokrasya, Youth for Nationalism and Democracy (YND), Kaisa Ka Youth Philippines in UP Diliman, and Alternative Politics (a multisectoral electoral machinery of Kilusan) in UP Diliman and the entire district of Quezon City).

To protect their privacy, the authors used "Nanay A" and "Nanay S" to refer to the research participants. On the other hand, the community organizer, , Ms. Precy Dagooc, consented to have her name spelled out in this paper, especially since that she also served as the co-author of this paper. Further, Ms. Dagooc was the one who shared the secondary data used for analysis.

Selection of Participants

Since the authors believe that this study is an illustrative case study, which means showing what a situation is like, in this case, the organizing story of Lakas, Inc., the authors used purposive selection of research participants. A story about Community Organizing would make sense if accounts from the organizer herself and the subjects of organizing were collected, analyzed and presented. Moreover, the individuals who participated during the in-depth interviews signified their interest and willingness to share the story of Lakas because for them having an article written about Lakas could help them get their message across to the UP Administration since their biggest challenge at the time was that the *gulayan* (urban vegetable garden), which they built to address hunger in the community, was built on a UP-owned land. Since it was located in a university property, Lakas could not develop nor expand the *gulayan* without securing the needed permits, which they could not do as the PO members are illegal residents at Pook Aguinaldo. Having no permit also meant that Lakas could not install a water facility at the *gulayan*, not even nearby, thus posing a threat to the sustainability of the project. Ms. Precy Dagooc, Lakas's community organizer, expressed that Lakas members would be very much willing to help in the completion of the study especially if it would mean getting their appeal heard by the University.

Research Instruments

Asking semi-structured/unstructured questions was the preferred strategy to make the participants feel free to respond as well as lead the discussion as they wanted. In addition, this paper aims to showcase the learnings from and the actual experience of women in collective action. Thus, it is only most appropriate that the research tool used is "characterized by flexibility and sharing of power between interviewer and interviewee" (Mukherji & Albon, 2015, p. 155, para. 2, line 1). In addition, to deepen the interview, the lead author used "following responses" as an interview technique. Nonetheless, below are some of the questions that were actually asked:

a. How did Lakas start? When was it formed?
b. Did the idea of forming Lakas spring from the women-residents themselves or spring from the suggestions of the community organizer or from the samaaralan sessions in which the women used to join?
c. Who were the first members of the core team that spearheaded the official establishment of Lakas?
d. What made the women gather together?
e. What made the women realize that they need to form an organization?
f. What are the processes that the women need to undertake to form Lakas?
g. What did the women take to establish a gulayan?
h. What did the women take to establish the Community Learning Hub?
i. Does the organization have officers? How did the election and general assembly take place?

j. Is Lakas recognized by the barangay and by the government of Quezon City?
k. Who are Lakas's partners? Who has been helping Lakas?
l. What are the next steps for Lakas?

Limitations of the Study

This paper utilized an illustrative case study of only one PO; hence, the authors do not claim that results are generalizable among people's organizations in the country which are newly formed during COVID-19 pandemic.

This study also had a relatively small number of participants during the data collection. The lead author did not conduct interviews regarding the life stories of individual members, instead, she focused the data collection on the story of Lakas, Inc. - how it started, how it was formed, its past and current undertakings and how the women feel about themselves, their organization, their tasks, their accomplishments and the future challenges that they have to face.

Discussion and Analysis of Results

Lakas, Inc.: Its Beginnings and Its Role in Addressing and Mitigating Hunger during the COVID-19 Pandemic

The Barangay UP Campus was doing its best to provide food security among its constituents, particularly by ensuring that *ayuda* (the Spanish word for "assistance") is provided to all 14,000 households. All barangays, especially during the pandemic, played a vital role in the delivery of social services, most especially, in ensuring that their constituents would not die of hunger. However, providing *ayuda* was definitely not a sufficient measure to say that the government was fulfilling its obligation to protect Filipinos' right to adequate food. *Ayuda* was just a stop-gap measure to appease the hunger pangs of Filipinos during the pandemic. In this view, the national government down to the barangays was falling short based on the definitions of food security and sovereignty. First of all, the national government could only provide one-time financial assistance (*Rappler*, 2021) to local government units (LGUs) which then used this for cash or in-kind ayuda to their constituents. This was enforced by the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) through Circular No. 136 Series of 2021 also known as "Guidelines on the Release and Utilization of the Financial Assistance to Cities and Municipalities in the NCR and in the provinces of Bulacan, Cavite, Laguna and Rizal that were placed under Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ)." By implementing "one-time assistance," the DBM was contradicting the concept of food security which refers to sustainability of food access for both present and future generations. The one-time *ayuda* did not even last for two weeks upon receipt. Second, the Circular mentioned that an LGU was allowed to provide P4,000 per family. This guideline did not consider that family size varies and is especially large in low-income communities. This also meant that this DBM Circular itself contradicted the features of the right to adequate food, namely, adequacy, availability, accessibility, and sustainability. Food insecurity had already been an issue before the pandemic and COVID -19 only made it worse. Third, there is no food sovereignty when there is lack of land sovereignty. Land sovereignty is the right to have effective access to, use of, and control over land and the benefits of its use and occupation, where land is understood as resource, territory, and landscape (Borras Jr. & Franco, 2012). Most families in Pook Aguinaldo do not own the land they occupy in Barangay UP

Campus. So, even house repairs and renovations cannot be done without the approval of the UP Office of the Vice Chancellor for Community Affairs. A community garden may prove useful for the community members' daily survival, but land use becomes an issue since the land which they planned to till is owned by the University and they never know when they will be evicted from their residence. Fourth, food security, food sovereignty, and the features of the right to adequate food are all hard to fulfill since the Philippine government has yet to accept and adopt a Structural approach in addressing hunger problems and poverty at their roots.

The task of addressing hunger is too overwhelming for the barangays if not for NGOs and people's organizations sharing their resources. The Local Government Code of 1991 legalizes this collaboration between the LGU and NGOs. In the case of this paper, two people's organizations had been especially helpful to Barangay UP Campus during the pandemic. These were Youth for Nationalism and Democracy (YND) and Pagkakaisa ng Kababaihan para sa Kalayaan (Kaisa-Ka) Youth-Philippines. Both consider themselves as political youth and women centers that recognize the immediate, short-term, and long-term needs of the community.

YND community organizers pushed for the formation of the UP-Transport Group (TG) Alliance to collectively present their needs for food and financial aid to government offices, particularly the Office of the Vice President and other philanthropic and humanitarian groups. To advance their political and economic rights, the UP TG and Samahan ng mga Tsuper at Operator Tutol sa Phase-Out (STOP-WPL) wrote letters to the Quezon City LGU and succeeded in securing a meeting with Mayor Joy Belmonte to discuss their situation and needs. They also wrote letters to the Land Transportation, Franchising and Regulatory Board (LTFRB) and the UP Administration to secure QR codes and a new route in the campus. This initiative became successful and even the women in Pook Aguinaldo were provided with food aid, although very limited as they were unorganized.

As a result, Kaisa Ka Youth initiated a general assembly of the women of Pook Aguinaldo to form a local women's organization, which came to be called Lakas ng Nagkakaisang Kababaihan sa Barangay UP Campus (Lakas, Inc.).

Before the holding of the general assembly, preparatory work had already been laid out for the formation of Lakas, Inc. The idea of being organized and the women's initiative to provide food not just for their respective families but also for the whole community had come up during informal chit chats or *kumustahan* with each other. Nanays A and S had been neighbors for decades along with the other eventual members of Lakas, Inc. Even before the pandemic, every household was already growing vegetables in plastic containers as an attempt to survive to augment their food supply. However, during the pandemic, the homegrown vegetables became the main source of sustenance as many of the breadwinners, who were the husbands of several Lakas members, were affected by the stoppage of jeepney operations as the pandemic wore on. The day came when these informal conversations among the women in the community turned into planning about how to make the household-level backyard gardening much more sustainable and long-term for the whole Pook. Since the female community organizer (CO) of YND and Kaisa Ka Youth was their neighbor and since they had been in contact with Kaisa Ka Youth from the time the latter had conducted a workshop on September 23, 2019, entitled "Masin-zineang Usapan" that tackled young women's take on current issues, Kaisa Ka Youth had been extending aid to the women in Pook Aguinaldo.

A general assembly (GA) was then held in September 2020, giving birth to "Lakas, Inc. sa Barangay UP Campus" or Lakas, Inc. During the GA, the members identified the top problems in the community, among which were: 1) lack of food; 2) difficulty of children and parents to cope with the demands of blended learning; and 3) joblessness. Among the solutions they identified to address these problems were: 1) urban farming and application to the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE)'s Tulong Panghanapbuhay sa Ating Disadvantaged/Displaced Workers (TUPAD) program; 2) tutorials, community-based internet connectivity plan; and 3) livelihood projects.

As of this paper's writing, Lakas had 37 members and they had elected their first set of officers – President, Vice-President, Secretary, Treasurer, two (2) Press Relations Officers (PROs), and an Auditor. Aware of the protocols and guidelines of the COVID-19 Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) and Barangay UP Campus, Lakas initially held rotational meetings in a member's house and maximized Facebook Messenger as their main communication platform. Eventually, they felt freer to use the Volunteer Barangay Public Safety Office (VBPSO) post or office hut, since the protocols began to loosen up and because several Lakas women were serving in the VBPSO, so the hut was practically theirs.

Lakas Women's Capacity Building and Resource Generation Experience

Lakas women were clear with their goal to set up a community garden which would supply their daily food and help augment the family income during the pandemic. With the help of the community organizer, Ms. Precy Dagooc, Nanays S and A enrolled in the Training on Vegetable Seed Production conducted by the Department of Agriculture (DA) through the Agricultural Training Institute (ATI) and the Bureau of Plant Industry (BPI) on September 28-30, 2020. The activity was about seed production, handling, quality control, distribution, and plant propagation. After the successful training, and with the help of the community organizer, the Lakas women received their first net, shovel, rake, and other gardening start-up tools. Fortunately, a rice farmer volunteered to provide a portion of the land he was tilling for the women to establish a full-fledged urban farm. As of February 2022, Lakas had four rice paddies with a three-year contract with the DA and the DA-ATI. Eventually, male workers were encouraged to do the same and so Lakas at Ugnayan ng mga Manggagawa sa Pook Aguinaldo was established—with both men and women planting vegetables. Below are photos of Lakas women during their first harvest of lettuce.

Photos from left to right: A pail of freshly harvested lettuce; Lakas women while harvesting; a tarpaulin that marks the *gulayan* in the area

Lakas, Inc.'s first harvest happened in February 2021. They had red sili, eggplant, tomatoes, green sili, alugbati, pechay, Chinese kangkong, okra, and lettuce. They had three rounds of harvest until the rainy season came in September 2021. Nanays A and S said that 10% of their harvest went to the households and families in their Pook while 90% was sold to generate income. Their harvest was also sold to UP professors who are residing in Hardin ng Rosas. Out of the households that benefitted from 10% of the harvest, 7% paid while 3% got the vegetables for free. This was because Lakas, Inc. had an understanding with the community that: (a) those who can pay should share and (b) households should only get what is enough for them so that there will be left for those who are in dire need. The objective was to ensure that no household would be left behind. Nanays A and S also shared that their income out of the gulayan was used to pay for the Community Learning Hub's utility bills. When asked how much they produced per harvest, they said that they were able to fill a large pail with red sili (chili), had one and a half sacks of pechay, had 40 kilos of okra, and for the rest of the vegetables, they lost count. They were even able to contribute to the community pantry.

Lakas Inc. was also able to reach the women of a nearby Pook, Pook Area-17, who were organized under the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). Lakas and Kaisa Ka Youth helped form the KAISA KA Area-17 chapter and tapped the DA-ATI to help establish their urban farming project. Later on, the Barangay UP Campus Chairperson, Ms. Zenaida Lectura, visited their garden and helped provide, through the help of the "Joy of Urban Farming Office," seedlings and potting soil mix. During that time, Chairperson Lectura, together with a DSWD representative and a DA-ATI Agriculturist, discussed the possibility of entering into a formal institutional partnership and to sign a Memorandum of Understanding.

During the height of the community pantry initiative, Lakas Inc. and Kaisa Ka Area 17 also set up and sustained community pantries in their respective Pooks. The community pantries operated from May to July 2021 and were able to provide food, groceries, and vegetables from their *gulayan* to not less than 1,000 households. The DA-ATI, along with the Jessie Robredo Foundation, also added tons of vegetables to the pantries set up by Lakas, Inc.

By June 2021, both organizations, Lakas Inc. and Lakas at Ugnayan ng mga Manggagawa sa Pook Aguinaldo, launched the formal partnership with the DA-ATI under the Plant, Plant, Plant Program. Kaisa Ka Youth also helped the organizations process and submit the documents required to apply for the DOLE registration. DOLE accreditation would help them directly access (without endorsement of the District Congressman) the Department's TUPAD and Integrated Livelihood Program (DILP) programs. Their application for TUPAD (Tulong Panghahanapbuhay sa Ating Disadvantaged/Displaced Workers) was endorsed by DOLE Quezon City Field Office. The women had successfully lodged their application in DOLE National Office in Intramuros and they were told to monitor the status of their application by giving them the office's telephone number. Lakas women persistently followed up on their application. However, they were told that DOLE National Office's TUPAD did not have adequate funds anymore and that the funds were lodged under the Congressmen. The women were told to try asking for help from Congressmen instead. Consequently, Lakas women went to the office of Congressman Jesus "Bong" Suntay of District 4 Quezon City. After several tries, the women were told that their application for TUPAD could no longer be accommodated since Congressman Suntay's funds were already allocated for other applicants. However, Lakas women learned from Cong. Suntay's Purok Coordinator that the real reason behind why their

request did not make it to Cong. Suntay's beneficiaries was that the Congressman's priority was the "people under his wings". The Community Organizer said,

> "*Tapos sumunod naman pumunta kami sa Purok Coordinator ni Cong. Suntay. Ang sabi niya uunahin daw muna niya ang mga tao ni Cong. Ganun din ang sinabi ng isa sa mga Secretary ni Cong. Suntay nung pumunta kami sa opisina nila. Bumalik kami sa DOLE sabi nila tiyempo po kasi kayo na mayroong fiasco sa District 3 TUPAD Distribution may balita noon na ginagamit ng mga politicians ang TUPAD for corruption, may mga hindi totoong benepisyaryo at may mga binibigyan na may mga trabaho naman.*" (Then we went to Cong. Suntay's Purok Coordinator. H/she said that the people under Cong. Suntay will be prioritized. The same was relayed by one of Cong. Suntay's secretaries. We went back to DOLE and they said that it was a bad timing for our application because there was a fiasco in the TUPAD distribution in District 3 (Quezon City) - there were people benefitting from the program but were supposedly not qualified since they had jobs.)

Despite their efforts to comply with the requirements, Lakas women experienced being disadvantaged and disenfranchised.

In October 2021, five Lakas members started training with the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) on Organic Agriculture Vegetable Production (OAVP). The on-farm training ran for a total of 15 days, with a teacher from TESDA conducting the training sessions right in the Lakas farm or *gulayan* thrice a week until November 2021.

Lakas women's Experience as Affirmation of Feminist Social Work

Women accounted for the 44% of the employment losses in the country during the second quarter of 2020 (Ibañez, 2021, para. 10, lines 1-3). Likewise, during the Enhanced Community Quarantine which took place during the second quarter of 2020, a few of the Lakas women lost their service jobs. This resulted in their greater involvement in caring for their households, which was exactly how Ibañez (2021) described the phenomenon, "the labor force exits are massive among women which is the result of women's greater involvement in caring for their household members which is also known as care burden" (para. 13, lines 1-3). For the Lakas women, their care burden was worsened by hunger, lack of income, their children's difficulty in coping with remote learning, and the unpredictability of life brought about by the constantly changing COVID-related protocols issued by the government.

The formation of Lakas, Inc. and the creation of the community *gulayan* were results of the women's initiative to address hunger experienced within their respective families. They were aware that their husbands who had lost their source of income due to the pandemic needed to be supported, and they knew that they needed to act for their families to survive through the health crisis.

Not only did the women in Pook Aguinaldo realize their role in securing income and food for their families' survival, but they also understood that what their own families were experiencing during the pandemic was a reality being experienced in the community up to the national levels. Thus, their seeking the assistance of Kaisa Ka Youth to formalize and materialize

their plans as well as to organize themselves as a people's organization was a process undertaken by the women of Lakas to convert women's private troubles into public issues through feminist social action. This also tells us that the women of Lakas are trying to break the traditional social and cultural gender norms. In other words, through the conscientization work and support provided by their organizer, Kaisa Ka Youth, Lakas women learned that their work and responsibilities are not limited to the home and that they can offer long-term solutions to shared problems in their community.

The experiences of Lakas, Inc. can be cross analyzed through the principles of Feminist Social Work as well as the Empowerment Theory. As mentioned in the Theoretical Frameworks section of this paper, recognizing the diversity of women and valuing women's strengths are two feminist Social Work principles (Dominelli, 2002, p. 162-163). Lakas women know that the women in Pook Aguinaldo, and even within their organization of 37 members, vary in terms of what each can contribute. During the interview with Nanays S and A, they shared that the gulayan was open to everyone in the Pook. But in order for the gulayan to be available and accessible to everyone, those mothers who have the capacity to pay are encouraged to do so, while those mothers who cannot pay still get their share, though only enough for their family's meal. Further, Lakas women value each other's strengths by identifying each member's interests, willingness, and openness to take on different roles in the organization, alongside their reproductive and productive roles. As of this writing, the youngest member is a 27-year-old mother while the oldest is 59 years old. They belong to different family life stages, thus, some of them are nurturing small children, while others are already in the "empty nest" stage with more time to participate and volunteer in community activities. Some women are willing and confident to be directly trained by service providers and partners. Others prefer informal peer-to-peer training and coaching. Some are now experts in seed production while others volunteer as tutors at the Community Learning Hub. Some Lakas women are now skilled in terms of fund-raising and partnership development. All these were made possible since the members collectively studied their situation and took note of what each woman could offer, complementing each other.

Lakas women, as well as their community organizer, uphold two more feminist Social Work principles, namely: (a) "considering women as active agents capable of making decisions for themselves in all aspects of their lives" (Dominelli, 2002, pp. 162-163) and (b) "democratized structures and processes" (Hyde, 2013, para.13, line 49). The experience of Lakas Inc. in its assertiveness and in its collaboration with DA-ATI, TESDA, the University of the Philippines-Diliman, the Jesse Robredo Foundation, Barangay UP Campus, and some fellow POs such as STOP-WPL and Lakas at Ugnay ng Manggagawa sa Pook Aguinaldo is a fitting example of how networking and relationship building work as central components in feminist Social Work practice. Lakas women not only paid attention to processes but also to the product of their efforts in networking and relationship building. In addition, after their CO, Ms. Precy Dagooc, facilitated the participation of two Lakas officers in the training conducted by DA-ATI, Lakas, Inc. has since become independent in making decisions for itself as an organization. They are equipped in decision-making and knowledgeable on what to do, assessing what resources are available or not, and networking with stakeholders with whom they can partner, seek support from, and serve. When the women saw that their *gulayan* harvests were plentiful, they also recognized that they needed to share the bounty in the form of a community pantry.

With the continued guidance of their community organizer, Lakas, Inc. expressed that

they want to sustain their *gulayan*, which is why they secured a permit from the UP Office of the Vice Chancellor for Community Affairs as well as their three-year grant as a beneficiary of the Plant! Plant! Plant! Program of the Department of Agriculture (DA). These are the steps that they took to achieve their aim—a sustainable urban garden. To reiterate, sustainability is one of the four key features of the right to adequate food and one characteristic of "food security." Lakas women became educated on why the pandemic had worsened their community's food insecurity. They came to the realization that they needed to continue their *gulayan* even after the pandemic, and that this would only happen if they continued to nurture their PO and its initiatives. Thus, they are looking for more sustainable solutions, rather than relying on stop-gap measures. Nanays A and S shared that their PO has ongoing talks on putting up a store that sells rice, cooking oil and eggs, part of their organization's sustainable development activity. This is how the Feminist Social Work principle of "looking for collective solutions to individual problems" (Dominelli, 2002, p. 163, para.1, line 1), is perfectly applied.

Lakas women's Experience Affirms Empowerment Theory

The women of Lakas have grown in developing critical awareness of their household and community's situations beginning from the onset of the pandemic, which perfectly demonstrates the Empowerment Theory. The women realized that they needed a set of skills that would complement their goal of setting up an urban garden to address food insecurity. Then gradually, this process helped them realize that to have a greater degree of control over their individual lives, a personal and social change must take place. This was perfectly shown when the Lakas women chose to enroll in the trainings available at DA-ATI and TESDA. As Nanays A and S shared, *"Kami lang po yata ang galing sa mahirap doon o hindi nakapagtapos. Yung mga kasama namin, may sinasabi (sa buhay). Pero o 'di ba, nakagraduate kami mula sa training.* (It seems that we were the only ones who were poor and had not completed a college degree. Our co-participants seemed to be professionals. But see, we graduated from the training.)" The experience of the Lakas women shows that empowerment involves both an individual and a collective process.

Table 1 summarizes how the PO affirms Empowerment:

Table 1: The Experience of Lakas vis-a-vis the Empowerment Principles According to Rose, S.M., 1990

Empowerment/Advocacy Principles (Rose, S. M., 1990)	Definition of Each Principle (Rose, S.M., 1990)	Experience of Lakas, Inc.
Contextualization	Refers to acknowledging the social being of the client system and being open to the idea that "clients know themselves better than we do"	It was narrated above that when the women realized that coming together to address their household and communal concerns had to be formalized, they took the initiative of asking for help from political organizations like Kaisa Ka Youth, Youth for National Democracy and even UP students. The women knew that their issues on hunger and around their children's modular education during the COVID-19 pandemic were issues that they could not fight alone and that they had to be guided by helping

		professionals i.e., community organizers, community-based social worker to ensure that their efforts are well-directed. On the other hand, when the CO was asked, she emphasized that the women were the ones who thought of the idea of the communal vegetable garden, Community Learning Hub, helping other communities through putting up a community pantry, applying for DOLE TUPAD and other initiatives. The CO added that her only input was to advise the women about the application processes in the government institutions and other more technical tasks. The CO shared that she is amazed of the women's persistence and self-efficacy. The women are well aware of their inner strengths, weaknesses, as well as the opportunities and threats external to them.
Empowerment	Refers to externalization and critical questioning about contextual experience to facilitate the client system's social development and produce their desired outcomes.	It was narrated above especially by Nanay S that the communal vegetable garden is their best project yet. The women saw the importance of having an available and accessible source of food and a functional learning hub that ensures that their children are not left behind in terms of education during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nonetheless, the women realized that the pandemic is far from being completely over. Hence, they desire for their organization to continue existing and flourishing because they know that there will be other emerging problems in both the household and community levels which can possibly be addressed more accurately if they continue to work together as a formal and recognized people's organization.

Collectivity	Refers to bringing people together to "mutually externalize and reflect upon previous or present feeling", the origin of these feelings, and their relation to existing social structures such as family and schooling; also refers to collective consciousness raising which means people can achieve individual and social transformation	Lakas women were clear about the reason why they formed Lakas ng Nagkakaisang Kababaihan. This is because they carried the responsibility of taking care of their families and community. When their husbands lost their jobs, they felt and realized that they needed to step in and step up. Nanays S and A said that they needed to "rescue" their families from being hungry, first and foremost. Up to now, Lakas women are participating in educational discussions e.g. samaaralan that are being conducted by their partner organizations such as Ateneo's Legal Aid Mission, Youth for National Democracy, AlterPol (Alternative Politics), and Kaisa Ka Youth because according to them, through attending these venues, they realize more and more that their individual problems are due to much more deeper root causes such as inequalities brought by corruption, classism, neoliberalism, gender discrimination and a lot more. Lakas women, up to date, know that their garden and learning hub are not enough measures of their success as an organization. Their organization shall continue to flourish if collective consciousness raising becomes a natural part of their organizational life and when it becomes their automatic response to every problem that they face.

Lakas Women Meet the Digital Divide Head On

Aside from the issue on food, a big chunk of Pook Aguinaldo's population, the children and youth together with their parents, have also been greatly challenged by the consequences of online and remote learning which created the digital divide at the local level.

When Lakas members identified the top three priority issues of Pook Aguinaldo, following food insecurity on the list were the problems that came along with their children's remote learning. Further, as mothers, the Lakas women resonated with all the other parents who fill in worksheets on their child's behalf. Indeed, the Lakas mothers' sentiments on this matter reflected both local and global news about Filipino students lagging behind, as discussed in the Related Literature and Studies above. In response, the Lakas women made a move to fulfill their children's right to education by creating the Community Learning Hub.

Lakas Women and Their Transition from Internet Sharing to Community Learning Hubs

During the general assembly, one of the main issues identified was sustaining their children's remote learning. As such, the Lakas leaders sought the advice of a staff member at the UP-Information Technology Development Center (UP ITDC) who was a resident of Hardin ng Bougainvillea, an area also within Pook Aguinaldo. The UP ITDC staff member was able to map out a connectivity plan and help identify the needs and costs for the community to establish its

own public Wi-Fi. However, the women-leaders backed out from the idea of spending money for internet connectivity since many already had cellphones and tablets which were provided by the Department of Education and a cheaper Wi-Fi connection was available, costing only P7.00 per hour. Further, since many of the women were finding it difficult to teach their children at home while struggling to make ends meet, they decided to gather their children in one place and teach them simultaneously once a week.

Kaisa Ka Youth and Lakas, Inc. applied to be a beneficiary of the Office of the Vice President (OVP) Community Learning Hub Program. Their application was approved in April 2021 but they had to wait for the actual commencement of their services because there was a surge in COVID cases at that time. Eventually, Lakas' 17 volunteer tutors were trained for one month under the auspices of the OVP Community Learning Hub Bayanihan E-Skwela team.

On December 11, 2021, the Aguinaldo Community Learning Hub (CLH) was formally launched, and classes began two days after. The CLH was the result of the concerted efforts among volunteers from Lakas, Inc., Kaisa Ka Youth, YND, Barangay UP Campus under the leadership of Barangay Chairperson Zenaida Lectura, VBPSO, and JCI Capitol Quezon City Chapter.

The Aguinaldo CLH is located in the VBPSO office, which is a hut standing along the main street when entering the Hardin ng Rosas along C.P. Garcia. JCI Capitol provided the resources such as the Smart TV, learners' kits, a thermal scanner, an alcohol dispenser, and a mini library including reference materials. They also raised funds and shouldered the repair cost of the learning hub (at P55,000.00). The Office of the Vice President provided the Aguinaldo CLH with 10 personal computers, five tablets, one android phone, two pocket Wi-Fi devices, one voice amplifier, one Globe at Home WiFi device, and school supplies good for two months.

The CLH program would not be a success without the volunteer tutors, mostly mothers, who run the daily operations of the CLH. However, their biggest concern at the time of this writing was securing approval from the UP Administration on their request to install floor tiles for the CLH. They said that the equipment wiring, cables, and plugs were in danger of being damaged by rats and other factors if the CLH remained without concrete flooring. The Lakas women feared that their request might be denied because of the existing issue on land ownership and tenure. Nonetheless, they continued their efforts on networking and alliance building with Barangay UP Campus, JCI Capitol, Kaisa Ka Youth, and Youth for National Democracy, and were prepared to engage in social action in case UP did not heed their request.

The CLH caters to 30 out of a total of 82 Grade 1 to 6 pupils residing in Pook Aguinaldo, as of February 2022.

Photo: Pook Aguinaldo Community Learning Hub

Understanding Lakas Women Using Structural Social Work

The problems of the Lakas women surrounding education and food are best understood by studying the social structures that produce and maintain inequality and personal hardships. The Lakas women are in constant learning (through samaaralan, a local term for collective learning) with Kaisa Ka Youth, Alternative Politics Movement, and Youth for National Democracy (YND). These are political organizations that aim to address social problems and human rights violations by unsubscribing to neoliberalism and by looking for pro-poor and pro-people solutions through community organizing and collective action. Thus, the Lakas women were made aware that food insecurity at home and the direct consequences of the digital divide on their children were worsened by COVID-19 which, in turn, "has pulled back the curtain to reveal the power of brutal neoliberalism – and its global financial markets – in all of its cruelty" (Giroux, 2020, para. 36). As Giroux mentioned in his article, "The current pandemic is more than a medical crisis, it is a political and ideological crisis." He said that we were suffering more in this pandemic because neoliberal governments denied the significance of public health and public good while cutting the budgets of the institutions that were supposed to provide the services for free. Millions of Filipino workers easily lost jobs due to retrenchment because neoliberalism introduced labor that was cheap with no respect for the people's right to job security. Family breadwinners in Pook Aguinaldo, who mostly belonged to the service sector, could not put food on the table not only because they had lost their jobs but because our country was suffering from the effects of neoliberalism—among which are de-industrialization, privatization, job outsourcing, and on the like, which "have deprived many working people of their security and dignity, making the aggrieved vulnerable to demagoguery" (Giroux, 2020, para. 4). Long before the pandemic, the Philippines had been predominantly influenced by a neoliberal ideology whose prevailing message is that those who are motivated to work have high chances to be employed, in other words, unemployment and poverty are viewed as individual responsibility. This also affirms Lundy's (2011) statement, "…government and public discussions more and more are based on the ideology of blaming the victims for their poverty and misfortune" (para. 3, lines 4-7).

The way we attribute our problems to individual fault because the neoliberal ideology is deep-seated in us. We therefore lose our belief in social solidarities to address our shared issues which we believe are only personal inadequacies. Person-blaming as part of neoliberal ideology is also expressed in how the Philippine government approached the virus crisis. For example, whenever the COVID cases were on a surge, protocols become stricter and quarantine measures were tightened because, allegedly, people were not taking social distancing seriously, were not practicing proper hand washing, and were violating the "no more than 10 people in one place" rule—in other words, because Filipinos are "pasaway" (hardheaded). With this notion of individualism during the pandemic, the poor Filipino family that went hungry after receiving ayuda for only three times in 20 months of lockdown was left on its own. In addition, since neoliberalism had ingrained a competitive attitude in us, our government pushed for remote education even though many Filipino families are financially incapable of acquiring devices and learning resources, as well as internet connection, to support their children through this "new normal" way of learning imposed by the DepEd. On top of this, there is a lack of mitigating and support services and a lack of proper assessment and contingency planning to cushion the impact of remote education. More gadgets are needed especially in urban poor families and communities. Parents feel that they are unprepared for the new responsibility and not as capable and competent of assisting their children answer their modules, unlike. their children's

schoolteachers. Parents were challenged by their new pandemic-induced role of supervising their children's remote education. As Structural Social Work suggests, the problems being addressed by the Lakas women, were not just the lack of food on the table and the lack of gadgets and internet access to support their children's remote education, but were problems deeply rooted by neoliberalism which limit human functioning and exacerbate human suffering.

To reiterate what has been presented in the Theoretical Framework section, Structural Social Work sees that a person's life circumstances and problems are connected to his/her economic and social standing in society and that social work intervention at both the level of the individual and social structures is necessary (Lundy, 2011, p. 89-90, para. 4, lines 4-6). A social worker who uses Structural Social Work in response to a client's needs considers not only the material and social conditions of the client but also the social relationships and institutional formations that may be serving as barriers to meeting the client's needs (Lundy, 2011, p. 90, para. 2, lines 1-5). Lakas, Inc. did not have a professional community-based Social Worker to guide them but they have an experienced Community Organizer, Ms. Precy Dagooc, who took the Social Work roles of being an educator, enabler, advocate, intercessor and mediator, which helped Lakas women understand that there are societal structures that impede the improvement of their wellbeing and that in order for them to address their problems, they have to do it collectively. As presented above, the lack of land tenure and ownership posed a big threat to the sustainability of Lakas, Inc.'s community garden and learning hub. As long-time tenants of UP-owned property, the Lakas members' relationship with the University must be studied, their rights and entitlements must be identified, and a dialogue, between and among all stakeholders (i.e., tenants, Barangay, LGU, and UP) on their rights as well as their responsibilities, must take place. In addition, any social worker who would be working with Lakas, Inc., Pook Aguinaldo, and other barangays with the same relationship with UP, shall still be faced with the longstanding question, "Is the land Quezon City-owned or University-owned? Whose rights should be protected? Upon whom will responsibility fall?"

The story of Lakas gives us this takeaway that any social worker who might respond to the case of the Lakas women and Pook Aguinaldo using Structural Social Work approach should give emphasis on advocacy and social change as well as take on two general rules as identified by Moreau (1970):

1. To explore the socio-political and economic context of individual difficulties and to help collective personal troubles; and
2. To enter into a helping process that facilitates critical thinking, consciousness-raising, and empowerment (Lundy, 2011, p. 89, para. 1, lines 7-10).

In order to stay true to analyzing and addressing problems using a transformative (also known as radical change) framework, social workers should always aim for changing the social structures especially when these restrain and curtail them and/or their clients. For instance, social workers must enjoin POs like Lakas, Inc. to demand more state-funded welfare programs and services. We will be successfully practicing Structural Social Work if we advocate for a more inclusive, rights-based version of government programs such as DOLE's TUPAD and the DA-ATI for POs like Lakas, Inc.

Lakas, as an organization, has decided to further strengthen its ranks and sustain its community-led efforts. It is with hope and a commitment that they would continue to foster

critical thinking, consciousness raising, and empowerment in their all-women PO.

Lakas, Inc. Affirms Community Organizing

The CO experience of Lakas can be best viewed and analyzed using the spiral model of community action by Margie Bruun-Meyer as cited in Lundy, 2011, p. 265.

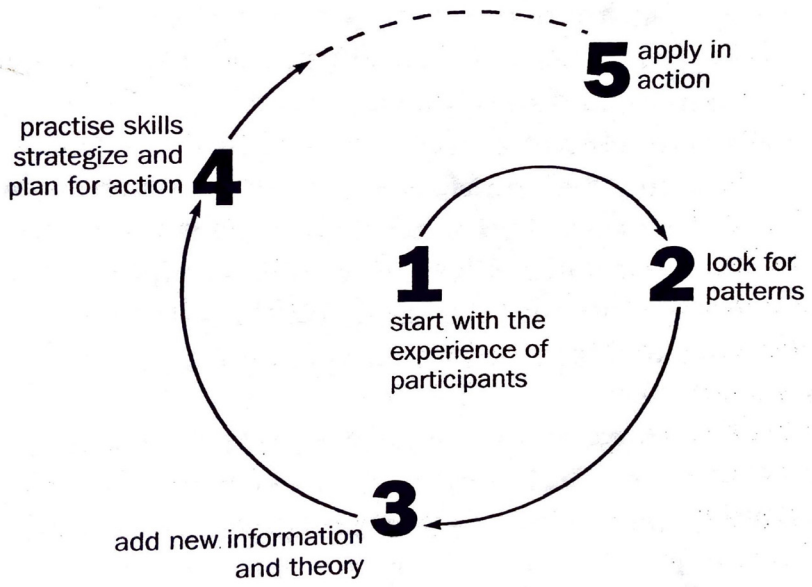

Figure 2: The Spiral Model of Community Action by Margie Bruun-Meyer/
(Art Work from Educating for a Change by Rick Arnold, Bev Burke, Carl James, D'Arcy Martin, and Barb Thomas (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1991). Cited in Lundy, 2011, p. 265)

This is an action and reflection model that guides the process of social action, a Community Organizing model. What the Lakas women did is a collective struggle toward social change. Below is a matrix that proves that the story of Lakas, Inc.'s formation is a story of community action:

Table 2: Making Sense Out of the Story of Lakas Using the Spiral Model of Community Action

Action-Reflection Steps	Lakas, Inc.'s Experience: A Summary
1. Start with the experience of participants	Lakas's organizing story began when the women felt the effect of their husbands' job loss and the challenges around their children's modular education during COVID 19-pandemic. Women realized that they had to 'come to their family's rescue'. They realized that they needed to find ways of bringing food into their respective households if COVID-19 hindered their husbands from doing the same. In addition, as an implicit gender role expectation on them as mothers, Lakas women were having difficulty with helping their schoolchildren on their modules. They realized that if they could not be effective teachers to their children, in one-on-one mode, why not gather together and teach their children collectively in a community learning hub, wherein they could also invite volunteer teachers from outside of Pook Aguinaldo?

2. Look for patterns	Lakas women saw that the problems being experienced by one mother/ wife is also what is being experienced by another mother/wife. Lakas realized that their problems on hunger and education cannot be resolved individually but collectively. Together, they attended educational sessions which helped improve their confidence, self-esteem, letter writing skills, facilitation and teaching skills, understanding on social issues, networking and advocacy. Nanays S and A, who attended the training of DA-ATI, realized that more people's organizations are out there, working collectively to address household and community issues. They used this knowledge to instill in their fellow Lakas women that they must form and sustain their own PO, which may continue on serving as their means and strategy in battling individual, familial and communal problems.
3. Add new information and theory	Lakas women, through attending educational sessions that were being conducted by their partner sociopolitical organizations, are continuously realizing that the 'personal is political', that individuals are not to be blamed solely for his/her own problems but that the problems are systemic. Lakas women also realized that women have the capacity to lead. They also realized that empowerment starts within them and that external change agents such community organizers serve as guides, but empowerment does not spring from people (external to their community) who help them.
4. Practice skills, strategize and plan for action	Lakas women saw that collective action produced the answer to their hunger which is the gulayan. Eventually, they also acted together to answer their problem on their children's education which resulted to the Community Learning Hub. They tried to enrich their CLH by applying to be a partner-beneficiary of the Office of Vice President Leni Robredo. Again collectively, they tried to supplement their gulayan by applying for DOLE-TUPAD. Despite this not materializing, Lakas embraces the importance of collective action in every endeavor. Lakas knows that collective action takes skills, will and perseverance. To date, they are looking for other activities that will promote their families' and community's wellbeing.
5. Apply in action	The women consistently and continuously applied all their learnings from their actual actions and experiences, from their sessions with their community organizer and from their educational sessions e.g., *samaaralan* in the development, management and sustenance of their organization.

Furthermore, the story of Lakas went through the phases of Community Organizing - (i) social preparation which includes identification of problems and making sense of the results of social investigation, (ii) leadership development and capacity building which includes identification of core members who will first be trained on certain skills and who will assume leadership and the responsibility of ensuring that the organization is slowly becoming a collective with a clear purpose, (iii) organizational development and management which includes coming up with organizational mechanisms, by-laws and officers and (iv) consolidation and expansion which includes resource mobilization, networking and advocacy. As narrated in detail above, although not perfectly, Lakas indeed underwent all the aforementioned CO steps.

A Summative Proof that Lakas Brings Life to the Combination of Feminist Social Work, Empowerment Theory, Structural Social Work and Community Organizing

Below is an illustration of the authors' claim that Lakas affirms the combination and collaboration of concepts and processes under Feminist Social Work, Empowerment Theory,

Structural Social Work and Community Organizing:

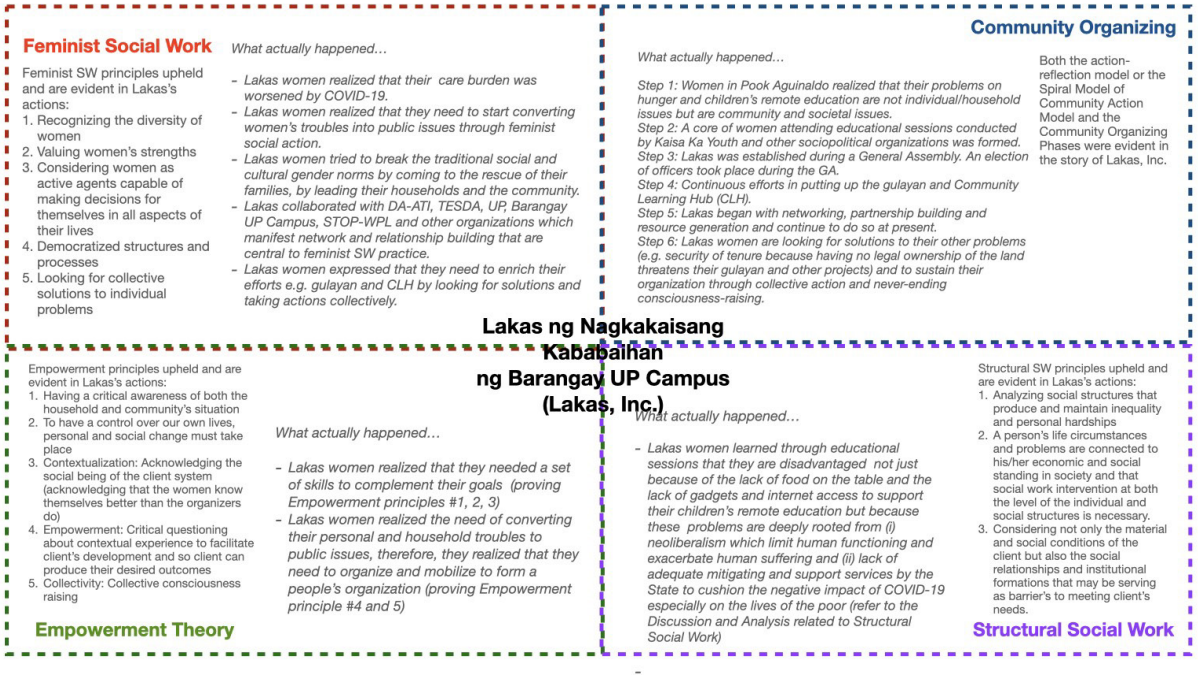

Figure 3. The Experience of Lakas, Inc. and its Affirmation of the Collaboration of Feminist Social Work, Empowerment Theory, Structural Social Work and Community Organizing

Conclusion

The story of Lakas shows that, during the world's worst crisis (to date), which is the COVID-19 pandemic, Filipinos have the willingness and capacity to go back to damayan (helping as a product of mutual sympathy and concern) and foster bayanihan (a spirit of civic unity and cooperation among Filipinos) because we realize that our problems are not personal but political. Second, Lakas's story proves that an individual who and whose family greatly suffers during a crisis can muster the initiative to look for ways to save herself and her family. This is proven by the principles and concepts of Feminist and Structural Social Work and Empowerment Theory and Community Organizing. Third, Lakas reminds us that Community Organizing is alive and is resorted to when people become aware that their concern is mutually felt and shared. Fourth, a community whose members study and analyze their problems together is capable of responding to their shared issues by tapping their potentials and utilizing their own resources. Again, this is proven by the principles and concepts of Feminist and Structural Social Work. Fifth, a future global crisis like COVID-19 could once again have disastrous social, economic, and political consequences beyond that of a public health calamity. With all these conclusions, a transformative approach (as seen from the discussions on how Lakas affirms the four theoretical perspectives) would best inform social work practice where practitioners recognize the importance of influencing people in viewing problems as not rooted from personal inadequacies but from social structures that exploit and dehumanize people. In so doing, we can in turn address these problems using the principles of Social Work such as social justice, social change, empowerment, and equality.

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Re-examining the Phenomenon of Homelessness During the COVID-19 Pandemic in the National Capital Region

Ana Teresa L. Prondosa

Abstract

The case study aims to take a closer look about homeless individuals in the cities of Quezon and Manila while the country is facing the COVID-19 pandemic. It re-examines the phenomena of homelessness in the middle of a pandemic, looking at the experience of Joel and Rosamay (not their real names). The author employed a qualitative research design which began with a single case study of a homeless family in Quezon City. After writing the case, the author conducted a focus group discussion (FGD) with other homeless individuals staying in Sto. Niño Parish in Tondo, Manila to corroborate the data from the case study. The author also participated in a stakeholder consultation conducted by the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) and Kariton Coalition, a group of individuals from various churches, civil society, and faith-based organizations campaigning for the rights of Homeless Street Families and Individuals (HSFIs). The author used the lens of structural social work and the perspective of neoliberalism in re-examining homelessness.

The author emphasizes that homeless individuals and families are among the marginalized sectors that were made vulnerable by the COVID-19 pandemic coupled by the militarized response of the Duterte administration and negligence to a health and social issue. The structural social worker practitioners are reminded to practice the following: 1) connecting people to needed resources, 2) changing social structures, where feasible, 3) helping service users negotiate problematic situations and 4) deconstructing sociopolitical discourse to reveal the relationship with individual struggles (Payne, 2005). Social workers are reminded to be critical of the social and political structures that pose as barriers to their respective clients, revealing struggles of their clients and influencing changes not only directed to the individual client but to the environmental structures that deters the potential of the client to change and improve their situation.

Families in street situations are among the most vulnerable sectors at present. They have a right to live in the city. It was not their choice to stay on the streets. It became their only option for survival given a political system that refuses to provide mechanisms and support for them to change their situations. It is incumbent, especially upon the social workers in Local Government Units (LGUs), to work with families in street situations in formulating programs and services that will start from a recognition of their dignity and their human rights as individuals and families.

Keywords: Homeless Street Families and Individuals, COVID-19 pandemic, structural social work, neoliberalism

Introduction

Of the estimated 106 million population of the Philippines, at least 4.5 million are homeless individuals, three million of whom are in Metro Manila (Fealtman, 2020). This data springs from the understanding that homelessness is primarily an urban phenomenon, considering the fact that land is more or less readily available in rural areas.

The Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) conducted a survey of street dwellers in 2010. The DSWD survey results showed that there were 1,476 street dwellers in Manila City, including the members of the Badjao community. Visetpricha et al. (2015) argue that this group of people roaming the streets should not be included in the list since they can afford to rent for accommodation. In 2015, the DSWD Director for the National Capital Region estimated that there were 3,500 street-dwelling families in the cities of Manila and Quezon. As of 2018, Quezon City had a homeless population of at least 700 families and individuals living in public spaces such as parks and sidewalks.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought to the fore the plight of homeless Filipinos, especially when quarantine restrictions and lockdowns were put in place to control the spread of the virus. The militarized response of the Duterte administration—headed by the military, a sector whose expertise is neither epidemiology nor other health sciences (Imbong, 2021)—led to lockdowns and created militarized zones of control of cities. Poor residents such as homeless families became targets of punitive practices and expulsive policies (Ortega, 2016) leading to violation of their rights.

By sheer aspiration, having a home is the perpetual dream of homeless families. Yet, the government housing program is far from providing housing facilities for these homeless individuals. Similar to other social services, the government's housing program is dictated by the demands of capital and, in so doing, the process of the national shelter program is trapped within the neoliberal mold. Housing has become a commodity that remains inaccessible to the poor, especially the homeless families.

Philippine Government Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic

In January 2020, the first two cases of COVID-19 positive patients were reported in the Philippines. Both were tourists, one of them died. Local transmission of the disease was reported in February 2020 and then, when the number of cases spiked, the national government announced a lockdown on March 16, 2020, placing the National Capital Region (NCR) under Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ). The national government called for physical distancing and urged residents to stay in their own homes. But where would the Homeless Street Families and Individuals (HSFIs) stay to protect themselves from the virus without violating government policies and protocols? How were the HSFIs treated by the national government in the midst of a pandemic?

The Duterte administration, known for waging the war on drugs, also responded to the pandemic as the war on the unseen enemy, the COVID-19 virus. The lockdown directive meant home quarantine for all, suspension of public transportation, strict regulation of food distribution and of essential health services, and heightened presence of fully-armed uniformed personnel in strategically positioned checkpoints—a militarization of the government's

response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Yusingco, 2020). This militarized response to a health crisis was followed by cases of human rights violations ranging from police attacks against activists and the detention of relief workers, to arrests of individuals who violated the "stay at home" policy of the Duterte administration (Pizarro & Yusingco, 2020). To further legitimize the militarized response, the Duterte administration created the narrative of the pasaway. In the context of lockdowns, the term *pasaway* referred to people violating government-imposed health protocols (i.e., staying inside their homes) who were seen as virus spreaders and became the bane of the government's pandemic response (Hapal, 2021). Things became more repressive when President Duterte said violators of quarantine protocols and lockdown measures would also be shot.

The pandemic response of the Duterte administration was based on the policy of exclusion—marginalizing groups from political, social, and economic processes on the basis of their class. Quarantine violators were not treated equally. A case in point. Dorothy Espejo, a 69-year-old homeless grandmother, who, after allegedly shouting expletives at barangay officials who called to her as she slept on the streets of Manila, was jailed for resistance and disobedience to authority, with possible imprisonment of up to six months and a fine of PhP100,000.00. On the other hand, Sen. Aquilino "Koko" Pimentel III, was confirmed to have been COVID-19 positive and was expected to observe strict protocols on self-quarantine. Yet, the senator breached not only these protocols but the ECQ itself by rushing his pregnant wife to the hospital, thus potentially endangering his wife and his unborn child, as well as all the health workers at the hospital that he came into contact with during that time. The senator's reckless action forced the hospital personnel he came into contact with to self-quarantine. Obviously, this contributed to a reduction in the number of available health workers in a country that was in dire need of nurses, doctors, and other health workers (Imbong, 2020). Espejo was seen as a quarantine violator and pasaway who was eventually charged and imprisoned with the belief that imprisoning her was a way to keep everyone safe; while Sen. Pimentel, who also breached quarantine protocols, called for compassion and was not imprisoned despite violation of the protocols in place.

In the absence of decent housing where they can protect themselves from the dangers of a contagious virus, the homeless can merely secure a night's rest on exposed sidewalks making themselves most vulnerable to the threat itself, negating the very notion of quarantine. This situation of homelessness worsened as demolitions of informal settlements continued despite the declaration of a national health emergency (Imbong, 2020). Local authorities ordered the closure of centers providing shelter and food to street dwellers for not observing physical distancing. Such policies placed the homeless in extremely vulnerable situations.

The Department of Budget and Management (DBM) reported that, as of December 31, 2021, a total of PhP690.26 billion had been released to continually support the COVID-19 response programs of various implementing agencies. The government had obligated a total of PhP637.97 billion (92.4%) and disbursed PhP570.04 billion (89.4%). The Bayanihan to Heal as One Act or RA 11469 was also enacted granting the President additional authority to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. Bayanihan 1 had an allotment of PhP387.93 billion of which PhP369.08 billion was obligated, while Bayanihan 2 had an allotment of PhP214.12 billion of which PhP204.07 was also obligated (DBM, 2021). There was no budget in both Bayanihan 1 and 2 allocated for the homeless families.

Methodology

The author employed a qualitative research design which began with a single case study of a homeless family in Quezon City. After writing the case, the author conducted a focus group discussion (FGD) with other homeless individuals staying in Sto. Niño Parish in Tondo, Manila to corroborate the data from the case study. To deepen the author's understanding of the context of the aggregate date from the case study and the FGD, she participated in a stakeholder consultation conducted by the Commission on Human Rights (CHR) and Kariton Coalition, a group of individuals from various churches, civil society, and faith-based organizations campaigning for the rights of HSFIs. The stakeholder consultation focused on the review of the CHR Joint Memorandum Circular to propose for immediate and long-term programs for the benefit of the HSFIs. The input and discussion from the stakeholder consultation supported the findings from the case study and the FGD.

Framework for Analysis

Understanding homelessness

The CHR, through an August 2021 advisory on the rights of persons experiencing homelessness and destitution during pandemic, defines homeless street dwellers as having a very loose community network, which differentiates them from slum dwellers who live in a tighter network. The same advisory also clarified the rights of persons experiencing homelessness and destitution against the pandemic and served to remind the national government of the increasing vulnerabilities experienced by our HSFIs during the COVID-19 pandemic. It was a call for immediate action to ensure that their concerns were appropriately addressed (CHR, 2021).

The CHR advisory cites Leilani Farha, former Special Rapporteur on the Right to Housing, and her three-dimensional approach in defining homelessness. The first dimension addresses the absence of home in terms of both its physical structure and its social aspects. The second dimension considers homelessness as a form of systemic discrimination and social exclusion, whereby "the homeless" become a social group subject to stigmatization. The third dimension recognizes homeless people as resilient in the struggle for survival and dignity and potential agents of change as rights holders (CHR, 2021).

Furthermore, other studies have also shown that reasons for people living in the streets are far more complex, whether it be due to homeless peoples' own decision or because they are forced due to circumstances present in their lives.

Rights of homeless families violated during the pandemic

The right to food is an inclusive right. It is not simply a right to a minimum ration of calories, proteins, and other specific nutrients. It is a right to all nutritional elements that a person needs to live a healthy and active life, and to the means to access them (OHCHR, 2010). The right to food can also be described as follows: the right to adequate food is realized when every man, woman and child, alone or in community with others, always has physical and economic access to adequate food or means for its procurement (OHCHR, 2010).

According to Joel (not his real name), in the morning, he would look for ways to make ends meet. *"Susubukan ko muna dumiskarte ng makakain ng mag-iina ko. Kung minsan ay naglalako ako ng isda. Dito ko na minsan kinukuha yung pang-ulam namin. Pagdating ng ala-una ay susunduin ko na yung mga anak ko sa eskwela at didiretso kami sa QC Circle para makapang-limos sa mga nagpipicnic."* (I will try my best to make sure that my wife and children are able to eat. There are times when I sell fish; I sometimes get our daily meals from what I sell. By 1:00 p.m. I fetch my children from school, and we stay at the Q.C. Circle where we ask for alms from people having their picnic there) (J. Toledo, personal interview, May 19, 2021). By 7:00 pm, they would return to a jeepney owned by a friend to rest and sleep.

The right to livelihood

The right to an adequate standard of living requires, at a minimum, that everyone shall enjoy the necessary subsistence rights: adequate food and nutrition, clothing, housing, and the necessary conditions of care when required. The essential point is that everyone shall be able, without shame and without unreasonable obstacles, to be a full participant in ordinary, everyday interaction with other people. Thus, people should be able to enjoy their basic needs in conditions of dignity. No one should have to live in conditions whereby the only way to satisfy their needs is by degrading themselves or depriving themselves of their basic freedoms, such as through begging, prostitution, or forced labor (Icelandic Human Rights Center, n.d.).

In 2019, the Quezon City government formed the Task Force Disiplina (TFD) to clear sidewalks of illegal structures and to ensure that no homeless individuals would roam the streets. When the pandemic started in 2020, the TFD was directed to enforce health safety protocols in public spaces, a task that involved confiscating the carts of sidewalk vendors and demolishing the makeshift tents of individuals and families living in the streets. Calling such draconian steps as measures to "rescue" street dwellers amid the pandemic, the TFD forcibly brought the homeless to "temporary shelters" such as the Amoranto Sports Complex and Quezon Memorial Circle.

Lens of Structural Social Work

Structural social work is part of a critical, progressive tradition that has been concerned with the broad socio-economic and political dimensions of society, especially the effects of capitalism, and the impact of these influences in creating unequal relations amongst individuals (Weinberg, 2013). It is focused on examining the interplay between the agency of individuals and structures, particularly the barriers brought about by institutions that limit and discriminate individuals based on class, race, gender, ability, religion, economic means, etc.

Obviously, the hegemonic influence of neoliberalism that has shaped the contours of Philippine society is also evident in how the government deals with the problem of housing for the poor, especially the street dwellers.

Neoliberalism is a perspective that champions the market as the prime regulator of economic activity and seeks to limit the intervention of the State in economic life to a minimum (Bello, 2009). Neoliberalism in the Philippines was introduced in the form of various structural programs imposed by the World Bank in the early 1980s. It advocates for capitalist-led and investment-oriented developments and champions for the extension of market rationalities of

competitiveness into social life and relations while minimizing state and individual choice as a means of guaranteeing human welfare (Ortega, 2016). This perspective resulted in policies and projects that are not only our country's market competitiveness on a global scale, it has also legitimized public-private partnerships and left public services to non-governmental organizations; privatization of public services such as real estate development was encouraged to be placed under the control of the elite (Ortega, 2016). Real-estate development is seen as proof of a city's productive economy that will yield availability of jobs, an increase in revenue/ taxes, and the promotion of tourism while displacing the urban poor and homeless families that are seen as eye sores in the development trajectory of cities.

Even the National Shelter Program (NSP) as the guiding framework of the Philippine Government in addressing the housing needs is market driven. The NSP highlights the Resettlement Program and the Community Mortgage Program (CMP) as being targeted to assist the lowest 30% of households.

The impact assessment of the NSP showed that the households that become beneficiaries of the programs are those who were formerly informal settlers and not part of the lowest 3 income deciles (UP Planades, 2018). Despite questions on the target beneficiaries for the government housing programs, the national housing agencies such as that of the National Housing Authority (NHA) and Socialized Housing Finance Corporation (SHFC) has continued to build housing structures and low-rise buildings and promoted partnerships and alliances with the private sector such as that of private developers. The promotion of mixed-use housing to promote access to livelihood is but a typical actualization of neoliberal planning that is based on the promotion of an economic agenda that enhances the city's competitiveness and attract investment (Recio, 2021) despite failing to reach the families within the lowest 3 income deciles and that of homeless individuals and families.

The current Marcos administration's priority program is the Pambansang Pabahay Pilipino Program (4PH) with an ambitious target of constructing one million housing units within six years. It aims to build 10- to 30-storey housing units in highly urbanized cities and four-storey low-rise buildings in urban and urbanizing areas. This target focuses on the number of housing units which can reduce the housing need which exceeds 6.5 million units (4PH Operations Manual, 2023). The 4PH outlines alliances of the Department of Housing, Settlement and Urban Development (DHSUD) and private developers to produce the target housing units without discussion on subsidizing for the cost of these units to make it affordable to the target population that needs the housing units.

Moreover, structural theory posits that the conditions of the structures benefit those in power for them to maintain their privilege at the expense of a marginalized group. Structural social work theory begins from a conflict, rather than an order perspective (Mullaly, 1997). The theory regards society as composed of groups with conflicting interests who compete for resources, power, and the imposition of their own ideological views of the world. In this perspective, social problems are more the result of "defective rules" which pathologize those who are marginalized (Mullaly, 1997) and the consequence of institutional arrangements which maintain social hierarchies, rather than faulty socialization of individuals.

The process of degrading a person's status from being a renter to being homeless is also expressed by Joel. Sharing the same predicament with homeless individuals, he also experienced

the clearing operations carried out by the TFD before the pandemic.

He and his wife, together with their four children, stayed in a temporary shelter at the Quezon City Memorial Circle. At the time of the case study, his eldest child was 11 years old, while the youngest was two. Previously, they had been renting a small room in a community beside the Central Market along Kalayaan Avenue. *"Maliit lang ang inuupahan namin na kwarto noon. Hindi nga kami pwede tumanggap ng bisita. Nagbabayad kami ng Php 2,500 kada buwan para sa maliit na kwarto na may matarik na hagdan. Minsan na ngang nahulog ang anak ko doon pero ito ang espasyo na pwede naming tirahan."* (Our family was renting a small room. We couldn't even accept visitors. We paid Php 2,500.00 per month for this small room with steep stairs. There was one time one of my children fell from the stairs. But this is the space that we could live in.) (J. Toledo, personal interview, May 19, 2021).

For two years, Joel's family stayed in that small room. He supported them with the little he earned from selling fish, serving as a parking attendant in a nearby establishment, and collecting and selling recyclable scraps. In 2018, Joel became sick and could not work. Unable to pay rent for the month, he and his family were evicted by the lessee. Joel preferred to comply instead of appealing or having a confrontation. So, he and his family left. Joel built a *kariton* or pushcart using discarded pieces of wood and old tarpaulins to provide a roof over their heads.

As observed and stated earlier, the military mindset that steered the government's response to the pandemic expectedly led to punitive actions against perceived violations of health protocols. It was fundamentally an anti-homeless people measure. In 2019, Joel's *kariton* was dismantled by the TFD in one of the sidewalk clearing operations led by the Metropolitan Manila Development Authority (MMDA). No one in the demolition team cared to talk to him and his wife before taking their *kariton* apart, unaware that one of his children was inside it. *"Iilang damit lamang ang naisalba namin dahil tuluyan na nilang sinira yung kariton namin. Pati birth certificate ng mga anak namin ay hindi na namin nakuha."* (We were only able to save a few clothes since the demolition team destroyed our kariton. Even the birth certificates of our children, we were not able to save) (J. Toledo, personal interview, May 19, 2021).

Without any means to provide shelter for his family, Joel asked one of his jeepney driver friends if he and his family could stay in the jeepney at night. They were allowed to do so on the condition that they wake up by 4:30 a.m. and leave the jeepney before sunrise. *"Kailangan namin linisin yung jeep at ibaba yung gamit namin para maihanda na yung jeep sa pagpasada."* (We needed to clean the jeepney and unload our things, so the jeepney would be ready for its trips) (J. Toledo, personal interview, May 19, 2021). His family would then spend the day in one of the waiting sheds along Kalayaan Avenue, while his four children would go to school. Joel and his family would go to the gasoline station across the street to use the bathroom.

Obviously, living on the streets had put Joel's family in danger. In one incident, a drunk homeless man barged into the jeepney, and caused a scene. Joel asked him to leave. The incident reached the barangay council. The jeepney owner installed a rear door with a latch to provide protection for Joel and his family. Despite their situation, his children continued attending school, with one of them having been accelerated to the next grade. Joel even expressed that, even if his family was on the streets, he made sure that his children continued to go to school.

The HSFIs staying outside the Sto. Niño Parish in Tondo, Manila shared that they had been staying in the streets prior to the pandemic. Then, at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, they experienced maltreatment from the local government unit (LGU) of Manila. Rosamay narrated that, during the lockdowns, they were inhumanely treated by the Manila City personnel. *"Sa halip na kami ay tinulungan, dinampot kami ng mga tauhan ng LGU, sinira nila ang aming kariton na may kakaunting gamit namin at nawalay sa aking anak na dinala sa Boys Town at ako naman ay nanatili ng ilang araw sa City Hall"* (Instead of helping us, the LGU personnel destroyed our cart and our things, I got separated from my child who was brought to Boys Town while I stayed for some days in the City Hall). (Rosamay, personal interview, August 21, 2022).

Joel is one of the many families that experienced how the pandemic exacerbated an already inhumane situation, from being renters of a small space to being families living on the streets and being the so-called *pasaways* in the government's war against COVID-19. He and his family became collateral damage in a situation where they should have been receiving assistance and services from the government.

In the narrative of Joel and Rosamay, the LGUs served as an extension of the government structure that further marginalizes homeless families who are seen as passive recipients of assistance, the *pasaways* of the government's response to the pandemic, by not providing attention to the lived experiences of the homeless families. They are lumped together as a group that is further stigmatized and marginalized by government structures and their response.

The Alignment of the Housing Program within a Neoliberal Mold Forces the Homeless to Fend for Themselves

The government's response for housing is basically clothed with tokenism.

After losing their *kariton* and with the pandemic forcing the homeless off the streets, Joel agreed to move to a temporary shelter at the Quezon Memorial Circle. He thought it would be safer for his family to stay there as strict lockdown measures were being enforced. With them were at least 500 homeless individuals staying in open air tents. Although the park was spacious, Joel felt they were detained. *"Parang nasa loob ng kulungan sa loob ng Quezon Circle. Kapag bagong pasok ay tinatanong kung anong pangkat ka. May mga insidente rin ng nakawan at pag-aaway. Pero nakisama ako sa kanilang lahat para makaiwas sa gulo."* (We are like prisoners inside the Quezon Circle. If you were new arrivals, they would ask you what group or pangkat you belong to. There were also incidents of theft and quarrels. I befriended everyone just to avoid trouble) (J. Toledo, personal interview, May 19, 2021).

The "rescued" homeless received meals and hygiene items that had been donated to the local government. There were two months during which canned goods and sardines poured in every day as donations from government and private groups. Joel learned that some sold the relief goods they received to be able to buy drugs. Those who wanted to feel "high" would mix donated rubbing alcohol with water and drink it. Individuals staying in the shelter were allowed to leave only if they had a gate pass and they had to return within the day. If one returned the next day, he or she was required to stay in a quarantine facility for observation of COVID-19 symptoms.

The Quezon City Social Services Development Department (QCSSDD) supervised the temporary shelter. Each homeless individual or family had an assigned social worker who would assist them in claiming the assistance from the city government. Joel as a fish seller, was able to receive Php 5,000.00 from the city government. It took him seven months to finally receive the mandated government emergency cash assistance under the Social Amelioration Program or SAP. He said that his family was supposed to receive Php 16,000 but he got only half of the said amount. According to the social worker assigned to them, the other half was channeled to the services provided in the temporary shelter. Joel and his family stayed at the Quezon Memorial Circle for seven months, hoping that they would qualify for the city government's housing program for the homeless. But this did not happen.

During their stay in the temporary shelter, Joel and his family frequently experienced severe stomach aches and loose bowel movement. The shelter, however, did not have medicines for these medical conditions. The SSDD had to order medicines, and those who needed them would be lucky if they received the medicines within a week. Joel and his family did not receive any up to the day they left the shelter. On their last day, he had to sign documents, one of them claiming that his family received a certain amount of money which he said they never got. His family was among those who were given a pack of groceries, while others received cash. Although life on the streets in Metro Manila was not easy for his family, Joel did not consider returning to Naga City in Camarines Sur because finding work would be difficult and he no longer had relatives living there. *"Kapag bumalik kami sa probinsiya, ang magiging trabaho ko lamang doon ay pedicab driver at wala ang mga kamag-anak ko na maaring tumulong sa amin."* (If we will go back to the province, the available work for me there will be as a pedicab driver, and we have no relatives that can help us) (J. Toledo, personal interview, May 19, 2021).

The experiences of many homeless individuals and families are outright dehumanizing. The government's approach is to force them to keep quiet and deliberately remove them from the visual landscape of the population that pretends that homelessness does not exist and is not an issue (Rothe & Collins, 2016). This experience was further magnified by the COVID-19 pandemic as highlighted by the experience of Joel and others.

Social Work's Commitment to Social Justice

A structural approach to social work can be viewed as a practice that acknowledges the role of social structures in producing and maintaining in-equality and personal hardship and the importance of offering concrete help to those in need or difficulty (Lundy, 2011). Using the lens of structural social work, it also highlights the critical human rights approach which upholds the following commitments (Nipperess, 2016):

- Working towards greater social justice and equality for those people who are oppressed and marginalized within society;
- Working alongside and with oppressed and marginalized people in a "bottom-up" rather than "top-down" approach;
- Incorporating an analysis of power that helps to explain the oppression and marginalization of vulnerable groups and nature;
- Interrogating dominant assumptions and beliefs about human rights; and
- Working towards emancipatory personal, cultural, and social change.

Looking at the experience of Joel and his family, they experienced the first and second dimensions of homelessness before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. This made them accept the response of the local government units to the point of experiencing abuse of their basic human rights.

Social workers are in the position to further humanize social problems and to politicize the responses for homeless families. Being at the frontline, the social work profession is ideally situated to bring to light the struggles of the marginalized sectors such as the homeless families, provide for their immediate needs, and at the same time work with them in responding to their long-term needs including housing. This requires the social workers to continuously engage in consciousness-raising activities and the critical reflection process wherein the lived experiences of the oppressed and the marginalized are discussed, sorting through the myriad issues and linking these to power relations with the end view of embedding the political content of the analysis. With this, the profession engages in meaning making and provides space for the marginalized, such as the homeless families, to actively engage in changing their narratives. Beginning with lived experiences means working to ensure that these voices are not only heard but are valued throughout the organization in which the social worker is employed (Nipperess, 2016).

Homeless People Fighting Back

While inside the temporary shelter, Joel and his family met Pastor Tim Ngo and Camille Ibañes of a group called Street Believers. Joel's wife, Rachel, was among those who underwent a short seminar on soap making which could serve as their source of income. In October 2020, Joel and his family decided to leave the halfway shelter and participate in the reintegration process of Street Believers. His family moved to the halfway house of Street Believers in Caloocan City where Joel was offered a work opportunity as a construction worker at a project in Quezon City. Street Believers also helped with the education of the children and the livelihood of his wife, Rachel.

Unfortunately, Joel was not able to fulfill the condition of the reintegration program which prohibits participants from drinking alcohol. Street Believers dropped his family out of the program, but still helped find a place for him and his family and shouldered their rent for the first two months. While this case study was being prepared, Joel and his family were renting a small house in Pook Arboretum, a working-class community in Barangay UP Campus.

Homeless individuals and families were greatly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and they were further made to feel ostracized by the militarized response of the Duterte administration and being on the receiving end of the State's criminal negligence with regard to the homeless. Tranum (2021) asked the question if the phenomena of homelessness can be treated like a pandemic. She proposed a three-pronged approach for programs focusing on affordable housing, support programs, and prevention. The city attracts rural poor by offering opportunities to escape from rural poverty (Ghosh, 2020). In the city, they work in low-end jobs but they remain too poor to be able to access formal housing, forcing them to live in informal settlements as renters or in the streets as homeless. Their conditions are further in peril in the midst of the implementation of neoliberal policies that restructure the cityscapes by building private properties and gated communities that result in their eviction. If homelessness were to be treated as a pandemic, there should be a shift in the role of government and a view of housing

the homeless as a social investment and promoting their right to the city. An urban sociologist Robert Park wrote that this right to the city means not merely a right of access to what already exists, but a right to change it after their heart's desire (Harvey, 2008 p.1). The concept has been used as a vehicle for social inclusion. It suggests that marginalized people not only have the right to inhabit a city but also the right to design, reshape, and transform it (Vaddiraju, 2016).

Support programs must be in place in order for homeless individuals and families to be able to access housing programs, instead of excluding them and turning a blind eye to their current conditions. Just as Joel mentioned, all he wanted was for he and his family to have a house that would keep them safe, but their economic means does not permit them to avail of housing programs. Access to housing programs also calls for the current system to provide support for the families to keep their homes. Thus, there is a need for government to invest in affordable housing, while also regulating the housing market (Tranum, 2021).

Joel is only one of the many homeless individuals struggling to keep his family safe. Having a house that he and his family can call their own is a dream that Joel hopes to make into reality. He has friends now residing in Bulacan and paying a monthly amortization of Php 200. Joel is willing to pay Php 800/month for a housing unit within Quezon City. *"Hindi ko talaga pinangarap na tumira kami ng pamilya ko sa kalsada. Nagkataon lang na walang-wala ako at wala rin akong makapitan. Kaya sa kalsada kami nanirahan. Sana magkatotoo yung pagkakaroon namin ng bahay—yung tunay na pabahay para sa mahirap. Magkaroon ng lugar na matatawag na akin para sa mga anak ko, para lumaki sila na mayroong matatawag na tahanan."* (I did not aspire for me and my family to live on the streets. It just happened that I had nothing and did not have anyone to ask for help. I hope one day my dream of having my own house for my family will be a reality—the real housing for the poor. To have a place that I can call my own for my children, so they will grow up having a place they can call home).

Conclusion

Social work is not merely a conduit of government services. It also looks at the dynamics of the homeless family and the environment, and how the current government and organizational structures deter homeless families in accessing services—and then connecting them to resources in order for them to solve their problematic situation.

Structural social work practitioners are reminded to fulfill the following: 1) connecting people to needed resources, 2) changing social structures, where feasible, 3) helping service users negotiate problematic situations, and 4) deconstructing sociopolitical discourse to reveal the relationship with individual struggles (Payne, 2005). Social workers are reminded to be critical of the social and political structures that pose as barriers to their respective clients, discern their struggles, and influence changes not only directed to the individual client but to the environmental structures that deter the client from changing and improving his/her situation.

Families in street situations are among the most vulnerable sectors at present. The national and local government units should work together to provide a holistic approach in responding to their needs. These families have a right to live in the city. It was not their choice to stay on the streets. It became their only option for survival given a political system that refuses to provide mechanisms and support for them to change their situation.

It is incumbent, especially upon the social workers in LGUs, to work with families in street situations in formulating programs and services that will start from a recognition of their dignity and their human rights as individuals and families.

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Philippine Child Caring Agencies Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic:
Operational Challenges, Responses, and Reflections

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Abstract

In the history of child welfare, past pandemics paved the way for the establishment of orphanages or Child Caring Agencies (CCAs) as they are called today. With the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, these social institutions' capacity to protect children-in-care is again tested. The study presents the experiences of 15 private CCAs in the Philippines located in different parts of the country with high numbers of COVID-19 cases. The results provide a glimpse of how CCAs cope amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, their challenges, responses, and reflections developed by the CCAs' key leaders and personnel. The study shows that CCAs are affected by external, organizational, and personal challenges. Their responses imply an adequate level of capacity to adapt to the challenges such as the pandemic. It also highlights the CCAs' organizational reflective processes, responses, and innovations which, if used critically, could lead toward transformative practice in an organization. The study results can aid child protection social workers and other development workers in Residential Care Facilities for Children (RCFC) to examine the present condition of our CCAs and take a critical stance to advocate for change, an essential skill in transformative social work practice. The results can also be used to review and advocate for the revision and creation of new guidelines and policies that will address long-term problems that affect the implementation of CCAs' programs and services. Lastly, they could spark the development of possible social work models or approaches in working with children-in-care during disasters and emergencies.

Keywords: children-in-care, child caring agencies, pandemic, child welfare

Introduction

As the world battle the COVID-19 pandemic, children were among society's most affected sectors. The pandemic affected children's well-being negatively in a multitude of ways imaginable. The risks for children-in-care were even more significant as they are away from their families and depend only on other people's help. At the forefront of this battle were hundreds of Child Caring Agencies (CCAs), a type of residential care facility (RCF) that caters to children in the Philippines. CCAs may differ in nature and in terms of the kind of children that they serve. Commonly, CCAs cater to Children in Need of Special Protection (CNSP), including those who are victims of physical and sexual abuse, neglected and abandoned children, children in commercial sexual exploitation, street children, etc. Long before the pandemic, CCAs had already been experiencing challenges in their operations, budget, personnel, partnerships, and case management (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2010; Nhep & Doore, 2021). With the worldwide onslaught of COVID-19 that

stayed on for nearly three years, new challenges or even more serious issues are expected to confront the field of child welfare.

Since a pandemic is not a regular occurrence, there are no readily available systems/ protocols for CCAs to guide their personnel in alleviating the psychological effects of such a catastrophe on children and the staff. While authorities scrambled for measures to mitigate the impact of COVID-19, these institutions, licensed and accredited by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), were expected to protect children-in-care (DSWD Administrative Order No. 17, Series of 2008). The bulk of this task rests on the shoulders of social workers who manage the cases of the children. Other support staff like house parents, teachers, psychologists, medical practitioners, administrative staff, and others also have vital roles to play. In reality, however, they may be overwhelmed by the degree of responsibility in ensuring that children receive appropriate care. Some may be emotionally torn between their clients' welfare and that of their own families, affecting their work performance. In any social work setting, the workers' emotional stability is crucial, especially in residential care facilities for children, as clients are psychologically and emotionally dependent on them. As licensed institutions, CCAs may implement drastic measures to ensure the children's safety under their care, especially during the height of a public health emergency, such as the pandemic. On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic brought an array of obstacles to the already challenging world of case management for children-in-care.

Nevertheless, while this disaster might have created chaos in the child welfare system, particularly among CCAs, its consequences also brought out the best in these institutions as they emerged with creative ways to innovate, strategize, stay afloat, and eventually adapt to the new normal. The earliest CCAs, which have been existing for centuries and have battled various emergencies including pandemics, have already proven this. Unfortunately, past pandemics have given us only a glimpse (or almost none) of how these institutions survived such dreadful experiences due to the scarcity of records, documents, and reading materials that would vividly describe their experiences and the kind of culture they developed during those times. Therefore, it is high time that the experiences of child caring institutions during the recent pandemic be documented as references for the next generation of residential care workers.

It is critical to know and describe the kind of innovations and strategies these institutions employed to successfully deliver their programs and services and the factors that impeded their operations during the COVID-19 pandemic. It is likewise crucial to document these CCA experiences and responses that could then serve as an essential future reference for child welfare and social work practice.

Research Objectives and Methodology

This study aims to document the experiences of CCAs in cope during the COVID-19 pandemic while protecting children in care. Specifically, it attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What challenges did the CCAs encounter in implementing their programs and services during the COVID-19 pandemic?
2. What were the CCAs' responses to mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. What were the CCAs' reflections that contributed to their COVID-19 pandemic responses?

This study is descriptive and exploratory. It employed a purposive sampling method that selected 15 private CCA respondents from the areas with the highest COVID-19 cases in Luzon, Visayas, Mindanao, and the National Capital Region (NCR). One consideration of choosing private CCAs or those managed by Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) is that these small agencies were at a higher risk of closure during the pandemic because they largely depend on donations for funding. The length of service, excellent records in working with CNSPs, willingness, and openness to participate in the study were likewise part of the respondents' selection criteria. Formal letters were sent to these CCAs through email. Due to the strict COVID-19 pandemic protocols and the risk of contracting the virus, in-depth interviews were done using different virtual platforms accessible to the agencies, such as Zoom and Google Meet. Responses were then grouped and organized into themes for data analysis.

Conceptual Framework

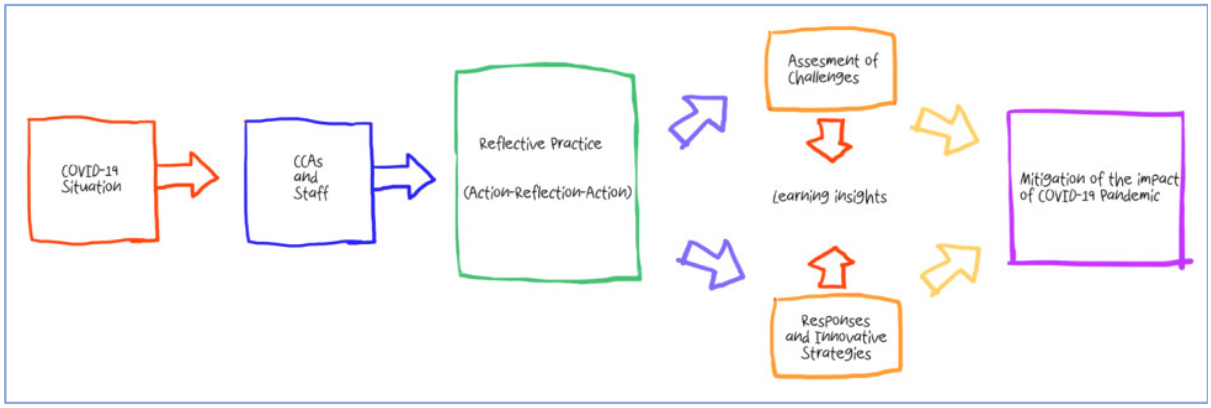

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 shows how the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on CCAs was primarily determined by three main factors: a) the type of challenges that emerged in the course of the pandemic, b) the reflective skills level of the agency and its staff, and c) the level of strength or capacity of the agency and its staff to respond to the challenges through innovative strategies.

Challenges arise in any organization. The Collin dictionary (n.d.) defines a challenge as "something new and difficult which requires great effort and determination." Challenges in the organization's context are categorized into three types: Environmental or External Challenges, Organizational Challenges, and Personal Challenges. Environmental or external challenges are factors imposed by the external environment that affect the organization's survival which is beyond the organization's control, while organizational challenges are factors within the organization that are consequences of environmental challenges. The organization can manage this type of challenge. Personal challenges pertain to the organizational challenges and structures that affect the staff. These test their skills in performing under pressure and affect their motivation level, which may negatively impact their job performance (Daniels, 2022; Aravindan, n.d).

On the other hand, responsiveness is the organization's ability to identify organizational changes, intervene and adapt to the situation by internally introducing changes in organizational structures and policies through individual action and learning levels and introducing interventions that increase organizational flexibility. Responsiveness also boosts organizational

reflective practice in planning or developing strategies (Pata, 2010). Reflective practice was first conceptualized by Schon and is considered a core concept in helping professions, including social work. Using reflective practice enables practitioners to engage in "action-reflection-action" by processing their experience and what they do while they are doing it, which is called "reflection-in-action," or processing the understanding and using this to generate knowledge from practice which is called "reflection-on-action" (Schon, 1983, as cited in Pata, 2010). According to Jude and Regan (2010), in reflective practice, professionals are expected to develop a certain level of expertise or skills when regularly practicing, which becomes a habit or talent.

Reflective practice can be used at an organizational level when practitioners use their skills and competence in a shared and collective manner that invites collaborative, transformative, and reflective practice. In times of disasters and emergencies when things are chaotic due to the absence of rules, guidelines, and protocols, reflective practice is crucial as it can assist professionals and organizations in what course of action or response they will undertake to ensure the quality of service delivery. The framework shows that by using reflective practice, the CCA and its staff can effectively assess and identify the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic that affect the implementation of its programs and services. Reflective practice, especially if done in a collective manner or at an organizational level, will also help the CCA to revise and to create innovative strategies to respond to their clients' needs to mitigate the impact of the ongoing disaster or emergency in the implementation of its programs and services, as shown in Figure 1. It is deemed that the impact will greatly depend on the CCA's capacity as an organization to withstand and respond to the challenges brought about by the situation. These may include the CCA's and its staff's ability and level of skills, strengths, motivations, and other factors in reflective practice.

Review of Related Literature

The World Health Organization (WHO) declared the COVID-19 outbreak as a public health emergency of international concern on January 30, 2020, during the 2nd meeting of their Emergency Committee, and subsequently declared it a pandemic on March 11, 2020. A pandemic, as defined by the dictionary, is "an outbreak of a disease that occurs over a wide geographic area (such as multiple countries or continents) and typically affects a significant proportion of the population" (Merriam-Webster, 2022).

As the COVID-19 pandemic continued, so did its impact on children's lives, and more severely so on children living in impoverished countries and children in care who face a different level of vulnerability (UNICEF, 2020; World Vision Philippines, n.d). During the pandemic, some children may have lost one or both parents and ended up in residential care facilities for children or orphanages (The Human Rights Watch, 2020). A Child Caring Agency is a private, non-profit or government agency duly accredited by the DSWD that provides 24-hour residential care services for abandoned, orphaned, neglected, or voluntarily committed children. (DSWD, 2018, p. 4; Official Gazette, Republic of the Philippines, 2009). In the Philippines, DSWD has licensed 177 agencies that operate 197 Residential Care Facilities for Children (RCFC), while DSWD operates 46 nationwide. On average, these agencies have a 50-bed capacity except for Elsie Gaches Village, which has 400-490 beds, and another two that cater to abandoned and sexually abused children have a 125-bed capacity. Admissions, before the pandemic, usually exceeded the capacity of these centers. During the pandemic, although some froze their admissions, these agencies still had to cater to the needs of their residents or clients,

and some had to continue accepting clients, especially government agencies or residential care facilities (DSWD, n.d.).

In a study done by World Vision Philippines (n.d.), 2% of the study respondents were willing to send their children to their relatives or to institutions if worse comes to worst. The problem with these facilities, however, was that these were hotbeds for the rapid spread of infectious diseases, such as COVID-19, due to the often-limited space, poor conditions, and the proximity of the staff and children in care with each other (Human Rights Watch, 2020; Lumos, 2020). In the Philippines, for instance, 80 children from the Reception and Study Center for Children (RSCC) in Quezon City were submitted for swab tests after some staff at the Center were reported to have contracted COVID-19 (Ornedo, 2020). On August 24, 2021, Hospicio de San Jose, one of the oldest orphanages in the Philippines, called for donations as 81 of its residents contracted COVID-19, including a three-year-old client (Depasupil, 2021).

Earlier literature predicted that, due to the high possibility of COVID-19 contamination in orphanages, governments and institutions around the world might impose laws that would immediately take the children away from the child-caring facility in a bid to mitigate the spread of the virus. However, removing children without proper emotional preparation, assessment, support, and monitoring would only put them in an even more harmful situation (Lumos, 2020). Likewise, the imposition of lockdowns, curfews, and movement restrictions led to the abrupt closure of some residential institutions thereby jeopardizing the continued care for CNSPs in times of disaster (Human Rights Watch, 2020).

An interview consultation organized by Save the Children Philippines among the children staying in some Bahay Pag-asa facilities within Metro Manila revealed that: 1) the children are worried about being infected by COVID-19, 2) they are terrified for their family's safety and for their parents who are out of work, 3) they also deal with sadness because their families are not allowed to visit them, and 4) while other children have communication access to their families, others have no idea how their families are doing (Abad, 2020). Furthermore, less than half of these children do not know the government's COVID-19 response, reflecting that children have limited access to such information.

The COVID-19 pandemic also affected the case management of the children, which has implications for their stay in residential care facilities. For example, court hearings and issuance of release orders were suspended due to the implementation of the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) (Abad, 2020). At the same time, during the ECQ implementation, there were no existing policies, guidelines, protocols, programs, services, etc. regarding the management of all residential care facilities for children in the Philippines except to follow the national protocols. Each facility devised its own strategies to cope with the pandemic's effects while waiting for the government guidelines for center-based or residential care facilities for children, which were eventually released two months after the lockdown implementation. On May 15, 2020, DSWD released its guidelines for "Compliance to Regulatory Standards of Social Welfare and Development Agencies (SWDAs), Private Organizations Intending to Operate as SWADAs and Service Providers." The guidelines covered three critical areas: 1) Submission of the accomplishment report for the fiscal year 2019, 2) SWDAs applying for registration/license to operate and accreditation, and 3) Service providers applying for accreditation. The Department released another guideline on May 27 for "All Social Welfare and Development Agencies (SWDAs) Operating Center-Based (Residential) Facility." The advisory was issued as guidance for the daily management of these residential facilities.

Summary of Findings:

Respondents profile

The study involved 15 private Child Caring Agencies, each servicing 10 to 130 CNSPs in the areas with the highest number of COVID-19 cases in the Philippines. These included three (3) from the National Capital Region, six (6) from Luzon, three (3) from the Visayas, and three (3) from Mindanao. Fourteen agencies have been serving CNSPs between 16 to 42 years, while only one was newly established, having been created eight years ago. Seven (7) of these are small- to medium-sized agencies maintaining an average number of staff between 10 to 30, and serving fewer than 50 clients. Six (6) have regular staff numbering from 50 to 107 and serve more than 50 clients. These agencies serve diverse clients who are victims of physical and sexual abuse, neglect, abandonment, etc. The number of clients served during the pandemic ranged from 12 to 79, aged 8 months to 17 years old. Except for the four faith-based agencies, the rest are considered secular NGOs. During this study, there were five CCAs whose personnel contracted the COVID-19 virus. The vaccination rate of the staff of these agencies ranged from 75 to 100%.

All except one respondent are female, aged 23 to 80. Ten (10) are married, three (3) are single, and one (1) is a nun. All respondents finished a bachelor's degree, and half had master's degrees. Eight (8) of the respondents are graduates of Bachelor of Science in Social Work (BSSW), two have Master of Social Work (MSW) degrees, and the rest are graduates of other helping professions such as sociology and education. Five (5) respondents occupy the position of a residential social worker who is mainly responsible for managing children's cases. Other respondents include six (6) Executive Directors and four (4) program heads. Thirteen have been working in their agency for 7 to 28 years, while the other two had only joined their agency for a year at the time of the study.

The 15 agencies have different programs and services focused on children in care and their families. Table 1 below shows that the programs and services of these agencies are varied, and their nature could sometimes overlap. It is important to note that, due to the pandemic, one medium-sized agency in NCR had to close a coffee shop that it had been operating as a project of their independent program for their youth.

Table 1
Programs and Services of Respondent CCAs

Programs	No. of agencies	Services	No. of agencies
Residential Care/Shelter/ Alternative Home	15	Case management	15
Community-based Program			
	5	Medical/Dental	7
After Care Program	3	Educational (academic, sports, life skills)	6
Educational Program (scholarship)	3	Spiritual/moral	6

Advocacy program	2	Home life	5
Healing and Recovery Program	1	Psychosocial services/psych	2
Volunteer Program	1	Mentoring/ coaching	2
Adoption Program	1	Legal services	2
Rehabilitation Program	1	Aftercare services	1
Independent Living Program	1	Placement services	1
Apprenticeship Program	1	Liaison services	1
Outreach Program	1	Recreational/ cultural services	1

The following presentation shows the findings of the study presented in three parts: 1) Challenges, 2) Strategies Employed, and 3) Learning Insights in the residential care program of the agencies and the top six areas of services identified by the respondents.

The challenges are categorized into two areas in the course of a CCA's operation: 1) case management process, and 2) programs or services such as psychosocial, medical, educational, and homelife.

1. Case Management Process

All the respondents shared that one of the most challenging tasks for them to do during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic was to ensure that case management of children in care was properly implemented. The respondents identified five areas of the CCAs case management process that were very challenging. These were: 1) processing and monitoring of cases, 2) processing of documents and 3) communication and coordination, 3) scheduling of activities, and 4) case conferences/meetings.

1.1. Processing and monitoring of cases - All respondents agreed that, aside from the fear of the workers contracting the virus, the strict protocols—such as submitting a Reverse Transcription Polymerase Chain Reaction (RT-PCR) test, processing the Safe, Swift, and Smart Passage (S-PASS), and the length of the quarantine period—affected the timeline of their case management. These restrictive protocols made monitoring cases challenging for the workers who needed to process, update, and monitor their clients' case progress. For instance, one small agency from the Visayas mentioned that their social workers were challenged to procure the necessary travel documents needed to move from one place to another during the height of the pandemic to conduct special home visitations on cases of concern. Another shared that, since they are located in Mindoro island, they had difficulty monitoring their clients' cases and processing their documents due to the pandemic restrictions.

1.2 Processing of documents - Difficulties were also experienced while processing the children's documents. Six (6) small agencies from Luzon shared that it took a minimum of one month to process and acquire children's legal records from government offices and other partner agencies, which caused further delays in processing children's cases. Examples of these legal records are late registration of birth, foundling certificate, court documents, adoption documents, especially the Certificate Declaring a Child Legally Available for Adoption

(CDCLAA), etc. These documents could easily be acquired during the pre-pandemic period—except for the CDCLAA, which sometimes took time but was made worse by the pandemic.

1.3 Communication and coordination - Five (5) small agencies (two each from Luzon and Visayas and one from Mindanao) shared that coordination with the local social welfare office and other partner agencies became arduous due to the intermittent telco-connection, difficulty of reaching partner agencies, location of clients in far-flung areas or in government-declared COVID-19 high-risk areas. It was said that coordination was complicated with the children's families, who had no access or capability to acquire communication gadgets. Coordinating with LGU social workers was also a challenge. As described by one respondent, "Requesting for a Parental Capability Assessment Report (PCAR) of the LGU now is very difficult as it took so long for the LGU to respond to such a request due to travel restrictions and LGU's other tasks." Some respondents also shared this sentiment and agreed that one of the main reasons for the delay in LGU's response was their additional task of implementing the Social Amelioration Program (SAP). The difficulty in coordination also included not only the LGU agencies but also other government institutions. As one respondent explained: "I had been coordinating with a DSWD regional institution for women for their referred clients, but to no avail. I later learned that they have limited the number of personnel on duty."

1.4 Scheduling of activities - Admission of cases was canceled or delayed, especially during the ECQ. Eight (8) CAAs canceled client admission during the height of the pandemic. At the same time, seven (7) agencies said that they still facilitated the admission of clients in their agencies but implemented strict adherence to COVID-19 protocols, such as a 14-day quarantine period and required medical examinations for incoming clients. Another canceled activity during the ECQ was the "trial period" for the Prospective Adoptive Parents (PAP) to meet their adoptive child three times before placement of the child in their home.

1.5 Case conferences/meeting - In addition, activities such as case conferences (admission conferences, family conferences, matching conferences), court hearings, etc. were canceled or rescheduled. Unavoidable face-to-face meetings or conferences in the facility added to the burden of the agency to identify space within their facility where they could implement IATF protocols for COVID-19 to ensure everyone's safety. This was incredibly challenging for all seven small agencies which had limited space for big group activities.

2. Programs and Services

2.1 Psychosocial Services – The CCAs' psychosocial services met two significant challenges during the pandemic: 1) scheduling of psychosocial interventions and 2) children's behavioral manifestations. Children's activities were canceled, such as going to school, holding sponsored parties inside or outside the facilities, attending field trips, and other therapeutic activities (e.g., therapy sessions, drama, dancing, themed activities, etc.). On top of this, some psychological interventions such as individual and group therapy sessions were put on hold as well.

With regard to children's behavioral manifestations, according to the respondents, older children in the agencies manifested anxious behaviors at the onset of the pandemic. They were worried about contracting the virus and afraid for their families, whom they could not see physically during the lockdown. At the same time, small children were observed to be scared upon witnessing the staff/workers wearing the required face masks for the first time. As the

pandemic persisted, the cancellation of psychosocial interventions aggravated the psychological and behavioral state of some children already suffering from psychological trauma. Although some were not professionally diagnosed, the agency observed many unfamiliar behavioral manifestations by the children, especially during the early stages when homeschooling was implemented instead of the traditional face-to-face school setup. Behavioral manifestations included in-house teen romantic relationships with other children-in-care and other kids in the neighborhood where the agency is located. For example, one respondent described that their female clients tried to establish communications with some of the boys residing in the informal settlers' area adjacent to where their agency was situated. To attract attention, the girl clients would wave their hands whenever boys from the neighborhood would pass by their area and eventually secretly exchanged love notes with these boys through their laundry area fence. This behavior of their female clients was never observed during the pre-pandemic time. It is also important to note that half of the CCAs have no in-house psychologist and depend only on outsourced psychological services. This situation was made worse by the pandemic, as one respondent said, "It is difficult for the outsourced psychologist to visit the agency due to the pandemic restrictions."

2.2 Educational Services – The shift from the traditional face-to-face learning mode to either virtual or modular modalities resulted in three major concerns. These were: 1) the need for gadgets (computer and internet connection), 2) the need for physical space dedicated to online classes, and 3) the need for additional staff to help the children's academic transition. All the agencies were not prepared for this kind of situation. For example, most agencies have slow internet connections used exclusively by their administrative staff. They also do not have available computer laptops or tablets to be used by the children because these were not part of their annual budget. With regard to physical space dedicated to online classes, all the respondent agencies—except for one with an in-house school within their premises—had to adjust to the new form of children's schooling as they had always sent their children to a mainstream school near their area before the pandemic. On the need for additional staff to help address the academic transition, children's academic activities became one of the most important undertakings in the facility. Assisting children to fulfill tasks related to their remote learning arrangement became one of the time consuming and tedious tasks for most agencies' staff. Unfortunately, not all agencies had hired regular teachers to do teaching jobs for children. Some of the agencies did have teachers on their payroll, however, their numbers were insufficient to help all the children with their academic requirements, as per the survey.

2.3 Medical Services - One of the services that became extremely challenging due to health-related concerns during the pandemic was Medical Services to meet a range of mild to severe to life-threatening conditions. The risks faced by the CCAs included putting their regular medical checkups for the children on hold or rescheduling them to later dates since hospitals were prioritizing COVID-19 cases, especially during the ECQ period. There was also that fear on the part of the CCA personnel of contracting the virus themselves when visiting medical clinics or hospitals. Another concern was the rising case of dental problems such as toothaches, needed tooth extractions, etc. which had to be delayed, thus contributing to the increase of dental issues for these growing children. Only emergency cases were allowed to undergo dental procedures if needed, and agencies had to sign a medical waiver. One respondent said, *"Nakakatakot mag decide kasi baka magka-COVIDd ang bata"* (It was scary to make a decision because a child might contract the COVID-19 virus).

Moreover, the respondents shared that the waiting period for securing a medical consultation schedule took an average of more than two months. Waiting time was longer whenever there was a surge of COVID-19 cases. In addition, accessing vital medical supplies such as oxygen tanks and other medicines during the COVID-19 surge was difficult as it posed a risk for the staff to be infected with the virus in acquiring these supplies from the stores. Such delays in medicine acquisition could put the children's health at risk, especially those with comorbidities. This happened to two children with comorbidity from two different CCAs in Luzon who died because the CCAs' clinics were not medically equipped to handle serious cases and the children could not be brought to the hospital for the much-needed medical interventions.

Two CCAs observed further that some toddlers seemed to have suffered delays in language development because the houseparents were wearing face masks during the pandemic. These toddlers could not observe the facial expressions and lip movements of their houseparent, and the staff surmised that this resulted in delayed language and speech development for these toddlers.

2.4 Homelife Services - The main challenge for all the CCAs' homelife staff was managing the children's daily routines, such as online classes or modular learning during weekdays, psychosocial activities during weekends, disciplining and teaching children life skills, and emotionally comforting those children who were exhibiting anxiety and depression, or other behavioral manifestations. Another concern was how to augment the children's activities or schedules which had previously been facilitated by volunteers during the pre-pandemic period. This proved challenging because the staff's schedules sometimes had to be a two-week straight duty and two weeks work-from-home.

Responses

These are the responses or innovative strategies employed by the CCAs in response to the challenges discussed above.

1. Case Management - To ensure effective and efficient implementation of the case management process, all CCAs implemented COVID-19 protocols in all their undertakings. In compliance with the COVID-19 IATF (Inter-Agency Task Force) and DSWD (Department of Social Welfare and Development) guidelines, agencies set up their quarantine facilities and implemented protocols such as: no visitors were allowed in the children's dorm; all donations should be dropped off in designated areas; volunteers were not allowed to come physically to the agency, wearing of facemasks inside the premises and observing of social distancing were strictly required, disinfectants such as alcohol were provided for staff and clients, designated quarantine areas were set up, staff were required to undergo a RT-PCR test prior to reporting to the agency after being sick, and clients and staff were required to have an antigen test after attending outside activities (e.g., court hearing, medical checkup, etc.). All the agencies encouraged their staff to get the recommended COVID-19 vaccinations, and some even established a "bubble community" where their staff was allowed to stay at the agency for an extended period and provided free transportation for their staff to and from the agency. For example, a small agency in Quezon City rented an apartment to house all its staff and, to ensure less exposure to the virus, provided a free shuttle service for the staff to bring them to and from the agency on their scheduled times of duty. One agency in NCR strictly implemented a two-

week rotational lockdown and got a ready-made bahay kubo to be used as an isolation facility.

CCAs also shifted from face-to-face to virtual meetings to connect or monitor and follow up with their clients or other partner agencies. These included online case conferences, online psychological therapy, family meetings, staff training, children's training, virtual selection of prospective adoptive parents (PAP), child matching conferences, virtual orientation, and admission of a new child. Phone calls were employed to communicate with children's families who lacked internet access and resided in high-risk COVID-19 areas.

All the CCAs' respondents conducted limited home visitations and face-to-face community meetings with clients and other partner agencies assessed to be in low-risk areas after the ECQ period. They also adopted modified face-to-face meetings for activities that could not be done remotely, such as case conferences, family visitations, children's reintegration with their families, and children's transfer to another CCA. Attendance in these special meetings was also limited; only those individuals whose presence was essential were allowed to attend. After the ECQ period, most CCAs allowed parents and families into their centers but they could only stay in designated areas. One CCA also limited the number of visitors to 10 individuals at a time.

Most of the respondent CCAs adopted a modified work schedule. The staff alternately adapted to working from home and reporting to the office for at least two weeks for each type of arrangement. Only one CCA in NCR allowed their staff to go home from work every day. When working from home, most coordination and communication were done online by the staff using different platforms such as Zoom, Facebook Messenger, Google Meet, etc.

2. Programs and Services

2.1. Psychosocial Services - As a response to the psychological needs of the children in care, all the CCA respondents reported that they conducted COVID-19 orientation for the children, except for one agency in Mindanao whose children in care are still too young to understand as most of them are babies and toddlers. The orientation aimed to put the children at ease while also making them aware of the COVID-19 risks. Each CCA came up with its own orientation activities, which mainly included film viewing and discussions. The children were made aware of the safety protocols such as wearing masks, social distancing, and the need to be inside the homes.

The CCAs were also actively monitoring the children's behaviors. Systems were set up to keep track of the children's emotional states, such as identifying those with behavioral manifestations and closely monitoring them or referring them for counseling or therapy, which could be online or face-to-face, depending on the situation. One agency also introduced music therapy, while the others had an on-call psychologist. CCAs also redesigned the children's activities to fit their needs. They converted what used to be outdoor activities into indoor ones. They created activities that were fun but therapeutic. These included children's games and game tournaments, arts and crafts, story-telling, dancing, cooking and baking, video games, in-house summer camps, basketball leagues, film viewing, in-house parties and milestone celebrations, themed parties, fashion shows, visitations of their school campus, and joy rides around the barangay, etc. One CCA conducted search and rescue operations for children absconded from the facility.

Due to the difficulty of getting psychological consultation schedules, which resulted in a surge in psychological cases, the CCAs utilized their staff's knowledge and skills to conduct psychological first aid. Likewise, when on physical duty in the facility, most social workers' activities included individual and group social work counseling and other therapeutic activities with the children. This was done not only to augment the lack of a psychologist for some agencies but also the lack of resource persons for other curricular activities of the children, which have previously been handledby volunteers. In addition, the CCAs organized in-house Mass or Sunday service celebrations and Bible study sessions. They continued to teach the children to pray and foster harmonious relationships with and among individuals in the agency.

2.2 Educational Services – The CCAs utilized their residential staff (social workers, houseparents, psychologists, admin staff, nurses, etc.) in helping the children transition from face-to-face to remote learning. This was done by supporting the children early in their academic year. Staff became the children's tutors, especially in understanding and answering their modules. The staff also set up gadgets for the children's online classes and monitored them in case there would be a signal interruption, as this would disrupt the children's study time and make them anxious. Although this seemed to work, it also put a strain on the daily operation of the agency as most staff had to drop their original tasks to attend to the education needs of the children. To remedy this situation, four medium-sized CCAs, three from Luzon and one from Visayas, hired additional teachers. Four CCAs allowed their teachers to stay in their dorms, especially during the lockdown period. Of the five CCAs which have in-house schools, three had set these up before the pandemic, while the other two set up their in-house schools during the pandemic to create and simulate a classroom-like environment that would give the children the feeling of normalcy. One agency even sent its teachers for online training on how to conduct virtual classes. Four CCAs launched a donation campaign to ensure that all children would be able to have electronic gadgets for their online classes. Some donors brought their donations to the CCA, while one CCA shared that they got donations of cash and laptops from an electronic store after they sent a solicitation letter. Other sources of donations came from funding agencies or CCA partners such as the Consuelo Foundation.

2.3 Medical Services - To ensure the physical health of the children in care, the CCAs employed the following: utilizing virtual consultations, practicing due diligence in submitting children for laboratory testing, carefully assessing the potential risks within hospital premises vis-à-vis the children's safety, wearing Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) whenever bringing children to the hospital, providing children with vitamins, referring children to health centers for a free checkup, encouraging staff to be vaccinated, practicing COVID-19 safety protocols (isolation when sick, social distancing, sanitizing, undergoing RT-PCR or antigen test if needed), and tapping their internal resources. For instance, one CCA has staff equipped to provide basic first aid and physical therapy to children, which came in handy when children needed such during the lockdown period. Another CCA tapped members of the Board who are medical doctors and whom the staff personally know, so that they could avoid physical visits to hospitals to lessen possible exposure to the COVID-19 virus.

2.4 Homelife Services - The first strategy that CCAs did in response to the pandemic was to revise the scheduling of their houseparents on duty. During the lockdown period, houseparents had to stay in the premises for the whole duration of the lockdown or be on duty for two weeks. Some CCAs involved their children in home life activities to ensure they would not get bored. For example, older children were made part of the homelife planning activities. Children were

given rewards, such as incentives for creating and selling their arts and crafts, as well as free time to relax and do anything they wanted but within the bounds of the agency rules. These were aimed at encouraging good behavior. Likewise, the agencies' homelife activities were also revised and redesigned.

Reflections

Below are the reflections and learning insights identified by the respondents. The CCAs used these reflections in developing their organizational responses during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure the efficient and effective delivery of their programs and services. The CCAs discussed these reflections during their meetings and strategic planning, where they identified their strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities.

1. On emergency preparedness for the pandemic – During the onset of the pandemic, after the government had released the safety protocol guidelines, the CCAs realized that they were not prepared for the COVID-19 pandemic or any pandemic for that matter, as no one had thought about it. They found that they lacked so many of the essential elements to face such a major public health emergency. as Among these were: a huge space to practice social distancing or allocate an isolation room for the sick; a budget allocation for the purchase of sanitizers, face masks, face shields, vitamins, and other medicines; medical equipment necessary to combat the COVID-19 virus such as oxygen tanks, antigen test kits, dormitories for the staff, etc. Likewise, 13 or most of the respondent CCAs did not receive a memo or guidelines from the DSWD that was explicitly intended for residential care facilities on how to proceed with their operation and case management given the lockdown restrictions. Only two CCAs from the Visayas and Mindanao said they had received a memo from DSWD. The CCA from the Visayas said they received the memo four months after the onset of the pandemic, while the one in Mindanao said they got the memo from ABSNET. The CCAs that did not receive the memo used the guidelines released by the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) instead and followed the Department of Health (DOH) announcements. They also crafted their own COVID-19 protocols tailored to fit the needs of their organization while also aligned with the country's guidelines. Post-pandemic, they now regard these as permanently incorporated into their Disaster Risk and Reduction Management (DRRM) guidelines. At the same time, the lockdowns demonstrated the passion and commitment of the staff to their jobs, as some of them did not hesitate to stay in-house during the lockdown, even if this meant being away from their families. This assured the CCAs' management of supportive and dedicated staff.

2. On case management – When lockdowns were imposed, all the CCAs shared that they were hit by the realization of the enormity of their undone task to ensure the movements of children's cases. These included the unfinished papers or documents of children that needed to be processed in different government offices, such as birth and foundling certificates, court orders, barangay or police clearances, school documents, etc. Respondents said that, if only they had known that a pandemic would strike, they should have done their best to process the children's records. Upon realizing this, they did their best to process the children's records by coordinating with other agencies and their families but with much difficulty. This resulted in further delays in case movements. Also, since they could not do field work and process the documents, some CCAs used this time to finish writing their reports (e.g., social case study reports, progress reports, etc.). They also quickly realized that

services such as psychological testing, counseling/therapy, family visitations, and children's activities are all vital interventions to ensure the mental health of the children. Thus, they tried to revise and create new activities for them.

3. On children's education – CCAs realized that, although nothing compared to a classroom environment experience, the shift from face-to-face learning to in-house, online, or modular made some of the children thrive. These were the children who usually had difficulty in mainstream school. For instance, one respondent from a CCA in Visayas shared, "Our girls were so happy not to be in school physically because nobody bullied them anymore and labeled or called them names such as children from the orphanage (mga batang ampunan). Thus, they were able to concentrate on their studies." As a result, the CCA management planned to look into reviewing their policy of placing their children in the mainstream school post-pandemic.

4. On caring for children during the pandemic – The CCAs appreciated that the length of time the staff had to stay together with the children in the facility made them focus and give more attention to the children. They observed that their constant presence affected the children positively, and helped the kids settle down emotionally and ease their worries about the pandemic. Respondents also reiterated the importance of having patience and tolerance when living with the children in care. Further, drastic changes were made in the children's activities due to the pandemic, such as: 1) being confined within the limited space of the facilities, 2) not being able to go outside for outdoor activities which promote socialization skills, 3) not being able to attend face-to-face classes, and 4) being denied regular visits from volunteers, donors, and families. These led to both positive and negative effects on the children's behaviors. For instance, the toddlers who would normally have benefitted from the hugs and attention of the regular volunteers were observed to have manifested delays in their social and motor skills because they could not see the faces of the staff because they were covered with masks. According to the respondents, seeing the mouth and lip movements of those caring for them is essential for toddlers to imitate and learn to talk.

5. On personal and professional growth of the CCA staff – All the CCAs that participated in the study shared that the pandemic pushed them to fulfill their tasks beyond their duty to protect those children under their care. Many staff chose to stay in their centers for at least three months at a time and endure being away from their families during the most critical time of the pandemic. Professionally, they found themselves being true to their pledge to act for the child's best interest at all times, pandemic or not. Also, most Executive Directors deemed that, if only the program staff were equipped with skills in managing and planning activities during a pandemic, they could have better responded to the needs of the children. It is commendable that the CCAs and their staff used the quarantine period to equip themselves with additional knowledge and skills by participating in free webinars and virtual networking with other CCAs. Likewise, the staff's knowledge of basic physical and psychological first aid came in handy during the ECQ. CCA staff and directors realized that it is beneficial for the staff to have an open mind, be flexible, adapt to change or multitask, if necessary, be innovative and creative, maintain sensitivity when faced with difficult situations, and think critically. They also came to appreciate that staff collaboration and teamwork—coupled with close supervision that boosts team morale and strengthens job commitment—were vital in residential care facilities (RCFs) during the pandemic. Bonding or fellowship among the staff encouraged teamwork that positively impacted their performance. Living with other

staff for an extended period also allowed the respondents to see their colleagues' capacity and the importance of respecting each other. On a personal note, the CCAs likewise learned that looking into one's mental health is vital; thus, debriefing and unwinding from time to time and developing an attitude that promotes work-life balance is essential. Finally, self-care was encouraged aside from debriefing, in the form of rest and recreation activities created for the staff and the children.

Discussion and Analysis

The study reveals that the three challenges that confronted the CCAs and affected the implementation of their programs and services during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic could be characterized as external or environmental, organizational, and personal challenges. The *external or environmental challenges* were those brought about by the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic which was beyond the control of the CCAs. Aside from the fear of contracting the virus, the imposed safety protocols, policies, and guidelines created further challenges for the CCAs, such as the difficulty of conducting fieldwork, processing children's documents, and bringing children to their medical and psychological appointments, among others. These external challenges, in turn, gave birth to *organizational challenges*. Examples were the need for additional space to ensure the practice of social distancing within the CCA premises and to be used as isolation rooms, staff dorms, and classrooms. Other concerns were the lack of staff such as teachers and resource persons for children's activities as volunteers were not allowed, the budget to purchase electronic gadgets for the children's schooling, adjustments for straight staff duty, etc. The pandemic also affected the CCA staff, who experienced *personal challenges* brought about by the changes in the agencies operations such as being away from their own families and how to ensure their physical and mental health while doing their duty. Obviously, the challenges experienced by the CCAs had a significant impact on the delivery of their programs and services. However, the study also reveals that these challenges acted as triggers that pushed the CCAs to create innovative responses or strategies that demonstrated their capability to adapt to a situation such as a pandemic.

The responses and strategies created by the CCAs were considered administrative and program interventions that helped mitigate the immediate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their programs and services. *Administrative interventions* for example included the creation of the CCAs' COVID-19 safety protocols, rearranging staff work assignments and schedules, changing and modifying administrative guidelines and policies, and budget realignment among others. *Program interventions*, on the other hand, included shifting from face-to-face to virtual meetings and case conferences, redesigning children's activities, coordinating and collaborating with the children's families and other partner agencies, and ensuring the children's health by providing their basic needs. These CCAs' responses are manifestations of the organizations' agility and ability to do contingency planning, crisis management, and program and personnel management during disasters and emergencies such as a pandemic. Likewise, the CCAs' creative and innovative responses can be considered as a validation of their commitment to their clients and their agencies' mission, vision, and goals, effective administrative management, as well as a high level of adherence to the DSWD guidelines for residential care facilities for children. However, the responses to the challenges were specific only to the immediate needs of the CCAs during the pandemic, which means that these are more of a reactive rather than a proactive solution.

Moreover, the CCAs' reflections are composed of both organizational and personal thoughts. The *organizational reflections* include the realization of the CCAs' level of preparedness (or lack thereof) during disasters and emergencies such as pandemics; the inadequacy of protocols and guidelines; the enormous backlogs in children's case management; the need for physical space; the importance of teamwork, collaboration, coordination, multitasking, and impact of children's academic shift to the daily operation of the agencies, etc. Among the *personal reflections* were the CCA staff's awareness of their strengths and weaknesses, valuing the importance of self-care, and validating their passion and commitment to how far they will go to uphold the best interest of the children they serve. The responses to the challenges experienced by the CCAs are outcomes of a personal and organizational reflective process which, if established, will benefit the CCAs.

The study also validated the experiences of some CCAs in the Philippines, as reported by Rappler, that children are not exempted from the psychological effects brought about by the pandemic, such as anxiety, depression, boredom, and the thought of what the future holds for them and their families. They must be helped to manage their emotions and continue their lives in the CCAs. The weight of the experiences of children-in-care is possibly magnified more than for children who are with their families. In addition, although some incidents of negative behavioral manifestations were noted among the children in the CCAs, most of the children managed to do well amidst the pandemic crisis. Like adults, children have no choice but to adapt to the changes in their surroundings.

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed that CCA protocols are not designed to combat the effects of an emergency as devastating and as prolonged as the pandemic. Historically, this type of institution or residential care facility thrived during past pandemics. Still, the lack of historical records and documentation for CCAs to refer to as a basis for their actions might have contributed to their challenges in the recent pandemic. This could be one of the reasons why even the DSWD fell behind in immediately issuing the needed implementing systems and protocols for CCAs Hence, the agencies' individualized and center-specific responses, especially during the earlier part of the pandemic. Despite the COVID-19 pandemic challenges faced by the CCAs, yet they have survived and even thrived. Using a strengths perspective, CCAs focused on tapping their staff and institutions' capabilities, such as their acquired knowledge and skills from previous training, experiences, and natural creativity.

The respondent CCAs' staff remained strong, flexible, and ingenious and thrived in the carrying out of their mandate. Their internal capacities, drive, and willingness to help the children in their care motivated them to do their jobs effectively. For CCAs' social workers to have conducted the most needed fieldwork during the pandemic meant that they were able to manage work-related risks, an essential skill in social work practice under all circumstances.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The challenges faced by small and medium CCAs during the COVID-19 pandemic were almost the same. They were composed of the old pre-pandemic concerns which were made more difficult by the pandemic, and the new concerns that emerged due to the pandemic. These combined challenges tested the CCAs' creativity to reflect and think critically. These also propelled them to employ innovative responses and strategies to keep their programs and services afloat and ensure the children's best interests under their care. The responses used

by the CCAs showed their resilience as an organization to withstand the adverse effects and impact brought by the pandemic. These likewise highlighted the managerial and administrative capacity of the CCAs and the commitment of the stakeholders (staff, children in care and their families, donors, volunteers, etc.) to respond to the plight of CNSPs.

Further, the study shows that reflective practice is vital in managing Child Caring Agencies regardless of a global crisis, as it could act as a foundation for transformative practice. This study did not reveal any form of structural or organizational oppression; nonetheless, its challenges somehow exposed the factors from within and outside the organization that affect a CCA's implementation of its programs and services. It also highlighted the respondent CCAs' organizational reflective processes, responses, and innovations which, if used critically, could lead toward transformative practice in an organization. For the CCAs to be transformative, they should advocate for new policies or changes in the organizational structures and processes based on their COVID-19 pandemic experiences. They should bring these issues (e.g., the slow processing of CDCLAA) to their Board of Directors and DSWD to change the current practices not only as a band-aid solution but as a long-term response to the needs of children in care in a post-COVID era. Serving in a primary setting of social work practice, CCAs' social workers and other child protection development workers have a vital role in ensuring the best interest of the children in care. They need to examine the present condition and take a critical stance to advocate for change within (micro-level) and outside (macro-level) of their organizations, an essential skill in transformative social work practice.

In conclusion, this study recommends the following to the CCAs, Association of Child Caring Agencies in the Philippines (ACAP), schools of social work, and the DSWD to: 1) have a thorough investigation to be conducted in all areas of CCA operations as an organization to determine the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on these institutions to revisit CCAs' programs and services, case management systems, and internal policies to ensure that these are still responding to the needs of the children-in-care (e.g., placing children in mainstream school, etc.); 2) review and advocate for the revision and creation of new DSWD guidelines and policies that will speed up the implementation of CCAs' programs and services especially during disasters and emergencies (e.g., processing of licensing and accreditation, provision of technical aid and resources to small private CCAs, case management guidelines, etc.); and 3) develop possible social work models or approaches in working with children in care during disasters and emergencies. This will be particularly helpful since the Philippines is geographically located in the Pacific Ring of Fire and the typhoon belt of the world where disasters and emergencies are a regular occurrence.

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Medical Social Workers' Social Well-being:
Tales from the Frontlines

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Abstract

Medical social workers are considered as frontline workers since they play an essential role in responding to health crises, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study's main objective was to determine the experiences, challenges, coping strategies, and insights on the future of the medical social workers working on the frontline of the COVID-19 pandemic. The data were obtained through online interviews with five medical social workers working in the Southern Philippine Medical Center, Davao City. The researchers used phenomenological qualitative research to determine the detailed stories and experiences of the Filipino medical social workers. In determining the research participants of this study, the researchers used a snowball sampling technique. The findings of this study revealed that medical social workers were physically and emotionally exhausted, discriminated against, and fearful due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They therefore utilized various self-care activities to overcome the loneliness and fear brought by the pandemic. A strong connection with their support system likewise aided in improving and sustaining their social well-being. Despite the health and safety risks, medical social workers remained dedicated to public service and steadfastly persevered to address the needs of the patients. This study will undoubtedly inspire future researchers to delve into the social workers' experiences in the field for future global outbreaks and insights. In addition, medical social workers may use this study as an opportunity to make the social work profession more widely known to the public. Future researchers may also undertake a similar investigation exploring other indicators of well-being.

Keywords: medical social workers, social well-being, qualitative, phenomenology, Davao City (Philippines)

Introduction

As agents of change, social workers are among the frontliners in the battle against the COVID-19 pandemic. They are needed to respond to unprecedented situations and must habituate quickly and substantially. Thus, the presence of social workers in the field is vital. The British Association of Social Workers (2020), however, adds that, due to their high risk of exposure to the virus, the challenge of maintaining their family and other social relationships while practicing social distancing or quarantine is a great obstacle to their social well-being, making workers feel isolated and lonely.

In Wuhan City, China, the World Health Organization (2020) announced that over 10% of the global infections were composed of healthcare workers who were more subjected to stress, isolation, and emotional distress of exceptional intensity. It is therefore vital to recognize them as individuals beyond their function as frontline responders and consider their societal role as parents, spouses, and offspring (Souadka et al., 2020).

In the Philippines, to address the large number of 1,694 confirmed COVID- 19 cases among health care workers as of April 30, 2020 (20% of the total number of cases), online training on infection and prevention control (IPC) was conducted among hospital workers and community health workers (World Health Organization, 2020). The Philippines' Department of Health strongly advocated compliance with at least the minimum health measures and protocols to prevent the collapse of health institutes and assist the healthcare workforce in responding to COVID-19 cases. Then Senate President Pro Tempore Ralph Recto initiated better pay for social workers to boost the morale of the frontline medical social workers, pointing out that social workers were crucial in the government's fight against COVID-19 (Torregoza, 2020).

In Davao City, the sudden escalation of virus cases was primarily associated with the residents' attendance at cockfighting matches in Matina Galleria. On April 4, 2020, the region was put under Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) to control people's movement in and out of the region (Chavez, 2020). In the report by the Department of Health, the total infected cases of healthcare workers in the Davao Region increased (Capistrano, 2020). Considering the escalating cases of infected people in the region, the role of medical social workers became very much in demand. This placed them under very high risk of exposure to the virus. Hence, not only their physical but also their social well-being needed to be protected.

During the pandemic, medical health workers which included medical social workers, also experienced various forms of challenges brought about by the right-wing nationalist populism that tremendously undermined the social work practice (Magnus, 2022). Noble and Otmman (2018, p. 117) said that social policies became "more selective, narrower in scope, and socially exclusive." For instance, Biana and Joaquin (2020) found out that, while interventions were being urged to deal with the psychological, emotional, and spiritual well-being of the general public, these should also have been urged for the healthcare workers. In the Philippines, Amnesty International (2021) pointed out that health workers were already voicing their concern regarding being overwhelmed with the lack of manpower and facilities. They were also alarmed because of their unpaid benefits and the shortage of medical-grade personal protective equipment (PPE). All these could be traced back to the lack of social policies to protect their needs during this health crisis. Faced with all these challenges in their workplace that hindered them from protecting themselves more effectively, the social well-being of the health workers was also heavily affected due to discrimination.

Kahambing (2021) reported that, during the pandemic, social workers faced multiple risks including vulnerability to the stress brought about by their COVID-19 response to people needing their service. This was supported by Redondo-Sama et al. (2020), claiming that social workers, as they responded to the needs of the vulnerable population of society, also experienced this vulnerability themselves. Social workers, especially those who worked with other healthcare providers in hospital or health facilities during the pandemic, became one of the vulnerable groups during the health crisis. Carascal et al. (2022) supported this as well by stating that many healthcare workers suffered from distress, uncertainty, dissociation, and

valuation of life. This affirms Tomacruz's (2020) statement that medical social workers faced multiple adversities during the pandemic which included interacting with patients in a time of quarantine and even causing alarm to communities due to their known exposure to high-risk individuals. All these confirmed the well-being issues that medical social workers faced during the pandemic, pointing to the need to explore their lived experiences to better understand what they encountered while in the line of duty.

Thus, this study explored the pandemic experiences of five medical social workers and the impact of the COVID-19 outbreak on their social well-being. Their coping mechanisms to deal with these challenges were also looked into in this paper. Considering the usefulness of this exploration, this study may serve as an example and a reference for future discussions and may encourage future researchers to explore other aspects of social workers' well-being.

The study's primary purpose was to determine the Filipino medical social workers' experiences amid the COVID-19 pandemic by investigating the experiences of five medical social workers in Davao City. The second purpose was to understand how they coped with the challenges of the pandemic. Moreover, this study aimed to discover the coping strategies they utilized to understand the struggles of those who had limited social interaction during the pandemic. Ultimately, this study unraveled possible expectations for the social work profession's future after the global health crisis. The researchers believe that, through this academic undertaking, social workers would be enlightened about the experiences of their colleagues in the profession, giving them the hope and encouragement to be continually dedicated in their line of work.

Considering the scarcity of studies on Filipino medical social workers and their lives during the pandemic, the researchers were given the impetus to conduct this study. This study is intended to fill the current research gap showing that few studies focus on the Filipino medical social workers' social well-being in the international, national, and local scene. Moreover, the researchers hope that this study can shed light on medical social workers' needs most especially when faced with various work-related crises.

Method

Research Design

The researchers used phenomenological qualitative research to determine the detailed stories and experiences of the Filipino medical social workers from Davao City and the effects of the pandemic on their social well-being. Hammarberg et al. (2016) stated that a phenomenological qualitative method is used in research to answer questions about experiences, meanings, and perspectives from the participants' standpoint through key informant interviews (KIIs). In this study, the researchers set aside their ideas about the phenomenon to understand the participants' lived experiences from the point of view of the subjects.

Research Participants

In this study, the snowball sampling technique, a non-probability type of sampling, was used in determining the five Filipino medical social workers in Davao City who were to be part of the pool of research participants. The researchers decided to choose only five participants

in order to have a closer inquiry into medical social workers' lives during the pandemic. This was based upon the recommendation of Crouch and McKenzie (2006) that having less than 20 participants in qualitative research helps a researcher build and maintain a close relationship with them and thus improve the "open" and "frank" exchange of information.

Due to some challenges in purposively choosing participants for this study, the researchers decided to employ snowball sampling to determine the five participants, aged 25 to 35 years old, for the interviews. Snowball sampling is suited for a hard-to-reach population, as in this case, since the researchers needed to observe the medical protocols of the hospitals where the participants were employed. The researchers likewise based the choice of this sampling technique on the study of Gever and Okoro (2020), which revealed that snowball sampling is recommended when the participants cannot be strictly delimited or detailed. Given the number of participants considered for this study, it must be noted that the experiences discussed herein are not representative of the entire population of Filipino medical social workers.

Data Analysis

After the interviews with the selected participants, the researchers transcribed and translated the responses. Through the help of a data analyst, who is an expert on qualitative data analysis, the researchers were able to come up with codes and themes that were then categorized per research question. Verbatim responses were used as support to the identified themes, and core ideas were also determined by the data analyst to aid the researchers in interpreting the themes more meaningfully. All thematic categorization and data interpretations were reviewed by the data analyst to ensure accuracy of qualitative data processing.

Results and Discussion

Experiences of Medical Social Workers Amidst the Pandemic

Due to the pandemic, medical social workers experienced a variety of challenges such as emotional difficulties in their job and responsibilities, as well as increased workloads, shifts, and adjustment to the new normal.

Fear Brought by Uncertainties. The participants expressed that they developed fear due to the ongoing pandemic. Fear became a common emotional reaction because the pandemic brought challenges never encountered before. Fear was also felt because the unseen virus could infect anyone, including their families. Participant 5 said,

> "*What we felt was fear because we don't know when we can have that virus and anytime we can be infected.*"

This fear was rooted in the surge in cases globally, most especially in the Philippines, as the COVID-19 outbreak grabbed news headlines throughout the world. The virus was new, fast-spreading and had a death rate of around 2% between March and April 2020, with numerous unknowns regarding its origins, nature, and course. As the number of COVID-19 infections and fatalities continued to rise (Taylor, 2020), along with the spread of news indicating the increase of cases in the community, most participants expressed that they experienced fear.

Because of the ongoing pandemic situation, the public, especially the medical frontliners, became more anxious and worried. The COVID-19 pandemic had far-reaching and unprecedented economic and emotional ramifications throughout the world, having a tremendous psychological impact on everyone around the globe. Fear was one of the psychological aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic (Pakpour & Griffiths, 2020). Deacon et al. (2020) said that, when fear is excessive, the effects could be detrimental at both the individual level (e.g., mental health problems, such as phobia and social anxiety) and the social level. This supports why Participant 2 mentioned, "I experienced anxiety due to the new virus." Participant 3 also said,

> "*Though we seldom interact with patients, there comes a time that my co-worker tested positive to COVID, so it causes us anxiety and other psychological effects, and we are also emotionally disturbed.*"

Based on the responses, it can be gleaned that Participants 2 and 3 felt fear as they continued to provide service to the community amidst the pandemic. For them, the uncertainty of the prevailing situation caused and heightened the anxiety and stress they experienced.

Close Exposure to Serious Physical and Mental Tolls of the Disease

Part of a medical social worker's job is to assess patients and their family members to support their needs. In this study, the participants took care of the family tracing of the unclaimed bodies of COVID-19 fatalities. Thus, the participants witnessed the severity of the situation firsthand. Medical social workers demonstrated a strong sense of responsibility and concerted effort to alleviate patients' suffering despite the challenges, such as working in a completely new environment, experiencing physical exhaustion from heavy workloads and the burden of wearing protective gear, facing the fear of becoming infected and infecting others, and having a sense of powerlessness in dealing with patients' conditions. Participant 1 expressed,

> "*Working in a COVID hospital is fearful. We have developed fear in dealing with our clients, for we all know that it can be transmitted through sneezing, talking, and coughing and knowing that we still don't have the equipment to protect ourselves.*"

With all of this, all frontline workers—including medical social workers—also need constant support and upliftment to enable them to perform their tasks adequately. Comprehensive support is needed for frontline healthcare providers, including sufficient personal protective equipment, reasonable work schedules, effective communication, monitoring and supervision of infection control, and professional psychological support (Golightley & Holloway, 2020).

According to Vizheh et al. (2020), frontline healthcare providers providing care and treatment to patients with COVID-19 have greater risks of mental health problems such as anxiety, depression, insomnia, and stress because they are directly exposed to the situation. As Participant 5 pointed out,

> *"It is very frightening to watch patients suffering, struggling to breathe, isolated and those hospital staff with their PPE's. You will be very anxious and scared because you can see it closely."*

Emotional, psychological, and social well-being are all part of mental health. Mental health also has an impact on the way people think, feel, and act. It also influences how people deal with stress, interact with others, and make good decisions.

Concern for their Safety and That of Their Families. Medical social workers' concern for their own safety and that of their families at home sharply increased due to their exposure to the virus during their interactions with clients, especially those who were not following the required health protocols. This was a concern of Participant 4, who stated that,

> *"I am afraid of being the carrier of the said virus, and I may be the reason to transmit it to one of my family members or to other people as well."*

Following the protocols such as social distancing and wearing of facemasks was crucial at that time. Complacency, such as ignoring the government's measures to slow the spread of the coronavirus or issuing reckless policies that ignore the risks, also posed potential harm to individuals and society. Humphreys (2020) stated that, with infectious illnesses like COVID-19 accounting for over 25% of world fatalities each year, the public health system must employ every available and feasible preventative approach and epidemic management method to avoid disease transmission.

Proper wearing of facemasks was deemed one way to help mitigate the spread of the disease. Facemasks were seen as a means to guard against various respiratory illnesses that are transferred by droplets, such as the coronavirus and the flu. A facemask would prevent such droplets from coming into contact with one's face or lips and thereby entering the body (Adalja, 2020).

In addition, social distancing, frequent handwashing, observing cough/sneeze etiquette, practicing appropriate tissue usage and disposal, avoiding touching one's face, and respecting others were personal responsibilities that all individuals were enjoined to do. As people could spread the virus even if they were not ill or were unaware that they had been infected, maintaining a safe distance between oneself and others was considered a wise practice and one of the most effective ways to avoid contagion with the COVID-19 virus.

Practice of the Profession Became More Challenging. The nature of social work practice became more challenging due to the pandemic, as changes in work arrangements and schedules interrupted the daily practice of the profession. Adjustments in how interactions were done to comply with health and safety protocols made daily transactions difficult because extra care was required. For Participant 1, these changes were challenges to face during the pandemic as well.

> *"There are also changes in the schedule of our work. We adopt a skeletal work schedule where not all of us are required to go to the office and some of us are working at home. As of now, we*

> *struggle when it comes to interviewing our clients due to safety protocol."*

The COVID-19 pandemic had many consequences for frontline and non-frontline workers, such as greater stress, heavier workloads, new workstreams, and increased caregiving obligations. COVID-19 also prompted many workers to rapidly shift to working from home.

As mentioned above, it was a major adjustment for the participants like Participant 1 to transition to a new normal, especially in delivering their services in situations where they needed to closely interact with their clients to have an intensive conversation and to assess their needs accordingly. Participant 5 expressed this concern in this way.

> *"The struggle is that we really want them to fully understand what we are trying to imply but, because of the barriers, some clients were unable to understand or there's a need for us to repeat the instructions."*

In the medical social work profession, communication is vital and complex, a give-and-take process, and disruptions at any point in the cycle could prevent understanding from being achieved. A phone call, drop-in guests, distances between individuals, barriers (e.g., walls), and static on the radio are all examples of physical distractions that could detract from the efficacy of communication (Lunenburg, 2011).

Desire to Continue Service despite the Challenges. Amidst these challenges, there is a great need for the services of social workers in the medical setting. All the participants in this study still expressed willingness to render their services even if risk and fear now come with the job. Driven by passion and dedication to serve people, the participants did not let COVID-19 stop them from delivering their services and care to their clientele. Instead, their institutions and departments created alternatives to allow them to continue their services as safely as possible. In fact, the participants thought more about their job than their fear. Their passion and determination to help those in need motivated them to do more and serve people. They demonstrated their desire to help even if it meant risking their lives. Participant 5 assured,

> *"Fear is there and it is difficult to face the reality that we are in but personally, I am thinking of those people that need my intervention, my service. The service in medical settings should not stop because there's a lot of sick people during this pandemic. For me, you should really embrace the situation and use precautions. The happiness when I help someone while doing my service will also help eradicate the fear."*

Despite the obstacles and struggles brought about by the changes that have occurred because of the pandemic, these medical social workers continue to endeavor to render the services that the people need and deserve.

Coping Strategies of Medical Social Workers with the Challenges of the Pandemic

The well-being of medical social workers was greatly affected by the pandemic. In order to combat its negative effects, coping strategies such as complying with health and safety regulations, maintaining solid connections with support systems, and practicing self-care became essential. While medical social workers adhered to all health and safety standards when providing services to their clients, their support systems—including family, peers, friends, and co-workers—played equally critical roles in providing them with moral and emotional support. Furthermore, despite the limitations brought by the pandemic, medical social workers practiced self-care and participated in enjoyable activities to alleviate the stress they were experiencing. These themes are discussed below.

Adherence to Health and Safety Protocols. The participants shared about utilizing coping strategies such as putting protocols in place to ensure the safety of everyone, using alternative means of interacting with clients, and employing extra precautions. These were essential in lowering the risks and worry of getting infected with the COVID-19 virus. Participant 4 expressed that following the protocols helped a lot.

> *"I follow the protocols such as wearing a face mask, face shield, and social distance. For me, it's a strategy when you follow the protocols and rules of the agency you're working at."*

According to the World Health Organization (2020), COVID-19 infection prevention for health workers necessitated a multi-pronged integrated strategy of Infection Prevention and Control (IPC) and Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) procedures. The WHO recommended that all healthcare institutions establish and implement IPS and OHS protocols to ensure the safety of their health workers.

Medical social workers also employed extra precautions, especially when coming from work, to prevent possible transmission of the virus to others. According to Howard et al. (2022), limiting infected individuals' direct interactions by physical distancing and other measures lowering the transmission probability per contact were two effective strategies in reducing the spread of the disease. Additionally, when compliance with public mask-wearing was high, it was found to be most effective and efficient in preventing the virus from spreading.

Support System. From the data obtained, the support systems of the participants in this study were composed of their family, friends, peers, and co-workers. The family was seen as the participants' primary support system. According to Hawryluck et al. (2004), in crises, rather than severing social relationships as part of an imposed quarantine or isolation strategy, there is a need for well-built social relationships—as was seen in the experience of the medical social workers who underwent the COVID-19 pandemic. As Participant 4 shared,

> *"At first, it was a struggle for me to overcome the stress, struggles, and anxieties I experienced. But, it took me months to overcome it. There were times that I chose to isolate myself and stay in my bedroom, and I don't want anybody to talk to. But, because of my family, I overcame it. What we usually do is, we do stress debriefing - talk about our experiences for*

> *the entire week, which eases the struggles that we encounter throughout the week."*

In fact, maintaining meaningful and positive social connections boosts health (Cacioppo & Cacioppo, 2015). According to Williams (2019), too, socializing is the key to good health. The participants' friends and peers served as their secondary support system, which helped maintain their mental and physical well- being. Participants 1, 2, and 5 also considered their co-workers as their support system because the latter also provided affirmation that others were going through the same challenges along with them. As Blake et al. (2020) stated, psychosocial support requires developing a psychologically safe environment, strong leadership, and effective management plans for workers' well-being, positive communications, and strong team support. Such a working environment would enhance individual resilience and allow self-compassion and self-care. Participant 1 described it in this way,

> *"My colleagues are my support system. If everyone is present and does not show laziness or there is no discouragement, in effect I'm also motivated to work."*

The COVID-19 pandemic inevitably hampered social interactions. However, medical social workers ensured that, despite the outbreak, they remained connected with their support systems. Although physical interactions were less frequent, they found other methods to stay in touch with their family members, friends, and peers. Maintaining strong and effective communication with their support systems contributed to reducing the stress caused by the pandemic.

Engagement in Self-care and Enjoyable Activities. From the data obtained, there were three core ideas under this theme. Participants engaged in physical activities that promoted health, such as exercise. Additionally, they made time for enjoyable activities that served as stress-relievers, such as shopping, using social media, eating, and watching movies. As mentioned in the Inaugural Conference of the International Center for Research, self-care is one strategy in uplifting individuals' social well-being (Riegel et al., 2020). Engaging in self-care activities helped the participants in battling the stresses brought by this pandemic. This is also supported by the Well-being Theory of Seligman, which states that engagement is an act of becoming highly interested, absorbed, and focused on life activities. One of these activities is the use of social media. Participant 4 shared how social media helped him, although he did emphasize to be careful with the use of it during the pandemic.

> *"I use social media because we can learn a lot from social media. But, we also have to make sure that we choose the right [content] to believe in. Also, I try other coping mechanisms such as learning new hobbies, eating, and trying different ways of entertainment."*

Boosting immunity by taking vitamins and flu vaccine shots also served as an effective self-care strategy for medical social workers. According to Murni et al. (2021), one of the most significant measures in preventing COVID-19-related morbidity and mortality was to have a healthy immune system. This strategy helped the participants, particularly Participants 2, 3, and 5, in combating the virus and preventing them from getting infected with it.

As mentioned, the COVID-19 pandemic caused heightened anxiety among medical social workers. They were facing a difficult situation which placed them at risk, leading to fear of acquiring the disease themselves and infecting others, especially their loved ones. Among the strategies for alleviating such stressful conditions was by engaging in activities that were not only enjoyable but healthful as well. Thus, having a strong immune system helped the participants to reduce the risks of getting infected while adhering to health and safety protocols. For example, Participant 2 prioritized his health to enable him to help the clientele effectively. He mentioned, *"I'm making sure that I'm healthy. I take vitamins and have the flu vaccine."*

The coping strategies employed by the medical social workers interviewed in this paper go back to the Empowerment Theory in the practice of social work. For the Virginia Commonwealth University (2021), empowerment is vital in social work. Therefore, social workers strive very hard to empower society and its members. However, social workers also need empowerment themselves, more so at crucial times such as the pandemic. As previously discussed, these medical social workers experienced helplessness when they first encountered the pandemic. They felt like they were facing so many uncertainties during the initial outbreak, so they felt sad and confused for themselves and their families. This is where social policies to protect the well-being of frontliners, including medical social workers, come into play as the government could create more programs to safeguard their physical, mental, emotional, and social condition as they carry out their functions. As related to the Empowerment Theory, the lack of equitable policies during the pandemic may be considered a "power block" that hindered medical social workers from achieving better social well-being amidst the health crisis.

Insights and Expectations on the Future of Social Work after COVID-19

Medical social workers were among those at the frontline of the pandemic battle, working around the clock. As a result, medical social workers anticipate that their profession and the vital role they serve in society will now be more recognized by the public. Even though the COVID-19 pandemic placed great demands on the workers' physical, social, and economic well-being, it did not stop them from staying true to their oath of service. Social workers also expect that the pandemic experience has strengthened the connection they built with the other fields of social work and the shared commitment to continue excellent public service. These themes are discussed in the following sections of the analysis.

Social Work as a Profession Serves a Key Role in Society. The findings show that the participants were frontliners who provided assistance, support, and guidance to patients and medical workers during the pandemic. Participant 2 highlighted the important functions of a medical social worker.

> *"Although we don't directly see our patients, we help our patients by facilitating their needed resources. For example, (for) COVID patients who have no watchers, what we do is we assist them by buying their medicines and other supplies. We also do the family tracing, especially on those patients who have no watchers. We also manage their hospital bills, so medical social workers are vital in this pandemic battle."*

According to Bright (2020), medical social workers did play a critical role in this crisis. Notwithstanding the newness of the virus, the profession was highly adept at managing difficulties, with training to address everything from individual fears to global policy coordination.

Recognition of the Value of Social Work. Based on the findings of this study, all the participants felt that the roles of medical social workers during the pandemic were undervalued. They did not get as much recognition as doctors and nurses did, and many people may not have been aware of how vital their duties are in the medical field. As Participant 2 narrated,

> "*Doctors and nurses are not the only frontliners affected by the pandemic. Some of them wonder what the role of a medical social worker is, and they believe that social workers only work in DSWD. But they don't know social workers are also in the medical field working as a frontliner.*"

A social worker's impact on their client, community, or nation deeply resonates beyond the initial interaction. It may reappear as a vital component during crisis situations in the future, like the recent pandemic (Matthews, 2020). Following the COVID-19 experience, medical social workers hope that the public will give more appreciation and attention to the profession for their service to the people. This is what Participant 3 hopes for.

> *"I hope that the people will also recognize medical social workers, apart from the typical social worker we see in DSWD or community workers, since the service we do here in the hospital is critical."*

Passion, Dedication, and Commitment to the Profession Keep Social Workers Going. Medical social workers believe that their service to the people must not end. Despite the challenges during the pandemic, social workers will continue serving the public earnestly in the future. Participant 4 expressed,

> *"Passion is for a social worker and for the profession, D for dedication to my career, and C for compassion and commitment as a Medical Social Worker."*

Participant 5 added, *"Putting the Social Work profession in my heart rather than my mind makes me realize how valuable my work is to the clients."*

In spite of the medical social workers' best efforts, the virus continued to spread and impact the workers' well-being well into 2022. Nevertheless, amidst the rapid changes and uncertainty, most medical social workers were able to turn challenges into new opportunities for service during the pandemic. With a mission to "enhance human well-being and help meet the basic needs of all people" (NASW, 2022), medical social work is genuinely a profession rooted in its oath of service.

Unity among Social Workers from Different Fields must be Strengthened. Based on the findings, despite social workers from different fields having different work conditions and expertise, working alongside one another in the middle of a pandemic brought them closer

together. Thus, the differences in terms of experiences and challenges should ideally serve as a unifying factor for all those in the social work profession. Participant 4 voiced this hope,

> *"The coordination and respect in the other field of social work. I hope the relationship we build with them while working on this pandemic will be strengthened, and we will be more united even after this crisis. I expect there will be no more selfish times when working with other social workers in different fields."*

Frontline medical workers endured unprecedented stressors because of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the light of these constraints, unity has become both more crucial and more challenging. Fortunately, various cases of naturally transpiring assistance appeared at medical institutions, including situations in which people made the effort to operate together during the crisis who may not have done so under 'natural' conditions (Matthews, 2020). Medical social workers are looking forward to the continuity of this strengthened relationship with the other fields of social work.

The themes that emerged in this study revolved around the coping strategies of medical social workers as related to the Cognitive Development Theory by Vygotsky (2015), which highlights that a support system, self-care, and other pleasant activities will help workers have lower anxiety levels. The social connection is therefore deemed essential to help enhance physical, mental, and social well-being. For when workers feel socially connected, it will create positive emotions and satisfaction—and in the case of the medical social work profession, a more empowered, efficient, and committed force to bolster the frontlines in future crises.

Conclusion

As the Philippines continues to be vigilant in its battle against the deadly COVID-19 virus, medical social workers on the frontline stationed in COVID-dedicated hospitals remain steadfast in their commitment to providing frontline services to patients and their families despite the continuing health and safety risks involved.

Going through this crisis was indeed not easy for all who have endured it. The lives of medical social workers were drastically changed due to forced isolation from their families and friends, shifts in their living arrangements, and being exposed to the severe physical and mental toll of working amidst this disease. However, despite these risks and the fear surrounding their job, medical social workers continued to render their services.

In the face of all the challenges brought on by the pandemic, medical social workers urge the public to not let down their guard concerning possible future health crises. People must stop downplaying the COVID-19 situation and other potential health risks to the point of calling it a conspiracy, saying this is all a scam. The medical social workers who, with their valiant efforts, continue to contribute and fulfill their mandate have shown how significant the profession is in serving the country.

The researchers of this study discovered how demanding it is to work in such a complex job, as evidenced in the results. The bravery and enthusiasm of the study participants can serve as both an inspiration and a mirror for the future careers of social workers. Hearing about

their experiences and struggles made the researchers realize just how dire the situation was during the pandemic, with the strong likelihood that the situation would have been more chaotic without the valiant stand of the frontline soldiers. They hope for the public as well as the national government to recognize and appreciate the efforts of medical social workers, who do not deserve to risk their lives while receiving only a meager reward and struggling to overcome their challenges by employing a variety of coping strategies.

This study provides a deeper and more precise understanding of the experiences, challenges, and coping strategies of medical social workers working on the frontline of the COVID-19 pandemic—as well as insights on the future of this profession. Using phenomenological analysis to understand the medical social workers' lived experiences, the interesting, shared accounts of the five medical social workers in this study can undoubtedly inspire future researchers to delve into the needs and prospects of the social work profession going forward. The researchers hope that this study becomes a wakeup call for policymakers and healthcare administrations to craft and implement programs that can help address medical social workers' well-being amidst possible future global health crises.

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Social Workers' Roles, Challenges, and Lessons Learned During the COVID-19 Pandemic in Albay, Bicol

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has adversely changed people's lives on a global scale. Each government has implemented protocols to prevent and contain the transmission of the virus resulting in the limited movement of people and stoppage of many activities. Consequently, the restrictions caused by the pandemic have affected the lives of people not only in the economic sphere but in the physical, psychological, and social aspects as well. Social workers are at the frontline in combating the negative impacts of this crisis. This qualitative research explored the roles, challenges, and lessons learned by social workers in the Province of Albay, Bicol, as they responded to the client's needs and problems during the pandemic. The researchers conducted in-depth interviews with 20 purposively selected social workers employed in different settings. Through the case studies and thematic analysis, this study revealed that social workers in Albay performed diverse roles, namely: resource provider, facilitator, social broker, coordinator, and educator. The challenges were categorized into physical, psychological, and social aspects. Despite the challenges, social workers acquired significant learnings and insights in their personal and professional development, which include a stronger commitment to the profession's principles and ethical values, the development of social work competencies, and the strengthening of self-care management.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, social work practice, reflection, lessons learned, competencies, professional development, self-care management

Introduction

The onslaught of the *novel coronavirus,* also known as COVID-19, has radically changed millions of lives across the globe. Compared to other diseases, COVID-19 is more transmissible, prone to mutations, and causes a 1 to 9% mortality rate (Johns Hopkins University & Medicine, 2020). Thus, a strategy used by many countries to contain the virus' transmission was to impose lockdowns and community quarantines resulting in the stoppage of various economic activities and the limited movement of people and goods. Hence, the COVID-19 pandemic has slowed down the economy of nations (OECD Interim Economic Assessment, 2020), including the Philippines.

In the Bicol Region, the first three cases of COVID-19 were reported in the Province of Albay (Department of Health, 2020). Moreover, Albay was identified as one of the provinces in the region with the highest number of confirmed cases. Therefore, it was placed under a

strict community quarantine in March 2020, prohibiting people from going outside their homes and forcing the province to close its borders. The lockdown resulted in the closure of various business establishments, schools, and markets, affecting the living conditions of Albayanos. In such times of social, economic, and health crisis, social workers are at the forefront.

The Social Amelioration Program (SAP) implemented by the National Government through the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) was one of the major interventions to address the needs and problems of the most affected individuals in areas under community quarantine, which included the Province of Albay. This program called upon the competencies of social workers, particularly in assessing the well-being of people. Furthermore, social workers were involved in facilitating and monitoring the distribution of assistance to the vulnerable sectors, including solo parents, the elderly, persons with disabilities, distressed overseas Filipinos, homeless families, pregnant and lactating women, and indigenous peoples (DSWD, 2020). In its implementation, practitioners coordinated with the Local Government Units to ensure an effective and efficient process. Social workers employed in the different local social welfare and development offices participated in its delivery. Some of them shared that they facilitated meetings with partner stakeholders to discuss strategies and interventions as part of the planning process. As they facilitated, they tackled relevant issues with local executives, community leaders, and partner non-government organization personnel on how they could expedite the provision of services and support to people. Aside from material resources, some Albayano social workers provided psychosocial interventions for those individuals who experienced stress, depression, and anxiety due to COVID-19. They conducted psychological first aid and other psychosocial support mechanisms through phone calls and the use of Messenger, Google Meet and Zoom Videoconferencing platforms, among others. Furthermore, social workers in hospitals performed a crucial role in helping medical practitioners educate the public regarding relevant pandemic-related information and health protocols.

The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (2020) asserted that a well-supported, equipped, protected, and empowered social service workforce is essential in mitigating the damaging effects of the pandemic. The primary mission of the social work profession is to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic and complex needs of all people, particularly those who are the vulnerable, oppressed, and disadvantaged (National Association of Social Workers, 1996). They are trained in serving various clients and sectors and are employed in different settings, including but not limited to public offices, private organizations, academic institutions, mental health institutions, and hospitals. Social workers perform different functions considering that social realities are complex and multidimensional. Their actions focus on responding to economic fallout, social problems, and social change, which require extensive rehabilitation, restoration, prevention, and developmental interventions.

Roles of Social Workers amidst Public Emergencies and the COVID-19 Pandemic

Social workers perform fundamental roles in disaster rescue, recovery, and prevention. Despite the presence of various health professionals, social workers provide a unique service to people in times of public emergency (Cooper & Biggs, 2014; Brinkerhoff, 2014 as cited in Okafor, 2021). These pieces of literature recognize the crucial roles of social workers in responding to the impact of a disaster, such as the current health crisis that is present on a global scale. Social workers deliver interventions that can address the biological, psychological, and social needs and concerns of the population. Park and Lee (2015) articulated that the role of social work in

public emergencies appears complex and highly dependent on the preparedness and capacity of the practitioners to perform the tasks and functions effectively amidst an unpredictable and infectious environment. Therefore, their commitment to protecting human rights and welfare is profound as they aim to respond and provide appropriate actions to the multilayered challenges caused by the pandemic. Petruzzi et al. (2019) highlight that social workers are at the forefront of crisis intervention, offering social support through crisis resolution. They do not only respond to health concerns but also utilize their skills and resources to help restore an individual's functioning. Specifically, they respond to people's financial and food provision needs. Moreover, they promote disease prevention and educate the population regarding crisis-related information.

These roles became far more complex with the emergence of COVID-19. The British Association of Social Workers (2020) affirmed that social workers filled a unique position during this public health emergency, such as offering psychosocial health support and educating the larger community. Significantly, they formed the core structure of the service system that maintained the well-being of a population by providing support and assistance during a crisis (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2020; Dauti et al., 2020; Okafor, 2021; Petruzzi et al., 2020; Sukmana & Abidin, 2020; Walter-McCabe, 2020). Social workers played a critical role, and despite the newness of this virus, the profession was highly adept at managing it (Bright, 2020). They ensured that the vulnerable sectors such as children, the elderly, and persons-with-disabilities were safeguarded from harm. Furthermore, social workers served as guides and advocates by connecting clients with a wide range of health and social services to address the devastating impacts of COVID-19. They disseminated accurate information from trusted sources and helped address anxiety and other concerns resulting from the public health crisis (International Federation of Social Workers, 2020).

Social Workers' Challenges during COVID-19

Like all other professionals, social workers were greatly affected by the pandemic. As social workers interacted with their social environment in the course of performing different roles and functions in addressing the pandemic's impact, they unavoidably experienced different physical, social, and psychological challenges. As frontline practitioners, they put their safety at risk to ensure that service delivery was fulfilled while adapting to substantially challenging working conditions (Abbas et al., 2020; Amadasun, 2020; Ashcroft et al., 2020; Banks et al., 2020; Chan et al., 2020; Holliday et al., 2020; Murenje & Porter, 2020). Social workers had to adapt to the new circumstances and respond to difficulties caused by a deadly biological phenomenon that was invisible yet affected the daily functioning of society (Domenilli, 2020). As a result, they experienced the impact of the pandemic in their own lives, homes, and workplaces while helping clients and communities.

Furthermore, technology emerged as a vital tool among social workers and welfare agencies to deliver services and perform their expected roles and functions. The COVID-19 situation forced several organizations to shift from in-person to distant and online services as part of the nation's effort to reduce the spread of the virus. This has resulted in additional challenges faced by social workers, particularly online coordination with large interdisciplinary teams and a lack of protocols to guide their work (Barsky, 2020). In addition, Dauti et al. (2020) asserted that social workers struggled with addressing the ethical provision of online services. Although social workers did resort to different telehealth services to provide intervention and

support individuals in managing their psychosocial needs, these did not hinder them from offering in-person provision of food, shelter, and general health care (Reitmeier, 2020). These realities, as presented in the above cited literature, pointed out the need to further explore the different challenges of social workers regarding service provision amidst COVID-19.

The Need to Explore Social Work Experiences during COVID-19

The rapid changes in society brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic have highlighted the need for the critically reflective practice among social workers due to far more complex problems, needs, and issues affecting individuals, families, groups, and communities. Some people and sectors cannot cope or adapt to the changing social, economic, and political landscapes, which can lead to problems in social functioning. As the environment changes, the social work profession has to evolve to remain relevant and responsive to the needs and problems of its clients. In a major crisis such as this global pandemic, social workers have to reflect on their experiences in practice to contribute evidence for policy enhancements, develop innovative ways of helping, and assert the integral role of the profession during emergencies and crises and towards social development.

The qualitative study of Redondo-Sama et al. (2020) explored the immediate responses of social workers among vulnerable groups in the first 15 days of the pandemic in Barcelona, Spain. Their study presented the interventions done with an improved communication channel that enabled a better understanding of the situation of individuals and families and addressed the most urgent social needs with particular attention to vulnerable sectors. Additionally, Kamrujjaman et al. (2018) used a qualitative approach to analyze the roles of social workers during disaster management in Indonesia. It revealed that the social workers' roles during the disaster phase included advocates, catalysts, volunteers, coordinators, and supervisors. As highlighted, practitioners encountered challenges such as the limited number of workers for a large population and a lack of practice experience.

Moreover, the study of Park and Lee (2015) focused on the experiences of foreign residents during the MERS outbreak in South Korea and presented the implications of such experiences to social work practice. The findings revealed that social workers played an integral role in society's response to the Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS) health threat, mainly assisting those needing social support and care. While it is crucial to investigate the roles of social workers, ethical challenges remain an area of concern. Banks et al. (2020), in collaboration with the International Federation of Social Workers, gained qualitative insights related to practice ethics. The study concludes that COVID-19 and measures to control its spread have restricted the services and responsibilities carried out by social workers while generating new needs and demands. As a result, social workers have struggled, but have also worked creatively, to respond to people's needs and respect their rights to privacy and participation.

The previously stated studies analyzed the roles and challenges of social workers during disasters and crises using the qualitative approach (De Vicente et al., 2020; Kamrujjaman et al., 2018; Park & Lee, 2015; Banks et al., 2020), which served as a guide as to how this study was designed and structured. This study differs in terms of scope and setting. Nevertheless, based on the materials found, the evolving roles and challenges of social workers and the lessons they gained from their experiences can be ascertained.

Although social workers are duty bound to fulfill several roles before, during, and after a health emergency (Gwynedd Mercy University, 2020), their roles are often overlooked and misinterpreted. Existing research has been focused on health professionals, and less is known about social workers on the frontline (Redondo-Sama et al., 2020). In addition, Collins (2007) argued that less attention had been placed in exploring how social workers deal with greater demands and find satisfaction and rewards at work. These situations resulted in this fundamental *question that this study aimed to answer: "What are the roles, challenges, and lessons learned of social workers as they respond to the needs and problems of their client sectors during the COVID – 19 crisis?"*

This study describes the significant roles of frontline social workers in this crisis, their challenges, and the lessons learned while performing these roles. The results of this study provide a better understanding of the social workers' experiences during the pandemic. No similar study has yet been conducted in the province of Albay to explore this topic. Thus, this study sought to contribute research-based findings about transformative social work practice by discussing the social workers' involvement and situations in responding to the pandemic. Transformative social work emphasizes how the present context can affect the way practitioners deal with the clients' needs and problems, and the insights and realizations they can draw from those experiences as a result of critical reflection. This work can serve as a basis for identifying appropriate services and developing approaches to address social workers' needs and concerns during a crisis.

Methods

This study used the qualitative approach through a case study method to systematically describe and interpret the responses gathered, which paved the way for generating diverse insights and experiences from the respondents. According to Crossman (2021), a qualitative study involves collecting and analyzing non-numerical data from the respondents to understand their roles, experiences, and other essential concepts.

The purposive sampling technique was used in the selection of the social worker respondents based on the following criteria: 1) employed in either a government office or non-government organization in Albay, Bicol Region; 2) in direct practice; 3) working during the COVID-19 pandemic; and 4) willing to participate in the study. Through this, 20 respondents were selected, 14 or 70% of whom were female, and 6 or 30% of whom were male. The respondents' ages range from 21 to 60 years. They work in various settings, including medical, child welfare, and government services. Regarding years of service, 12 have been working for at least 1 year and 5 months to 3 years, 5 have been working for 4 to 8 years, and 3 have been working for 20 years or more.

The pertinent data were collected through in-depth interviews, which were conducted online due to the limitations brought about by the pandemic. The researchers designed a semi-structured interview guide to obtain relevant data and information on the respondents' roles, challenges, and lessons learned during the pandemic. Open-ended questions allowed the respondents to express their ideas and suggestions. Such an interview was necessary to capture a rich and comprehensive narration, descriptions, and insights. In addition, it was helpful for further clarification and explanations regarding their responses. To obtain informed consent, the researchers discussed with the respondents the ethical considerations prior to the interview,

such as the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, integrity and transparency, and confidentiality.

Thematic analysis was used to interpret the collected data, thereby identifying common themes, topics, ideas, and patterns that repeatedly emerged from the responses. Smith and Firth (2011) defined thematic analysis as a method for analyzing qualitative data processes to identify patterns in information, such as commonalities and contrasts. The results of the analysis were shared with the respondents for validation.

Findings of the Study

Roles of Albayano Social Workers during COVID-19

Based on the conducted analysis, the following significant themes emerged as the roles of the study's respondents during the pandemic.

Theme 1: Resource Provider

The first key role refers to the direct provision of material assistance and resources to target clients, whether individuals or families, to reduce situational deficiencies and struggles caused by the pandemic. Such provision is based on carefully assessing the client's eligibility and situation.

The respondents' role as resource providers was highlighted during the implementation of the Social Amelioration Program (SAP), which was one of the primary government responses to help the most affected and underprivileged during the lockdown. The SAP had essentially become the main resource for the beneficiaries to sustain their needs during the pandemic. In addition, the social workers took part in the provision of cash subsidies to low-income families who were negatively impacted by the effects and repercussions of the pandemic.

As resource providers, the respondents carefully assessed the clients' needs to arrive at the most appropriate ways by which these needs could be met as part of the direct provision of assistance. Before providing the aid, the respondents conducted interviews to determine the individual's eligibility. Furthermore, some respondents identified themselves as paymasters of the program who took part in releasing cash aid to the beneficiaries. The respondents gathered the target beneficiaries in a designated place, facilitated the cash distribution process, and ensured that people lined up properly while observing and following the precautionary health measures.

> *In response to COVID-19, we served at the frontline as resource providers by distributing relief packages and financial assistance to those affected by the lockdown or enhanced community quarantine. In addition, we assisted in delivering food packs to almost all of the municipalities in Albay. I consider it as one of our core functions.*

Mendoza (2008) pointed out that resource provision is not limited to money or goods but includes other concrete services necessary to achieve the helping goals of the clients; hence, the administration of such programs is an essential and legitimate professional responsibility

of the social workers. It can be analyzed from the findings of this study that being a resource provider was one of the significant roles performed by Albayano social workers since clients needed urgent assistance during the pandemic. Furthermore, social workers' responsibilities were not limited to fighting against the spread of COVID-19 but also to ensuring the provision of essential items like basic needs.

Theme 2: Facilitator

The role of a facilitator denotes mobilizing a group of people and conducting meetings and activities. The respondents had to fulfill extensive duties to facilitate and deliver the services amidst the limitations caused by the public health crisis. Additionally, some respondents revealed that they facilitated the gathering of practitioners from their partner agencies through conducting meetings, activities, and other group sessions to discuss programs and services for their clientele sectors and formulate interventions to address their needs. During the pandemic, they had to find new strategies to meet the clients' needs. As mentioned by one respondent:

> *As a facilitator, my role focuses on gathering support from our partners in the private and public sectors to expedite the program implementation. For example, meetings with partners, such as Municipal Social Welfare and Development Office, Local Executive, and Barangay Heads on Social Service.*

Furthermore, some respondents assisted persons considered under monitoring and investigation for COVID-19. Additionally, for those who were stranded due to the lockdowns, they facilitated the Balik-Probinsya Program. They assisted clients during the quarantine period until they reached the quarantine facility and facilitated the provision of their physiological needs.

Social workers, being at the forefront in responding to the challenges of the pandemic, needed to perform the role of a facilitator through mobilizing communities, organizations, and groups and establishing connections between different systems of care set up by the government, non-government, and other stakeholders present in the community (Okafor, 2021). Based on the findings, respondents performed the said role by mobilizing groups of people and facilitating the process while complying with the health precautionary measures and restrictions. Furthermore, communications and collaboration with colleagues from other disciplines were adapted and sustained throughout the pandemic to ensure that the people benefitted from coordinated, holistic, and personalized support as much as possible (British Association of Social Workers, 2020).

Theme 3: Social Broker

Another critical role is that of the social broker, which highlights the respondents' involvement in making referrals to link clients or their families with additional resources and assistance, primarily to support their socioeconomic needs. In performing this task, they addressed the need for information related to the available resources, eligibility requirements, fees, and location of services. They did not simply provide information, however, but worked with partner agencies such as the Department of Social Welfare and Development, the Philippine Charity Sweepstakes Office, and the Office of the Vice President. Respondents who

were assigned in public and private hospitals worked directly with these agencies on the clients' behalf and assisted the clients to submit the requirements and documents needed for financial assistance. A respondent shared:

> *We refer our clients to partner agencies to provide necessary interventions for them and their families. In addition, we link them to appropriate agencies that could greatly help address their needs. Aside from referring them, it is also important to monitor if the assistance provided was effective.*

To perform the social broker role, the respondents assessed clients' needs and examined their capacities to access the most appropriate resources and services. Due to pandemic restrictions, they sent formal letters and necessary documents to partner agencies through email. Having no face-to-face contact with clients and partner agencies, some processes were conducted online or remotely using information technology and social media. Indeed, social workers worked with various individuals and stakeholders, driven by a deep commitment to social justice and human rights (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2020), to connect the clients to available services and resources that can address their needs and problems amidst the pandemic.

Theme 4: Coordinator

The key role of coordinator pertains to the respondents' task of communicating with partner stakeholders. During the pandemic period, coordination with the national government and the local government units was strengthened. The respondents were able to make a concerted effort to address issues related to the pandemic's impact, such as the lack of financial resources and limited access to food. It was found that coordinating with different local government units and partner agencies became one of their essential roles during the pandemic, considering that needs, issues, and problems should be dealt with collaboratively. As stated by one respondent,

> *We coordinate with government agencies and municipalities, especially with the delivery of food packs. We should be well-coordinated with these municipalities so they can be prepared. The social workers from municipalities, we coordinate with them in case there is medical assistance or any kind of assistance that can be given to the affected population.*

The respondents coordinated with partner agencies and municipalities for additional support to assist them in extending the needed services to individuals and families. Unlike in the social broker role, respondents did not work directly with the clients; no referrals occurred. Instead, they often worked with government agencies and local government units by recruiting social volunteers to deliver and provide aid to the people. The study affirmed that social workers served as a cornerstone in supporting community sustainability together with a multidisciplinary team and concerned organizations in addressing the negative impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Theme 5: Educator

The respondents took part in educating the people about the effects of COVID-19. As educators, they shared relevant information to help clients secure their health and safety against the threat of the virus. In addition, they helped in promoting disease prevention and providing pandemic-related information through sharing and posting on their social media accounts. Through their actions, individuals, groups, and communities in Albay were able to acquire information about COVID - 19 and gain ideas about healthy ways of living in a timely, accurate, and efficient manner. Aside from disseminating factual information and measures to mitigate the impact of the pandemic, some respondents taught the clients how to access services during the pandemic. As one respondent said:

> *We always perform the role of being an educator to our partner beneficiaries, so we conduct lectures and share relevant materials related to COVID-19 prevention and safety.*

The Australian Association of Social Workers (2020) emphasized that social workers have a unique position to advocate disease prevention efforts, including disseminating accurate information from trusted sources and helping address other concerns arising from this public health crisis. The respondents pointed out this critical role in raising awareness about the emerging crisis. Their role in educating the community was crucial as it helped minimize the spread of the virus through proper health measures.

Challenges Faced by Albayano Social Workers during COVID – 19

The respondents mentioned various difficulties in their work during the COVID-19 crisis. The challenges were presented in three identified themes, namely: physical, psychological and social aspects. The physical aspect pertains to the bodily challenges of social workers; the psychological aspect refers to the mental and emotional challenges, and the social aspect pertains to the interactional and relational issues encountered by the social workers.

Theme 1: Physical Challenges

Most respondents claimed that, during the pandemic, they performed additional duties because of the sudden shift in the work set-up. This resulted in the following physical challenges: 1) body strain; 2) physical fatigue and exhaustion; and 3) sickness such as migraine attacks, colds, cough, and allergies.

The respondents who worked during the pandemic experienced body strain. This was due to the shift in their work arrangements, particularly the implementation of a skeletal workforce and work-from-home scheme, insufficient human resources, and increased workloads and paperwork. As stated by one respondent:

> *The physicality is straining as we sometimes carry heavy loads of boxes when distributing relief assistance since we lack workforce.*

The respondents also had more extended working hours than before, especially during the implementation of the Social Amelioration Program. Even when they were scheduled to

rest at home, they still tended to work to meet the expected tasks. They expressed that the reduced time to rest caused them to often feel tired.

> *You must wake up early and go home late, especially when we were still preparing documents needed for SAP. Yes, we must beat the deadline to help the people, to provide financial aid. We were still working in the office even beyond the curfew hours.*

Additionally, the respondents experienced fatigue and exhaustion. They felt extreme tiredness and loss of strength due to a lack of rest and sleep, overwork, and stress. This jeopardized their health and safety, causing them to develop work-related muscle injuries and feel burned out, which impacted their work productivity.

Most respondents suffered from colds, cough, migraine attacks, and allergies while working during the pandemic. Trying to work with such ailments affected their focus as they could not effectively fulfill their tasks and functions. Becoming ill was inevitable because of the altered environmental conditions and increased work demands. A respondent mentioned:

> *When you have a sore throat and colds, it seems like you cannot sleep. It happened to me when I came home, and I have a sore throat and cold. I did not enter our room because I still have a 2-year-old child.*

Theme 2: Psychological Challenges

Based on the findings, the psychological challenges experienced by the respondents fell within two subthemes: anxiety and mental exhaustion.

Most respondents found themselves experiencing anxiety during the pandemic. They felt anxious about their safety and the demands of additional work-related tasks. Being on the frontline meant they had to serve a wide range of people and be exposed to the threat of COVID-19, particularly during service delivery. It caused them to worry excessively about their health as they were at heightened risk of acquiring the virus and unknowingly transmitting it to their families and others. As some respondents stated:

> *The fear was extreme, and I could not sleep. It took me until 3 a.m. thinking that the virus might infect me, and my family would be infected.*

> *If you have COVID-19, you will experience anxiety, thinking you are a carrier and can infect other people, especially your family. We do not know what will happen because it is unseen. The paranoia that everything you touch could bring you the virus. No matter how much we take precautions, there will always be a possibility to get infected.*

Mental exhaustion was another major psychological challenge among the respondents. They claimed that the additional workloads apart from their main assigned tasks did not only

affect them physically but took a toll on their mental health as well. The unfinished workloads and long-term stress made them feel overwhelmed and mentally exhausted. For instance, a respondent said:

> *On my part, even when I am about to sleep, I carry mental baggage due to having unfinished workloads. Therefore, you must wake up early to finish your work the following day. The mental exhaustion is brought about by the frustration of being helpless. You want to impart a change, but you are not allowed to or do not have the drive to do the tasks because of the pandemic. Moreover, you do not know when it will be over.*

Theme 3: Social Challenges

In the social aspect, the following subthemes were identified as major challenges: (1) limited interaction and contact with friends; (2) doubt and grievances from the clients; and (3) discrimination.

The respondents stated that, due to the health protocols that were implemented, their face-to-face interactions with clients, family, and friends became limited—driven by the fear of contracting and spreading the virus to their loved ones. Hence, they merely engaged with them online. As mentioned,

> *Communication with other people became limited. It is difficult, especially since we are social workers. We had to lessen our time interacting with our workmates and colleagues as we were protecting ourselves against COVID-19. With our family, whenever we arrive home, we need to limit our contact with them. It is difficult. You cannot talk with them because you are afraid that maybe you are a carrier.*

Another social challenge was dealing with clients' doubts and grievances. Since the respondents were involved in facilitating the distribution of cash assistance, they encountered some undesirable reactions from others. They received numerous complaints from those who were not qualified as beneficiaries. They heard negative feedback against them, and unsolicited comments accusing them of favoring some beneficiaries with connections. Worst of all, some questioned the respondents' credibility as social workers and blamed them for their ineligibility for financial assistance. As mentioned,

> *Not all people can appreciate our service. It is difficult to provide service because of the doubt of people and the community.*

> *I was dealing with people with diverse attitudes and aggressive clients. They were more intense because, number one, people are hungry as they do not have the chance to go to work. They were confused. There were aggressive because they wanted the assistance, yet they were disqualified based on the criteria.*

Furthermore, the respondents experienced discrimination and stigma. As mentioned by respondents employed in a hospital:

> *I experienced intimidation and discrimination during this pandemic since we are on the front line. The people were rude. There is a stigma that we are virus carriers, even if it is untrue. I observed that our family is being affected. They are being intimidated and humiliated.*
>
> *I sometimes experience discrimination, especially in our community. They would say I have COVID. I would disregard them. It was a waste of time to put up a fight.*

Discriminatory treatment towards the respondents included refusal to talk with them, neighbors expressing anger, gossiping, and spreading false information, causing other people to stay away from them.

Lessons Learned by Albayano Social Workers during COVID – 19

Given all these findings, social workers remained essential service providers in the pandemic. Although they stated that they faced numerous challenges, these did not discourage them; rather, the respondents revealed that they learned significant insights and lessons based on their experiences. Hence, these have strengthened their will to become more competent and responsive.

Lesson 1: Social workers must always have a strong commitment to the profession's principles and ethical values.

A strong commitment to the profession's values and principles guides the respondents in their professional actions and service provision. During the pandemic, they faced various obstacles and challenges that tested their steadfastness to work. A respondent said:

> *When we facilitate the Social Amelioration Program, people raised different concerns and complaints. No matter how aggressive and mad the beneficiaries were, we must maintain the ethical standards of social work. We should remind ourselves of the social work principles like acceptance and non-judgmental attitude. Indeed, values are important. Those were the experiences I have learned deeper.*
>
> *Always hold on to social work principles and life principles.*

The respondents reported that they managed to serve the people no matter how challenging it was to work with a large population amidst a risky situation. As one respondent mentioned:

> *I am still dedicated to working because this is my passion. Some people are working for the salary. It happens. If you are dedicated*

> *to your work, regardless of any pandemic and challenge, work from your heart.*

Lesson 2: Continuous development of social work knowledge, skills, and attitudes is imperative amidst a crisis.

The respondents realized the importance of developing additional knowledge regarding program administration and policy guidelines, as in the case of the Social Amelioration Program. For instance, based on the responses to this study, some aggressive clients attacked workers verbally for telling them that they were unqualified to receive cash grants.

> *It is important because there are programs from the national government implemented in local government units. Therefore, it is necessary to understand the guidelines so we can explain them to clients.*

In terms of skills, the respondents shared insights regarding innovation, time management, and interviewing. The respondents emphasized the importance of innovation to ensure that all services and programs are still delivered, using alternative techniques as needed. As stated by the respondents:

> *Whatever difficulties we may experience in the field, we must improve and strengthen our skills to make innovative strategies since we handle people in crisis and difficult situations. We must know and think of alternative solutions in response to difficulties in our environment. It might not be easy to address and manage concerns and challenges if we are not good at thinking of strategies or alternatives. There should always be a plan A, B, and C until the right and accurate decision is reached.*
>
> *Another vital skill that the respondents learned was time management. As mentioned,*
>
> *I learned to set priorities, so I can avoid cramming.*
>
> *There were many clients, so you must manage your time properly to address the needs.*

Moreover, the respondents revealed the need to practice quality interviewing skills when interacting with a client, even on a virtual platform. Complete and accurate information had to be gathered so that the client's needs could be defined and addressed effectively.

In terms of attitude, the respondents learned to enhance and exercise patience, understanding, respect, and optimism. Patience and deep understanding were commonly practiced toward clients with uncontrollable behavior. Despite adverse criticism from the public, excessive workload, tiredness, and other obstacles, the respondents were able to remain calm and manage their emotions appropriately. They shared:

> *Unfathomable patience is needed in the type of work we are doing. Although we felt exhausted and drowsy sometimes, we still bear beautiful smiles when dealing with people.*

> *During our SAP days, we had aggressive clients who shouted at us in front of other people and my coworkers. The lesson for me is patience because, in this profession, you are defeated if you have no patience. Social workers are the first to adjust. If you are not used to understanding people, you are not used to making adjustments. We should always put the welfare of people first.*

Additionally, being respectful was another attitude manifested because the respondents were working with diverse groups of people. Such respect entails accepting someone for who they are, regardless of socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, or gender. Respect promotes trust and a sense of safety, which is significant in building helping relationships with clients.

Another attitude that respondents practiced during the pandemic was optimism. It served as their strength to cope with the difficulties they faced. As they said:

> *What I do is to think positively. I think this is not forever; everything happening now is not for a lifetime. Time will come, these challenges will end soon.*

> *One learning I hold on to until now is to always be positive. As social workers, our work is not ordinary. We are dealing with different kinds of people with different behaviors. We are implementing different programs and services and coordinating with different agencies. These tasks are not ordinary and cannot be done by other professionals. We are trained. If you get easily affected, and you easily question negative circumstances, chances are, it may bring you down. Nevertheless, always be positive because if you are embracing positivity, your passion will spark. You will work harder to help people in need. It will start your motivation every day to work.*

Moreover, adaptability and flexibility were important qualities during the pandemic and in all similar crisis situations. These are what enable the respondents to address and deal with changes that may arise in the course of their work. Being prepared to deal with such unforeseen circumstances is essential. As a respondent stated:

> *As professionals and individuals, we should always be flexible because we do not know what might happen next. We cannot foresee possible changes. We do not know how abrupt they are. Therefore, we should be flexible about possible changes. It will be hard for us to adjust if we are inflexible.*

Lesson 3: Strengthening self-care management is vital.

While working during the pandemic, the respondents experienced excessive worry, anxiety, over fatigue, and body exhaustion. Therefore, they learned to prioritize their health and safety. Most respondents claimed that self-care management must be practiced to maintain a healthy well-being. As a respondent stressed:

> *Self-care, because there were times we cried out from multilayered stress. I realized that it did not always work. So, I made ways to divert my attention, like cycling, going out with friends, and disconnecting from work on Saturday and Sunday. I rest during the weekend. Indeed, more on self-care, unwinding, and emotional stability.*

Respondents realized that they must always uphold the value of practicing self-care. They should observe proper care and rest to prevent burnout. Making self-care a priority can help social work practitioners attain a healthy balance in their career and personal lives. Another respondent shared:

> *I realized that self-care is essential. Being tired and feeling drained is already part of our work. With this, you should learn to give importance to self-care, especially these days. Working is not easy, especially when you are on the frontline. We should take care of ourselves, not just our clients.*

Discussion and Conclusion

Social workers played a vital role in the COVID-19 pandemic response by providing direct assistance to individuals and collaborating with multi-professionals in an attempt to decrease the risks and related harms of the virus outbreak. The crisis, as globally recognized, was not only a medical catastrophe but also a significant social issue that impacted many aspects of people's lives and that of their communities. In Albay, social work served as an essential discipline, in which the practitioners served multiple roles as resource provider, facilitator, broker, coordinator, and educator. These roles were multidimensional, addressing the micro, mezzo, and macro problems and needs of individuals and communities. They revolved around response interventions and the provision of immediate community-based assistance through coordination, linkage, and support across various organizations and systems to address the needs and problems caused by the pandemic.

The roles identified by the respondents in this study were already performed by social workers even before the pandemic. However, these roles as practiced amidst the health crisis asserted the professional services of social workers which had been previously unappreciated. The practitioners ensured that essential items such as food, water, and financial aid were provided to the most affected population. Moreover, they collaborated with professionals from other disciplines and organizations to formulate interventions to efficiently carry out the programs and services considering the various limitations and restrictions.

The pandemic likewise allowed the social work profession to be more widely known because of its significant contribution to mitigating the impact of the crisis. As a result, the social work community is finally gaining the recognition it deserves from the public because of its unparalleled service during this crisis. The pandemic also provided an opportunity for the nation to reconsider what sort of society we want to be and brought to the fore critical aspects to be addressed to effect long-term and sustainable change. This may in turn provide opportunities for social workers to take a leading role in the development and enhancement of interventions and strategies to address the needs and problems of victims and survivors of emergencies (Okafor, 2021) that are geared towards social transformation and development.
As social workers performed their roles and functions during the pandemic, they encountered physical, social, and psychological challenges due to increased workloads, longer working hours, and other changes that emerged. Wherever one is, the COVID-19 pandemic affects clients and social work professionals (Blackmon & Hardy, 2020). Notably, the responsibilities and services in which they operate were subjected to higher demands. Thus, it can be surmised that increased challenges on a particular aspect may impact another aspect due to their interconnection. When a social worker is physically exhausted, for example, experiencing body strain, fatigue, and illness, this may impair his or her psychological well-being, and vice versa.

The pandemic, as found in this study, brought to light another critical subject in the field of social work. This relates to the engagement of social workers across all practice settings to professional and personal self-care. The new update of the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics, effective last June 1, 2021, includes explicit attention to self-care. It is an undeniable truth among social workers that promoting and practicing self-care is an ethical imperative. The changes in the NASW Code of Ethics (CoE) strengthen the legitimacy of self-care within the profession through a global lens. One modification is a call for macro-systems to "promote policies, procedures, and tools to assist social workers' self-care." Although the NASW CoE intends self-care language to be supportive and aspirational rather than mandatory, it encourages social workers to see it as a goal they should attain.

More significantly, this study highlights the lessons that social workers acquired during the pandemic. In social work, reflective practice is an essential skill for gaining, validating, and developing knowledge based on one's experience. The context of COVID-19 poses great challenges and opportunities for social workers to critically examine their growth and development as persons and as practitioners. This study produced evidence-based insights and findings that support why the social work profession is essential in responding to the impact of a pandemic. It provided perspectives on the social workers' condition of being at the forefront during such a crisis. Significantly, the pandemic tested and strengthened social work's ethical principles of service, social justice, human relationship, inherent worth and dignity, integrity, and competence.

The results signify that the social workers developed and practiced their knowledge, skills, and values to support the individuals' well-being and address their challenges during the pandemic. The risks and threats of the virus did not hinder them from prioritizing delivering services to communities and people in need. Furthermore, the lessons learned have implications on how they uphold the value of social justice. Social workers in Albay displayed patience, respect, optimism, and understanding, which are manifestations of culturally sensitive practice. Their roles challenged poverty, hunger, social oppression, and economic inequalities. Furthermore, their lessons highlight the values of integrity and competence, in which social

workers act based on the profession's purpose, values, and ethical standards. They realized the essence of practicing self-care for personal and professional development, which can likewise contribute to developing and strengthening a strong sense of self-awareness. Furthermore, the lessons learned among social workers reflect the Bicolano spirit of "oragon" or being resilient and determined amidst life's challenges and crises.

This study does have its limitations. The experiences of social workers during the pandemic would unavoidably differ among provinces, countries, and other geographical areas. Furthermore, social workers' experiences are not homogeneous because they operate in various settings, practices, and organizational mandates. The study did, however, note that the social workers' roles, challenges, and lessons underwent an evolution as the pandemic progressed, which is critical and essential in the development of the social work profession.

While social workers in Albay faced increasingly complex demands due to COVID-19, it is vital that they also came to recognize their own needs. At the same time, evaluating their professional principles, values, and competencies is just as critical as monitoring their personal well-being. Thus, by placing equal importance on these components, they may be better able to ensure their effectiveness as practitioners. Moreover, this study affirmed that social workers in Albay had undergone transformational shifts when they were prompted to adopt remote mechanisms through online transactions into their practice in order to guarantee continuity of client care. As a topic for future research, it is significant to assess the gaps that emerged as a result of technological integration and social workers' remote and limited face-to-face interactions with clients and other practitioners brought on by the pandemic. This could lead to determining possible areas for training, education, and policy enhancement that would benefit clients, social workers, organizations, and communities in the event that similar major crises were to arise.

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Dance Movement Exploration (DME) with the Filipino Children during the COVID-19 Movement Restriction Period:
An Exploratory Study on Focus DME Model

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Abstract

The Philippine government implemented a nationwide lockdown due to the coronavirus 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic in the country. Movement outside of the house was restricted except for vital reasons, such as buying essential goods like food and medicine. In addition, any form of group physical activities and gatherings (e.g., birthday parties, group exercises, outdoor play) were prohibited. Part of the affected segments of the population were the children, who were used to playing outside with friends and going to school. In this study, the children were observed to be in shock due to the restrictions on movement as well as the closure of schools. Hence, the researchers applied DME (Dance Movement Exploration) in a Focus DME Model as an "emotional approach coping" mechanism and as a vehicle for understanding the effects of the pandemic restrictions on children. The Focus DME Model, which is contextual in its approach, looks into the potential of dance and movement in general as means of empowerment and healing. The study selected five (5) children using the convenience sampling design. Needs analysis, creative process criterion, reflexivity, and semi-structured interviews were used as instruments for collecting data on the effectiveness of the DME intervention. Narrative synthesis was employed to summarize the identified narratives, and the data from the interviews then underwent inductive thematic analysis. The qualitative results determined that DME aids in relieving the children's feelings of frustration, distress, sadness, and confusion. The combination of the activities included in the DME was consistent with the literature in exhibiting positive effects. As a conclusion, it was surmised that the DME in the Focus DME Model can be a form of "emotional approach coping" where emotions are processed and expressed through movement, dance, and physical activity.

Keywords: Dance Movement Exploration (DME), Focus DME Model, pandemic, children, emotional approach coping

Introduction

The first novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) case in the Philippines was recorded on January 21, 2020 (Department of Health Philippines, 2020). As of this writing, over 423,437,674 confirmed cases with 5,878,328 deaths have been reported globally (World Health Organization, 2022). The rise in cases caused countries to impose lockdowns, restricting movement to only the buying of essential goods. While the movement restrictions effectively helped to contain COVID-19, the effect was overwhelming for the people, increasing their risk for mental health diseases such as depression, anxiety, and stress (Balkhi et al., 2020; Bao et al., 2020; Brooks et

al., 2020; Wang et al., 2020). Children had a higher risk of mental health disorders during the COVID-19 pandemic (Elbay et al., 2020; Mazza et al., 2020; Ozdin et al., 2020; Abouzeid et al., 2020), while adolescents had a difficult time being isolated during the lockdown due to their energetic and enthusiastic anticipation of new experiences daily (Imran et al., 2020). Faced with these scenarios, coping strategies played an important role during the lockdown.

According to some researchers, coping strategies can be helpful in relieving the negative feelings felt by people. These are the strategies of a person to manage stressors of different kinds (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Coping can be categorized into two types: avoidant coping and approach coping (Eisenberg et al., 2012; Taylor & Stanton, 2007; Suls & Fletcher, 1985). Avoidant coping strategies include withdrawal or denial of the stressor, while approach coping focuses on acting on or confronting emotions in response to a stressor. Approach coping tends to be more effective in reducing distress in the long term compared to avoidant coping (Taylor & Stanton, 2007). A specific type of approach coping is emotional approach coping, which is considered an adaptive emotion-focused coping style wherein people engage in their emotions to reduce the negative emotions surrounding a situation or event (Stanton et al., 2000). Two primary components of emotional approach coping are emotional processing and emotional expression. Emotional processing is defined as the "acknowledgement, understanding, and acceptance of one's emotions" (Juth et al., 2015) while emotional expression is the "verbal and non-verbal disclosure of one's emotions" (Juth et al., 2015). Emotional approach coping has been linked to positive psychological and physical health (Smith et al., 2002; Stanton et al., 2000), and adjustment to stress (Kashdan et al., 2006); and its benefits were identified with numerous stressors and settings (Stanton, 2011; Stanton & Low, 2012a; Stanton et al., 2009). One psychosocial intervention that has been found to be of help in the investigation of coping strategies is Dance Movement Exploration.

Dance Movement Exploration (DME) conceptualization may be traced from the author's M.S. thesis (Dimarucut, 2014, unpublished thesis). The concept of DME as dance as physical activity (Dimarucut, 2014, unpublished thesis) resulted from the analysis of the effects of Dance Movement Therapy (DMT) in the prevention and control of academic stressors among selected university students. The study revealed that DMT caused changes (though not significant) in levels of stress, coping mechanisms, and positive-negative effects (Dimarucut, 2014, unpublished thesis). Having noted the positive effects of DME on students in the study previously mentioned, it was of interest to the researcher to further examine the utilization of DME in the community in the aftermath of disasters and violence. Thus, DME was developed into the Focus DME Model with therapeutic interventions aimed at alleviating the adverse effects of disasters and violence. Contextual in its approach, the Focus DME Model deals with the potential of dance and movement in general as a means of empowerment and healing. It focuses, firstly, on the self as a means of understanding and achieving one's utmost potential as a human being. Secondly, it is a tool for communicating and expressing the self into the fibers of society. The Focus DME Model primarily consists of three methodological and theoretical bases from DME: Dance Movement Therapy (DMT), Psychosocial Theories (PST), and Physical Activity (PA). DMT is "the relational and therapeutic use of dance and movement to further the physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and cultural functioning of a person" (DTAA, 2022) and it "combine(s) the elements of dance, movement systems, creative processes, and psychological and scientific theories, to address the specific needs of groups and individuals" (DTAA, 2022). PST is the use of the eight different psychosocial development stages of Erik Erikson (1950) as a lens on how to approach the DME activities with the participants. Lastly, PA is defined as "people

moving, acting, and performing within culturally specific spaces and contexts, and influenced by a unique array of interests, emotions, ideas, instructions, and relationships" (Piggin, 2020, p. 1). These theoretical bases were utilized further in the exploration of the Focus DME Model.

Purpose

It was for these reasons that this study emerged with the main purpose of analyzing the effects of DME in the Focus DME Model on Filipino children affected by the COVID-19 lockdown. DME was utilized as a form of "emotional approach coping" in the search for the inner self leading to a better understanding of one's emotions and behaviors; essentially, an approach to Discovering Meanings in Existence through de-stressing movement experiences (Dimarucut et al., 2014). Hence, the Focus DME Model with its DME concepts was utilized as a psychosocial intervention and a coping strategy tool for the selected children experiencing distress during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines. The Model focuses on confrontation and acceptance of emotions and current situations towards a better outlook in life. It integrates the whole person through creative movement that facilitates changes in personality, one's feelings, and way of interacting. With methodological and theoretical bases from DMT, PST, and PA as experiential movement applications, it utilizes inner processes and body expressions. Thus, the DME in the Focus DME Model is significant as a psychotherapeutic tool, for motor skill learning, and as a teaching strategy in recognizing an individual's capabilities in any physical activity.

Methods

Sampling Design

Convenience sampling was used to select participants for this study (n = 5). This was the method used due to the restrictions imposed by the lockdown during the conduct of this study. Table 1 presents the demographics of this sample.

Table 1

Demographics

Variables	N = 5
Age	10.8 years of age
Education	Elementary, Public School
Cultural Roots	Kapampangan
Location	Pampanga, Philippines
Relationship	Three of the participants were siblings while the two others were their friends in the compound
Socio-economic status	Low-to-middle class income
Environmental situation	Lockdown due to COVID-19
Routine	Before the lockdown, the participants' routine was: 1. Going to school 5 days a week 2. 2.Playing at school and after school 3. 3.Doing homework at home Before the intervention, the routine had changed due to the lockdown restrictions: 1. No school 2. Playing video games (no outdoor physical activity) 3. No homework

The selected children had feelings of frustration, distress, confusion, and sadness brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, as revealed in numerous consultations of the researcher with their parents. The parents gave consent for their children to participate in this study to address the mentioned feelings of their children. The venue of the study was inside the compound where the facilitator was also staying. In this study, the term used to refer to the children is interchangeable with the word participants.

Instruments

Four instruments were used in this study: needs analysis, creative process criterion, reflexivity, and semi-structured interviews. Needs analysis is the process of identifying the needs of the person or individual. Identifying the specific needs of the group aided the facilitator in adjusting the components of DME to make it personalized. The facilitator consulted with the parents and children on their status through semi-structured interviews. Also, the facilitator did observations of the participant's movement and interaction to note if there was a change in their behavior during the DME sessions and adjusted the intervention based on the reaction of the participants.

Furthermore, the creative process criterion identified the design, implementation, concept and process, and outcome of the DME. Since the implementation of the DME was dependent on the group, it was essential to outline the planned intervention. Table 2 presents the creative process criterion that was used.

Table 2

Creative Process

Creative Process	Explanation
Design	Design is the result of the creative mind of the facilitator based on the given facts. The design of the program is based on the needs of the selected group and is composed of the beginning, middle, and end phases.
Implementation	Implementation is the creative ability of the facilitator to conduct the design program. The implementation of the program sets the expected behavior of the facilitator with the following work principles: passion, observation, wisdom, knowledge, instinct, empathy, service, and skills.
Concept & Process	Concept and process are the detailed activities and the principles underlying the facilitation. Concept: The DME concepts and process utilized were based on Dance Movement Therapy (DMT), Physical Activity (PA), and Psychosocial Interventions (PSI). Process: The actual DME session was composed of the inner process + body expression: Introduction, Welcome/greetings, Warm-up, Movement Activity 1 (with de-briefing), Movement Activity 2 (with de-briefing), Relaxation (guided or non-guided), Sharing, Closure, and Goodbyes.
Desired Outcomes	Outcomes are the guided assumptions and the outcomes of the facilitation.

Moreover, reflexivity was used to identify the facilitator's own insights into the implementation of the intervention and his observation of the effects of DME on the participants. Questions were asked, such as:

1. What were you thinking and feeling during the facilitation of DME?

2. What did you observe before, during, and after the facilitation of DME in terms of helping children cope with the COVID-19 pandemic?
3. Is your observation in line with what the parents saw in their children after the DME session?

The facilitator continually updated the parents (key informants) on the intervention and conducted semi-structured interviews to gather insights on the effectiveness of DME to relieve the negative emotions experienced by their children. The responses of the children were not recorded. The researcher relied on the observation of the parents on the behavior of the children after the facilitation.

Data Analysis

Narrative synthesis was used to summarize the data from the creative process criterion and reflexivity of the facilitator. Inductive thematic analysis was used to analyze data from the interviews (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Results

Needs Analysis

The time of the intervention was during the lockdown due to COVID-19. Based on the initial observations of the facilitator, the children were limited in their movement in terms of play and sports as identified through their bodily frustrations. Moreover, face-to-face classes were prohibited at that time, further restricting the activities of the children to just inside the compound where the facilitator also lives.

Upon conversing with the children, the facilitator noticed that the children always asked why they were not in school learning, why playing was limited within the compound, and why they were not allowed to go to the market. Furthermore, the frustration felt by the children was evident in their posture, gestures, and voices. Additionally, the parents shared the same observations that their children were experiencing distress during the lockdown because of the restrictions on movement. Also, the parents reported to the facilitator that the children were only watching TV, using cellphone, and sitting all day during the lockdown.

Based on the observations and conversations with the children and their parents, the problems that needed to be addressed with DME are:

1. Lack of education related to COVID-19
2. Lack of movement
3. Lack of physical activity
4. Lack of interaction
5. Lack of school-like setting
6. Feelings of frustration, distress, sadness, and confusion

Creative Process

Table 3 presents the creative process used with the children.

Table 3

Creative Process

Creative Process	Explanation
Design	Design is for education, entertainment, and the affirmation of health safety.
Implementation	Implementation is through the readiness of the facilitator physically and mentally to be with the children.
Concept & Process	Concept and process is through games, dances, and learning together with the principles embedded within DME.
Desired Outcome/s	The outcome is for the children to play and have enjoyment and at the same time to be informed.

Since the participants were undergoing the COVID-19 pandemic, the DME aimed to provide education (facts about COVID-19), entertainment, and awareness of the health and safety protocols, through a total of four sessions to be conducted twice weekly. Simulation of a classroom scenario was provided as a learning avenue for the children and to address the school-like setting that the participants were looking for. The initial intake happened weeks before the actual conduct of the DME through consultations with the parents. Information on the status (health conditions) and number of participants was supplied. The facilitator identified that the participants had an average age of 10.8 (9-12 years of age) and adjusted the activities based on this. Tools, equipment, and the venue to be used were prepared.

The DME session aimed to build a safe space for exploring movement and dance as an instrument in imparting to the participants the nature of the pandemic. The mental state and functional ability of the participants were uninterrupted in following the instructions. Body and mind connection was self-assured and gradual reactions in the movement quality were evident. The participants' self-experience and the facilitator's reflections were documented and reported to the organizer for evaluation.

For the implementation of the session, the facilitator equipped himself with knowledge about the COVID-19 pandemic and collected educational materials about health precautions. The program design was thoroughly assimilated by the facilitator to ensure a smooth flow of the session as well as to adapt and modify if unforeseen circumstances arise. The venue and materials were organized by the facilitator an hour ahead of the intervention.

The concept and process of the session were focused on the application of the core principles of DME (DMT, PA, and PST). The design process was divided into educational activities, puzzle games, arts and crafts, dance, debriefing, sharing, and movement exploration. The closure of schools and restrictions on the children from moving/playing outside was the concept that the facilitator sought to resolve in the minds of the participants. Processing was facilitated by exploring the body, the mind, and the emotions. The core of the DME concept and process was for the children's enjoyment in doing the given tasks.

The outcome of the session affirmed the happiness felt by the children, As they appreciated the educational activities and the information about safety precautions imparted in the session. The children were thankful for the play, enjoyment, and instructions provided.

Dance Movement Exploration Activities

Table 4 presents the activities used in this study.

Table 4

Dance Movement Exploration activities for children during the COVID-19 pandemic

DMT Creative Process	Physical Activity	Activities	Session 1	Session 2	Session 3	Session 4
Preparation		Opening	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer	Prayer
		Introduction	Welcome, Feelings Chart	Welcome, Feelings Chart	Welcome, Feelings Chart	Welcome, Feelings Chart
	Low Intensity	Warmup	Breathing, Shaking, Tapping, Brushing	Breathing, Shaking, Tapping, Brushing	Breathing, Shaking, Tapping, Brushing	Breathing, Shaking, Tapping, Brushing
			Favorite body movement: Introduce Name	Favorite body movement: Introduce Name	Favorite body movement: Introduce Name	Favorite body movement: Introduce Name
Incubation & Illumination	Low Intensity	Activity #1	Matchsticks	Matchsticks	Matchsticks	Matchsticks
			Puzzle: Fish	Puzzle: Chair	Puzzle: Glass	Puzzle: Pyramid
			Reading Short Stories: "My Hero Is You, A Storybook on Children about COVID-19" by UNICEF (debriefing)	Reading Short Stories: "The Color Monsters, a story about emotions" by Anna Llenas (debriefing)	Reading Short Stories: "Wash Your Hands" by Tony Ross (debriefing)	Reading Short Stories: "The Bravest Fish" by Matt Buckingham (debriefing)
			Spelling bee	Spelling bee	Spelling bee	Spelling bee
	Moderate-to-Vigorous Intensity	Dance #1	Gummy bear dance Community dance	Gummy bear dance Community dance	Gummy bear dance Community dance	Gummy bear dance Community dance
	Low Intensity	Activity #2	Arts and craft: Egg design (debriefing)	Find an object that will represent you (debriefing)	Egg hunting (debriefing)	Back-to-back tracing (debriefing)
	Moderate-to-Vigorous Intensity	Dance #2	Monkey Dance	Happy and You Know Dance	Monkey Dance	Happy and You Know Dance
			Structured Dance (Sorbetero dance)	Structured Dance	Structured Dance (Sorbetero dance)	Structured Dance
Evaluation	Low Intensity	Relaxation / Closing	Listening to soft music and sharing	Listening to soft music and sharing	Listening to soft music and sharing	Listening to soft music and sharing
		Goodbyes	Breathing and waving actions	Breathing and waving actions	Breathing and waving actions	Breathing and waving actions
			Assignments (reading and writing)	Assignments (reading and writing)	Assignments (reading and writing)	Assignments (reading and writing)

The first phase of the DMT creative process was the preparation. The objective of this phase is to prepare the mind and body of the participants. All activities started with a Catholic prayer. Then, the facilitator gave a welcome message and distributed a feelings chart to each participant to identify what they were feeling before the session. Afterward, breathing, shaking, tapping, and brushing exercises were facilitated to help prepare the body of the participants. Then, an activity called "favorite body movement" was facilitated to close the preparation phase. This involved different categories such as "Introduce Name," "Introduce Color," "Introduce fruits," and "Parent's Name" where the participants performed a movement based on the category.

The second phase of the DMT creative process was incubation and illumination. The aim of this phase was for the participants to be present at the moment during the activities, be educated on important knowledge related to COVID-19, perform dance and arts and crafts activities to help them cope with the COVID-19 lockdown, and perform school-related activities to mimic in-classroom settings. The activities for dancing included a combination of Filipino pop dances (i.e., *sorbetero* dance) and international dances (i.e., monkey dance, happy and you know dance"). Meanwhile, the arts and crafts activities included matchsticks, puzzles, egg designing, and many more. Finally, a school-like setting was mimicked so that the participants could experience in-classroom settings during the COVID-19 lockdown.

The last phase of the DMT creative process was the evaluation, where the realizations of the participants were uncovered and the session was evaluated. Soft music was played to help the participants become more relaxed after the session. The sharing involved expressing their reflections on the activity (this was not recorded but the insights from this can be seen in the reflexivity section of the paper). Finally, a breathing exercise and waving actions were done. The waving action was a form of acknowledgment of the presence of each person in the circle. Lastly, assignments were given to simulate the school-like setting.

The facilitator chose the activities mentioned above based on several reasons. Prayer aimed to bring a sense of protection to the children at the start of the session. It was a familiar activity in school before the start of a class. Breathing, tapping, brushing, shaking, and grounding were used to prepare the body for movement and dance at the cell level. The activity in which they mentioned their favorite body movement was a form of acknowledgment. The movement of body parts in tracing names, colors, fruits, and parents' names was for appreciation. Community dance, online dance, and structured dance were for expressing verbal and non-verbal movements in unison. Listening to soft music was an accompaniment in the sharing of the innermost thoughts and feelings of the children. Assignments on reading and writing were given to bring them back to a school setting, while arts and crafts provided a creative component of the session. Figure 1 presents photos of some of the activities conducted.

Figure 1

Dance Movement Exploration Activities

KII Interview Outcomes

Table 5 exhibits the themes identified by the organizers/parents as a result of the thematic analysis.

Table 5

Thematic Analysis Results

Domain	Theme	Theme Definition	Sample Responses
Physical	Active	The participants are more physically active.	*Response:* "Nawala yung pagka-bored nila, meron na silang ginagawa ngayon." (Their boredom was eased and now they are doing something.) *Interpretation:* The children's boredom was gone due to the activities of DME. Before, the only options for activity were cellphone use, watching TV, and other non-physical activities. Now, they have a whole set of activities that can stimulate learning and movement.
Emotional	Enthusiasm	Intense and eager enjoyment and happiness during participation in DME Playful atmosphere displayed by the participants	*Response*: "I think with the given activities they have actively interacted with each other." *Interpretation:* During the DME sessions, the participants were positively and actively interacting with each other due to the included activities. *Response:* "Yes, there was a change in the manner of their interaction after the DME. Before they did not know how to act but now, they talk about Covid 19, the pandemic and other health precautions." *Interpretation:* The knowledge of COVID-19 taught by the facilitator changed the way the children interacted. Before, they did not know how to act based on the restrictions of the government. Now, they talk a lot about the COVID-19 pandemic and the necessary health precautions to protect themselves from being infected by the virus, and protecting others in the process.

			Response: "Yes, now they start to play." *Interpretation:* Before, the children were not able to play due to the restrictions. With the facilitation of DME, they realized that they could play within the restrictions of the government and interact with one another. This caused them to be happier and enthusiastic. *Response:* "Sana tuloy tuloy ito para lagi silang masaya." "Yung parang nasa school pa rin sila." ("Hopefully this can be continued so they will always be happy". "As though they are still in school".) *Interpretation:* The DME facilitation helped the children feel like they were at school. Some of the activities were conducted like they were in the school. This helped them relieve the sadness brought about by not having traditional school-like interaction with a teacher and other students.
Mental	Awareness	Being aware of the current situation of the country and acceptance of the limitations	*Response:* "They were able to know what lockdown is and knowing what to do not to catch the virus." *Interpretation:* The participants were more aware of why lockdown was conducted, and the measures needed to be taken to lessen the risk of getting COVID-19. The children now understood these new rules and could adapt their activities and mindset to these.
Social	Cooperation	Working together with one another	Response: "Oo, dahil nagbago yung kanilang pakikitungo sa isa't isa. lagi nagtatanong ano at bakit may lockdown. Dati hindi sila masyado nag uusap sa loob ng bahay. Ngayon nagtutulungan na sila sa mga gawain na kailangan nilang magawa." (Yes, their relationship with each other was changed. Before they frequently ask what and why there is a lockdown. Before they did not talk much inside the house. Now they help each other in doing things to be done.) Interpretation: The DME sessions helped the children improve their social interaction with one another.

Based on the responses of the organizers/parents, DME had functioned well in the physical, emotional, mental, and social domains. It was carried out with the active participation of the children. The participants were focused on listening to instructions and delivered what was asked for. Changes noted in their behavior were: they accepted the situation brought about by the pandemic - "They were able to know what lockdown is and what to do to not catch the virus."; they developed stronger friendships - *"Oo, dahil nagbago yung kanilang pakikitungo sa isa't isa. Lagi nagtatanong ano at bakit may lockdown. Dati hindi sila masyado nag uusap sa loob ng bahay. Ngayon nagtutulungan na sila sa mga gawain na kailangan nilang magawa*" (Yes, there was a change in how they dealt with each other, and they asked a lot about the what and why of the lockdown. Before, they did not talk much with each other at home. But now they help each other with the chores that need to be done). Enthusiasm, enjoyment, happiness, and silliness were noticeable as the children worked and supported each other to fulfill the tasks during the session. These behaviors were evident even at home as attested by the parents when the children were doing the reading and writing assignments.

Reflexivity

Based on the observations of the facilitator, the children gained an understanding of COVID-19 by telling stories of different scenarios related to this. Also, the children learned about the things they should and should not do during this pandemic. The children learned how to protect their physical and emotional/mental health. Moreover, the children accepted feelings of distress, confusion, and sadness due to the restrictions and sudden changes in their daily routines.

Emotions were talked about through stories of "colored emotions." This was to validate that those feelings are real and manifest in the body, voice, facial expressions, and movement. The sessions gave the children a chance to acknowledge and understand their inner feelings and express these in dance and movement. The DME sessions gave the children an avenue to explore their knowledge about COVID-19 and their knowledge of how to interact with others.

Discussion

The results show that DME in the Focus DME Model had a positive effect on relieving feelings of distress, confusion, and sadness due to the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic; and improved knowledge on the purpose of the "movement restriction period" or lockdown within two weeks of four DME sessions. The DME employed dance and movement to help the participants relieve negative emotions and teach them the importance of the movement restriction protocols (e.g., washing hands, applying alcohol, and wearing face masks). Also, interaction among the children through movement and dance was crucial in helping them cope during the COVID-19 pandemic. These results can be a form of emotional approach coping, encompassing both emotional processing and emotional expression. The children used dance to process and express their emotions during the pandemic. By doing this, the participants understood their situation better and accepted that these feelings are a normal part of life, especially given the sudden transition from a life free of restrictions to a life full of restrictions. The abovementioned results were supported by the following studies conducted with different populations in the conduct of dance, dance intervention, and DMT.

A meta-analysis was conducted on the effectiveness of dance intervention in improving health-related psychological outcomes (Koch et al., 2019). In the meta-analysis of Koch et al., 41 controlled intervention studies (Dance Movement Therapy = 21; Dance = 20) were included for investigating the quality of life, clinical outcomes, interpersonal skills, cognitive skills, psychomotor skills, and residuals (psychotic symptoms and physiological change). The results showed that, in general, "DMT decreases depression and anxiety, increases the quality of life and interpersonal and cognitive skills whereas dance interventions increase psychomotor skills" (Koch et al., 2019). DMT was one of the components of DME and was implemented as the "relational and therapeutic use of dance and movement to further the physical, emotional, cognitive, social, and cultural functioning of a person" (DTAA, 2022). Moreover, a study by Duberg et al. (2020) aimed to investigate whether dance intervention was effective in reducing stress-related symptoms in 112 adolescent girls aged 13 to 18 years old. The study duration was twice every week of dance intervention for 8 months focusing on enjoyment and socialization. Results showed that dance interventions may reduce somatic symptoms and emotional distress when done for long periods of time (Duberg et al., 2020). The duration of the study period must be considered for future research as the outcomes may be more effective in helping children cope during situations such as the COVID-19 pandemic and other area-based issues where DME can be used. Furthermore, movement through dance was implemented as part of the methodological and theoretical bases of DME to help participants cope with the pandemic.

In the local context, the study of Baraero-Sharma (2006), the benefits of DMT were shown through the use of body-mind integration with abused children in bringing forth unconscious impulses to interact with the conscious. In addition, it resulted in gaining positive relationships using different facilitated movement activities. These approaches and results are similar to those that were gathered in the present study. It was found that the restrictions in the

usual everyday routine of the children due to the lockdown caused negative emotions which the DMT creative approach helped them to process.

The concept of the dance and movement activities that were utilized in the DME facilitation was carefully chosen by the facilitator based on the psychomotor stages of the participants. At their age, they understand space, and their fine and gross motor abilities are adequately strong and coordinated. Also, the concept of "group identity" starts to manifest at this stage, thus being with friends has a vital role in their participation. The participants also exhibited shifts in emotions every now and then due to hormonal changes which can cause impulsive behavior. All these were taken into account to have age-appropriate activities in the DME facilitation.

Similarly, the dance and movement activities were based on the inclination of the participants. With technology being a vital part of this generation's lifestyle, dances were taken from the videos that they watch on YouTube and TikTok while the explorations of movements repertoire were based on what is familiar to them. These are activities they usually play or do at home and at school, as well as being influenced by social media. The participants basically contributed to the dance and movements patterns that were safe, age appropriate, and appealed to their preference.

The use of dance and movement as a coping mechanism in this study was also the intention of the facilitator as a means to help the participants in regulating their difficult emotions that were brought about by the lockdown. It was deemed imperative for the participants to deal with their stressful situations by using healthy coping skills to improve their emotional resilience in the future. DME facilitation is a tool and one avenue for them to develop and manage their emotions. Dancing as the main activity of DME helps in their coping skills, dance releases the chemicals dopamine and oxytocin in the body, resulting in positive outcomes, Thus, the participants felt motivated, ready for learning, and in a pleasant mood for dance movement exploration.

Culturally, Filipinos love to sing and dance, as can be seen in gatherings where these are a means of performance or simply an activity to enliven the event. In the local context, dance or dance movement has not yet been used as a tool for coping mechanisms, nor does the community know of the possibility of its positive effects. Therefore, this study will be a first in introducing the possibilities of dance movement in this respect.

Language, meanwhile, is the key tool for verbal communication and expression. Thus, the use of the local language (Kapampangan, for the area of this study) in the DME facilitation provided a natural channel for the facilitator and children to readily bond and form a relationship that allowed comfortable interaction to achieve the goal of the DME. On the other hand, dance and movement convey a universal language that uses the body to express emotion as perceived by the senses. Thus, they serve as a language for social interaction that everyone can relate to. In the study, the children expressed more using body language, which the facilitator thoroughly observed in order to guide them to achieve a positive interpretation of themselves.

DME also includes arts and crafts among its activities. A study by Wang et al. (2020) analyzed data from 23,660 individuals included in an organization. The results show that "frequent arts participation and cultural attendance were associated with lower levels of mental

distress and higher levels of satisfaction, with arts participation additionally associated with better mental health functioning" (Wang et al., 2020). In the present study, the inclusion of arts and crafts may have contributed to the positive effects of the DME on the participants.

Education about COVID-19 was likewise part of the activities of the DME to help the children understand the purposes of the restrictions imposed, how the disease could affect them should they become infected, and how to protect themselves from this disease. A study by Khalid et al. (2021) investigated the relationship between how much knowledge a person has about COVID-19 and psychological distress. With 937 students from Pakistan participating in this study, the results showed that there may be a relationship between knowledge about the COVID-19 pandemic and psychological distress, with more knowledge about COVID-19 apparently leading to lower levels of psychological distress. However, a study by Saravan et al. (2020) shows the opposite results, indicating that students with more knowledge about COVID-19 experienced more psychological distress than those who did not. It is possible that context played a major role in these outcomes. The two studies were conducted at different periods of time and in different countries, Pakistan and the United Arab Emirates—with each country likely to have had varying levels of restrictions and guidelines.

In this present study, the education of the participants regarding COVID-19 was different since the facilitator was present to impart the information to the participants, simulating a school-like setting. The participants learned what COVID-19 was, the reason for the lockdown restrictions, and how to keep themselves safe from the virus. The parents of the children reported that prior to the DME sessions, the children were not interacting much. But, after the DME activities, the participants asked many questions about the pandemic and began to help each other finish tasks needed during the pandemic.

The DME intervention also incorporated listening to soft music. A study by Kong and Wong (2021) investigated the use of listening to music as a means of coping with psychological distress in kindergarten students. The subjects of the study were experiencing stress, anxiety, and depression due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The results showed that music without lyrics led to a prominent moderating effect on the students' health/psychological distress (Kong & Wong, 2021). Moreover, a study by Hasanah and Haikal (2021) investigated the effects of music therapy on cortisol levels in children. As cited in this study, music therapy was considered a psychosocial intervention tool that was "safe, easy, economical, and feasible to use and has the benefit of reducing cortisol levels as a stress biomarker" (Hasanah & Haikal, 2021; Hasanah et al., 2020; Linnemann et al., 2016).

Finally, storytelling was used in the DME intervention to educate the children about the COVID-19 pandemic. A study conducted on hospitalized children (Brockington et al., 2021) revealed that storytelling increased the "oxytocin combined with a decrease in cortisol in saliva after 30 minutes of storytelling" (Brockington et al., 2021). This intervention was short-term and considered a "simple and inexpensive intervention that may help alleviate physical and psychological pain of hospitalized children…" (Brockington et al., 2021).

All the activities of DME in the Focus DME Model that were included in the present study have been shown to have a positive impact on the negative emotions of the participants. Among the outcomes were: a) less frustration, distress, sadness, and confusion; b) more knowledge about the COVID-19 pandemic; and c) increased movement, interaction, and physical activity

in the household. The combination of the activities included in the DME was consistent with the literature in exhibiting positive effects on the participants.

A Note on Transformative Social Development and Children's Rights in DME

Social development is the upward progression of society in many factors including creativity, productivity, choice, and enjoyment. Development in social transformation involves qualitative improvement in identity, emotions, embodiment, actions, creativity, and paradigms. Culture is one of the causes of that transformation which has three main sources: invention (new ideas), discovery (something new in something that exists), and diffusion (spreading of ideas). With the abovementioned information, DME can be a supplementary form of transformative social development that may benefit any individual or group regardless of sex, age, religion, socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity.

DME in the Focus DME Model provides therapeutic interventions that may alleviate the adverse effects of various issue-based problems. It is usually done collectively in a group and is not expensive to facilitate, making it accessible even for poor communities. DME is a form of intervention that has the capacity to develop social and emotional competencies which are necessary to achieve quality of life. Every individual needs to have the ability to interact with others and to understand each other's behavior, character, personality, and emotions. They also need the ability to think, solve problems, and act upon any given situation or challenge. DME can provide that. In addition, it is through the DME facilitation that verbal and non-verbal communication are enhanced for better interaction. These are all possible to achieve as DME is contextual in its approach, dealing with the potential of dance and movement in general as means towards empowerment and healing.

The utilization of the arts—which includes dance as an art form for human development and empowerment—has long been a part of the discourse on human rights and development. In the Philippines, Presidential Decree No. 603, or the Child and Youth Welfare Code declares the 12 rights of a Filipino child. Some of those rights served as the facilitator's foundation during the DME facilitation to ensure full protection of the children from harm, as well as to provide them with possible interventions to achieve quality of life.

One of the rights that was curbed during the lockdown was the children's right to play, as the COVID-19 restrictions confined them to their homes. Their right to engage in recreational activities whenever they wished was curtailed. Thus, DME facilitation provided an avenue for them to play within the limits of the lockdown guidelines. Another right that was hampered by the health protocols was the right to be protected from danger. The DME activities, therefore, included the imparting of educational information about COVID-19 and other health protocols for the children to understand how to protect themselves from the virus. The DME facilitation also ensured that their physical, mental, and emotional states were managed. The facilitator's plan was to provide access to play, information, and exploration for these children so that they would feel support from the people around them, thereby building a sense of security that would strengthen their character. The freedom they were given to engage in dance and movement likewise provided them a sense of peace in exploring movement interactions.

DME in a sense helped the children to be aware of themselves and to understand the situation that was happening during the lockdown. The DME facilitation became a tool for

interaction to support the children in their emotional quest in that uncertain time, while the dance and movement activities equipped the children with the knowledge to protect themselves, as this knowledge was imparted through the education activities. Transformation from negative to positive emotions secured the children through play, education, and exploration of a better outlook during the pandemic.

Conclusion

This study aimed to analyze the effects of DME in the Focus DME Model on Filipino children affected by the COVID-19 lockdown. There were positive effects on the feelings of frustration, distress, confusion, and sadness of the participants based on the facilitator's observations as well as the interviews conducted with the parents of the children. The study findings suggest that DME can be a form of emotional approach coping, where emotions are processed and expressed through movement, dance, and physical activity. Therefore, DME in Focus DME Model can be employed as an intervention for children experiencing feelings of frustration, distress, confusion, and sadness during stressful or uncertain times, similar to the lockdown periods of the pandemic in the Philippines. Finally, DME can be a supplementary form of transformative social development applicable to any individual or group regardless of sex, age, religion, socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity.

Limitations

One of the major limitations of this study was the unrecorded narratives of the participants. These could have served as a rich source of data on how the intervention helped them cope better during the COVID-19 lockdown.

Recommendations

The data collected in this study were purely qualitative. Thus, there was a need to include objective measures using validated questionnaires to measure the effects of DME on specific health-related psychological variables. And with the DME as an intervention of the study, objective measures must be present to quantify the effects of DME on the children. Hence, further development of the methods of DME is a must to ensure that both qualitative and quantitative data are gathered and used to establish the effects of DME on children during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Moreover, it is suggested that an experimental and control group type of experiment be conducted to see if the changes from pre- to post-test were not random or by chance. Also, having a larger number of participants in this study would increase the evidence of the effectiveness of DME in the Focus DME Model. DME can then be applied in the context of the pandemic to different age groups to determine if it yields the same outcome as that among the participants of this study. Finally, a longer DME intervention is recommended to examine the effects of conducting more sessions. It is likely that DME will continue to show more positive benefits if conducted with more interventions.

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Social Movements as Enablers of Transformative Social Protection and Building Back Better:
A Case Study of the Nagkaisa Labor Coalition's COVID Advocacy

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Abstract

Going into the third year of COVID-19, the Philippines is experiencing multiple and intersecting covariate shocks—the pandemic, super typhoons, and inflation. This paper probes the impact of the pandemic and other covariate shocks on the well-being of Filipinos with a focus on its differential outcomes for the working poor and poor women. Building back better from the pandemic can be done using transformative social protection as an anchor. The paper argues that integrating the role of social movements that advocate for transformative social protection strengthens the concept's innate political thrust. A qualitative case study of the pandemic advocacies of the labor coalition Nagkaisa in the Philippines revealed the catalytic role of social movements, as well as the barriers they face, in advocating for a transformative type of building back better. Nagkaisa's demand for universal programs on basic income, health care, and job guarantees responded to the impacts of covariate shocks to varying degrees and were transformative policies that went against the grain of the neoliberal status quo. To spearhead campaigns to win these reforms, Nagkaisa used a repertoire of actions including transforming its advocacies into electoral engagements for the purpose of resisting a deeper turn to authoritarianism and reviving civic spaces for contestation.

Keywords: COVID-19 pandemic, building back better, social development, social protection, covariate shock

Introduction

Going into the third year of COVID-19, the Philippines is experiencing multiple and intersecting covariate shocks—the pandemic, super typhoons, and inflation. While deep in an economic and health crisis induced by a militaristic response to COVID-19, super typhoons pummeled the country in two succeeding years. And while struggling to come out of one of the longest lockdowns imposed in the world, people have been facing runaway fuel and food prices since 2022. Social development practitioners are faced with the challenge of crafting effective policies so that the country can recover from the ravages of these covariate shocks. This paper probes the impact of the pandemic and other covariate shocks on the well-being of Filipinos with a focus on its differential outcomes for the working poor and poor women. The article then proceeds to interrogate the concept of transformative social protection as a type of building back better from the pandemic. The paper argues that embedding the role of a social movement that advocates for transformative social protection strengthens the concept's innate political thrust. Thus, it is significant to undertake a case study of the pandemic agenda and advocacy of a social movement in the country—the Nagkaisa Labor Coalition. Specifically, the paper aims to 1)

identify the key pandemic demands of Nagkaisa in response to the covariate shocks; 2) evaluate Nagkaisa's platform according to the framework of building back better and as a response to the covariate shocks; and 3) understand the dynamics and outcomes of Nagkaisa's advocacy for transformative social protection. Finally, the essay ends with some concrete recommendations for a human-centered and transformative approach to recovery from COVID-19 based on the pandemic platform of Nagkaisa.

Review of Related Literature

For the past three years since the onset of COVID-19, the country has been experiencing multiple and intersecting shocks that have differential impacts based on class and gender. While the pandemic, super typhoons, and inflation negatively affect the well-being of all Filipinos, these covariate shocks disproportionately impact the working poor and poor women.

Impact of the pandemic

The Philippine economy contracted by 9.5% in 2020, the worst on record since the end of the Second World War and also the worst in Southeast Asia (Manuel, 2021). At the worst stage of the lockdown, from March to May 2020, more than seven million Filipinos were officially unemployed (De Vera, 2020). As the economy slowly opened up, streams of workers started to return to work so that, by the end of 2020, the unemployed hovered around four million (De Vera, 2020). This was however a result of the fact that more than two million people without work already stopped looking for a job and thus were technically not considered unemployed (De Vera, 2020). By 2021, unemployment was still above four million (Rivas, 2021). However, as the economy gradually returned to some state of normalcy, by December 2022, the number of unemployed went down even further to 2.22 million. Yet the number of underemployed—or employed workers desiring more hours of work presumably due to low incomes— remained high at 6.2 million (Cabuenas, 2023). More workers were back at work but in temporary jobs or vulnerable livelihoods.

Informal workers were much worse off compared to employees in the formal economy. Social protection partly shielded formal workers so that they could enjoy paid leaves and other benefits. But street vendors, jeepney drivers, home-based workers as well as other workers in the informal economy could not avail of such safety nets. Since men are a majority of the informal workers, they were also worse off (Cabegin, 2020; Bersales & Ilarina, 2019). Still, the women's labor force participation rate, already low at 48%, slipped further by 3% amidst the pandemic (Cabegin, 2020).

Workers in micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs), as compared to those in large companies, were also gravely affected (Shinozaki & Rao, 2021). Many MSMEs could not survive the lockdown as they lost markets and could not avail of loans. Thus, the pandemic had differential impacts based on gender, industry, and job status.

In the strictest period of the lockdown, the number of families reporting hunger was around 4 million (CNN Philippines staff, 2020). By the end of the year, the number rose to 7 million families (Aguilar, 2020). At first glance, this is startling since hunger incidence was in opposition to the unemployment rate. But this is not surprising given the shift from formal to informal work, from full-time employment to part-time employment, the rise of under-

employment, and the decrease in labor force participation. Likewise, inflation worsened as the pandemic wore on.

COVID-19 of course does not discriminate across classes, gender, ethnicity, or nationality. However, the health impact of the pandemic is different across classes and genders because Filipinos do not have the same access to healthcare, for example. The rich, the employers, and males are better off in terms of coverage and provision for healthcare compared to the poor, workers, and females.

A universal healthcare law was enacted just before the pandemic but its implementation is sorely lacking, mainly due to funding issues. Millions of Filipinos remain without coverage by the Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PhilHealth). Likewise, the most common preventive course of action against COVID-19 is personal hygiene and hand washing. But the availability of running water, or even just water, is a challenge to the urban and rural poor, and people in depressed areas and far-flung villages. Likewise, soap and disinfectants may be inaccessible due to their cost. Further, multivitamins are a luxury to the poor. Even the most basic personal protective equipment (PPE) like masks and face shields cost money.

The lockdown imposed in the country was part of a securitized form of response (Hapal, 2021) by the administration of former President Rodrigo Duterte. Arguably this was a continuation of the same iron fist policy used in the war on drugs that led to the killings of thousands of mostly poor Filipinos in depressed areas. Further, this particular response by the administration revealed a tendency to authoritarianism. The lockdown was weaponized by the administration against its political rivals within the elite and also in civil society (Agojo, 2021; Hapal, 2021; Viajar, 2020). By the latter part of 2020, killings of activists increased substantially (Aspinwall, 2020). Civil liberties such as the freedom of assembly and press freedom were curtailed using the pandemic as an alibi. Even very local and spontaneous initiatives like community pantries were harassed by security forces of the State.

Impact of super typhoons

Climate change brought powerful storms to the country from 2020 to 2022. Five typhoons in late 2020 caused an estimated Php 90 billion worth of damage, equivalent to 0.15% of the annual GDP (Talavera, 2020). Typhoon Ulysses in particular caused extensive flooding in Cagayan and destroyed crops. Super typhoon Odette caused even more harm in terms of jobs and livelihood. The International Labour Organization (ILO, 2021) estimated that 2.2 million workers, mainly vulnerable informal workers without social protection, in ten regions were affected.

In 2021, 15 storms entered the Philippine area of responsibility resulting in varying degrees of damage but it was the last, a Category 5 typhoon code named Odette, which cut a trail of destruction over the central islands of the country (Relief Web, 2022). The death toll exceeded 400, making it the deadliest in Southeast Asia for that year. The damage was estimated at Php 40 billion with some 1.5 million homes destroyed and some 4.5 million people affected (Reuters, 2021; Al Jazeera, 2022). Farmers and fishers, who comprise the poorest sector of the population, were the most affected. Subsistence coconut farmers, small fishers, children, elderly, pregnant and lactating mothers were of special concern amidst the ruin left by Odette (Relief Web, 2022).

Even more typhoons entered the Philippine area of responsibility in 2022 but only five out of the 18 made landfall, which again caused different degrees of destruction. Super typhoon Karding most affected Central Luzon and Calabarzon (Relief Web, 2023). The Office of Civil Defense claimed that Karding was similar to Odette of 2021 in terms of intensity while it was comparable to Ulysses of 2020 in terms of the affected areas. More than a million people were impacted by Karding with about Php 3 billion worth of damage to agriculture (Sadongdong, 2022). Other harmful typhoons that year included Agaton, which caused a landslide in the province of Leyte, and Paeng, which resulted in floods in the province of Maguindanao.

For the three years of the pandemic, at least one powerful typhoon per year caused substantial damage, specially to the most at-risk populations. While powerful storms started hitting the Philippines more frequently even before the pandemic—such as super typhoon Yolanda in 2013—the double disaster of super typhoons and the pandemic gravely impacted vulnerable communities. The impact of climate change became more severe due to the swift rise in the number of people living in floodplains and coastal areas since the 1970s (Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction, 2011) and to the increased incidence of strong tropical cyclones (Kossin et al., 2020).

This double disaster created a humanitarian crisis in the country, as both negatively impacted livelihoods and complicate the health response (Rocha et al., 2022). Disaster response is even more difficult in the context of mobility restrictions and health facilities overwhelmed by the pandemic. Simply delivering relief goods to typhoon evacuees became problematic amidst supply chain disruptions generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. While high winds destroyed makeshift tents in hospital open spaces that were being used for triage and wards (Lucero-Prisno III et al., 2020). The double disaster also affected the mental health of Filipinos (Rocha et al., 2022)—one example being the case of some female students who reported having a grueling time coping with studies (Cueto & Agaton, 2021).

Impact of inflation

By March 1, 2022, the lowest level of restrictions was finally implemented in Metro Manila and other major cities, signaling the start of the so-called new normal. Yet this was little comfort to many Filipinos as 11 straight weeks of fuel price hikes since the last week of 2021 battered consumers and self-employed transport workers (CNN Philippines Staff, 2022). This led to demands by jeepney drivers, delivery riders, farmers, and fishers for fuel subsidies (Reyes, 2022) and by workers for wage adjustments (Pazzibugan & Gascon, 2022).

Inflation in January 2022 was pegged at 3.0%, significantly lower than the 3.7% inflation in the same month of the previous year, and slightly down from the 3.2% in December 2021 (PSA, 2022). But from there, it was all downhill for consumers as prices continuously rose on a monthly basis. From a consumer price index (CPI) of 111.7 in January 2022 (with 2018 as the base year), the CPI rose to 121.4 by January 2023. Thus, by January 2023, inflation rose to a high of 8.7% (PSA, 2023).

The most controversial price inflation of a commodity in this period was that of onions. At one point in December 2022, onions were selling at Php800 per kilo, which was two or three times dearer than meat (Ragasa, 2023). While it was an outlier event, the scandalous inflation of the cost of onions exposed the extent of troubles faced by ordinary consumers. For

formal workers who are dependent on fixed-income wages and informal workers who subsist on precarious incomes, inflation further eroded their household earnings.

The group Partido Manggagawa (2023b) asserted that Php 88 had been shaved off the P570 minimum wages of workers in Metro Manila. This is despite the minimum salary hike of Php 33 in June 2022. That salary increase was the first wage order in more than three years. This meant that real wages had not just stagnated but eroded over the period of the pandemic. While changes in minimum wages affect formal workers directly, it also has an indirect impact on informal workers due to the lighthouse effect. Minimum wages in the formal sector serve as a signal to the rest of society, including the informal economy, of what is an acceptable wage (Boeri et al., 2010).

Discontent and agitation among workers around the question of inflation and wages reached a point that, by the end of 2022, a group filed a petition in the Metro Manila regional wage board for a Php 100 minimum wage hike to recover the lost purchasing power of wages (Pazzibugan, 2022). There were also calls for Congress to legislate a nationwide across-the-board wage increase for all workers, even for those receiving salaries above the minimum since they are also subject to the adversity of inflation (Monzon & de Villa, 2022).

Labor groups argued that wage erosion had exacerbated hunger and poverty. A survey by the Social Weather Station uncovered that involuntary hunger increased from 11.3% in October 2022 to 11.8% by December 2022. This translates to 3 million families experiencing hunger. The survey also showed that poverty incidence rose by two percentage points to 51% over the same period. This meant that 12.9 million families rated themselves poor (Partido Manggagawa, 2023a).

Hunger, once disaggregated and examined granularly, reveals differential impacts. Again, the poor, the women, and the young are worse off. Within families, the bulk of the scarce food resources would usually go to the father or male members so that they are able-bodied enough to continue in paid employment. The mother, female, and younger members sacrifice. Further, hunger and unemployment generate or exacerbate conflicts within the family and thus lead to incidents of gender-based violence like wife-beating.

The PSA (2023) CPI figures reveal that the inflation in the cost of food items, as well as transportation, was consistently several points above the average. It is well-known that food comprises the largest part of the basket of goods for poor families. Thus, poor families are disproportionately affected by inflation. Further, given that mothers, women, and girls bear the burden of domestic work and household care, the physical and mental stress of coping with high prices falls on their shoulders. Interestingly, inflation in areas outside of the National Capital Region was also constantly and significantly higher than that in Metro Manila (PSA, 2023).

Summary

The pandemic, typhoons, and inflation are covariate shocks that adversely affected Filipinos within the years 2020 to 2022. These contrast with idiosyncratic shocks, such as unemployment or sickness, that only distress an individual. Covariate shocks highlight both the urgency and difficulty of crisis response and humanitarian interventions to mitigate the

adversity faced by large populations. Formulating effective, timely, and adequate measures is, therefore, a serious challenge for social development practitioners (Bastagli & Lowe, 2021; Lind et al., 2021; Bastagli, 2014).

These triple shocks led to a humanitarian crisis in the Philippines, while other Southeast Asian countries, which are more or less at the same level of economic development, escaped the worst of COVID-19. Vietnam in fact posted positive economic growth amidst the pandemic (Lee, 2021). Thus, it is possible for the Philippines to recover under a different kind of response. In fact, various groups in the country—from the political opposition to community pantries and social movements—advocated for an alternative response (Abad, 2021; Rey, 2021; Velasco, 2021).

Study framework and methodology

Given the landscape of the authoritarian response, economic recession, and humanitarian crisis in the country, an appropriate paradigm for recovery is imperative. In the case of the Philippines, different groups have diverging ideas of the proper response and the pathway to recovery. How to build back better is a contested concept.

Building back better has been the accepted normative principle in disaster response and mitigation. As the name implies, building back better means recovery from disasters that aims not to return to a previous state of vulnerability but instead to rebuild communities so that they are more resilient than before (Mannakkara et al., 2019). It is a realization of the fact that communities that recovered from calamities remained as susceptible, if not worse off, to new disasters. Vulnerability and resiliency are two extremes of a spectrum. Vulnerability refers to the degree of risk to disasters, while resiliency denotes the ability to bounce back from adversities. Building back better is codified in the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (United Nations, 2015).

Disaster risk reduction and management moved from a narrow emphasis on short-term recovery and rebuilding of built environments to encompass a more expansive view of resiliency. Thus, questions of poverty, inequality, and gender are relevant variables and social development principles—such as human development, sustainable development, and the human rights-based approach—have informed the proposals for building back better before COVID-19 and during the pandemic (Alburo-Cañete, 2022; Richter et al., 2021; Bawagan, 2011; Luna, 2011). Studies have usually focused on local communities although a few, such as Pineda-Ofreneo (2011), put forward proposals at a national level. This is expected as capacity building for disaster response is usually at the local level (Alcayna et al., 2016). Yet, the pandemic was not local but global in scope and thus presented a new challenge in terms of response and recovery. Mendoza (2020) argues that building back better necessitates the implementation of safety nets and universal health care.

Adaptive social protection has been advocated as a response to covariate shocks through the integration of safety nets into disaster response and climate adaptation (Bastagli & Lowe, 2021). In contrast, Devereux and Sabates-Wheeler (2004) assert that social protection must go beyond social transfers and safety nets. For them, transformative social protection must become political as it confronts the power imbalances and mass poverty in society through policies promoting collective rights and social inclusion.

The political nature of transformative social protection as a type of building back better is a key insight that reflects the reality of the pandemic response and recovery in the Philippines. The ways and means of building back better are subject to contestation as these open up questions about the status quo and challenge vested interests in society. In this light, building back better and transformative social protection will benefit from embedding a concept of social movements and people's empowerment.

Community organizing and people's empowerment are a necessity to realize a transformative pandemic response and recovery. Claim holders cannot remain atomized and have a beneficiary mentality. They must organize and actively claim their rights and freedoms. The poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed must build social movements to claim their rights and achieve well-being.

In the 1970s in the Philippines, this framework of people's empowerment was realized in various movements such as labor, urban poor, farmers, and women that advocated for social reforms and radical change. It still exists today in the form of "Tatak CD" which denotes that community development is premised on the active participation of the people (Manalili, 2017).

However, since the downfall of the Marcos dictatorship, community development (CD) has become mainstream but at the loss of its political and radical edge. For example, one of the most well-known applications of CD is Gawad Kalinga (GK). Some view GK in a positive light for making homeless urban poor beneficiaries into active participants in the development process (Habaradas & Aquino, 2010) or for fostering good governance and citizen participation among social actors including diaspora donors (Brillantes & Fernandez, 2011). However, others are critical of GK's brand of CD as they question the morals of private initiative substituting for a state responsibility (Kelly & Ortega, 2020) and its nurturing of patronage politics and clientelism at the local level (Villanueva & Salazar, 2015).

Still, the most widespread CD practice is grassroots organizing by traditional politicians. Through a system of community-cum-ward leaders, client networks of poor households are trapped in relationships of patronage with local politicians who dispense welfare in the form of aid, jobs, and hospital referrals for the needy.

Thus, CD was turned on its head and transformed from a mechanism for empowerment into a tool for dependency. The practice of social development in the Philippines must itself be transformed by reconnecting to its political and radical roots. Social movements advocating and campaigning for transformative social protection should challenge the mainstream practice of CD in both its form and substance.

The catalytic role of social movements in advocating for transformative social protection and building back better provides a useful lens in interrogating the pandemic agenda of the Nagkaisa labor coalition. A change in the paradigm of the pandemic policies is the most crucial component of a recovery plan. A paradigm shift is feasible as long as a critical mass or a constituency can be built. This implies building a social movement and an advocacy campaign that demands robust social protection. Hence, the significance of studying the pandemic advocacies of a movement such as Nagkaisa.

This paper is a qualitative case study of the pandemic advocacies of Nagkaisa. The research used document review and participant observation as methods. The main documents examined were the "State of Labor and its Agenda on Recovery" or SOLAR and "Unemployment Support and Work Assistance Guarantee" or USWAG, both published by Nagkaisa. Also, the author was able to observe the activities of Nagkaisa up close and personal from 2020 to 2022 as a researcher engaged in a project to probe the impact of the pandemic on labor rights.

Consideration of reflexity is factored into the reliance on document review to reduce the bias of the author, especially since observation is one of the research methods. The author has his own observations and opinions of the research questions to be answered, given the fact that he was embedded in Nagkaisa during the period of the study. Therefore, this has to be triangulated and validated by a review of Nagkaisa's documents, and of news stories of its activities and demands. Still, participant observation is not an invalid method of data gathering and in fact, provides useful insights by an insider that might be lost to a researcher looking from the outside.

Case Study Results and Discussion

Nagkaisa is a coalition of some 40 labor centers, federations, and institutions including big worker groups such as the Federation of Free Workers, Sentro ng Nagkakaisa at Progresibong Manggagawa, and Partido Manggagawa. It was formed in 2012 as an offshoot of solidarity for Philippine Airlines workers who were embroiled in the biggest labor dispute of that period. Since its founding, Nagkaisa has trailblazed in challenging the Duterte administration to make good on its promise to end contractualization.

The Nagkaisa Labor Coalition was a vocal advocate for a pandemic response that prioritized the interests of workers (Velasco, 2021). As spelled out in SOLAR, the seven planks of Nagkaisa's proposal for a workers' first recovery from the crisis wrought by COVID-19 are:

1. Protection of labor rights during health and economic crises;
2. Support for key sectors: an industrial strategy for recovery;
3. Support for micro, small, and medium enterprises;
4. Employment and income guarantees;
5. Universal and resilient public health systems based on equity and solidarity;
6. Just transition into safe and efficient transportation systems;
7. Financing and resource mobilization for the economic recovery program.

Thus, Nagkaisa's recovery plan prioritizes the basic needs or basic capabilities of people so that their fundamental human functionings can be guaranteed. That is freedom from hunger, sickness, exclusion, and vulnerability. This is to be ensured by the introduction of a universal basic income.

In the context of the pandemic, the imperative to ensure basic survival becomes paramount. But given the experience of the Philippines, basic survival is dependent on an effective response. The substantive freedoms of political rights, civil liberties, and voice and participation are crucial for forging appropriate pandemic policies. In this case, while political freedoms are a constitutive capability—a good thing in itself that people value—it is also instrumental. Without the right to air grievances and freely voice out opinions without fear of retribution,

arrest, harassment, or even death, then even calls for universal aid, social protection, and proper health response are hard to imagine. Hence, the stress placed by Nagkaisa on compliance and enforcement of labor rights and human rights precisely during a crisis.

In SOLAR, Nagkaisa calls for imposing a nominal wealth tax on the richest Filipinos to sustain a universal basic income and provides an initial but concrete proposal for its execution. The wealth tax will not impoverish the oligarchs of the country but it will keep millions of Filipinos from hunger.

Also, Nagkaisa asks for the full implementation of universal healthcare on the basis of full funding by the State so that all Filipinos are actually enrolled and covered as provided for in the law. Once more, the question of financing is the biggest hurdle. Besides a wealth tax, other necessary fiscal reforms include the reversal of the lowering of corporate taxes and strict enforcement of tax laws so that the rich and the middle class pay their fair share.

Nagkaisa likewise demands job guarantees that will provide decent and green jobs to the unemployed and underemployed. Economic recovery on the basis of full employment should be framed in the context of decent work, green jobs, sustainable growth, and the development of local industry and agriculture. This plank definitely implies a radical shift away from the market-driven, investor-friendly, and public-private partnership economic development paradigm.

Specifically, Nagkaisa's USWAG proposes the following:

1. Income guarantees, equivalent to the prevailing minimum wage or Php 10,000 per month, whichever is higher, for those unable to work due to lockdown conditions;
2. Wage subsidies equivalent to 75% of the prevailing minimum wage to save jobs of workers in MSMEs;
3. Employment guarantees for those who are unemployed, ranging from 100 days to nine months;
4. Trainings for strategic employment facilitation, with a stipend of not less than 50% of the minimum wage;
5. Expansion of the public sector to take on social tasks such as upgrading the public health system, developing renewable energy, and carrying out mitigation and adaptation measures to climate change (climate jobs).

A return to the old normal will merely replay the old ills of Philippine society—mass poverty, persistent unemployment, and degradation of the environment. Thus, the recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic should mean a better normal. In a nutshell, it can be described as putting people and workers first.

This is in contrast to the mainstream paradigm that privileges private businesses and foreign investors and conceives development as trickle-down. Before the pandemic, a decade-and-a-half-long economic growth with GDP increases of over 5% annually doubled output, led to a 50% labor productivity increase but also wage stagnation (Collas-Monsod, 2018). In other words, the pie doubled in size but the working population's share remained the same. The wealth produced by the labor of the Filipino working masses—from farmers and agricultural workers in the countryside to formal and informal workers in the towns and cities—must be equitably shared.

The concrete proposals for universal basic income, healthcare, and job guarantees within a model of promoting decent work, local industry and agriculture, green jobs, and sustainable growth are actually a call for asset reform and wealth redistribution. These can only be achieved with the working people exercising agency, becoming empowered, and constituting themselves as a movement that campaigns and fights for this new paradigm of social development. A progressive redistribution of wealth and asset reform is unimaginable without a social movement imposing its political will on the elite and the State. This is the only way that advocacies can be codified into laws and accepted as a necessary reform.

While universal basic income, universal health insurance, and universal job guarantees appear to be piecemeal reforms, the struggle for these has the potential to be transformative. This is so because, first, these necessitate inroads in the privileges of the elite. Second, universal social protection defies the dogma of market determinism. And finally, since these are achievable only through building social movements that transform the consciousness of the marginalized and transport them into political participation.

Opposition to reforms will come from the political and business class. The elite will certainly resist a recovery program that is not trickle-down. That is why the poor and marginalized will have to organize and mobilize. Thus, the proposals for universal basic income, health insurance, and job guarantees fall into the rubric of transformative social protection.

Nagkaisa's set of demands constitutes an alternative pandemic response founded on putting workers' rights and welfare ahead of the "economy" which is a code word for employers' vested interests. The pandemic as a covariate shock had a grave impact on jobs in the formal economy, livelihoods in the informal sector, and wages and incomes of all working-class families. This was revealed in historic levels of unemployment, underemployment, and hunger during the pandemic. Nagkaisa's demand for taxing the wealth of the richest Filipinos or billionaire oligarchs in order to fund robust social protection that supports job creation, income maintenance, and health care strikes at the heart of the contested terrain of building back better.

While Nagkaisa's alternative response necessarily focuses on dealing with the economic impacts of the pandemic, it is still strong on the question of the climate emergency and cost-of-living crisis. Among the seven planks of Nagkaisa's SOLAR are the promotion of mass transport and just transition for workers in the transport industry. Further, in USWAG, Nagkaisa explicitly emphasizes climate jobs as a key driver of employment creation.

Indeed, one aspect of the government's pandemic response that reveals the intersecting nature of covariate shocks is the forcible phaseout of jeepneys as part of the lockdown measures. The so-called public utility vehicle modernization program has been stymied for years due to resistance by well-organized strikes of jeepney associations. But the shutdown of public transport during COVID-19 opened a window for the abrupt phaseout of jeepneys. Then the gradual opening of the economy discriminated against traditional jeepneys (Aggabao et al., 2022). On the pretext of climate mitigation, jeepney drivers and operators were left without livelihoods. Nagkaisa, as part of Move as One Coalition, a network of advocates for mass mobility, called for shifting to service contracting of jeepney cooperatives as the norm of public transport (Aggabao et al., 2022).

Finally, income guarantees, wage subsidies, and training stipends all serve to protect

working-class families from the ravages of inflation. SOLAR and USWAG were formulated, in late 2020 and early 2021 respectively, not specifically to address the runaway inflation that exploded in 2022. Nonetheless, elements of Nagkaisa's COVID agenda provide a bulwark against the erosion of wages and incomes resulting from the rise in prices of basic goods and services. By late 2022, Nagkaisa asked for a legislated wage hike in the face of persistent inflation (Monzon & de Villa, 2022).

Nagkaisa combined lobbying together with traditional social movement tactics such as political education, community organizing, and mass actions. At the height of the pandemic, this transitioned to an online modality but shifted back offline as the mobility restrictions were lifted (Velasco, 2021). Still, Nagkaisa did not undertake mere posturing but seriously engaged policymakers in a bid to realize its demands. Thus, the group held dialogues with the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) to demand unemployment guarantees and even the Department of Finance for the wealth tax. While none become policy, the DOLE (2021) did incorporate the unemployment guarantee into its social protection floor recommendations.

The inability to translate advocacy into policies and campaigns into wins is partly due to a weak Philippine labor movement. But it also partly results from the severe constriction of the space for organizing and advocacy with the turn towards authoritarianism under the Duterte administration. The national polls provided an arena for social movements—Nagkaisa included—to channel political activism into electoral struggles. Nagkaisa's platform for recovery was transformed into an electoral program. It supported the candidacy for president of then Vice President Leni Robredo since she substantially espoused Nagkaisa's SOLAR and USWAG, and committed to preserving and extending the civic space that is crucial for the blossoming of advocacies and organizing (Magtubo, 2022). However, the election results of the 2022 elections deepened the turn to authoritarianism instead of reviving civil liberties and civic spaces.

Conclusion and recommendations

The Philippines faced multiple and intersecting covariate shocks such as the pandemic, super typhoons, and inflation from 2020 to 2022. This paper appraised the effect of these covariate shocks on the well-being of Filipinos and assessed its varying impacts on the working poor and poor women.

Transformative social protection provides a relevant framework so that the country can recover from the ravages of these covariate shocks, organize a better normal, and build back better from the present crisis. Transformative social protection highlights the question of overcoming power asymmetries and tackling social conflicts that are crucial realities on the ground in the Philippines. Nonetheless, the concept of transformative social protection is strengthened by incorporating social movements as protagonists and people's empowerment as an instrument. The case study of Nagkaisa's COVID response uncovered the role of social movements in advocating for an alternative vision of building back better from the pandemic. Social movements can be enablers of transformative social protection and building back better.

The key planks of Nagkaisa's program of recovery included universal basic income (to ensure basic needs of the population), universal healthcare (already codified into law but yet to be funded fully to be operationalized), and universal jobs guarantee (full employment for all Filipinos through both public and private initiatives which include promotion of green and

climate jobs). These respond directly to the impact of the pandemic but also to varying degrees to the challenge of climate change and inflation. Nagkaisa explicitly and coherently linked the question of jobs and environment and did not consider these to be in contradiction. Further, Nagkaisa's platform advocates transformative policies that go against the grain of the neoliberal status quo.

Nagkaisa's campaign for its transformative vision of building back better founded on a workers-first policy used a repertoire of actions: organizing and mobilizing in online and offline modalities, lobbying policymakers, and influencing public opinion through the mass media. However, the weak state of the labor movement provided little leverage and the shrinking democratic space made it even more intractable for Nagkaisa to translate its pandemic demands into policy victories. Advocacy for a transformative vision of building back better is enabled by a regime that respects, protects, and fulfills civil liberties and political freedoms. Therefore, Nagkaisa transformed its advocacies into electoral programs and engagements for the purpose of resisting a deeper turn to authoritarianism and reviving civic spaces for engagement and contestation.

Some key recommendations towards transformative social protection and building back better can be gleaned from the experience of Nagkaisa. First, services such as health, aid, and welfare must be considered entitlements due to everyone simply because they are born as humans.

Second, assistance must be provided continuously since the economy has not fully recovered despite the pandemic has largely subsided. This can be done through the establishment of a universal basic income that will keep everyone above absolute poverty. The scaffolding for this already exists in the form of the 4Ps program (Cabegin, 2020). This must be radically expanded to cover everyone and to comprehensively develop the scope of assistance provided to sustain basic needs.

Third, the institution of a wealth tax is called for to fund universal programs such as basic income, health care, and job guarantees. Nagkaisa was arguably the first group to air the call for a wealth tax in late 2020 in its SOLAR. Today, the wealth tax proposal has a much broader constituency and a number of advocates (Collas-Monsod, 2021; Tadem, 2022).

Fourth, the peace-and-order pandemic framework must be replaced by a response based on a public health paradigm. The war against the next pandemic does not need security personnel as much as healthcare experts and social development professionals. Social development practitioners have a crucial part to play since the pandemic and other covariate shocks have led to a humanitarian crisis.

Finally, political freedoms should be treated as rights that are due to all and cannot be reasonably denied even in a crisis like a pandemic.

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Rethinking Resilience:
An Analysis of the Online (Re)presentations and (Re) definitions of "Community Resilience and Cooperation" in Typhoon-related Relief Efforts in the Philippines

Irish Joy G. Deocampo

Abstract

This paper explores how "resilience" and bayanihan are (re)presented and (re)produced, and even resisted within the calamity-response discourses that emerged online. The study is located in the social mediascape of Facebook and Twitter during the consecutive onslaught of Typhoon Rolly and Ulysses last November 2020. I analyzed two specific themes by adopting a combination of discourse analysis, autoethnography, and digital ethnography. First, I described how acts of bayanihan are organized, performed, and reproduced in online citizen-led relief efforts. Second, I analyzed the role of hashtags in addressing the needs and mitigating the risks experienced by victims of typhoons. The study revealed the potential of social media and digital platforms in expanding the definition and bounds of community resilience while allowing narratives of resistance and dissent to surface. Moreover, the study illustrates how practices of bayanihan during a compounded crisis can offer insights into the new ways and practices that can be adopted and questioned when mobilizing calamity-related initiatives.

Keywords: *bayanihan*, community resilience, disaster management, hashtag, social media

A Crisis upon Crisis

In November 2020, four tropical cyclones wreaked havoc in my home country, the Philippines. The arrival of the last two cyclones coincided with the same week when the Philippines was replaced by Belgium in the last spot of the "Top 20 Countries with COVID-19 Cases." Super typhoon Rolly (international name: Goni), considered to be the world's most powerful tropical cyclone in 2020, made landfall twice in Bicol, one of the regions in the Philippines. It went on to hit two more regions as it weakened into a typhoon (Tantuco et al., 2021). Three more typhoons followed within a few days; Typhoon Ulysses was the last one. According to Manila (2020), Typhoon Ulysses was considered to have the worst impact and left more casualties during its onslaught. More than two million people were affected nationally, and one million of the survivors were temporarily housed in state-sponsored evacuation centers.

The prevalence of tropical cyclones, or typhoons as they are locally called, is nothing extraordinary for the Philippines, a country located in the Pacific Ring of Fire. Local news outlets are prepared to send their field reporters to cover stories of flooding and displaced communities during typhoon season. Most Filipino households are used to watching these news broadcasts live. These news stories are often framed within narratives of community resilience and *bayanihan*. *Bayanihan* is a Tagalog word that refers to the "spirit of communal unity and cooperation which makes seemingly impossible tasks possible through the concerted effort of

many people with a common goal and a sense of unity" (Sarmenta & Hirano, 1999, as cited in Isidro & Calleja, 2011, p. 3). This concept is often invoked in times of calamities to describe the different ways Filipino communities organize relief efforts for the victims, in this case, those experiencing the destructive effects of typhoons as compounded by the unforeseen global health crisis. Due to the limited mobility of people brought about by COVID-related restrictions and lockdowns, community coping mechanisms, rescue operations, and citizen-led initiatives were doubly challenged. Moreover, it is crucial to interrogate the dominant discourses that emerged during this time and to surface the narratives that were potentially silenced and obscured in the process.

Research Objectives

This unprecedented turn of events leads us to ask new questions. How can communities support and look out for each other when so doing could also endanger their own lives? How does this extraordinary period of multiple occurrences of crisis affect how resilience is defined and operationalized? Given these extraordinary circumstances, the concepts of *bayanihan* and community resilience in the context of calamity response need to be revisited and interrogated.

In line with this, I aim to understand how the concepts of "resilience" and *bayanihan* are (re)presented, (re)produced, and even resisted within the calamity-response discourses that emerged online. Specifically, I analyzed two main issues. First, I described how acts of *bayanihan* are organized, performed, and reproduced in online citizen-led relief efforts. Second, I analyzed the emergence of hashtags, specifically #RescuePH, in addressing a specific need of the victims of typhoons.

Methods

This research employed a combination of autoethnography, digital ethnography, and discourse analysis. I located the digital space as the main site of the study. During this period, I was a graduate student based in Belgium. My circumstances influenced the design and the conduct of this methodology.

I chose the social networking sites, Facebook and Twitter, as the specific platforms for analysis. I included data starting from the second week of November 2021, which was the aftermath of Typhoon Rolly and the period during Typhoon Ulysses' onslaught in the Philippines. I filtered through typhoon-related posts on both sites using the indexing system #RescuePH. I also included anecdotal narratives as part of the data.

Together, though Apart

A few days after the second lockdown in Belgium was announced, the news of a super typhoon hitting the Philippines reached me via the posts of my Facebook friends. I immediately contacted my family and told them to prepare an emergency kit. I also reminded them to keep their phones fully charged in case of electricity loss. One of my friends resided in the region that was reported to be the main location of the typhoon's landfall. I also sent him a message to ask how he was and to tell him to keep safe. Posts and updates about the casualties flooded my Facebook and Twitter feeds when the typhoon finally hit. My friend had not responded and our common friends told me that they could not reach him either. I found myself feeling

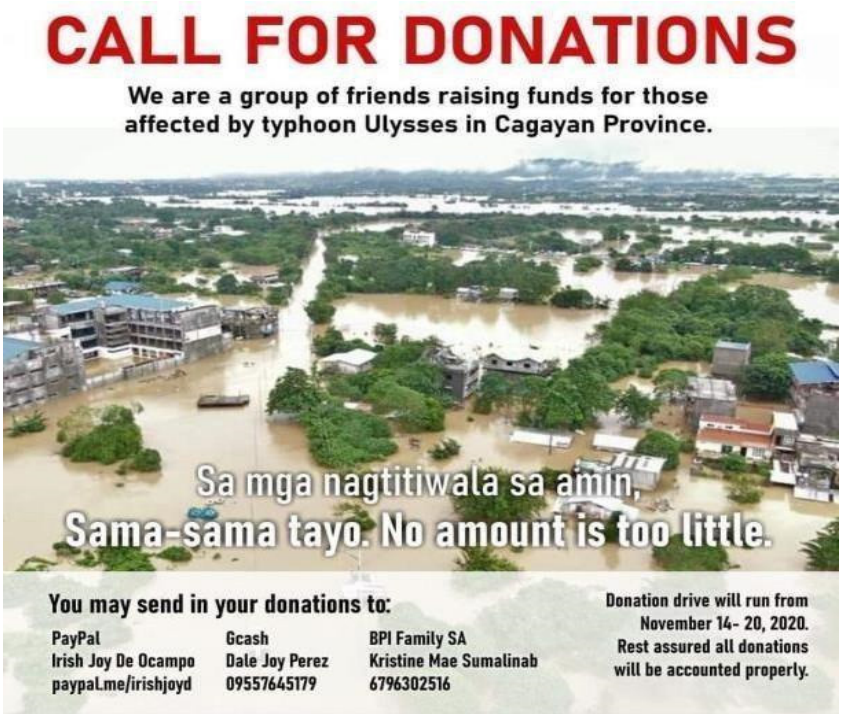
anxious and helpless. I was far away from home, living in isolation as my home country was experiencing the worst typhoon of the year. My fellow Filipino scholar in Belgium, Kring, and I discussed how we could help the affected communities

The day after I talked to Kring, she informed me of the fundraising initiative that she was co-organizing with other friends. She told me that she contacted one of the community partners of her previous workplace who resided in the affected region to ask how the community was affected and what kind of help was needed. The partner was also one of the lead coordinators of the relief efforts. Kring added me to the Facebook group chat, *Sama-sama Para sa Cagayan at Catanduanes* (this translates to "together for Cagayan and Catanduanes," Cagayan and Catanduanes being two of the affected regions of the typhoon). The group chat served as the main tool for communicating logistics and operational concerns.

These efforts for collective organizing in the form of fundraising initiatives can be considered an operationalized form of *bayanihan*. Moreover, this kind of *bayanihan*, which involves concerted efforts of volunteering resources such as time and finances, is in fact, a common occurrence in the Philippines in times of calamities. In Isidro and Calleja's (2011) study of the contribution of national values to organizational and individual resilience in times of disaster, volunteerism was cited as a societal value observed in disaster management efforts. Filipino volunteerism is defined as "helping someone out of absolute free will without consideration of any form of remuneration/benefit" (Aguiling-Dalisay et al., 2004 as cited in Isidro & Calleja, 2011, p. 4)

Within a few hours of the landfall of Typhoon Ulysses in the country, different citizen initiatives similar to ours sprang up on my Facebook feed. These initiatives were led by either civil society organizations, student-led organizations, or private groups of individuals. Below is a sample poster that was shared online to publicize our fundraising efforts. Included in the content of the posters are details about donations and an aerial shot of the Cagayan region.

Figure 1 Poster for Fundraising



The form of *bayanihan* that took place during this calamity has the added layer of accountability. For example, through our group chat, we sent updates on incoming cash donations to the group, while those who were in the community sent us updates on how the funds were utilized. These updates were in the form of on-site photographs. My main role was to publicize the fundraising initiative online and serve as a fund manager. I received the donated cash from the donors and transferred these cash donations to the partner community. As both parties sent their updates, I would then share these updates on my Facebook and Instagram accounts as a form of accountability. The photos used in the posters in this paper were the ones sent to us by the partner community. I obtained the permission of the owners of the photos and my fellow organizers to share these posters.

Figure 2 Accountability Report

These practices of raising funds and releasing updates were shared by other similar organizations. In traditional practices of volunteerism, volunteers are not expected to formulate an inventory to track the ways the services are provided or the number of donations contributed. This is deemed unnecessary when collective efforts are undertaken in a physical setting, and the acts of volunteering are readily visible. However, the acts of volunteering are not evident to the corresponding community when mediated by digital technology. Volunteerism, as affected by the migration to social media, occurs in intimate circuits such as group chats or private conversations. Thus, the prompt release of funds received was crucial in establishing transparency and accountability thereby contributing to the credibility of the organizing group.

Moreover, these photographs and publicity materials create a visual narrative of *bayanihan* circumscribed in the discourse of resilience. The updates on the increase in financial and material donations only prove the willingness of Filipinos to pool their resources to help their fellow Filipinos. At the same time, the need for photos underlines the importance of accountability and establishing trust. As Hechanova et al. (2015) pointed out in their study, the value of *bayanihan* was exhibited through "mutual assistance and support among community members" (as cited in Isidro & Calleja, 2020, p.3). Furthermore, *bayanihan* contributes to a community's resilience, or "the ability of social groups or individuals to bear or absorb sudden or slow changes and variation without collapsing" (Holling & Meffe, 1996, as cited in Crate & Nutall, 2011). In this instance in Cagayan Province, it is important to highlight the existence of *bayanihan* on two levels: 1) the mobilization efforts within the fundraising group to help the affected community and 2) the mutual aid among community members themselves, demonstrated by how our partner individuals who were purchasing and distributing the relief goods to the affected were themselves survivors of the typhoon.

Most neighborhood-based community organizing aims to form groups and develop alternative institutions (Pyles, 2007). In particular contexts such as calamities, Harrel and Zakour (2000, as cited in Pyles, 2007) underscore the role that informal organizations provide in isolated or marginalized communities. These organizations can increase citizens' participation and empower and improve access to services. Because the acts of *bayanihan* are premised upon the existence of a community, these acts illustrate how social media platforms have the potential to expand and redefine the borders of who constitutes a community. According to Crate and Nutall (2011), resilience in communities is embedded in the historical, social, and cultural constructions that govern social interactions and the material development of communities. In this particular example, one can see how the constructions that govern the social interactions of the community bleed from the physical into the "virtual." Without the existence of social media interventions in collective organizing, the traditional community is strictly confined within the geographical boundaries of a place. On the other hand, the bounds within social media are not as strictly defined, or at least, not restricted to physical geography. Thus, while informal organizations are "usually locally based" (Pyles, 2007), the borders of community membership and involvement become blurred and extended toward individuals who do not occupy the same geographical location as the other community members. In our case, Kring and I were both in Belgium, on a different continent and time zone while our partner community was located in Cagayan, Philippines. As of this writing, I have yet to set foot in Cagayan nor to meet the people who were in the group chat with me. Yet, I feel part of the community by me being from the Philippines and sharing the same sentiment of concern for my fellow Filipinos back home. Similar to mutual aid contexts and initiatives such as the community pantries, collective organizing often leads to the creation of a "community of anonymous others," unnamed individuals share what they have with those they do not personally know, and the latter accept help from people they cannot be personally indebted to (Camposano, 2020).

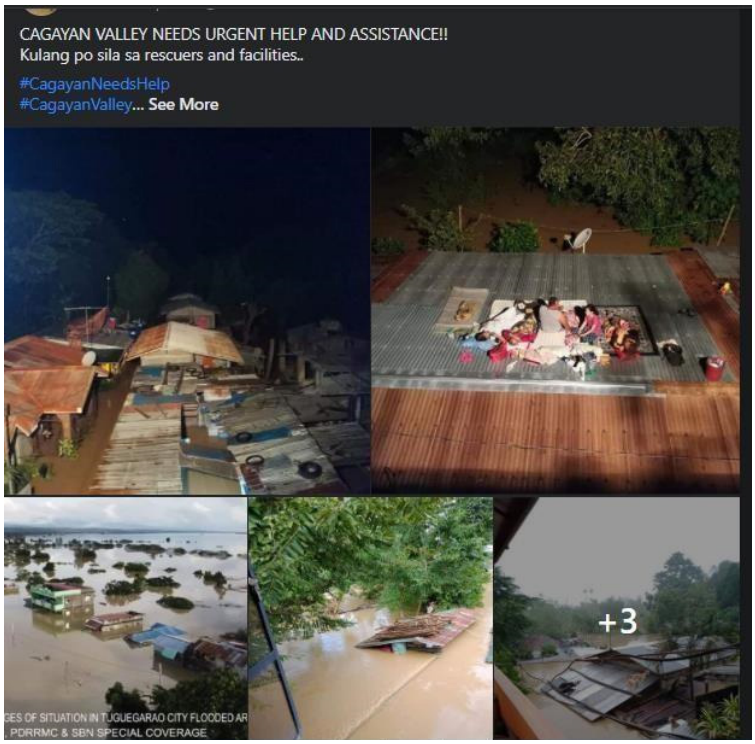
Hashtags as *Bayanihan*

Digital platforms, specifically Facebook and Twitter, served another unique role in collective organizing: the use of the hashtag #RescuePH. #RescuePH was first used in 2013 on social media to crowdsource information about the incoming Typhoon Yolanda (international name, Typhoon Haiyan (Tech in Asia, 2013). Since then, the hashtag has been used by Filipino online users during calamities to inform others about the circumstances of people who need

rescue or relief goods or to signal for help if someone needs rescue or emergency food supplies themselves. The hashtag #RescuePH became an indexing tool to address a specific need during the successive onslaught of Typhoons Rolly and Ulysses in October and November 2020.

In the middle of the torrential downpour of rain and overflowing rivers of Typhoon Ulysses, several families were left stranded on their rooftops as floodwaters around them started to rise and enter their houses (Ropero, 2020). However, due to the limited mobility caused by social distancing concerns during the pandemic, the local government units were not readily available to address these needs. The fellow community members of the affected families could not offer assistance because they too were either afraid to get infected due to lack of proper gear (e.g., facemasks, rafts, etc.) or they did not have a mobile connection. As a response, the people affected turned to social media and "outsourced" assistance from the broader public. The role of social media was crucial in making the call for assistance possible. The hashtag #RescuePH was reactivated to catalog the specific need of rescuing stranded families and individuals during the onslaught of the typhoon. They shared photos or status updates on Facebook and Twitter to serve as a digital SOS when they needed to be rescued or when they knew of someone who needed rescuing.

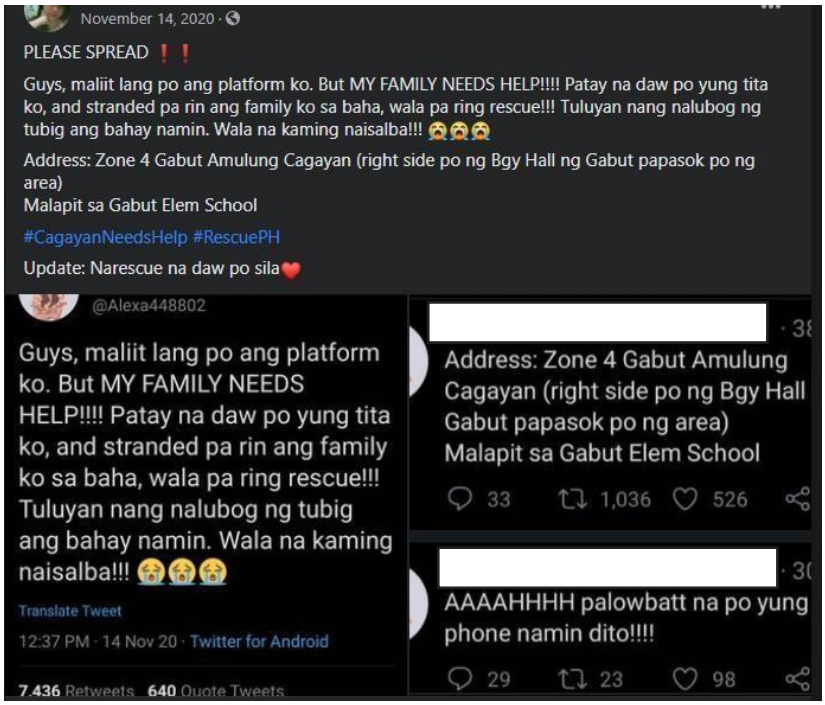
Figure 3 Screenshot of Facebook post (Jomarie Ramirez, 2020, November 13)



The photo above is a screenshot of a sample Facebook status that was posted during the typhoon. In the above photo, the post starts with "CAGAYAN NEEDS URGENT HELP AND ASSISTANCE" followed by the sentence, "*Kulang po sila ng* rescuers and facilities" which roughly translates to "They do not have enough rescuers and facilities."

After that, a series of hashtags ending with #RescuePH were included. Similar posts were accompanied by photos of the people involved or screenshots of the correspondence between the one sharing the post and the people in need of rescue.

Figure 4 Screenshot of Facebook post (Alexandra Santos, 2020, November 14)



In the photo collage above, two users were involved. The first post was from a concerned citizen who decided to publicly share the screenshots of the posts created by someone who claimed to need rescuing. The screenshots below the post were the original sources of the call for help. There were no photos provided, therefore, the concerned citizen included screenshots instead as proof of the original message. Uploading photos was challenging then because the internet signal was down in many areas. In the original post, the person who asked for rescue started by addressing the public and asking them to share his/her post because his/her platform did not have a wide reach. She explained that her aunt already died and the rest of the family members were still stranded in their house waiting to be rescued. In her next post, she gave her address. The last post was to inform the public that her phone battery was getting low. Furthermore, in this particular post, the original post was edited to include a subsequent update that the family members were finally rescued.

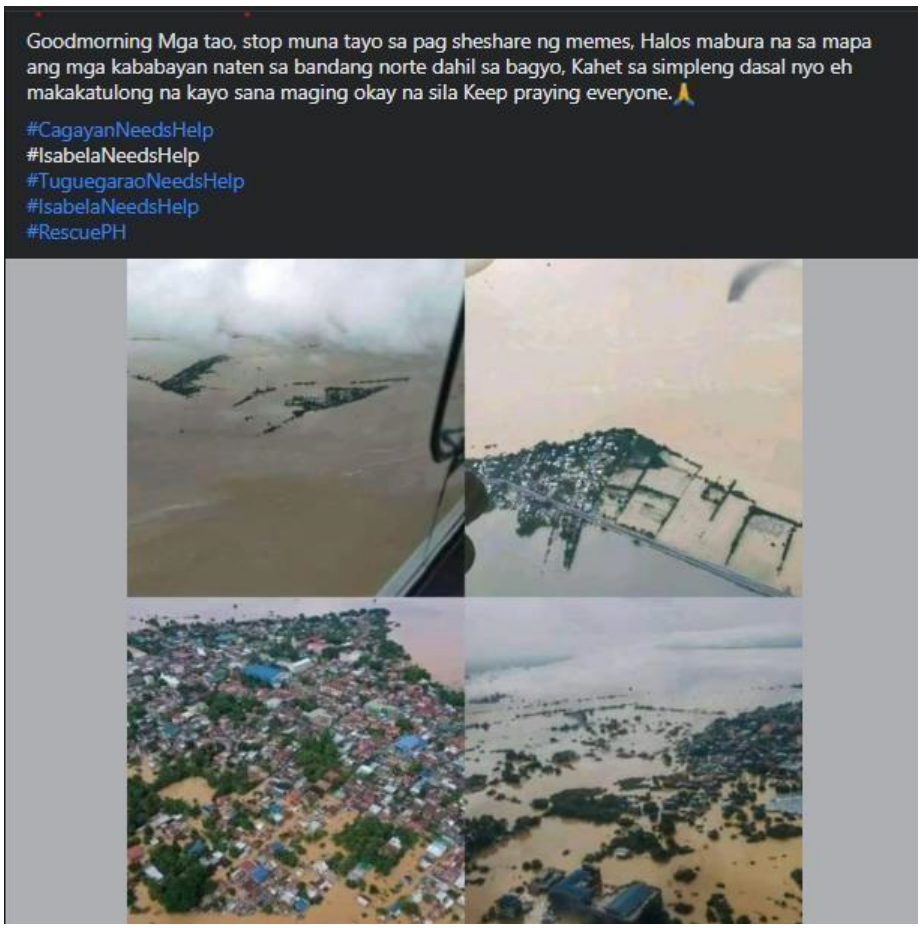
Other posts shared a similar template. The post would start with a call to share the post to spread awareness. This was followed by a brief situationer, an explanation of the kind of help needed, the location of the persons that needed rescuing, and then the hashtag, #RescuePH. While community members were not readily mobilized to assist because of social distancing concerns, the hashtag was used as a tool to connect the state authorities and other capable citizens to the communities at risk.

#RescuePH was instrumental in ensuring that disaster-related posts were properly categorized during that time. This concern was particularly relevant in the context of the then-ongoing pandemic. Aside from disaster-related content, COVID-19-related discourse was dominant in the social mediascape. In addition, due to social distancing and quarantine rules, people resorted to the digital space as the main platform of interaction. It was inevitable that the variety of digitally-bound activities increased exponentially because, by default, people had to be online for most of their waking hours. In times of emergency, the efficient organization of

information, such as information about survivors' location, can spell the difference between a saved life and a lost life. Moreover, in non-pandemic times, volunteer rescuers would be more willing to travel to the communities affected. Due to the fear of contracting the virus and the complex navigation amidst state-sanctioned quarantine rules, this was not possible at that time.

At the same time, the absence of clear boundaries in the social mediascape can likewise prove to be challenging in a crisis like this. Unlike traditional news outlets which have a system for prioritizing stories and updates about an ongoing calamity and its aftermath, social media activity is less organized and monitored. The use of a hashtag, thus, functions as a form of organization and prioritization. For example, in the middle of the raging Typhoon Yolanda, the #RescuePH trended on Twitter Philippines quite quickly because many users were tweeting and retweeting posts using that hashtag (Tech in Asia, 2013). Bonilla and Rosa (2015), in their study of hashtag activism, emphasized the capacity of the hashtag to serve as an indexing system and "a filter that allows social media users to reduce the noise of Twitter by cutting it into one small slice" (p. 6).By cataloging a post under the #RescuePH label, online users were indirectly participating in an attempted formation of a unified and organized indexing information system during the calamity. There were even posts that specifically asked online users to refrain from sharing non-typhoon-related content, such as memes and other humor-related posts, to avoid obscuring the "more important" posts about rescue operations.

Figure 5 Screenshot of Facebook post (Kar Sol, 2020, 16 November)

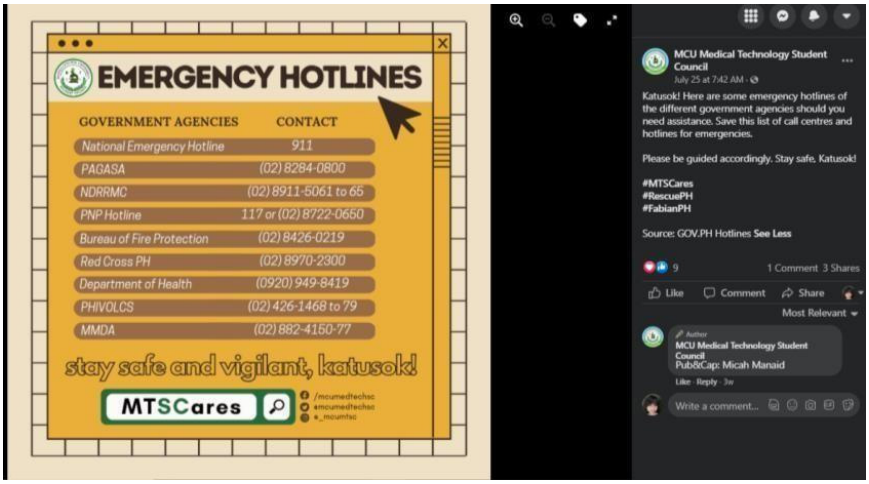


This screenshot is an example. The first sentence, "Good morning *mga tao*, stop *muna tayo sa pag sheshare ng memes,*" is roughly translated to "Good morning people, let's stop sharing

memes for the meantime." It is then followed by a statement about the flooding in the northern region of the country, adding that by simply praying, one is already helping. Here, there was no clear call for help or rescue unlike in the first two examples provided earlier. The post's call was for people to stop sharing memes in the meantime, and pray instead to help. It indirectly called for a disruption of the usual routine in social media. The owner apparently considered the act of sharing memes unproductive to the current situation. In contrast, sharing posts about the typhoon was considered more useful. This scenario demonstrated how people also take on monitoring roles in times of crisis. Thus, the use of the hashtag became a tool for monitoring both the narratives of survivors and the behavior of the other citizens.

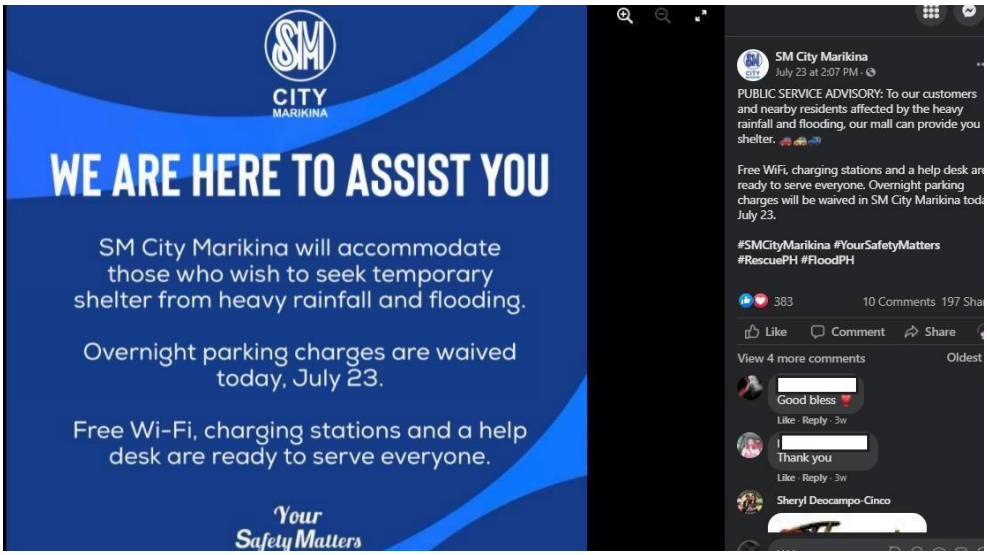
The hashtag #RescuePH was not only utilized for incidents such as the previously given examples. Other people also used the tag when sharing emergency hotlines that typhoon victims could contact. The photo below is an example of such a post.

Figure 6 Publicity Material (MCU, 2021, July 25)



Commercial establishments that offered assistance in the form of providing temporary shelters for the victims also utilized the hashtag #RescuePH, as seen in the photo below.

Figure 7 Publicity Material (SM City Marikina, 2021, 29 July)



As of this writing, #RescuePH has been used in 1.3 million Facebook posts. Although it was originally utilized during Typhoon Yolanda, #RescuePH has been adopted by online users to refer to any calamity-related post since then. As of this writing, the most recent post on Twitter with #RescuePH has a timestamp of 29 July 2021. The post was about the flooding in a province located in the northern part of the country. Aside from this hashtag, there are accompanying hashtags that are iterations of previously created hashtags. One example is the #[name of region]NeedsHelp (e.g., #ManilaNeedsHelp and #AgusanNeedsHelp). As Bonilla and Rosa (2015) pointed out, "hashtags have the intertextual potential to link a broad range of tweets on a given topic or disparate topics as part of an intertextual chain" (p. 5). The intertextual chain created in this scenario refers to the established meaning indexed by #RescuePH in times of calamities.

Studies on the role of social media in disaster management are mostly concerned with risk communication and information (see Boas et al., 2020; Young et al., 2016). The focus is on how social media is mobilized as a supplementary instrument of the government to aid in information dissemination campaigns for disaster risk response. However, the reality of the coronavirus crisis has reconfigured the role of social media and has revealed other potentials for its utilization. The role of Facebook and Twitter is no longer merely to serve as an information-sharing space for pre-calamity preparations. As demonstrated in this study, social media platforms can be instrumental in mitigating the risks in real time and in extending the bounds of what is traditionally defined as community resilience.

Despite the considerable reservations about the utility of the concept of resilience as an analytical tool, many social scientists and policymakers continue to apply the concept to society; resilience is the ability of social groups or individuals to bear or absorb sudden or slow changes and variation without collapsing (Crate & Nutall, 2011, 2016; Holling & Meffe, 1996, as cited in Crate, 2011). There is a growing focus on examining community resilience in understanding how communities can work towards the reduction of risk and losses from climate change. Moreover, local disaster studies underline the contribution of social groups, such as families, friends, and communities (Isidro & Calleja, 2020; Usama et al., 2014; Hechanova & Waelde, 2017). Isidro and Calleja (2020) claim that in collectivistic cultures such as the Philippines, group-based or community-based interventions are effective in increasing an individual's resilience in times of natural calamities (p. 2). This case study signals the possibility of rethinking and shifting the paradigm of defining community resilience, its boundaries, and its potentialities in the project of disaster risk reduction and mitigation. Moreover, the practices of *bayanihan* during a compounded crisis can offer insights into the new ways and practices that can be adopted and institutionalized when mobilizing calamity-related initiatives.

As one of the people who participated in sharing and retweeting these posts, I too wonder if indeed, our collective efforts to share, tweet, like, and repost were significant in helping the people who needed assistance. Questions about the "legitimate effectiveness" of social media—that is the extent to which its utilization warrants "real world" results—are academic concerns, such as in the study of Chua entitled, "Small Acts and Personal Politics: On helping to save the orangutans via social media (2018)." Chua argues that spreading the word through likes, shares, retweets, and other interventions are portrayed as 'seemingly' meaningful actions in themselves (p. 8). This skepticism towards social media as an enabler of "slacktivism" and tokenistic acts of care and concern towards others may warrant some truth. Some suggest that the virality and ephemerality of social media can only ever produce fleeting "nano stories" with little lasting

impact (Rosa & Bonilla, 2015). Yet, as can be seen in the posts and updates about the successful rescue of families during Typhoon Ulysses, it might be posited that the effectiveness of social media in times of crisis is its time-boundedness. There is an urgency that is unique in the transmission of data that does not exist in the "real world." In social media, a concerned citizen does not have to be "on the ground" to be able to transmit crucial information, such as details related to a family needing rescue.

Moreover, this second example of citizen-led initiatives during a typhoon demonstrates another form of online bayanihan. In most collective organizing efforts, the most visible and valued activity is the donation of supplies and other resources such as cash aid (Hobart & Kneese, 2020). It can be argued that participation in the sharing and retweeting of rescue calls can be perceived as less active and valuable than other forms of collective organizing. Nonetheless, knowledge-sharing is considered to be equally useful (Hobart & Kneese, 2020). If not for the leads brought about by posts bearing the #RescuePH hashtag, which included calls for donations and emergency rescues, it would have been extra challenging for the local officials and designated rescue teams to reach the stranded families.

Redefining community, rethinking *bayanihan*

While hashtags have become evocative of "a collective narrative, shared ideals, and imagined community," these also have the potential to evoke "greater conversations" around social issues globally (Doobrin, 2020). The same spaces also allowed for critiques against the resilience rhetoric to surface. As I have stayed online to maintain contact with friends and family back home, I noticed another emerging trend in the ways some Filipinos on social media talk about resilience. Some people have argued that the narratives of *bayanihan* and "resilience" have been romanticized and exploited. Do natural calamities bring out the resilient, *bayanihan* spirit of the Filipinos? Or is *bayanihan* used to mask the lack of accountability of the State to prevent and mitigate the consequences of calamities and other disasters? There were even calls on Facebook and Twitter for Filipinos to "refuse to glorify resilience, demand accountability." In this call, the people are asked to demand accountability from the government instead of embodying the "resilient spirit." What is understudied is the discursive dimension of resilience which has the potential to reveal the socio-political dimension of the meanings ascribed to the word.

While there is potential for social media to provide supplementary assistance for collective organizing, it can likewise highlight the glaring absence of the State. There is an emerging view that the spirit of *bayanihan* may in fact obscure, perhaps, even justify the lack of action from the State. When #RescuePH became one of the top trending tweets on Twitter, it showed that *bayanihan*, or the reliance on collective organizing is the default response to calamities. For some Filipinos, *bayanihan* became a justification to transfer the responsibility and accountability from the State to community- or individual-led initiatives. However, this reality is not lost on those who are on social media. Aside from #RescuePh, another hashtag, *#NasaanAngPangulo* (translated to #Whereisthepresident?) also became one of the top trending tweets during the aftermath of Typhoon Ulysses.

After the typhoon hit the regions, Duterte was noticeably absent during the briefing by the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) held on 13 November 2020 (Malindog-Uy, 2020). He was also reported missing "from the first high-level

public briefing on the world's strongest tropical cyclone this year," Typhoon Rolly (Tomacruz, 2020). Some citizens interpreted his absence as a sign of neglect or lack of care. They took to social media to express their frustrations and disappointments against the president. However, this incident was not the first nor the last time that #NasaanAngPangulo was among the top trending topics on Twitter. During Duterte's absence in the weekly presidential updates about COVID-19 and his virtual presence at the ASEAN Opening Ceremonies, #NasaanAngPangulo was part of the popular topics on Twitter (Esguerra, 2020; Galvez, 2021; Colcol, 2021). According to Prof. Maria Ela Atienza, "People look for decisive leaders who will not only mobilize resources to help people affected by any crisis but also empathize with them" (Colcol, 2021). However, the dominance of the resilient and *bayanihan* discourses police critiques against State responsibility. Popular sayings such as, "*Tumulong na lang kayo imbes na magreklamo*" ("Just help instead of complaining") demonstrates the higher value placed upon collective efforts rather than political commentary. More importantly, *bayanihan* and demanding accountability are considered mutually exclusive. Thus, the continued reliance on collective initiatives persists.

While it is commendable that Filipinos, almost by default, demonstrate care for each other in the forms of mutual aid and organizing initiatives, this internalized *bayanihan* spirit is not removed from the existence of systemic inequality and power structures. Hobart and Kneese (2020) emphasize how collective care can be used to "coerce subjects into new forms of unpaid labor and make up for institutional neglect" (p. 2). The dominance of resilient and *bayanihan*-based discourses masks critical conversations that revolve around the role of unresolved development challenges that result in disasters. As Ozerdem (2003) argues, sustainable development can reduce vulnerability by "addressing the root causes of disasters and the lack of access to economic and political tools". After all, mutual aid initiatives arise to the failure of the central government and are not designed for long-term goals (Jan & Lance, 2020). If we continue to depend on the *bayanihan* spirit of our communities, the cycle of state neglect and will continue to perpetuate. However, it is important to recognize that the values of *bayanihan* and resilience can be rethought and harnessed into sources of community power. If the communities can collectively call for action and accountability from the State, then perhaps we can continue to appreciate the multi-layered potential of community resilience in times of crisis.

Conclusion

This paper attempted to provide a case study of how a combination of calamities has redefined and reconfigured the notions of community resilience and *bayanihan* within the bounds of social media. Through the use of ethnographic methods, the research was able to describe and illustrate the operationalization of *bayanihan* and its impact on community resilience during the time of typhoons. Moreover, this research demonstrated how different actors and groups utilized digital platforms to mobilize and engage in calamity-related initiatives while surfacing repressed discourses against State neglect and accountability. It is suggested that longitudinal discourse and ethnographic studies on the role of social media and citizen-led initiatives during times of crisis be adopted to further explore how resilience is operationalized and discursively constructed.

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Feature Article

Social Work Practice during the Pandemic: Struggle from a Weaponized Social Work Practice to Rights-Based Approach (Philippine Context)

Gil I. Espenido

Abstract

Pres. Rodrigo Duterte's weaponizing of social services to serve counter-insurgency operation during the COVID-19 pandemic has led to an exclusionary practice of defining who are the priority beneficiaries of the Department of Social Services and Development (DSWD), the lead national agency in providing social services. The capture of retired generals of the highest positions in the DSWD has ensured this shift and focus of the department that employs the largest number of social workers in the country. Narratives from the ground level have surfaced that some social work practitioners have opted to abandon their embraced professional's values and ethics and engaged in depriving ordinary citizens of their rights and freedom.

The nonchalant attitude of the government at the onset of the pandemic has metamorphosed into coercive measures in implementing health protocols. On top of this is the gross mishandling to glaring ineptitude of the state's response to the needs of the people during the pandemic. This was exacerbated when corruption issues marked the state's purchase of health supplies that ran into billions.

Social work practitioners took their initiatives in how to respond to the pandemic. Yet, the most challenging and rigorous challenge is how to struggle against the weaponizing of social services and shifting away from needs-based approach to rights-based approach in accepting the challenge.

It has become increasingly notable that social work is one of the most hurt professions during this crucial period. Yet the profession has the fundamental obligation to rise from the hurt and give substance to its transformative character.

Key words: counter-insurgency, "whole-of-nation" approach, sovereignty, human rights lens