

# 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-Ofreño (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 reflexivity 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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