

Indigenous Peoples and the COVID-19 Social Amelioration Program in Eastern Visayas, Philippines: Perspectives from Social Workers

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Abstract

Amid the COVID-19 response, Indigenous Peoples suffer disproportionately and are especially at risk of being left behind in government responses due to the various inequalities they face. This paper discusses the treatment of Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines government's COVID-19 policies and programs, and examines the implementation of the Social Amelioration Program (SAP), and its impact, or lack thereof, in the lives of Indigenous Peoples. This paper used a combination of secondary data from government policies and news articles, and primary data from ten rapid ethnographic interviews with social workers and SAP implementers from the regional social welfare agency of Eastern Visayas. We conducted a preliminary analysis on the various issues surrounding the SAP implementation as well as steps taken, or lack thereof, in making the program more inclusive and responsive to the plight of Filipino Indigenous Peoples in the region - a hazard prone area of the country. This essay is divided into three parts. The first illustrates the virus outbreak in the country and the challenges Indigenous Peoples face during the pandemic. The second discusses the policy that created the SAP and issues surrounding it. The last one highlights the local social workers' perspectives and recommendations on how the government could better contribute to the social development as well as general wellbeing of Indigenous Peoples during and after the pandemic.

Introduction

This essay contributes to pragmatic studies related to Indigenous Peoples during the COVID-19 pandemic and examines the treatment of Indigenous Peoples in the Philippines government's COVID-19 response. The principal research question of this study is: *How did the Philippine government support Indigenous Peoples in the time of COVID-19 pandemic?*

We supported this by answering the following questions:

1. How did the current pandemic impact or challenge Indigenous Peoples?
2. How did the COVID-19 Social Amelioration Program or SAP help, or not, in alleviating these challenges?
3. How can the SAP better contribute to the social development as well as general wellbeing of Indigenous Peoples during and post-pandemic?

As a result of public health restrictions that prohibited face-to-face fieldwork, we conducted our key informants interview via phone calls, social media platforms, and email correspondences between May to August 2020. Due to the imposed mobility restriction, we situated this essay on the Indigenous Peoples located in Eastern Visayas, Philippines where the first author resides. A total of 10 key informants participated in this study: four social work practitioners from the Department of Social Welfare and Development, two social work academicians from the Leyte Normal University, and four social workers from non-government organizations working in Eastern Visayas. While we acknowledge that the time-sensitive nature of this research meant that our primary informants are relatively few, we made sure to collect sufficient qualitative data which enabled us to provide a substantial description and analysis of our informants' responses, which in turn, reflect contextual realities on the ground. We enriched our analyses by conducting secondary data analysis of available information obtained from the United Nations' database, national and local news publications, social media postings, and official government policies and press releases.

COVID-19 Pandemic and the Filipino Indigenous Peoples

The unprecedented and rapid disruption of the COVID-19 pandemic has widened the political, social, and economic crevices in the Philippines where lockdown measures were popularly used to manage the outbreak. Following the announcement of the first local COVID-19 case in the Philippines last March 2020, President Rodrigo Duterte placed the National Capital Region under General Community Quarantine (GCQ), triggering the exodus of people outside the State's capital to various provinces. Because of the rapid increase of cases, the entire Luzon island which consists of eight regions, was placed under Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ). Under ECQ, peoples' mobility was restricted except for essential businesses like health, finance, and food. While the country has one of the strictest and longest lockdowns in response to the pandemic (Dadap-Cantal et al., 2020), the Philippines still has one of the fastest rise in cases in all of

Southeast Asia (Esguerra, 2020). As of writing, the country has 365,799 cases confirmed, of which 6,915 died and 312,691 recovered (DOH, 2020).

While health experts note that the virus doesn't discriminate, contemporary societies do. Amid the response, Indigenous Peoples suffer disproportionately and are especially at risk of being left behind in government responses due to the various inequalities they face. The pandemic poses serious effects on the wellbeing, livelihoods and health of over 470 million Indigenous Peoples of the world (DeLuca, 2020; UNFAO, 2020). Indigenous Peoples in most countries fall into the most vulnerable health category (UNDESA, 2020) and the pandemic exacerbates their plight especially on issues of malnutrition, basic healthcare, quality education (UN EMRIP, 2020), and domestic violence (Klower, 2020).

In the Philippines, a regional social movement warned that Indigenous Peoples will die of hunger - not the virus (AIPP, 2020). Approximately 14-17 million Filipino Indigenous Peoples who belong to around 110 ethnolinguistic groups (UNDP, 2013) are heavily reliant on farming, fishing, and creating handicrafts. The lockdown along its restrictions on peoples' mobility to go about their daily livelihoods have a major impact on their water, energy, food, and health security, among others. Even before the pandemic, Indigenous Peoples have struggled to cope without a balanced diet, adequate food, as well as access to, and control over basic social services. More than ever, health and socio-economic relief programs are direly needed by Indigenous Peoples in order to survive in the ongoing pandemic.

On the other hand, the crisis opened an opportunity to highlight indigenous socio-cultural assets that have long been used by Indigenous Peoples in protecting themselves from disease outbreaks. For example, indigenous cultural communities in the Cordillera region have invoked indigenous rituals to implement 'indigenous lockdowns' which contributed to decreasing cases of infections. Lapniten (2020) reported that in the town of Bauko, an indigenous variation of a lockdown known as *tengao*, was invoked by indigenous community elders and implemented widely by the town through an official local government advisory. *Tengao*, once invoked, means that no one can enter or leave the community for a day or more, depending on the consensus of the council of elders. In Eastern Visayas, 14 Indigenous Cultural Communities (ICCs) are dispersed in the provinces of Samar, Eastern Samar, Northern Samar, Leyte, and Biliran. These ICCs include the *Mamanwas*, the *Badjaos*, and the *Manobos*, whose indigenous migrant ancestors came from the Mindanao island (Cuaton & Su, 2020). Because Indigenous Peoples are strongly linked to their

environment, and cultural and religious traditions, some of them consider COVID-19 as a punishment from [their] God(s) (*Tahaw* or *Magbabaja*), hence, they must seek cover and pray for protection. This belief forms part of their cultural assets which may play an active role with their collective response in ensuring that their communities are not exposed to the virus. While indigenous lockdown practices and religious beliefs could help decrease virus infections in their communities, the socio-economic impacts of these lockdowns still persist. Thus, many expect the role of the State in providing social protection in order to ensure that its citizens, including Indigenous Peoples, adequately eat, drink, access and receive social and health services to survive the pandemic.

The COVID-19 Social Amelioration Program

The *Bayanihan* to Heal as One Act (Republic Act No. 11469) was swiftly created in March 2020 upon the request of President Rodrigo Duterte. *Bayanihan* is the Filipino principle of mutual effort (Eadie & Su, 2018) and the word roughly translates to “helping each other”. Under the national law, Duterte was granted the power, among 29 others, to distribute PhP5,000.00-8,000.00 (~USD100-160.00) monthly financial subsidy for two months to 18 million poor and low-income households belonging to the informal sector (Buensuceso, 2020).

This financial subsidy, commonly known as the Social Amelioration Program (SAP), was implemented by the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD). However, more than three months after its implementation- March to June 2020, the distribution of this financial subsidy was still incomplete due to the lack of a comprehensive list of potential beneficiaries (Suzuki, 2020). Other common issues hounding the quick and effective execution of this relief package include the a) unclear guidelines and limited time in beneficiary selection, b) unreasonable quota of beneficiaries per barangay/ village despite a higher number of supposedly qualified recipients, c) duplicate recipients, d) corrupt disbursing officials, and e) absence of an updated information system that identifies poor and low-income households (Suzuki, 2020). In a macro-level, Bisenio (2020) argued that the inadequacy of the SAP underscores the government’s failure to address the plight of the most vulnerable Filipinos in the time of COVID-19.

In terms of the SAP implementation in Eastern Visayas, various challenges were encountered. On top of the ever-changing guidelines from the national government, there is a lack of institutional capacity, both in terms of human resources as well as fiscal mechanisms, to

implement rapid socio-economic response in the context of extreme contemporary crises like the current pandemic. Aside from the general time factor, the lengthy list of government signatories from the usual government bureaucratic processes, affected the timely distribution of the financial assistance. Figure 1 shows that in mid-May, at least 539,511 families or 90.51% of its targeted beneficiaries have been served and aided by their respective local government units (LGUs) in Eastern Visayas (DSWD-R.O. VIII, 2020). On the other hand, the LGUs also lack institutional readiness and capacity. An informant shared that, as of mid-July, the LGUs have submitted 91,923 waitlisted beneficiaries; however, only 75,390 have been encoded, while the rest are ongoing. Aside from encoding, the LGUs should also complete their liquidation of the first tranche of payouts. Due to various issues, including delayed payouts and difficulties in transporting documents due to travel restrictions, several LGUs still have not completed the liquidation. As of mid-July, only 135 out of 143 LGUs have successfully completed the liquidation of payouts. These contextual realities support our argument that the pandemic exposed the inability of LGUs to provide real-time and readily available data needed for a timely implementation of rapid response programs like the SAP.

With regard to Indigenous Peoples in Eastern Visayas, as in other regions of the country, the government did not consult the IP community leaders in terms of planning, implementing, and evaluating the program. We argue that the SAP is a blanket socio-economic program that failed to capture and provide the specialized, yet universal, needs of Indigenous Peoples with respect to their cultural, social, and physiological needs. In other words, the SAP became an “ephemeral universalistic social protection response” (Dadap-Cantal et al., 2020) which is in contrary to the socially fragmented and economically imbalanced sectoral groups of the country that need focused, culturally sensitive, and needs-based socio-economic responses to the pandemic. One of these sectoral groups are the Indigenous Peoples who are especially vulnerable from the pandemic due to the persistent inequalities they face even before the start of the outbreak.

As amply noted by an informant:

The SAP is just a stop-gap measure. It can only serve as a short-term government relief effort, but it can neither carry out direct nor profound effects on the social development of Indigenous Peoples in Eastern Visayas.



Figure 1. SAP Progress Report as of 2020 May 14; photo grabbed from the DSWD Regional Office VIII official Facebook page

Insights and Recommendations from Local Social Workers

All government agencies in the Philippines were unprepared for the unprecedented impact of COVID-19. We solicited the responses of local social workers in Eastern Visayas on how the government can better involve Indigenous Peoples in its response to the current pandemic as well as in future pandemics. They have five major recommendations for immediate consideration and action of the LGUs in the region:

- To ensure that Indigenous Peoples will not go hungry, the LGUs may augment the SAP assistance and provide food and grocery supplies to indigenous cultural communities following health and safety procedures.
- To minimize Indigenous Peoples' exposures to the bigger population vis-à-vis the virus, the LGUs may also provide mobile food stores from which these Indigenous Peoples can buy food. Mobility restrictions due to lockdown measures may prove difficult for some Indigenous Peoples to buy food, especially those living in far-flung areas who purchase goods only once a week.

- To enhance food security, the LGUs may also provide free high-value and high-nutrient crop seedlings that Indigenous Peoples may use to plant in their community gardens. This will eventually provide them food, especially that immediate solutions to the pandemic is unavailable.
- To promote health and safety, the local health offices may intensify their awareness campaign by providing informational materials and hygiene kits to Indigenous Peoples. These materials should be written using the common language of the barangay or village where these Indigenous Peoples reside to ensure that they understand it.
- To protect cultural knowledge and integrity, social and health workers may explore the local and indigenous knowledge and practices that Indigenous Peoples employ to strengthen community health, manage diseases, and avoid virus outbreaks. Incorporating these traditional knowledge and practices in the government's response may help Indigenous Peoples understand on a language, cultures, and beliefs that they hold true and effective.

Our informants collectively noted that it is important to understand the indigenous socio-cultural and political dynamics when working with Indigenous Peoples. These include understanding their beliefs, norms, customs and attitudes towards education, health, and medicine. In addition, the usual Top-Down Approach in program implementation is not an effective strategy when engaging with indigenous communities. Program ownership and community involvement are important to involve Indigenous Peoples effectively and genuinely. We argue that such should also be the case in implementing rapid socio-economic relief efforts in the current as well as future pandemics. An informant noted that the government agencies should include the Indigenous Peoples' community leaders in the Response Planning process to ensure that their needs will be prioritized, and the response will be sensitive to their cultures. In addition, the government should ensure convergence efforts among stakeholders at all levels. This will ensure that the survival and safety needs of Indigenous Peoples are included in the plans. These activities should also have synergy on the ground to attain better collection and utilization of resources. Most importantly, the implementation of these plans should follow the Needs and Rights-based Approach so that Indigenous Peoples won't have difficulties accepting the aids government will give.

Conclusion

Marginalized populations such as indigenous cultural communities are made particularly vulnerable during pandemics. In the case of Indigenous Peoples in the Eastern Visayas, a lack of consultation by the Philippines government in terms of planning and implementing the SAP program has meant that the specific needs of Indigenous Peoples were not met despite the extreme vulnerability they face amid COVID-19. Our study found that the government's one-size-fits-all SAP program failed to capture the cultural, social, and physiological needs of Indigenous Peoples. In particular, the pandemic posed serious threats to the survival of Indigenous Peoples regarding food and livelihood security as Indigenous Peoples are heavily reliant on farming and fishing as their source of food and livelihood. Moreover, the restrictions on mobility enforced during the lockdown meant that some Indigenous Peoples were not able to access their source of food and livelihood. As such, a prominent recommendation among the social workers we interviewed was the need to ensure that Indigenous Peoples have food security, in the form of access to food aid as well as crop seedlings, in the face of future pandemics. Moreover, local social workers highlighted the need to promote health and safety through awareness campaigns in the common language of the barangay or village where the Indigenous Peoples reside. Lastly, local social workers recommended incorporating the traditional knowledge and practices of Indigenous Peoples into future programs to strengthen community health, manage diseases and avoid future virus outbreaks. In conclusion, we argue that the practice of consulting Indigenous Peoples in the face of future pandemics can not only contribute to identifying and meeting the specific needs of Indigenous Peoples, but their local knowledge and practices can contribute overall to strengthening government rapid response programs.

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