

Symposium Report:

The Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Vulnerable Communities in the Philippines

Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (HHI)
HHI Resilient Communities

March 2022




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Executive Summary

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused the loss of millions of lives, disrupted the global economy, and created secondary impacts on livelihoods, education, and mental health across the globe. No country or economic group has been immune to the direct impacts of the pandemic, but marginalized communities are particularly vulnerable to the secondary impacts including some public health measures like extended lockdowns. Marginalized populations are those excluded from mainstream social, economic, educational, political, and/or cultural life. They can be excluded or discriminated due to multiple factors such as their race, ethnicity, age, gender identity, sexual orientation, disability, religion, language, and/or displacement, among others. The Harvard Humanitarian Initiative's (HHI) Resilient Communities Program sought to understand how vulnerable or marginalized communities in the Philippines experienced COVID-19, and how communities coped and adapted in response to direct and indirect effects of COVID-19, including public health measures. To do this, HHI invited Filipino authors exploring this central question to submit papers for consideration to be selected to present and share in a symposium. In addition to its research objectives, the symposium sought to connect researchers and practitioners to create a network of professionals dedicated to serving the needs of marginalized communities in the country.

HHI released a call for papers through academic networks, news and social media. A total of 60

papers were reviewed and nine were selected for presentation. Nine research teams presented their work during a live online symposium. To explore the findings, the symposium included three breakout sessions organized thematically. The first group focused on livelihoods, the second group on health, and the third on social vulnerability. Each group discussed four questions focused on identifying effective measures to protect marginalized groups at the local and national level, the role academia plays in this regard, the steps needed to be taken to protect marginalized groups, and how this network of researchers might work together in the future. Conversations were facilitated by HHI faculty and results of each discussion were reported back in plenary.

Reflections offered by the authors in the discussions of each question are derived from their own research experience with the community or communities each worked with. Authors engaged with a multitude of different kinds of vulnerable communities including seafarers, household domestic workers, garment industry workers, the homeless, indigenous peoples, the elderly, and displaced communities. While these different types of vulnerable communities have unsurprisingly different experiences and needs, common themes emerge from their disparate experiences and their varied approaches to coping with the pandemic provide interesting insights that other kinds of vulnerable or marginalized groups may be able to learn from.

IMPACTS OF COVID-19 ON MARGINALIZED GROUPS

In the first quarter of 2020, the Philippines recorded its first case of COVID-19 as well as its local transmission. Since then, the cases have ballooned into over 3.6 million and deaths at over 57,000, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) as of 11 March 2022. The country with a total population of roughly 110 million, has implemented one of the world's longest and strictest pandemic lockdowns and quarantine measures to prevent the rapid spread of COVID-19. As a result, the Philippine economy sank deep into recession from the second quarter of 2020 to the third quarter of 2021. The poor and marginalized sectors suffered most from the impacts of the pandemic and restrictions put in place by the government. It left millions of Filipinos unemployed. The country's poverty incidence also rose to 23.7% in the first half of 2021, from 21.1% in the same period in 2018, state records show. Discussions at the HHI online symposium highlighted that the country's aggressive pandemic response has failed to adequately assess and integrate how public health measures would impact marginalized communities, which is a key lesson for local and national governments to consider for future pandemic preparedness and response plans.

In the early days of the pandemic, there was confusion regarding whether seafarers were considered essential workers. There were at least 2,000 seafarers whose contracts were cut short and were left stranded in Manila. Lockdowns made it impossible for these seafarers to return to their homes in the provinces. Many others were stranded at sea across the globe sometimes unable to dock at port or leave their ships. There was general ambivalence regarding the impact and effectiveness of government policy with a number of people highlighting that there were insufficient social and economic measures in place to protect workers in larger industries where working at a distance was not an option, manufacturing garments for example, as well as in less formal industries like household workers. Many have lost their jobs such as those who were in the contractual or "No work, no pay" situation.

Additionally, due to the hard lockdown, some people were stranded who wanted to get back to their homes but so the government created this mandate on allowing them to go back to their homes but they had to observe a mandatory 14-day quarantine. Locally stranded individuals (LSIs) are discriminated when the lockdown was imposed.

Some authors pointed to a two-tier system, one for the elite who were able to skirt social distancing and other public health safety measures without penalty, a privilege not afforded to the great majority of the population. The extent to which laborers were impacted by COVID-19 layoffs was perceived to have more to do with individual company policies and decisions than with national government policy. Strengthening social protection measures was seen as the most important way to manage the economic impact of the crisis on livelihoods.

Mental health needs were perceived to have been a significant outcome of the pandemic and lockdown measures taken to counter the spread of COVID-19. One of the participants referenced a project their organization was involved in to mitigate some of the anxieties associated with the lockdown. Poor communities that this organization served feared running out of food so their organization offered both food assistance and offered online music lessons for the community as means of alleviating stress and positively focusing community members on activities they would enjoy and learn from. Importantly, this civil society organization was instrumental in providing an example of how to successfully implement a food service program that the local government was able to learn from and adopt to provide extended relief.

A common theme mentioned across various kinds of vulnerable groups was an expression of acute anxiety in not knowing how long the pandemic would last and whether they would be able to return to their livelihoods.

IDENTIFYING SUCCESSFUL EFFORTS TO MEET THE NEEDS OF MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES DURING COVID

Presenters identified several successful efforts to address the needs of vulnerable groups coping with the impacts of COVID.

1. Effective Communication and Coordination

The first had to do with effective communication, coordination, and consultation among civil society organizations, private sector actors, and local government units. In instances where these relationships were strong, civil society organizations were able to reach marginalized communities that may not have otherwise benefitted from government services. Local government units (LGUs) and government agencies sought the support of academics, especially in analyzing data and spatial mapping.

Some mentioned improved coordination among agencies as a crucial element of success with COVID-19 response. One participant highlighted how their organization's response to Typhoon Haiyan in 2013 had been marred by a failure to coordinate, embracing instead an independent and competitive approach to other organizations working on shelter. That experience resulted in wasted investments in temporary shelters and worse outcomes for the population impacted

by that Typhoon. The participant took those important lessons to prioritize coordination and careful assessment and communication as a key priority in their COVID-19 response. The use of feedback mechanism from the communities particularly during relief operations was cited to be vital in better understanding the needs of the communities from their own perspectives.

2. Collaboration and Information Sharing

Majority of the Philippine population live in coastal zones and are frequently hit by typhoons, flooding, and other effects of the rapidly changing climate. The pandemic further exacerbated their vulnerabilities. Hence, collaboration between academia, local government, and marginalized communities was pivotal to implementing flood early warning systems, flood mitigation measures, and distribution of goods. Similarly, collaboration between LGUs and government agencies like the Department of Science and Technology (DOST) and the Department of Health (DOH) was important to help mitigate the spread of COVID-19. Further, participants suggested that a strong relationship between academic partners and local government helped to reduce misinformation.





Social working groups or volunteers, initiated information drives to raise awareness of the virus and measures individuals could take to protect themselves. These social working groups were able to organize the distribution of aid while academic partners were able to aid with assessments. The important role of the academe in research was also highlighted as one respondent said, in the words of one of the symposium participants: “The government mostly, they are concerned with the implementation of programs and sometimes they are so busy that they cannot even analyze very well their data. Now, for us here, since we have the knowledge, skills and time, it is where we can come in to provide that evidence so we can convince everyone having these meager resources what to prioritize.”

3. Local Leadership

Local leadership was cited as pivotal to effectively identifying the needs of vulnerable communities and advocating for services on their behalf, especially in remote areas.

Reliance on local leadership was pivotal in being able to swiftly pivot from previous development or peace and security programming into humanitarian COVID-19 response. This was the case for a group of local communities in Mindanao

that had been focusing on conflict prevention and peace rights. Because organizations were working closely with local leaders, they were able to immediately pivot their activities to provide education and other services related to COVID-19. Outside organizations did not enjoy access to communities during the long lockdown and therefore relied entirely on local leadership to pivot from peace and security work to humanitarian response and education.

4. Adaptation and Resilience

a) *Thriving household businesses*

New interests and hobbies emerged during the pandemic for people to survive quarantine. Interestingly one participant had emphasized that cottage industries, like pottery, thrived during the pandemic. In some instances, people whose livelihoods were impacted by COVID who were working in industries deeply affected by the pandemic were able to transition to other sources of self-employment. Small family-run food stalls also fared well as people stayed away from larger markets and relied more heavily on local small food providers. It is not clear that the shift toward the informal economy or cottage industries offset the losses suffered from increased unemployment.

b) Locally led efforts

One of the presenters noted the need for locally-led relief efforts to vulnerable communities where those organizations or individuals leading the efforts have a real understanding of local practices and customs and are better placed to tailor efforts sensitive to local norms and needs. An example of this is related to indigenous communities in Mindanao that utilize traditional food sources for their sustenance and medicines and would not readily adopt unfamiliar types of support that may not work for them and may affect their wellness and wellbeing. As one respondent said, “In protecting our vulnerable population, there is a need for consultation and collaboration between the community members, the local government unit, and the academe. While taking

it into consideration or factoring in the socio-cultural and the historical background or the context of this marginalized population to make any intervention, these interventions work for this poor community.”

The presence of local NGOs that were first to respond helped the marginalized communities deal with COVID-19. As one respondent said, “We are already distributing assistance in the communities for two weeks, for three weeks but the LGUs are still thinking how to give assistance to marginalized communities.”

Another example is the creation of community pantries that helped other members of the community.





WHAT STEPS NEED TO BE TAKEN TO PROTECT THE MARGINALIZED COMMUNITIES OR GROUPS?

Symposium participants noted a common theme across the many vulnerable communities they worked with. It was fear and uncertainty about how community members could protect their livelihoods during the lockdown. Despite the significant trauma lockdowns and the virus created, there were notable innovations and creative responses that emerged within vulnerable groups. We mentioned earlier a great move toward home crafts and manufacturing. Other small shop owners learned to begin to sell their goods online, something they had never done previously, thereby not only kick-starting their sales but adapting their business practices to a crisis that will have positive impacts even after the pandemic has been managed.

1. Addressing Mental Health

Social services, especially free mental health services that were provided by mental health practitioners were essential to addressing acute mental health needs during the peak of the lockdown. These efforts were supported both by local government and NGOs and serve as a model for the ways networks of professionals can aid communities in need.

2. Contextualization

A key distinction between the Philippines' experience with COVID-19 and other countries is its unique geography. As an archipelago of more than 2,000 inhabited islands, communities experienced COVID-19 and its impacts very differently. There were some positive ways in which the Philippines' unique geography served to slow the spread of COVID-19 as travel between the different islands was diminished with large rural sections of the country spared the far higher rate of infection in dense urban areas throughout Luzon. On the other hand, wealthier areas of the country could bring greater resources to bear to combat COVID-19.

Sensitivity to local traditions, culture, medicine, and language were key considerations in providing services to marginalized groups living within indigenous communities. Many indigenous communities in the Philippines utilize natural medicines derived from plants. Their diets are also different from other areas of the Philippines with these groups relying on their own plants and animals as food sources. Food aid or medicines delivered by aid groups from outside the area would be rejected if they were not sensitive to these specific needs.

3. Importance of Research

Increased attendance to evidenced-based policies was seen as one positive direction the Philippines needs to move toward. The authors noted a trend toward greater support for research and increasing numbers of partnerships among academic institutions and government. Many felt these were positive developments but also noted low levels of social protection and low levels of self-organizing among Filipino laborers. Even where protections were in place, for example with household workers under the Kasambahay Act of 2013, it was evident that many household workers were unfamiliar with their rights and that implementation of the policy was poor.

Several participants observed that community members are increasingly asking for scientific research to inform policies in the communities they live in. Anecdotally, these participants encountered community members that cited frustration with and skepticism about information on disasters being shared on social media platforms. These researchers have observed an increasing openness and willingness of communities to welcome academics to work with community leaders to improve community preparedness for disasters, including pandemics. Some of the participants noted positive outcomes in terms of providing health services to marginalized groups where there was a strong collaboration between local government units, academics, and other local and state officials, particularly in the Department of Health.

One of the most significant challenges cited by researchers was in their understanding and effectively engaging the political and policy landscape to determine both how best to communicate their research findings and to whom exactly those results should be communicated to inform decision making, programming, and

policy, particularly at the national level. It was particularly frustrating for local academics to see large international organizations using foreign expertise to conduct research that Filipinos could be doing. This was seen as a lost opportunity for more localized influence of national policies. On the other hand, Filipino researchers were grateful for the opportunity to collaborate through the symposium and to be able to network amongst themselves. This increased awareness of other research focused on marginalized communities in the country and was welcomed.

4. Engagement

Participants were adamant that space be given for academic researchers to share their findings not only to learn from one another research methods and findings but to identify ways that a network of researchers could better inform policy and interventions through targeted awareness-raising. Several participants hoped to encourage further support from the Philippine government noting the positive outcomes of the Department of Science and Technology's support of empirical work. Participants also noted how important sharing findings were highlighting the differences around whether the government should be creating national-level policies that are consistent for all groups or whether interventions need to be tailored to meet the needs of groups according to their unique needs, experiences, and resources.

Finally, participants noted the importance of the continuity of engagement among researchers, policymakers in government, and implementing agencies providing services. They expressed great optimism over what they perceived as a respect for and use of empirical evidence. Symposium participants further noted the benefits of creating forums like this one and use it to make concrete plans to collaborate.



APPENDIX

SYMPOSIUM PANELISTS

1. Authors: Ara Joy U. Pacoma, MA; Yvonne Su PhD, MSc; and Ginbert Permejo Cuaton

Paper title: *"Forgotten Survivors: Impacts of COVID-19 on Haiyan Survivors" in Resettlement Sites in Tacloban City, Philippines"*

Institutional affiliation: Leyte Normal University

Read the full paper | Watch the presentation

2. Author: Ferdinand Medina, MPA

Paper title: *"Surviving and Thriving in Crisis Brought by COVID-19: The effectiveness and sustainability on assisting targeted small groups of poor and marginalized people from relief phase to better recovery through the lens of beneficiaries, benefactors and the channel"*

Institutional affiliation: Sparrow Music Philippines and University of the Philippines

Read the full paper | Watch the presentation

3. Authors: Marie Bernadette O. Villanueva, LPT, MAPsych; Ervie Emelda S. Gallespen, PhD, MA; Mariz A. Larido, LPT, MAEd, MAGC, MAPsych; and Inna Isabel G. Deramas

Paper title: *"Strengthening Community Resilience during the COVID-19 Pandemic"*

Institutional affiliation: Riverside College, Inc.

Watch the presentation

4. Authors: Sanley Abila, PhD; Serafin Malecosio, Jr., MSPH; and Rhea Subong

Paper title: *"Left at sea and on land: COVID-19 and Filipino seafarers working in internationally flagged merchant ships"*

Institutional affiliation: University of the Philippines Visayas

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5. Author: Benjamin B. Velasco

Paper title: *"Covid-Related Discrimination against Garment Workers in the Mactan Export Zone"*

Institutional affiliation: University of the Philippines

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6. Authors: Maria Constanca Fretelin C. David, Timothy Francis D. de Dios, Alyssa Lenra L. De Guzman, John Ruwen A. de Guzman, Jose Antonio P. De Guzman, Hannah S. De Jesus, Paula Nicole M. De Jesus, Elin Bettina I. De La Cruz, Aileen N. del Carmen, Arianne Joy E. De Mesa, Jewel Iry J. Dela Pedra, and Dr. Franciosa Luningning G. Gavino-Collins, MD, MPH, DFM
Paper title: *"Coping Mechanisms of Stay-In Filipino House Helpers in Metro Manila during the COVID-19 Pandemic: A Phenomenological Study"*
Institutional affiliation: University of the East Ramon Magsaysay Memorial Medical Center-College of Medicine
[Read the full paper](#) | [Watch the presentation](#)

7. Authors: Federico D. Calo; Mia Kristine C. Quinco; Zarah Jean I. Diche; Zython Paul T. Lachica; Kim Dianne B. Ligue, MSc; and May Anne E. Mata, PhD, MSc
Paper title: *"A Glimpse of the COVID-19 Threat to the Vulnerable Population of Davao Region, Philippines"*
Institutional affiliation: University of the Philippines Mindanao
[Watch the presentation](#)

8. Authors: Jefferyl Kae S. Pandac, MSMT; Maedy R. Tepacia; Ma. Ethel Kathleen G. Juanich; Razel Frances D. Nicolas; Hershey Dianne L. Reville; and Kara Mari V. Aljas
Paper title: *"The Kaleidoscope of Isolation: A Phenomenological Study on Mandatory Quarantine as Experienced by Locally Stranded"*
Institutional affiliation: Institute of Clinical Laboratory Sciences, Silliman University
[Read the full paper](#) | [Watch the presentation](#)

9. Author: Eden H. Terol, PhD, RPsy
Paper title: *"A Clinician's Reflections on Post-Disaster Trauma Care Intervention for Indigenous Communities in the Time of COVID"*
Institutional affiliation: University of the Philippines Diliman Extension Program
[Read the full paper](#) | [Watch the presentation](#)

Watch the full symposium video:



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ABOUT HHI

The **Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (HHI)** is Harvard University's academic and research center in humanitarian crisis and leadership supported by Harvard University's Office of the Provost. HHI is based at the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health Department of Global Health and Population and is affiliated with Brigham and Women's Hospital Emergency Medicine Department. HHI aims to relieve human suffering in war and disaster by conducting interdisciplinary, practice-based research and education that can be used by scholars, policymakers, NGOs, and others to foster interdisciplinary collaboration in the humanitarian sector.

ABOUT HHI RESILIENT COMMUNITIES

HHI Resilient Communities is one of HHI's research programs that uses evidence-based approaches to understand how communities mitigate the impact of disasters. Communities play a central role in disaster preparedness and response, and an understanding of the factors that contribute to or impede their resilience is essential to improving interactions with local civil society organizations, the private sector, national disaster management agencies, and the international humanitarian community.

The program supports local and national capacity for disaster preparedness and response by enabling grassroots organizations to adopt evidence-based tools and practices, enhance leadership skills and approaches, and promote intellectual exchange across national and disciplinary boundaries.



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14 Story Street, 2nd Floor
Cambridge, MA 02138
hhi.harvard.edu



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