

THE PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER, INC.

has its business and editorial offices at

Chino Roces Ave corner Yague and Mascardo sts., Makati City

P.O. Box 2353 Makati Central Post Office 1263 Makati City

Our Telephone numbers are 8897-8808 (all departments)

• Editorial Fax 8897-4793 • Advertising 8890-5535

• Classified 8897-8425 • Circulation 8805-9786

• Subscription Hotline 8896-6000

PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

OPINION

EDITORIAL

# Why the attack on transparency?

If utilized properly, the requirement for every government official or employee to fill out and submit a “Statement of Assets, Liabilities and Net Worth,” better known as a SALN, is a powerful tool for government and the public to check abuse of one’s office or theft of public funds.

Embedded in the 1987 Constitution, the requirement for a SALN covers all government employees who each must submit the notarized document upon assuming office and then every year thereafter. It has served as a useful tool for the Commission on Audit, the Civil Service Commission, the Office of the Ombudsman, other politicians, and members of the public, including (and especially) the media to monitor the growth (or diminishment) of an official’s personal wealth while in office.

Simple as it may sound, any increase in the net worth of a government official during his or her term of office is a potential red flag for investigators. Unexplained growth in assets and net worth from year to year could trigger probes into the source of such income, compared to one’s official salary and allowances, or assets gained before one joined government.

Their SALNs were used to oust the late former chief justice Renato Corona as well as his successor, Maria Lourdes Sereno. Impeachment proceedings against former president Joseph Estrada hinged, in part, on discrepancies between his SALN and his lifestyle and personal wealth. And to this day, calculations and comparisons between the official salaries of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos and his wife Imelda and their enormous wealth are used by historians, critics, and even the Supreme Court to demonstrate the enormity of the plunder that supported their conjugal rule.

Thanks but no thanks, however, to Ombudsman Samuel Martires, himself a former associate justice of the Supreme Court, the efficacy of the SALN as a check on official abuse is about to end.

Just this week, the Office of the Ombudsman made public new guidelines on access to and use of the SALNs of public officials. Under the new rules, access to SALNs may only be availed by the following personalities: the official involved or a duly authorized representative, bearers of court orders in relation to pending cases, and the Office of the Ombudsman’s Field Investigation Office for the purpose of conducting a fact-finding investigation.

Of note is the absence of the media, as representative of the general public, from the list of those entitled to request for copies of SALNs. The Ombudsman’s order effectively shuts the door to public scrutiny of the finances of public officials. Such a terrible irony given that the Office of the Ombudsman was created precisely to ferret out secret or unexplained wealth among government officials in preparation for submission of cases before the Sandiganbayan.

The designation of a SALN as a public document is precisely to make it available for public scrutiny. To shroud it in unprecedented secrecy (courtesy of the principal anti-corruption office no less) is to undermine its very purpose and thwart the Constitution’s mandate for a government of transparency and accountability.

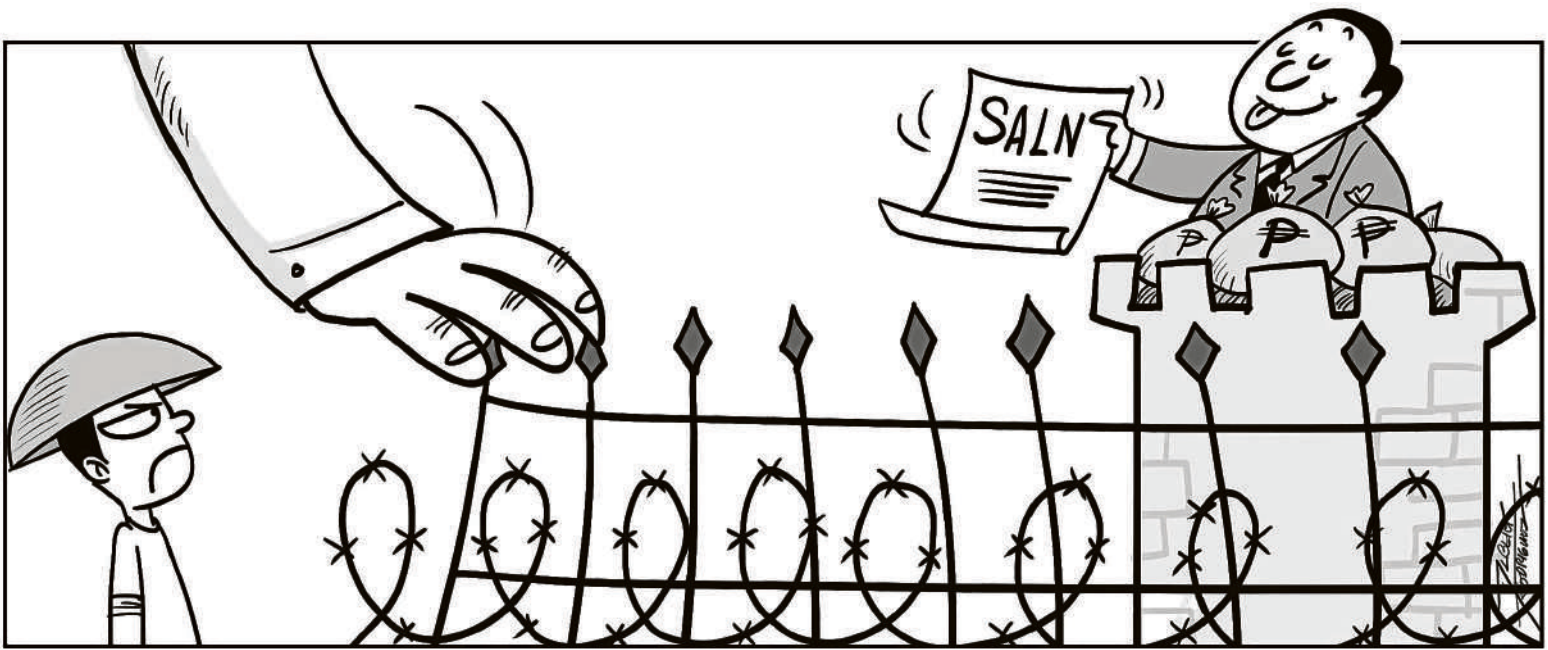
People are aware, too, of the generally obsequious attitude of the courts toward high-ranking officials, as well as the wariness of the Ombudsman’s field officers to be linked in any way to the leak of official documents.

What is the root of the Ombudsman’s recent order? It appears to have stemmed from the refusal of President Duterte and officials around him to release his SALNs for the past two years. Instead of reminding Malacañang of the President’s SALN obligation, the Ombudsman’s memorandum could only bolster the Palace’s defiance of not just the Constitution but also of the principle and practice of transparency that previous administrations had adhered to.

Indeed, in yet another instance of defying the principles of transparency, even such a simple act as the disclosure of the appointment of a government official is now left to the discretion of the appointee. According to a Rappler report, Malacañang has for months now refused to release announcements of the names of new appointees.

Why is this alarming? “The appointments of government officials are critical decisions made by the President which impact the public,” the report noted. “For instance, the Chief Executive appoints Supreme Court justices, police and military chiefs, heads of regulatory agencies, and department heads. Transparency on presidential appointees allows the public to scrutinize these new government officials and also voice their concerns regarding these appointees.”

What is the motive for keeping the Filipino people in the dark about what this government is doing, and how honest its people are? What is the Duterte administration so determined to hide from the public’s eyes?



## Fact: The gov’t has done a lousy job

The Asian Development Bank (ADB) just came out with growth forecasts for the region as well as member countries. Developing Asia is to contract by 0.7 percent this year, and Developing Asia without the newly industrialized economies will contract by 0.5 percent. The Philippines will contract by 7.3 percent, and Thailand will contract by 8 percent.

What is the message that we get? That since every country, or almost everyone, will experience growth contraction, we’re not doing so bad after all, especially since Thailand is not doing as well. The worst is over. Our government has done about as good a job as any other. Duterte *pa rin*.

Wrong, Reader. This government has not done as good a job as any other, and I am outraged that as a result, we have allowed so many of our middle and lower economic class Filipinos to suffer. We all should be told the truth, and President Duterte should apologize to the people for the ineptitude of his government. In fact, whether he is sick or not, I think he should step down, and allow Vice President Leni Robredo to take over. Then we will have a better chance of getting over the health and economic crisis that this administration has exacerbated.

Why do I think the government has done a lousy job? Let’s look at the ADB data. Only consider, Reader. As of the end of 2019 (pre-COVID-19), the Philippines’ growth performance of 6 percent made it rank No. 4 out of the 11 countries (Cambodia 7.1 percent, Vietnam 7 percent, Myanmar 6.8 percent) in Southeast Asia. Compare that to Thailand’s 2.4 percent, second to the bottom (Singapore was the bottom at 0.7 percent). Obviously, the Philippines was far above the average growth for the region, which was 4.4 percent.

Then, COVID-19 struck. And in ADB’s April 2020 outlook, the Southeast Asian region’s growth performance was forecasted to slow down to 1 percent. The Philippines was expected to have a growth performance of 2 per-



**GET REAL**  
SOLITA COLLAS-MONSOD

**WE SHOULD NEVER HAVE CONTRACTED AS BADLY AS WE DID. WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR THIS? WITHOUT A DOUBT, THE DUTERTE ADMINISTRATION**

cent (higher than the regional average), while the forecast for Thailand was -4.8 percent.

But that was before the Philippines’ actual growth (more specifically, a contraction) for the first six months was published. And the country showed a huge contraction in this year’s second quarter of 16.5 percent (first quarter, -0.7 percent). Reader, the Philippines has been keeping track of its GDP since 1946. Never before, not even in the country’s debt crisis under Ferdinand Marcos, has it performed so poorly.

If President Duterte wanted to emulate Ferdinand Marcos, his idol, he has certainly done it, in spades.

And now, in its latest forecast, the ADB expects the country to contract by 7.3 percent, much deeper than the Southeast Asian average of 3.8 percent. If we actually contract as much as predicted, the question now is: How did the Philippines deteriorate from being the fourth best performing country in 2019 to the second to the worst performing country in 2020?

Studies have shown that the major factor that accounts for differences in growth performance between countries is government policies and institutions (accounting for 70-79 percent of differentials—initial conditions, natural resources and geography, and demography account for the rest).

Conclusion: We should never have contracted as badly as we did. Who is responsible for this? Without a doubt, the Duterte administration.

But we don’t have to even look at the data to conclude that the government is responsible. All we have to do is look at who was crowing over the Philippines’ growth performance in the past four years. Was it not the administration? Therefore, they should take responsibility for this year’s execrable performance, too.

And Reader, you can see why President Duterte and his administration stumbled so badly: Instead of concentrating on the problem at hand, there were too many distractions—it had to destroy ABS-CBN, it had to pass an anti-terrorism bill, it had to try to establish a revolutionary government, it had to protect the Chinese government, it had to conceal the problems regarding the President’s health from the people.

And who suffers for this? Let me remind you, Reader. It is the middle class and the poor. That’s at least 90 percent of our population.

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## A vision of peace, prosperity amid the pandemic

The establishment of full diplomatic relations between Israel, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain is a watershed moment for the Middle East. While this region of the world is often thought to be somewhat of a dysfunctional family, the Abraham Accords Peace Agreement represents a conscious decision to instead be a normal one. It is a historic event that marks a new beginning for the region, and in addition to peace, will bring about tangible results that will be felt immediately.

The peace agreements represent an alternative and paradigm-shifting step forward for the region. It has fostered a revolutionary opportunity for other Arab nations to establish formal ties with the State of Israel, a concept previously deemed far-fetched and impossible. It provides a striking alternative to those radical forces who oppose peace and prefer to perpetuate war until victory is won, over resolving conflict in a peaceful manner and reaping the benefits that cooperation can provide. Our sincere hope is that other countries will see the connections we’ve forged between our peoples and economies through these agreements, and realize the benefits that they, too, could enjoy.

This historic event is an important stage in ending the conflict in the Middle East, and

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we believe that this kind of agreement will effectively serve to immunize countries against the calamity that comes with extremism, for which peace is the only remedy.

The United States played a leading role in brokering the Accords, and remains a true ally of all sides and a central player in the region.

Ultimately, the peace agreements represent an alignment of values. Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain are all facing the shared challenges of climate change, diminishing resources, and most pertinently, of coronavirus. It is essential that we focus on agreement over disagreement, and combine our capabilities for the well-being of our citizens. This is exactly what this agreement has achieved. The Abraham Accords Peace Agreement should be the guiding light for all other nations of the region of the good that can come from making peace with Israel.

The agreements also open abundant opportunities for trilateral cooperation between Israel, the Philippines, and the United Arab Emirates. Both Israel and the UAE have

strong and strategic areas of cooperation with the Philippines. We are positive that this milestone will expand new developments between our countries in the areas of agriculture, tourism after the pandemic, energy sector, trade and investments, and overseas Filipino workers.

Combining forces and finding common ground have never been more urgent than now, in the midst of a global pandemic.

Israel has granted significant assistance to the Philippines to help its fight against COVID-19. We have donated personal equipment to the first responders of the Department of National Defense and the Philippine National Police and learning equipment to help support the Department of Education.

These initiatives represent just a drop in the ocean of what is to come out of the potential peace treaties between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain.

This week, as we celebrate the beginning of the new Jewish year, let us hope and believe that the coming year will bring peace, security, prosperity, and most importantly, good health to all the people in Israel, the Philippines, and all over the world.

Rafael Harpaz is the Israeli ambassador to the Philippines.



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PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

# OPINION

## EDITORIAL

## Commuter inferno

We open with words of wisdom from Sen. Nancy Binay, who has in the past been derided for her supposed lack of preparation for the post she occupies but who has now become a source of practical, down-to-earth, and trenchant observations.

On the transport crisis that greeted workers and commuters on the first day of the general community quarantine (GCQ), Binay commented: “*Di po lahat ay may kotse. Di lahat ay may motorsiklo o bisikleta. Di lahat kayang maglakad ng ilang kilometro sa gitna ng baha at ulan. Di po sila* experiment (Not everyone has a car. Not everyone has a motorcycle or bicycle. Not everyone has the capacity to walk several kilometers in the middle of floods and rain. They are not an experiment). Our workers and the commuting public don’t deserve this kind of treatment. For the past three months, they’ve sacrificed more than enough.”

Binay was reacting to news coverage of stranded commuters bemoaning the absence or lack of public transport last June 1. It would have seemed only logical that in the face of the loosening of controls to jumpstart the stalled economy, adequate preparations for the shift to GCQ would have been carried out. After all, there was more than enough time to study the situation, ready workplaces and business districts for the deluge of workers, and ensure that going to and from work after months of quarantine would be as orderly, and safe, as possible for the riding public.

But what awaited workers/commuters instead? As the headline of this newspaper pointed out: “Chaos as thousands return to work in Metro Manila.” Ordinary folk were forced to walk for kilometers, or hitch rides from private vehicles, or elbow each other into scarce free rides belatedly offered by the government, thus ending up breaking distancing rules. Some daily wage-earners ended up blowing a whole day’s pay on taxis or TNVS rides. Others who resorted to alternative transport like bicycles then found themselves on the receiving end of government wrath, with Metropolitan Manila Development Authority spokesperson Celine Pialago threatening to file charges and impose fines on biking advocates who set up temporary barriers on Edsa to protect bike riders from early morning traffic.

The next day, the responsible officials found a target for their convenient ire. Who else but the beleaguered commuters who had suffered at their hands?

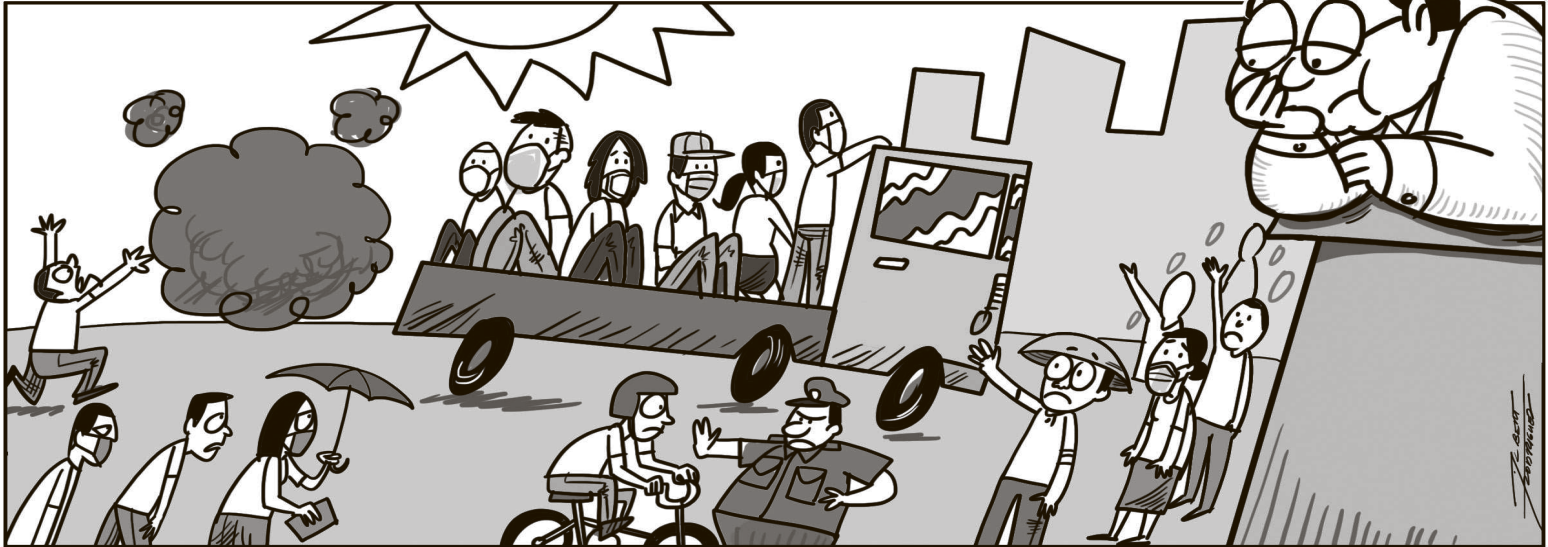
MMDA General Manager Jojo Garcia said that “people seemed to have lost focus” on the COVID-19 threat when the quarantine was loosened and the public headed out for work. Transportation Secretary Arthur Tugade, while admitting that the bedlam “was a result of what we call failure of implementation and we need to correct it” (note the passive voice—whose fault, pray tell, was that failure of implementation?), also insisted the government had “never promised” that transportation would be available once the GCQ was declared. But what was it expecting? Government regulations had effectively halved the capacity of public forms of transport due to the need to observe social distancing. How hard a thought process was it to consider next the logical consequence of that situation—that many workers, whose return to work the government and private sector had declared essential, would be left stranded or forced to walk under the searing sun?

Motorcycles and bicycles, on the other hand, are not allowed to take on passengers. When asked about a married pair of health frontliners commuting to work, Local Government Secretary Eduardo Año suggested they could add a sidecar to keep their distance. But that would make their vehicle a tricycle, and tricycles are not allowed on major thoroughfares. (The Palace added to the muddle by first saying sidecars were now allowed on national highways, then retracting the statement just hours later.)

Bicycles, long pushed as a healthy alternative to gas-emitting vehicles, have gained adherents among local governments, but national officials still seem unwilling to allow them leeway on city streets. Pialago, quick with what she imagines are “solutions,” said bicycles should be confined to sidewalks—even if these are nonexistent in many areas, occupied by pedestrians and street vendors and filled with obstructions like street signs, trees, and sheds.

The bottom line is that officials like Tugade, Año, and the MMDA worthies had more than ample time to sit down over the last 70-plus days and figure out how the “new normal” in transportation would work out. They didn’t even have to wait for the GCQ to be declared. There was certainly enough opportunity for them, if they were so inclined, to draw up a thorough, competent plan on how to best manage the complex and confusing transition that would ensue on the streets once controls were loosened.

But they failed, and the Monday commuter inferno was the result.



## Impending reign of terror with Anti-Terror Act

That the critics of the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020 range from far left to far right in the political spectrum is a red flag which should cause us to sit up and take notice.

The last time this unity of sentiment occurred, as far as I can recall, was during the protests against the Marcos dictatorship in 1983 onward. Left, center, and right marched shoulder to shoulder against this obscenity against the Filipino people. Since then, I have not marched with the left, nor have I agreed with their objectives. But today their objections deserve support.

What makes left and right (with a few exceptions) stand together? What is the Anti-Terrorism Act? Originating in the Senate, it was approved in toto by the House, thus removing the need for bicameral negotiations. It can be signed immediately by the President.

If you have the desire to read the Act, you will find out that both critics and supporters have bases for their stands. Sen. Panfilo Lacson, for example, the main sponsor of the Senate bill, offers, as proof that it offers no danger, that several provisions were borrowed from the United States and Australia, that it used United Nations standards, that other countries (Thailand, Singapore) had longer detentions without warrant. All true.

Local Government Secretary Eduardo Año assures that the people have nothing to fear, that only the terrorists and their supporters should be afraid. He does not elaborate.

Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana also assures us that the bill carries enough safeguards against abuses. And it does—reports to the Commission on Human Rights, torture is a no-no, custodial centers must keep logs



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of the detainees’ activities, right to a lawyer, right to visits from the family, etc. etc.

So why are we in a snit? Well, amid the UN standards and the beautiful language carrying safeguards, there are poison pills. The bill broadens the definition of terrorism—too much. And if one threatens, or incites, or conspires, or plans to incite other people to terrorize, one is punished (12 years’ imprisonment for threats and inciting, life imprisonment for planning or conspiring). What constitutes a threat or an incitement is not clearly specified. I guess it is up to the police or military to interpret. And we know how fast they charge people with “inciting to sedition.”

Then there is the warrantless arrest. People are arrested not by order of a court, but by order (written, to assure us), of the Anti-Terrorism Council (ATC), which is tasked with implementing the Anti-Terrorism Act. The ATC is composed of the executive secretary, the national security adviser, secretaries of foreign affairs, defense, justice, finance, local government, information and communications

technology, and the executive director of the Anti-Money Laundering Council. The secretariat is the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency. These executives, or their representatives, approve the detention of the “terrorists.”

And the detainees can be kept for up to 24 days before they bring up charges—with only the imprimatur of the ATC, not any judge.

In essence, the supporters of the bill (Lacson, Año, and Lorenzana—all ex-military/police) feel that this is what is needed to stop terrorism. But unfortunately, they assume that everyone they will detain are indeed terrorists. The proof to support that assumption will come from keeping these people under detention. If they already had the proof, they would have gone to the courts and filed charges, don’t you think? That’s the scary part.

About the safeguards—we are all witnesses of abuses on the part of the police (the military have for the most part behaved themselves). What is to prevent them, with much more leeway, from abusing even more? Safeguards never bothered them before. Scary.

I am afraid that this bill, which lends itself to even more abuses (because it gives the police more power and penalizes them less) will be the start of a reign of terror—not terror by nonstate actors, striking fear among the populace, but terror by the government, as in the Reign of Terror in France in 1870.

Given the behavior of the police on the whole these past three years, I would have thought that their power should have been curbed, not increased. And you know what happens with power—it corrupts.

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## A degrowth economy in a post-pandemic world

### COMMENTARY

JED ALEGADO  
AND JULIEN-FRANÇOIS GERBER

the livelihoods of people around the world. While the planet is “breathing” somewhat at last and pollution levels have been reduced, the present unplanned and chaotic downscaling of economic activity is *not* degrowth. Instead, it is an example of why degrowth is needed. If there is one thing the pandemic has taught us, it is this: the fragility of the current model of neoliberal development with its focus on false targets (growth) instead of public services like health care, its massive inequalities, and its unsustainability. Moving forward, we cannot rely on business as usual anymore. We must rethink the way we conceive of our economies.

Given the cracks of neoliberalism that the pandemic has exposed, the extent of our ecological overshoot, and the fact that the poorest countries still need room to adjust their economies to allow millions of people to attain a dignified level of existence, a post-pandemic scenario will require industrialized nations and upper classes everywhere to radically downscale their resource and energy demands.

Together with more than 170 academics based in The Netherlands, we are calling for five key areas of policy intervention in a post-COVID-19 world: First, we need to focus on human needs, not GDP growth. We need to differentiate between sectors that can increase and need investment, and sectors that need to radically degrow due to their fundamental unsustainability or their role in driving unnecessary consumption.

Second, post-COVID-19 prosperity does not require a general increase in wealth, but the better distribution of that wealth. We need an economic framework that establishes a basic universal income and a strong progressive taxation of income, profits, and wealth. We need to recognize care work and essential public services such as health and education for their intrinsic value.

Third, we need a transformation toward regenerative agriculture based on biodiversity conservation, sustainable and mostly local and vegetarian food production, as well as fair agricultural employment conditions and wages.

Fourth, we need to reduce consumption, including that of travel. We need a drastic shift from luxury and wasteful consumption to basic, necessary, sustainable, and satisfying consumption and travel. We need to reorganize around a new conception of the “good life” and rethink what is important in our communities.

Lastly, we need to cancel debts (both from richer countries and international financial institutions), especially for workers and small business owners and for countries in the global south.

This pandemic has presented us with an opportunity to chart a more just, inclusive, and sustainable COVID-19 recovery. It is the alternative to the current ways of thinking—a degrowth-based economy that will usher us toward creating open, connected, and localized economies based on solidarity.

Jed Alegado teaches post-graduate courses at the Ateneo de Manila University School of Government (ASoG) in the Philippines. Julien-François Gerber is an assistant professor at the International Institute of Social Studies in The Hague, Netherlands.

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PHILIPPINE DAILY INQUIRER

# OPINION

## EDITORIAL

## Women and the burden of care

When anyone in the family gets sick, chances are it is the mother (*nanay*, *ina*, mommy) who bears the burden of caring for the ailing husband, daughter, son, sibling, grandmother/grandfather.

Despite the changes in the social order and the shifting sands of gender relations, the “burden of care” still falls heavily on women, who must balance responsibilities outside the home, house management, time commitments, and even her own health to look after the ailing in the family.

This domestic role is reflected in women’s roles in our society, too. The overwhelming majority of school teachers, for instance, are women. Many in the front-lines of the fight versus the COVID-19 contagion are women—nurses, midwives, doctors, researchers, even hospital personnel who transport the sick, help look after their needs, scrub and disinfect the surroundings. So, too, must we acknowledge the continuing efforts of those who serve on the sidelines: househelp, sales clerks, vendors, even policewomen who somehow soften the harsh ways of law enforcers.

And it’s worthwhile to realize that this pattern is replicated elsewhere, even in prosperous, supposedly egalitarian societies.

But is the gender disparity in terms of health care really only a matter of unequal burdens and matters such as wage disparity, low status, and employment insecurity?

Sadly, it also has a bearing on the quality of health care available, and the health outcomes of women.

Writing in the health web page ThinkGlobalHealth, Julia Smith, a research associate in the Faculty of Health Sciences of Simon Fraser University, points out that the medical field often overlooks gender disparities in major public health crises, which impact on the survival of women. Data from the current Ebola outbreak in the Democratic Republic of Congo, writes Smith, “indicate that two-thirds of the people infected are women.” These higher infection rates, she reports, “are attributed to women’s social responsibilities as caregivers and due to their lack of trust in unknown male health providers.” Those in charge “need to take these factors into account if they are to reach those most at risk of infection and most in need of care.”

Women are penalized for their gender roles in other ways, says Smith. In response to the Ebola outbreak in West Africa, “maternal health clinics were closed as resources were diverted to the outbreak response. Consequently, the maternal mortality rate in the region, already one of the highest in the world, increased by 70 percent.” To cope with the COVID-19 outbreak, Smith suggests that women, and policymakers and practitioners, should ask questions like: Do pregnant women in quarantined areas have access to care? Are sexual and reproductive supplies, such as contraception, readily available?

Outbreak responses, says Smith, “consistently fail to meaningfully include gender analysis. This is despite substantial evidence from other researchers that gender inequities exacerbate outbreaks, and responses that do not incorporate gender analysis exacerbate inequities.”

Smith points out that while the focus is on differences between women and men and between girls and boys, “inequities related to race, ethnicity, sexuality and religion are integrated.” Add to the list inequities in income and social standing. Despite responding to tremendous pressure to put in more hours at work and risk exposure to deadly organisms, the mostly female health workforce must put up as well with low wages and even, in the case of frontline workers here, the lack of protective equipment to ensure their continued health.

Still and all, despite the gendered differences in treatment and privilege, women are stepping up to the challenge. Vice President Leni Robredo, the highest-ranking woman official of the land, responded promptly to the crisis by distributing protective equipment to hospitals and launching a shuttle service for health workers stranded because of the transport lockdown. The TOWNS (The Outstanding Women in the Nation’s Service) Foundation, a group of women achievers, with the help of major conglomerates and private donors, is likewise sourcing and distributing scarce protection equipment, while groups like Rock Ed, led by TOWNS awardee Gang Badoy Capati, are mobilizing donors to prepare food for the health frontliners who cannot even find the time to step out for a meal or snack.

Such initiatives are life-saving while also raising the morale of beleaguered health workers. Nurturing and caring and loving, it seems, are embedded in women’s DNA.



## Which kind of Filipino are we?

Reader, last week’s column expounded on the three requirements to successfully deal with the COVID-19 crisis: a well-prepared health system, good governance, and social capital. This column gives updates on the second and the third, as far as I can see.

These three working together will flatten the curve of the rise of COVID-19 so it does not overwhelm our health system (that’s why the lockdowns), and ensure that the economic and social impact is minimized, especially on our poor.

What is needed from our government are targeted policy responses, as opposed to a general, divide-by-n (everybody gets equal share) approach. From news reports, the government has announced a P27.1 billion financial package to fight the effects of COVID-19, which includes P3.1 billion for test kits. That means P24 billion for the economic and social costs.

Too little, too much, or just right? Let’s see. That P24 billion is about 1.3 percent of the country’s GDP (P1.86 trillion in 2019). Let’s compare that with Australia’s stimulus package—\$17.6 billion, which, compared with its GDP of \$1.89 trillion, amounts to 9.3 percent. Even the United States, which has been thought by many to have responded to the COVID-19 threat, is proposing a package of 4.7 percent of its GDP. What do you think, Reader?

To remind: NCR, Calabarzon, and the rest of Luzon were responsible for 3.2 percentage points of the country’s 6.2-percent growth in 2018—more than half. Not to mention the other parts of the country like Davao and Cebu, also in lockdown. The ADB will have to go back to its drawing board to estimate the negative impact on GDP of COVID-19. Or shift from its moderate-case scenario to its



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worst case scenario for the Philippines—a reduction of about 0.6 percent of GDP (from 0.3 percent). Methinks its worst-worst case scenario—a loss of 730,000 jobs and a drop of 1.7 percent of GDP—may be more like it.

Let’s take a closer look at the package—P2.8 billion for farmers and fisherfolk. The program lends a maximum of P25,000 per borrower. Do the math, folks. The fund will accommodate 112,000 borrowers. There are about 5 million farmers and fisherfolk, per the Census of Agriculture.

If the Philippines is to get through this crisis without hurting its poor too much, the government has to go back to its drawing board for a better way. I understand the economic cluster of the Cabinet is working out a better stimulus package. Millions of Filipinos are hoping they succeed.

Now let’s go back to the third leg of the tripod—social capital. That’s us. If the government can’t do it, it is left to us—the people—to help ourselves.

It is said that a crisis doesn’t make a person. Rather, it reveals what a person is made

of. What is the Filipino made of? Is what we showed to the world in 1986, when we peacefully deposed a dictator, when we put the country above ourselves—was that a one-off, never to be replicated thing? I bet not.

The Palace thanked the taipans and the oligarchs for cooperating with the government (the ones the President was cussing for their greed?). They should be acknowledged for doing what is right. But remember that they are giving from their excess, not from their substance. Their profits will be less, but they will not be losing.

They are better, though, than those who, in these vulnerable times, prey on people to make a quick buck. And what about the couple who posted the receipt of their purchases from S&R in Ayala Alabang amounting to P950,636, together with a picture of themselves, plus the filled-up grocery carts?

Pitted against these vermin are the Filipinos who think not of “me” but of “we,” and give of their substance even though it hurts, and do not seek glory for themselves. Example: a businessman who has 700 people in his employ. His projects have been suspended, and he cannot collect from his clients. But he still met his payroll, and gave them their 13th-month pay. Groaning, but still alive. No wonder his employees love him. On a smaller scale: A man who gives his driver, gardener, and caddy what they would have earned without the lockdown. And, above all, our doctors, nurses, health workers, and priests who selflessly give of themselves.

Which kind of Filipino are you, Reader? On your answer depends whether we win the war against COVID-19 or not.

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## COVID-19 and greater disaster resilience

The jolt of a new coronavirus outbreak should motivate governments to strengthen resilience to disasters, especially frequent in the Philippines. COVID-19 continues to unfold dangerously as seen in Italy, Iran, and Spain. In the Philippines, that the new coronavirus broke out as communities were struggling to recover from the Taal Volcano eruption highlights the urgency for preparedness. And the rainy season will soon be upon us, with the attendant fears of fiercer typhoons and floods.

That the Philippines scores above the global average on the World Health Organization’s Global Health Security Index is of no comfort. This is because the global average of the measures of prevention, early detection, rapid response, health system quality, standards, and risk environment is a low 40.2 out of 100. The Philippines’ score is 47.6 (53/195 countries), showing that preparedness for COVID-19 needs to be fortified. The shortage of test kits is alarming.

COVID-19 is still not well enough known for us to be able to anticipate its behavior. But we do know from past emergencies the priorities for action. The following six priorities are particularly relevant to the Philippines.

The first urgency is to protect high-risk groups—the elderly, the sick, and frontline health care workers—by taking measures to reduce their exposure to the virus and to prioritize them for medical support.

Second, clear surveillance protocols are needed. Close attention must be paid to high-risk groups in each province and to monitor

### COMMENTARY

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community transmission. There is a need for decentralized testing centers, including drive-by testing and quarantine facilities. Each province should do a “stress test” to reveal crucial gaps, such as in diagnostic equipment and prevention protocols.

Third, as in most Asian countries, the government needs to increase spending to strengthen the capability of health services to deal with public health emergencies, particularly surges in case numbers. Government health expenditure as a share of GDP in the Philippines needs to be higher for a middle-income country. Another concern is that Filipinos make sizable out-of-pocket expenses for health. By one estimate, there is one doctor for 33,000 patients and one hospital bed for 1,121 patients.

Fourth, Asian countries should strengthen partnerships between the public and private sectors, for example between government agencies and the pharmaceutical industry, to help maintain supply chains. Collaborative approaches exist for tuberculosis, AIDS, and malaria, but more is needed for disasters on the scale of COVID-19 and SARS. A flexible loan facility, as the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank have for natural disasters, can boost the country’s resources. Networks for health professionals are vital to

address clusters of infections.

The fifth priority is to tackle the growing link between environmental changes and new viruses, and the dangerous interaction between particulate matter and viral respiratory tract infections that are being noted in epidemiological studies. Two-thirds of known pathogens and three-quarters of newly emerging pathogens are spread from animals to humans, triggered by increased human encroachment on wildlife territory. So, protecting biodiversity should be a priority for national health, too.

The sixth is clear communication of risk levels and steps to help health professionals and the public to prepare as calmly as possible for emergencies. This would help reduce panic-buying, for example, as in the COVID-19 outbreak. It is crucial to understand diagnostic tools and surveillance systems linking laboratory information with electronic health records. China’s handling of COVID-19 showed the cost of delaying the announcement of the outbreak. Global lessons speak to the need to build public trust. In the Philippines, overseas workers need to get accurate and timely information for wise travel decisions over Easter, for example.

The Philippines is increasingly at the sharp end of disaster risks. COVID-19 might just provide the needed push to invest more and better in disaster resilience.

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