Life After the Pandemic:
Facing the New Normal in Work, Active Citizenship and Human Rights

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On the fledgling and continuing crisis citizenship in the Philippines

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Across the globe, there is a significant number of cases and deaths due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In a very short time, our daily routines have changed. Over three billion people are now living under some form of a total or partial lockdown. The Philippines is considered as a high risk area for COVID-19, with an average of 271 fresh cases per day in Metro Manila as of June 2020 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2020; Tomacruz, 2020).

Several academic, business, and cultural institutions have been forced to temporarily or permanently shut down. In the absence of a vaccine or an effective treatment, the outcomes could become severe in the next weeks or months. This pandemic is pushing us to reassess our strategies in coping up with such unpredictable situations. There already is a number of forecasts among experts on what will come next, and what this might mean for the economy and society.

While it is tempting to view the current lockdowns and restriction of movement as a form of paralysis, the current situation has stimulated creativity and offered new opportunities to engage the public to become socially relevant. In the Philippines, the pandemic prompted a renewed interest on volunteerism. Donation drives were initiated by civil society organizations (CSOs),[1] informal groups, and individuals, aiming to satisfy the needs of families who were severely affected by an unexpected loss of income. This reflects the critical position that has historically been held by Philippine civil society to promote development and social welfare during times of both peace and crisis.

The role of volunteers and citizens in the field of development is fast growing, and there is increased respect for the views of the populations being

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[1] Also known as nongovernment organizations (NGOs).

served. As part of the larger ambit of civil society, individuals and groups who freely devote their time and resources to benefit those who are in need reflect the urgency of collaborating together to contribute to efforts by the government and the nonprofit sector in a lot of ways. Citizens are coming together to join or form voluntary associations and mutual aid societies. They raise money for emergency relief, procure medical supplies and personal protective equipment (PPEs) for hospitals inundated with patients, and deliver assistance to those who lack some form of safety net. Others launched community kitchens and distributed financial aid and food packages among the most vulnerable sections of the population.

Examples

It is important to note that this pandemic, there are groups that are going beyond relief provision to spearhead efforts on helping people or to exact accountability from the government to protect the most vulnerable members of society. Organizations, societies, and initiatives are extending help to monitor the situation and are speaking out against cases of abuse of power. For instance, Marine Conservation Philippines created a free simulator that visualizes the impact of different forms of lockdown (i.e., business as usual, partial lockdown, and total lockdown) on the rate of COVID-19 infections (Rappler.com, 2020). Help from Home, on the other hand, documented efforts on collaboration during the pandemic. Comprised of volunteers, [Help from Home](#) is an information hub that compiles initiatives helping frontliners and communities, as well as collate data from hospitals and barangays about their needed supplies. To heed to the call for efficient governance and more transparency, members of GoodGov PH, a movement led by young professionals and university students, created "Bantay Bayan," a citizen watchdog that monitors responses and actions of all government units and institutions in the Philippines through reports coming from volunteers (Constantino, 2020). It started a social media campaign that aimed to protect democracy during the pandemic, by providing free legal assistance.

The table below provides just some of the efforts in civic engagement that were undertaken to ensure that citizens have a stake in responding to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Group or initiative	Activity/ies
GoodGov PH	• Monitoring of local government units and national government agencies based on reports and complaints
Marine Conservation Philippines	• Creation of a free simulator visualizing the impact of different forms of lockdown
Help from Home	• Documentation of different volunteer initiatives and legitimate aid drives • Collection of data from hospitals and barangays on their needed supplies
Kaya Natin Movement	• Organizing a donation and fundraising campaign for personal protective equipment (PPE) and care/food packs for health workers and frontliners • Plans to assist local government units during the second wave of COVID-19 infections
Veggies4Good	• Distribution of fresh produce to those who cannot leave their homes during the community quarantine
LEADS for Health Security and Resilience Consortium	• Risk mapping and monitoring of capacities for resilience and vulnerabilities for transmission and mortality across the population during the pandemic.
Government Watch	• Monitoring of citizen entitlements under the COVID-19 response, paying attention to providing what citizens are entitled to during the COVID-19 crisis situation, e.g. public services and social amelioration
Think Well Philippines	• Matching health workers to health facilities • Distribution of PPEs to health workers • Boosting nutrition for quarantined people
Project Wifi	• Provision of gadgets and load for students in need

Table 1. Example of civic engagement initiatives in the Philippines for the COVID-19 pandemic.

Two important things explain the helpfulness and impact of such activities. First, these are intended to save people's lives; hence, their effectiveness is therefore crucial to the wellbeing of the intended beneficiaries. The magnitude of volunteer work during the COVID-19 pandemic also reflects the relevance of the non-profit sector in responding to the shortcomings of the government in dealing with the basic needs of the affected population. Second, by looking at the nature of volunteering and relief activities in the Philippines, we

can potentially fulfil an important accountability function, one that does not solely involve the state as the first-line responder to the crisis, but also engages citizens for ensuring that accountability mechanism to those who are served by the government are adequately developed.

By being a core part of the COVID-19 recovery, the civil society – in the Philippines and elsewhere – has been serving as (1) an advocate or representative of the people, (2) a democratic watchdog, and (3) an authority that augments government response efforts (World Economic Forum, 2020).

As an *advocate*, these groups are aware that everyone does not experience COVID-19 in the same way because many people have been facing more difficulties than others. They devote time and effort to study the problems on the ground and listen to the needs and demands of individuals or sectors who have marginal voice in society. In doing so, they succeed in better articulating these issues and help ensure that their views are factored into policy decisions by politicians. Civil society also acts as a *democratic watchdog*, which is an important function to improve public transparency and accountability. Civic groups complement the work of independent media and offer a critical reflection on how to manage a foreseen problem, which is very crucial especially that the government is adopting emergency powers to effectively fight the virus. Finally, civil society groups like humanitarian organizations, advocacy groups, and community-based organizations have met the needs of the poor and marginalized sectors during the crisis. They serve as a *trusted authority* in dealing with and reaching out to different communities because they are able to utilize a language, format, and strategy that anyone can understand and trust.

There is a significant risk of corruption and abuse during times of crisis. Our national leaders are given the upper hand in implementing strategies that will ensure economic stability as we try to keep things as normal as possible. Given this, they are expected to be protective of their positions of power in a way that allows them to maximize whatever material and legal instruments available at their disposal. This possible risk of abuse makes the case for the importance of bottom-up accountability approaches and other forms of civil society interventions. They remain crucial for (1) ensuring that funds allocated for the pandemic reach their intended destination and (2) channelling the present frustration on government response into alternative forms of civic engagement, where they can organize themselves and share information.

Historical origins of civil society

Seen through an 18th century lens, Adam Ferguson explained how civilization had evolved. According to him, civil society is the inevitable consequence of a self-organizing community that seeks to attain spontaneous order in human society (Ferguson, 1767/1996). More recently, the term has often been used more functionally rather than as an analytical concept. It has become a term for well-intentioned civilians who operate independently but in support of the economic (or business) sector or the state. Many view such kind of citizenship as an important component of a peaceful and mature society. A thriving civil society means that citizens are eager to provide services to those who are in need, and are using their voices and available platforms to hold their leaders accountable to them.

In the Philippines, the historical sketch of volunteerism and active citizenship goes as far as the pre-colonial period. The concepts of "bayanihan" and "pakikipagkapwa" have been in embraced for millennia as part of Filipino culture (Pe-Pua & Protacio-Marcelino, 2000). These pertain to the willingness of people to pool their resources and use their knowledge and skills to support those who need some form of assistance during a personal or community crisis. Many of the modern-day civil society organizations (CSOs) descended from "the cooperative organizations set up by Filipino ilustrados who were influenced by the concepts and principles of modern cooperativism and the philanthropic organizations set up by wealthy families and the Catholic Church" (Tuaño, 2011). By the 19th century, a number of organizations started to appear, working for the agenda of nation-building. Those that were set up by the American colonial government operated orphanages, or trained women and men for skills that could earn them a living. On the other hand, there were progressive groups that were tied to a specific issue or advocacy, such as women's suffrage, improved labor conditions, and advocating for the advancing the interest of peasants, among others.

During the Marcos dictatorship, many civilians (including university students) participated in mass mobilization activities. These were inspired by the series of mass protests happening around the world and the resurgence of nationalist fervor. The main issues of the day were the rampant infringement of human rights, the looming economic crisis, and government ineptitude. The

contradictions that took place between the rhetoric of a progressive "New Society" and the actual social and political order led to an activist culture in society (Lim, 2002).

The installation of a new democratic order after the People Power Revolution of 1986 after the martial law paved the way to the expansion of civil society groups. Based on Securities and Exchange Commission's (SEC) 2009 data alone, there are around 100,000 registered non-profit organizations in the country (Tuaño, 2011). The said number does not include short-term initiatives that, while may have been successful in harnessing the interests and energies of individuals, did not consider the need to secure a legal personality provided by a SEC registration.

Current environment surrounding civil society activity

There are several considerations that civil society groups should take into account in their quest for a more engaged and participative COVID-19 response. First, there is currently a law that requires government permit before any group may solicit for a national fundraising. Another consideration has something to do with the current tendency of our leaders to use the pandemic to test the limits of our consent in order to accord more centralizing powers to the state. Such deploys constraints in movement through an increasingly authoritarian policy.

Government regulation on funding. External funding for these activities are primarily driven by donations. A consideration of reports highlights that many people want to feel they are doing something, as it enables them to deal with the unfortunate news they hear every day. However, the current economic crisis and increasing unemployment has affected the capacity of donors and the availability of funds, making it difficult to rely on contributions.

Presidential Decree No. 1564, otherwise known as The Public Solicitation Law, has been in effect for more than three decades. It was issued in 1978 to regulate the solicitation of donations from the private and public sector in order to avert illegal fund drives. However, some of its provisions are causing difficulties even to well-intentioned parties that simply want to pour in resources to fund their initiatives. Among the issues identified in the implementation of the law include a number of requirements that need to be submitted to the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) by the organization

intending to conduct a fund drive, which prove to be a burden to many. Nonetheless, the DSWD felt that if fundraisers for donation drives are not regulated, government would really struggle to track them to determine if these fundraising campaigns reach the intended beneficiaries and the donors were not deceived by some fly-by-night groups who wanted to take advantage of their willingness to help with the crisis.

Aside from the documentary requirements, another concern is the need to thoroughly monitor the proceeds of the solicited funds to ensure that these are delivered to the intended beneficiaries. This is especially true with this pandemic, given that the limited movement of government personnel to even reach out to monitor all volunteer and relief activities initiated to reach out to their target beneficiaries along the duration of the lockdown.

The current environment of uncertainty also raises difficulties for assessing the impact of the monitoring of public fundraising activities. For instance, the setting of objectives by which relief interventions will be judged is problematic. Many fundraising campaigns during this pandemic describe their objectives only in very general terms. Some organizations are still unclear about their activities in relation to the proceeds of their solicitation drives. Many of these factors stem from the nature of the emergency and the organizational and technical difficulties that this creates. This lack of specificity and identification of indicators of achievement means that the conventional evaluation provided by the Public Solicitation Law cannot be utilized.

Human resources. Many groups rely on volunteers, whether virtually or physically. Depending on the skills and abilities of volunteers, they could provide assistance by giving a boost to the initiative's social media profile, managing their website or webpage, organizing a fundraiser, and directing the shipment and distribution of supplies. Human resource is a means of ensuring sustainable growth for an initiative, which is unfortunately being hampered by the differences in priorities among volunteers and advocates given the economic impact of a lengthened community quarantine. Also, inasmuch as COVID-19 has caused uncertainty for many, the team needs to be properly handled and motivated. This makes mental health and psychosocial support a vital consideration in managing an initiative's goals and objectives.

On the current political climate. Another concern has something to do with the tendency of regimes with authoritarian tendencies to use the pandemic to test the limits in order to accord more centralizing powers to the state. The crisis might be used as an excuse for government officials to commit corrupt practices, human rights violations, or political maneuvering. For instance, President Rodrigo Duterte instructed his uniformed personnel to "shoot" persons perceived to disturb peace and order during the quarantine period.

The ongoing lockdown has shown the face of police brutality. The social media is flooding with viral videos where the police is brutally beating ordinary people for "violating" the rules of lockdown, even if they were only out to keep food on the table or procure essential commodities. We are also witness to the recent passage of an anti-terrorism law, which resulted to raised concerns from international and local rights groups over potential violations of civil liberties.

Recommendations

Nonetheless, COVID-19 has highlighted the inequalities on income and exposed our overburdened healthcare system. It also reveals the problems associated with the populist rhetoric embraced by politicians to attract support, and thus opens to scrutiny what many of us believe should be the real priorities of our elected leaders.

Such issues may affect activities by volunteers and advocates in a way that may limit their adequate participation. The government and civil society should pay closer attention to three important aspects that are crucial for a healthy development expansion of civic initiatives during times of crisis where concerted efforts among public and private institutions must take place. These aspects include the (1) current regulatory environment; (2) the right to free expression and participation of the public and difficulties in accessing our leaders and directly providing inputs into policymaking; and (3) the endless harassment of human rights advocates and defenders, which contribute to the stigmatization of efforts aimed at popular empowerment.

While this may be one of the most challenging environments, it can also be an important moment to realize its continued relevance of citizen participation. There should be a deliberate effort to seek out and engage formal and informal groups in joint projects and needs assessments, among others.

Mobilizing networks. The COVID-19 pandemic requires organizations and groups to quickly readjust their advocacy strategies to effectively and creatively assert themselves and convey their message, allowing for a wider audience who will realize shared concerns and will push their leaders to act and address their problems. If government support is unavailable, civil society is expected to help itself by looking into the different existing resources to mobilize civic engagement. Mainstream civil society organizations should also diversify their sources of funding and build new networks with organizations that emerge from volunteering. For example, they can establish physical and digital networks, where they can form alliances with smaller groups and promote initiatives to serve the affected and vulnerable communities. Leading by example provides an alternative to the failure of governance.

The civil society can initiate the creation of an accessible and easily navigable website or searchable database which can act as a central repository of key information regarding the capacities, resources, and contacts of each volunteer groups. This can be used for their tracking and networking purposes, as well as a reference material for the general public and government agencies.

Improved citizen-led partnerships. There are some practical things to be done to strengthen the way all actors work in emergencies. For instance, there should be a greater role for civil society groups to monitor the impact of school reopening on poor children. They can be tapped to help assess the situation by gathering concerns from the ground, in particular those that come from students, parents, and teachers. The government can use the data to come up with sound and comprehensive policies regarding learner and teacher needs during and after the pandemic. In particular, it can help us reconsider the "digital divide" on internet access between well-off and poor households.

The family beneficiaries of the government conditional cash transfer program (i.e. Pantawid Pamilya) can play a role in this regard. Their active civic participation could have been maximized if they were tapped to serve as contact tracers to boost the country's contact-tracing capability in accordance to the provisions of Republic Act No. 11494, the second law on COVID-19 approved by the government. In the past six (6) years, the experience of Pantawid Pamilya parent-leaders provide a textbook example of how active citizens from poor backgrounds can acquire the needed social capital to push for change. Through

the active citizenship and responsible parenthood modules used to train Pantawid Pamilya families, empowered parent leaders started to group themselves as the Samahan ng Nagkakaisang Pamilya ng Pantawid Pamilya (SNPP). Their lobbying efforts brought fruition to the eventual passage of a law in 2019, which institutionalized the said program.

The role of marginalized communities and other interest groups cannot be overestimated as we can push for effective partnerships and provide helpful recommendation to the pandemic. The civil society can expedite coordination with actors critical for COVID-19 recovery and facilitate engagement with the affected sectors, which is decisive in making sure that contextually relevant responses are taken up. This is especially so for the small local CSOs and volunteer organizations who need to be encouraged as they are key players in the humanitarian response.

Legal framework for partnership and participation. In terms of legislation, we can push for a legal framework on citizen participation in order to enlarge the influence and impact of civil society organizations in the public sphere. It is important to mention that such a consultative processes is acknowledged by the Philippine constitution.

There are macro-political factors hindering the actual facilitation of a mechanism for democratic engagement, not to mention the political climate that was made possible by the priorities and rhetoric of the current crisis response. Nonetheless, the promotion of convergence should be a continuing agenda for the government and should be waged by cross-sectoral groups who are willing to work out their differences in order to prepare and propose an enabling law on participation. However, their ability to push for such reform is being put into question due to a lack of unity and networking, factors that are crucial in ensuring the effectiveness of lobbying efforts by civil society.

On the role of the state. Lastly, there is a question of how we can hold government agencies and local government units accountable in their emergency planning if the state has the potential to become more controlling of the public, under the guise of "disciplining" its people. This should not be the case. A functioning communication and feedback system would enable the government to appreciate how the decisions and policies directed towards affected groups are actually impacting the latter. Given the scope of work and

network of civil society, it can facilitate engagement with communities that are impacted by the epidemic. Such assistance can be a crucial part of ensuring that COVID-19 response addresses particular circumstances and contexts that define localities.

However, the civil society cannot work on this fight alone. It needs political leverage and public support to do so. The principle of a people-oriented development model is based on shared responsibility. It perceives social transformation as only possible only through cooperation. If authoritarian regimes see a way to take advantage of the crisis, we can hope that interventions by concerned groups and individuals can push forward a new kind of politics.

The state should not become an all-powerful institution that completely dominate the public sphere. What should be happening is that, in spite of this crisis, there should be more engagement and empowerment of citizens. Only then can we make governance more responsive to the plight of the people. This gives us an existential security and the possibility to realize our collective self.

A crisis within a crisis

According to Jürgen Habermas (1973), a German philosopher, a crisis occurs "in the revelation of conflicting norms against which the identities of the participants shatter, unless they are able to summon up the strength to win back their freedom by shattering the mythical power of fate through the formation of new identities." This definition of a crisis uncovers a sense in which the COVID-19 situation has completely unforeseen consequences for society. The uncertainty pertains not only to the management of the epidemic risks, but just as much to the direct engagement of citizens that helps legitimize our democratic order.

At a time when the pandemic is demanding that social distancing should become the norm, how is civil society supposed to adapt to such change? The most important single measure in combating the pandemic is the self-isolation of the individual. Their isolation means that people are limited in their efforts to mobilize themselves and participate in core democratic processes that requires them to act more for the community and demand more from their duty bearers. For instance, what will happen to the large crowds that usually gather through face-to-face mobilizations? Just when the civil society is expected to manifest the

interests and will of citizens, correcting the current social system in crisis by means of such expectation is really difficult, because actions intended to be corrective may produce results that may intensify the current situation.

If the prerequisite behind organizing social movements is being discouraged, there have to be alternatives by which our voices remain to be heard. Accepting that the future is uncertain could strengthen our willingness to engage in collective action to tackle the challenges surrounding this crisis.

There is also a problem with simply relying on the altruism of well-meaning individuals who are willing to assist in surviving this crisis. It has the implicit assumption that such calls for volunteering will never end. Volunteer initiatives often avoid tackling the more pressing issues of institutional building or shortage in resources. While it is true that the structural problems can only be resolved only through significant transformation of the system, the underlying issues will never be solved. Also, it can reinforce parochialism towards host communities that may become mere passive "recipients" of help. In doing so, the civil society may fail to summon up the more important task of countering and responding to the continued colonization of the state and economy.

Another possibility is a type of tension may occur between volunteerism and the mandate of the state to provide services. While stringent lockdown measures are being undertaken, the government has developed policies that delineate or limit the roles and relationships among stakeholders and identify the necessary legal support to them. The current passage of an anti-terrorism law might have a damaging impact on a desire to actively immerse oneself on the state of affairs of the community and society. It leaves an impression to volunteer groups that they should avoid making political statements out of their activities, lest it could result to harassment or persecution.

Organizations and groups struggle to make their participation visible while there are legal mechanisms that constrain their active commitment to social change. A very serious threat facing civil society is the imminent danger of being demobilized as a result of the gradual but steady transformation of the state towards totalitarianism. Because power is the steering medium deployed by the government, the desire to accumulate more power leads to the challenge of ensuring checks and balances. In turn, civil society loses its character as an autonomous center of power. It challenges our assumptions that countries that

are democratic on paper are "better" than their authoritarian counterparts, or more devoted to the promotion of human rights. Shrinking spaces for civil society engagement also reduces the strength of democracy (Tocqueville, 1840/2004).

Towards a concerted political action

The COVID-19 crisis is part of the social crisis that is weakening and threatening society and humanity. Experts have been warning of increasing rate of occurrence of epidemics. Moreover, the causes of pandemics reflects the more general breakdown in the earth's ability to sustain life. There has been a consensus among health experts around the world since at least the epidemic of Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) in 2002 that globalization and climate change will make pandemics more likely and severe (Brenner & Marwan, 2018; Carrington, 2020).

We are likely to experience years of mass unemployment, cycles of total or modified quarantine, a rise in mental health problems, and other social disturbances relative to the resurgence of epidemics. While a privileged minority has been able to work from home, most of the working class have risked their own health to sustain their livelihoods. This pandemic has also revealed the intrinsic value of poorly paid occupations at the health and care sectors, which are mostly conducted by women. Moreover, women are also more likely to do unpaid domestic work. Across the world, women take on thrice as much unpaid work as men (Boniol, etc., 2009). To get through all this, we have to push our politicians to provide for universal health coverage or protection of labor, as well as policies that safeguard the environment, in response to sustainable development goals (SDGs) that ensures decent work and economic growth (SDG No. 8), climate action (SDG No. 13), and peace, justice, and strong institutions (SDG No. 16).

While this is particularly the case for civil society's role to come together to participate in initiatives, this is not possible when social distancing measures are in place. Face-to-face meetings and group sessions, which are the pillars of citizen-led initiatives, are really difficult to carry out under the existing policy of social distancing. Likewise, demonstrations and other forms of protests are hindered by such measures.

In a constitutional democracy like the Philippines, the responsibility lies with citizens to compel the government to act on the legitimate demands of the people, and to reimagine society based on the principles of equality and solidarity.

Having said that, participatory democratization promotes a mutual built-up community and cannot tolerate submissive social relationships. Conflicts remain and must be resolved by public disputes, advocacy, and contractual arrangements, because democracy is both a way and a goal.

The COVID-19 experience reminds us that effective institutions and capacities institutionalizing transparency and accountability are essential to pandemic preparedness and recovery. The state should develop mechanisms so that formal and informal groups and organizations can play their partnership role responsibly and effectively. So far, no society has found a perfect recipe for a sustainable and liberating development model of participation. As we know, as citizens ourselves, we often work together in less formal, more temporary ways. While this offers some hope in an otherwise dark time, formations such as volunteer groups are often considered minimal. Even at the micro level, their current contributions to social change remain marginal.

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