



## Citizens Demanding Vaccine Accountability: *Highlights of G-Watch's 2021 Ako, Ikaw, Tayo, May Pananagutan*



G-Watch Philippines  
4 March 2021

**Photos:** All taken by G-Watchers in 10 sites all over the country as they undertook their respective events and activities for the 2021 Ako, Ikaw, Tayo, May Pananagutan.

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## **Citizens Demanding Vaccine Accountability: *Highlights of G-Watch's 2021 Ako, Ikaw, Tayo, May Pananagutan***

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On February 14 to 16, 2021, G-Watch's annual event—*Ako, Ikaw, Tayo, May Pananagutan* (AIM-P)—took on an unlikely theme: 'Love and Accountability at the Time of a Pandemic.' The theme jumps off from the idea that the best way to love during a pandemic is to hold power to account.

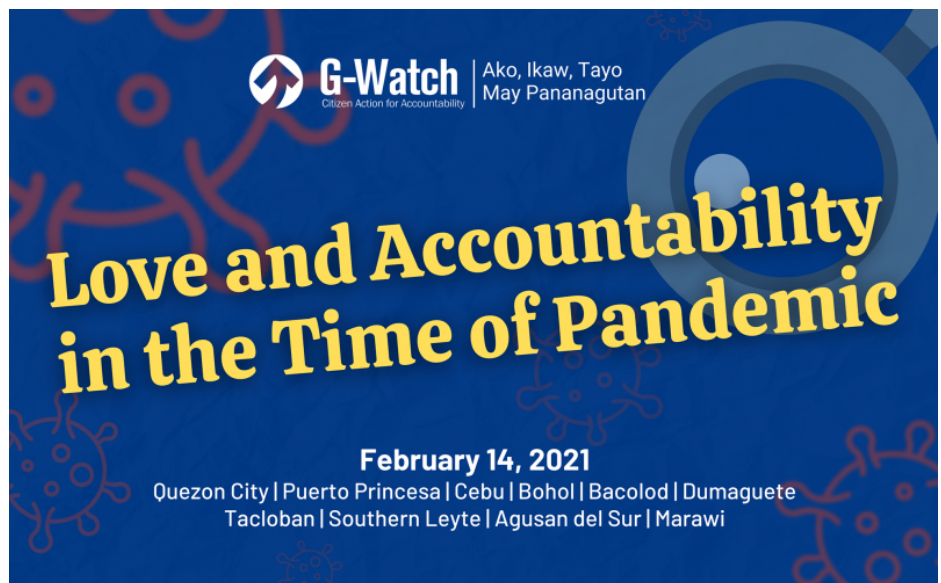
Ten sites in the Philippines held simultaneous events, both physical and online, which were attended by representatives from local government, youth groups, and civil society organizations, as well as citizens in Marawi; Bacolod; Dumaguete; San Miguel, Bohol; Sibagat, Agusan del Sur; Quezon City; Puerto Princesa; Cebu City; Maasin, Southern Leyte; and Tacloban. Majority of the events were held on Valentine's Day.

Since AIM-P aims to raise awareness about the transparency, citizen participation, and accountability (TPA) agenda in local contexts, core groups from the 10 sites collectively made the following calls: the need for safe and quality vaccine for all, and the need to demand accountability in the COVID-19 funds.

The calls are framed by the following issues: the lukewarm government response to pressing concerns on mass testing and vaccination; the lack of coordinated information to enable citizens to make informed decisions

during the pandemic; the transparency gap of the funds allocated for COVID-19 response (especially the funds from the Social Amelioration Program or SAP); allegations of corruption in procuring protective equipment and in billions of Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (PHILHEALTH) funds; and the continued erosion of institutional mechanisms for checks-and-balances.

As the Philippines starts its vaccination drive this week, the calls ring with more urgency, especially since health officials have been pressured to take the first jabs of Sinovac—a serum that has less efficacy than other vaccines, and has just been approved for emergency use authorization by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) prior to its arrival in the Philippines. Experts have not recommended the use of Sinovac on health workers. Meanwhile, deliveries of AstraZeneca vaccines have been delayed, even as government officials previously stated their delivery around the same time as the Sinovac vaccines.







Prior to these developments, groups all over the Philippines, participating in G-Watch's annual AIM-P celebration, expressed common concerns about the lack of information and coordination about local vaccination drives; the possibility of corruption in their implementation; and the need to account for COVID-19 aid especially for the poor. The G-Watch sites also shared the need to demand TPA for these issues as early as now, as they sense that the health agenda will be a campaign platform for candidates seeking office in the 2022 elections.

Based on the assessments of the simultaneous events, various themes on TPA emerged:

- The interfacing of the national and local governments would be key to the success of the vaccination program.
- The upcoming 2022 elections can be an accountability platform for the government's performance in responding to the pandemic.
- Despite the pandemic, citizens and citizen groups have adapted to continue demanding responsive governance and exacting accountability from the government.
- The youth are leading the call for accountability in COVID-19 response.
- The call for accountability in the vaccination program mobilizes multi-sectoral action.

### **Interfacing of the national and local governments helps the vaccination program succeed**

In Puerto Princesa, AIM-P took the form of a roundtable discussion about local vaccination programs, emphasizing the necessity of proper information in any accountability effort. Initially, G-Watcher Mickel Ollave said he was unaware of any local vaccination plan, but only learned, through the discussion, that vaccination plans were underway both in the city and in Palawan province, and involves an entire process where local and national efforts interface to ensure the success of implementation.





The local government has an existing agreement with AstraZeneca to secure 200 doses of the vaccine, and is exploring other options, such as Johnson & Johnson, which only requires the administration of one dose. A budget of Php500 million was allotted for vaccine operations and logistics, including the transportation of vaccines to rural and hard-to-reach areas. Simultaneously with local government efforts, the Department of Health (DOH) has also conducted orientations and trainings regarding the vaccination program. Puerto Princesa's vaccine protocol includes the return of vaccine vials to the DOH (which will contain vaccination details) for recording and

safekeeping.

*"Na-realize ko na locally...nasa ninety percent na ang kahandaan ng aming siyudad pagdating sa COVID vaccination," Ollave said. "Mula sa pagbili ng vaccine, mga pasilidad, polisiya, regulations, istrikto at organisadong proseso sa aktwal na pagbabakuna, pag-handle ng mga magkakaroon ng side effects at ng post-vaccination plan."*

(I realized that the preparedness of our city in terms of COVID vaccination is already at ninety percent. Form the purchase of vaccines, the preparation of facilities, policies, regulations, the strict and organized process for the actual vaccination, the handling of side effects and post-vaccination plan.)

Considering quarantine protocols, the discussion was made available online to citizens. For the local chairman of the committee on health who attended the forum, it was important that the discussion not only disseminated information but also generated live feedback from citizens. Local officials were open to partnerships with citizens to ensure the successful roll-out of the vaccination program.

The AIM-P discussion also expanded on issues beyond the calls on the agenda. According to Ollave, *"Naging oportunidad din ang forum dahil naging daan ito...na malaman ang ginagawa ng G-Watch pagdating sa monitoring ng transparency, citizen participation at accountability sa aspeto ng CBST [community-based sustainable tourism] at ngayon sa vaccination program ng pamahalaan."*





(The forum also paved the way in informing about the efforts of G-Watch in monitoring transparency, citizen participation and accountability in community-based sustainable tourism, and now, the government's vaccination program.)

Bohol's AIM-P forum also focused on vaccine deployment and the vaccination program of the national government. Aside from the national COVID-19 response, the forum was also a venue to discuss key accountability issues that will have an impact on the 2022 elections. Thus, participants included representatives from the Commission on Elections (COMELEC) aside from the DOH and the Sangguniang Kabataan (SK) Federation. The mayor of San Miguel also took an active part in the forum, raising important questions to both DOH and COMELEC.



An initial issue raised during the AIM-P forum is the urgent need for clarity on vaccine regulations and courses of action, including data collection. While the youth in San Miguel, Bohol are willing to disseminate information for this purpose, they are challenged by a roadblock: they themselves are uncertain of the protocols and regulations.

The forum was thus an essential space for youth volunteers to seek clarity from the DOH representatives present, even though health officials themselves may also be uncertain—highlighting the need for the national government to cascade clear instructions and messages to guide local governments.

## Despite the pandemic and other challenges, demands for accountability persisted

G-Watchers in Tacloban, in conducting their AIM-P forum, looked back to prior events in assessing the local TPA agenda. A health representative recalled that time when local officials, following national directives, bought rapid testing kits for COVID-19, which were subsequently



declared ineffective by health experts, as the recommended manner of testing now is a swab test.



The expenses for the rapid testing kits are now chalked up as losses, which, hopefully, won't be the case for the vaccines. As with other G-Watch sites, citizens in Tacloban harbor uncertainties about their local government's own vaccination plans, in the context of the record of weak government response to the pandemic.

In the youth forum, discussions of COVID-19 response and vaccines intersected with free speech issues affecting TPA. The Anti-Terror Law, according to participants, impede freedom to express concerns; so does the red-tagging of leaders of mobilizations in Tacloban. Quarantine limitations also bred fear of harsh consequences of possible violations. Nevertheless, CSOs continue to work with local government units and agencies in monitoring activities aside from the pandemic response.

Moving forward, G-Watch Tacloban aims, among others, to strengthen its partnership with the Department of Education (DepEd) further and prepare a candidates' forum for the upcoming elections.

### **COVID-19 and vaccination issues are accountability platforms for the 2022 elections**

"Accountability is an essential element of democracy; however, it is ironic that it is also its weakest link, meaning, those who are in power are the ones who appear to be the ones not accountable to the people."



These words kicked off the forum organized by G-Watch Dumaguete for AIM-P. G-Watcher Cindy Uy, who is also a member of G-WAVE (Gender Watch Against Violence and Exploitation), gave this opening statement to highlight the need for citizens to "step up their efforts" when it comes to TPA.



Uy cited previous successes facilitated, among others, by citizen participation in Dumaguete: improved health delivery services, the creation of monitoring tools, and the use of evidence to form recommendations on service delivery. For this year's AIM-P, participants were asked to share what they think will be the main accountability issues in the 2022 elections, and the role that youth can play in ensuring that these are addressed.

A representative from Voice of the Free pointed out an issue on information dissemination: the feeling of being “left behind” in the vaccine discourse, which also exacerbates issues on vaccine efficacy and price. Proper and accurate information, at the outset, should be made available.

This was echoed by a barangay official, who registered concerns for vaccine inoculation due to confusing news and statements, even if these already come from people considered as authorities. She added that strict monitoring in the procurement of medicines, the distribution of funds from the SAP, and the implementation of infrastructure projects must be conducted. Overall, representatives of civil society organizations (CSOs) who attended expressed doubts concerning the COVID vaccine, its safety, and its vulnerability to corruption.

Participants also raised that the distribution of a vaccine may even be “weaponized” to advance politicians’ interests, especially in light of the 2022 elections—thus the need to advance the TPA agenda even deeper in the locality. G-Watch Dumaguete thus plans to set the TPA agenda in this context, starting with the youth through the SK.



The gap in information for vaccination protocols is undoubtedly a strong and common concern across several G-Watch sites, Maasin included, which also registered strong disappointment with the seeming lack of information on local vaccination and mobilization plans. According to the G-Watch core group, the “alarming” challenges are twofold: the absence of concrete, detailed vaccination plans of the local government, and the need for better citizen awareness on the purpose of vaccination.



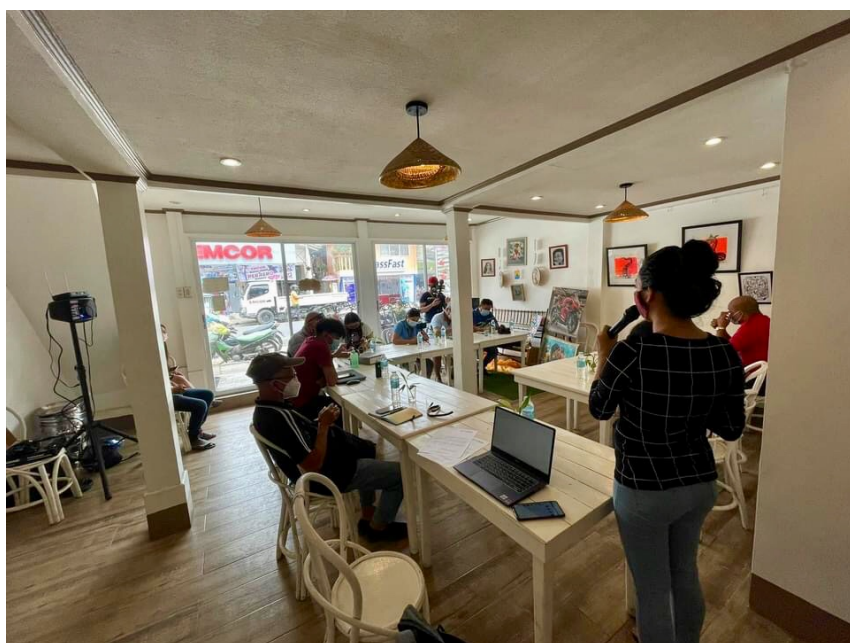
For G-Watch Maasin, CSOs are obliged to look into these government programs as early as now, as it was expressed in the forum that these same programs will be used as campaign propaganda for the 2022 elections.

Maasin's AIM-P forum (which was also aired in a local radio station) thus presented important tasks for volunteer-monitors in G-Watch: to look closely at local government proposals and deliberations to ensure citizens receive only quality vaccines through a proper and complete vaccination plan, and to look for ways to convince the LGU to allow full participation and close monitoring of the vaccination programs to be drafted.

In pursuit of these goals, G-Watch Maasin will sustain the work done for advancing TPA in the locality, starting with encouraging the LGU to make public the local vaccine budget



and vaccination schedules; engaging local teams on COVID-19 response and the vaccination plan; and promotion of awareness on the vaccine.



### **The need for multi-sectoral action to call for accountability in the vaccination program**

In Marawi, youth participants attended an AIM-P forum to learn more about TPA, many of which heard of it for the first time. While the campaign to advance this agenda is in its first stages, G-Watch Marawi noted the youth participants' willingness to learn more about the advocacy in line with the

recent transition of governance in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).



To strengthen the campaign for the future, G-Watch Marawi noted how it can take advantage of existing partnerships between civil society and government, and the current campaigns that are already advocating for government transparency (especially on social media). As there is a wide network of CSOs, NGOs, and religious organizations already active in the locality, the TPA agenda may be introduced in relation to



each sector's activities and programs. The core group also considered the possibility of kick-starting monitoring of 4Ps activities, from which it can draw lessons from other G-Watch sites.



During their AIM-P forum, G-Watchers from Sibagat, Agusan del Sur similarly observed that the local government does not appear to be ready with appropriate plans or protocols once a suitable vaccine is administered. This also raises the possibility of corruption during implementation, since at the outset, a proper procedure was not agreed upon.



Notably, the participants of Sibagat's AIM-P forum outlined in detail how TPA can be made concrete in the call for safe vaccines. Any vaccine protocol, they suggest, should start with determining the number of citizens willing to be inoculated with a certain vaccine, to ensure proper quantities; studying purchase orders to validate the quantity, price, and date of deliveries; verifying the list of citizens to be vaccinated; clear liability of persons responsible for the vaccination program; and knowing the brand, manufacturer, and expiration date of vaccines. In this respect, the youth can lead efforts to monitor reports on the vaccine.

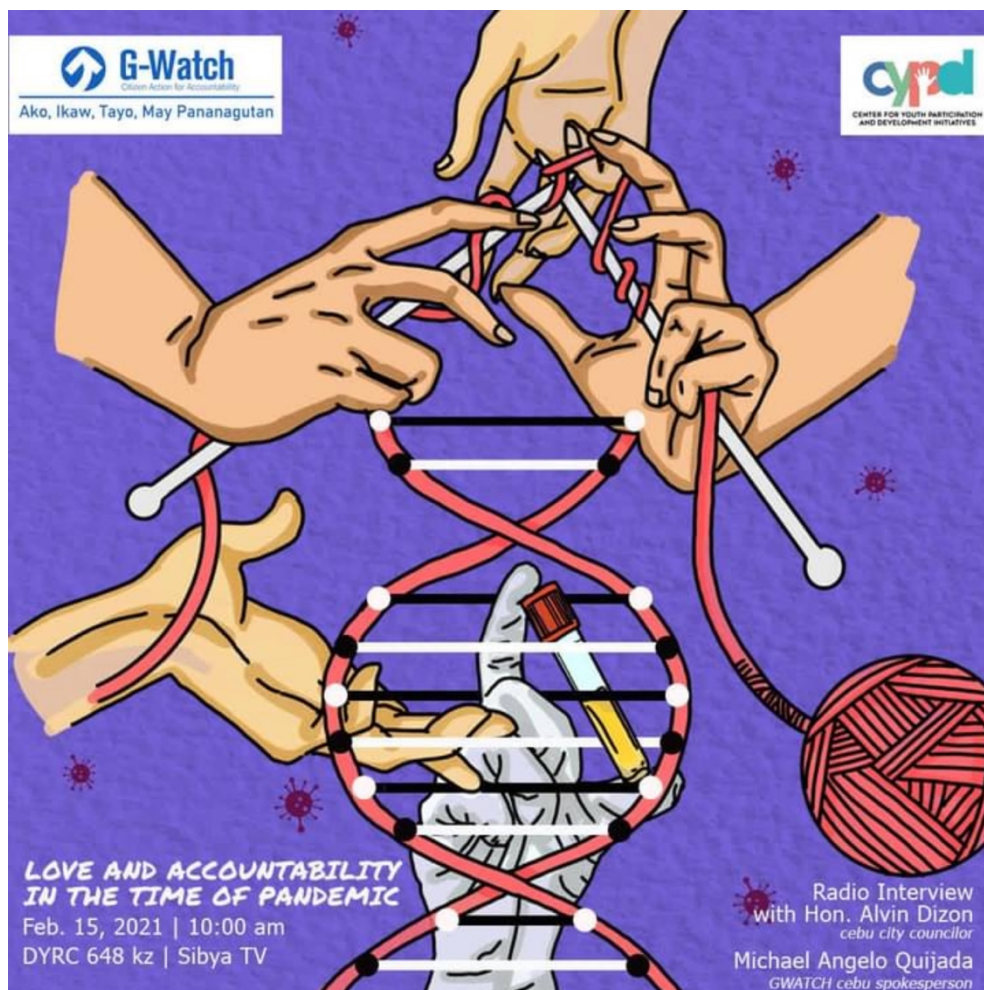


To accomplish this and to move the TPA agenda forward, G-Watch Sibagat will continue to monitor and observe the process of how vaccination is implemented. They will also continue monitoring water governance in Sibagat, which is the group's main capacity; and they will endeavor to be part of and secure seats in local special bodies.

In Cebu, G-Watch gathered youth participants and parent-leaders for the 4Ps in a focus group discussion regarding the overarching call for safe vaccines and accountability for the COVID-19

funds. An interview in local radio conducted by G-Watch Cebu with a local councilor also supplemented the discussions during the FGD.

From the FGDs and interviews, it was apparent that citizens do not glean any concrete plan of the locality in terms of purchasing COVID-19 vaccines for the public. The public itself have varying opinions in accepting the vaccine, according to G-Watch Cebu. Participants also raised, among others, that Cebu spent billions of pesos for a facility that was delayed in construction; there was not enough information to validate the amounts and suppliers identified for the purchase of relief goods and expenses in the Project Noah facility; and that there were delays in giving salaries and benefits to barangay health workers and medical frontliners in the locality.



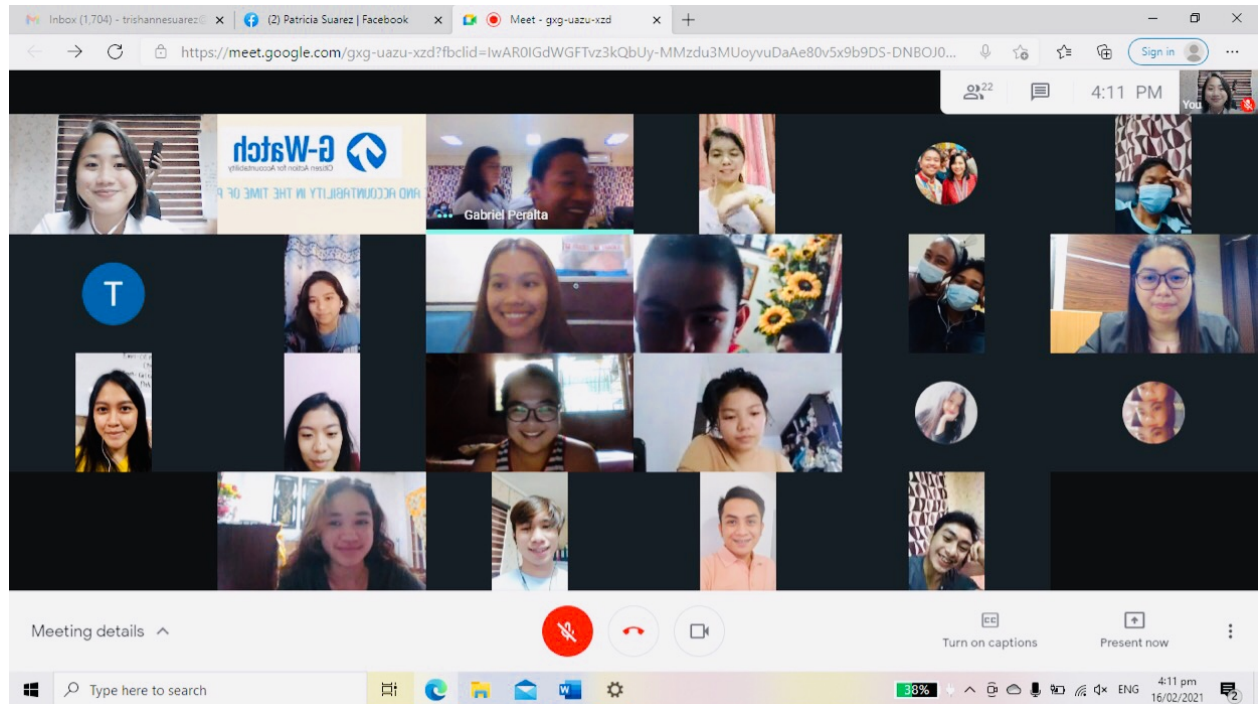
While TPA is described as a “neutral” campaign in Cebu, the public clamor for accountability for COVID aid (including SAP) and the procurement of vaccines make the issue relatable to the public. G-Watchers in Cebu note two challenges in advancing the TPA agenda: the rising cases of COVID-19 in Cebu, and that urban poor communities still prefer face-to-face approach of learning, sharing, and campaigning. While youth groups can adapt to “online mobilizing,” there is a need to secure their strong commitment.

To advance the TPA agenda further, G-Watch Cebu plans to continue existing monitoring efforts in education and health. A voter’s campaign is also proposed, as well as partnering with a councilor in issuing guidelines for an ordinance that incorporates TPA elements (public posting of COVID-19 finances).



## Youth leadership and potential for demanding accountability

Participants in G-Watch Bacolod's AIM-P roundtable discussion started with a basic premise: that the government has a vital and unique responsibility to watch out for the needs of its citizens. While access of youth to online educational platforms proved to be a cross-cutting issue during the pandemic, participants to the discussion pointed to the emergence of more opportunities to process the views and engage citizens at this time. More citizens, especially the youth, have grown even more active in social media as the government's response to COVID-19 became less satisfactory. Participants asked: how can this spike in online activity be harnessed into something concrete?



If the calls to account for the COVID-19 funds and to provide safe and quality vaccines for all are to be realized, there has to be a tactful mobilization that will bind the interests of all citizens, no matter how differently they may be affected by the pandemic, according to the participants in Bacolod. "The mobilization must be able to orchestrate the different calls for one consolidated and solidified demand for TPA," according to G-Watch Bacolod participants.

Jumping off from this insight, Bacolod G-Watchers highlighted the importance of TPA as a continuous campaign—“as part of the process of achieving a sustainable solution to these issues,” that is not limited to the annual AIM-P. G-Watch Bacolod will continue to provide spaces for regular discussions to help citizens direct their concerns arising from the pandemic, and to sustain the demand for TPA.

In G-Watch Quezon City, SK members held an online forum focused on the accountability of SK officials for their actions



and responses

to the pandemic. The forum was livestreamed online and also capped off the simultaneous national celebration of AIM-P.



While SK officials and members have been active in implementing recent projects—which included the distribution of hygiene kits and relief, profiling of SAP beneficiaries, livelihood trainings, and the like—it appears that there is still a need for leadership training among SK leaders and youth organization leaders amidst the pandemic, especially in pushing the TPA agenda forward.

Based from the discussions, an approach to TPA for the youth in Quezon City can focus on youth access to education through online platforms during the pandemic, the profiling activities for the QCitizenID, and the expansion of scholarship programs by way of assistance to families that were affected by the pandemic.

G-Watcher Fed Marcelo echoed Uy’s opening statements in the final event of G-Watch’s annual AIM-P celebration, and emphasized the need for a deeper understanding of accountability especially in the context of COVID-19 response. “Citizens have the right for quality services that they need: access to vaccine in a context of a pandemic is a right,” he said. “Citizens must act collectively to make social assistance and health the priority and that resources allocated for it are spent properly.”



## **VACCINE FOR ALL! ACCOUNT THE COVID-19 FUNDS!**

### ***Ako, Ikaw, Tayo May Pananagutan 2021***

In December 2019, a new deadly disease was discovered in the Chinese city of Wuhan after an elderly man began exhibiting flu-like symptoms. Now known as COVID-19, this virus has since spread to 223 countries, prompting the World Health Organization to declare a global pandemic on March 11, 2020. The said UN agency further indicates that as of January 17 of this year, the virus has already infected over 93 million people and has claimed the lives of more than two million individuals.

Closer to home, the Philippines had its first case of COVID-19 when a 38-year-old Chinese woman suffering from “mild cough” was admitted to the San Lazaro Hospital on January 30, 2020. Six days later, on February 5, health officials confirmed that the woman’s 44-year-old male companion died of COVID-19, making the Philippines the first country outside of China to record a confirmed death from the said disease. At present, almost a year after the first case was confirmed, there have been a total of 505, 939 positive cases and 10,042 deaths in the Philippines.

### **Government Response**

Malacañang’s initial response was to belittle the threat, assuring the public that there was no cause for concern. On February 3, 2020, for instance, President Rodrigo Duterte told the press that “everything is well in the country,” adding that “even without the vaccines (COVID-19) will just die a natural death.” The Chief Executive was, in fact, so confident of his government’s ability to handle the situation that he initially refused to impose travel restrictions on passengers coming from China.

But as the number of infections continued to rise, President Duterte was finally forced to issue Proclamation No. 922 on March 8, “declaring a state of public health emergency throughout the Philippines,” a day after the Health Secretary Francisco Duque III “confirmed the local transmission of Corona Virus Disease (Covid-19) in the Philippines.” The President then undertook further action on March 15 by imposing a lockdown on Metro Manila, which was extended to the whole of Luzon two days later.

Congress did not remain idle either, passing Republic Act No. 11469 or the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act, which authorized the President to realign the budget and mobilize government resources to better address the COVID-19 threat. Signed on March 24, 2020, the law enabled Duterte to “exercise powers that are necessary and proper” and impose “temporary emergency measures” to respond to the pandemic (Section 4).

It further provided the Chief Executive with the legal authority to “direct the discontinuance of appropriated programs, projects or activities (P/A/P) of the Executive Department” so that the funds can be used “to augment the allocation for any item (that) address the COVID-19 emergency” (Section 4.v). This gave the President direct control over a budget of nearly Php275

billion from the estimated Php438 billion national budget that was earlier approved for the year 2020.

### **Social Amelioration Program**

Out of the total amount for COVID-19 response, Php100,901,303,261.20 was allocated to the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) for its Social Amelioration Program (SAP). This is an emergency assistance scheme covering 18,046,093 low-income beneficiaries who are entitled to receive between Php5,000 to Php8,000 every month from March to April 2020 to cover their basic necessities such as food, medicine, and toiletries.

But in his final Report to the Joint Congressional Oversight Committee dated June 22, 2020, Duterte admitted that there has been considerable “delay in the distribution of SAPs for the month of April 2020.” And to make matters worse, these backlogs remained unaddressed even after the June 5 expiration of Bayanihan to Heal as One Act.

Because of the continuing “adverse impact of COVID-19 on the socioeconomic well-being of all Filipinos” (Section 3), Duterte signed Republic Act No. 11494 or the Bayanihan to Recover as One Act on September 11, thereby supplanting RA 11469. Under this new law, an additional Php6 billion has been allocated to DSWD for SAP distribution. The said amount had already been transferred to the Department on October 29; but the President has yet to provide any details on how the funds were used, and how many beneficiaries have finally received their long-delayed entitlements.

In addition, RA 11494 mandates that an emergency subsidy of Php5,000 to Php8,000 will be extended to low-income families affected by barangay- or purok-wide “granular lockdowns” (Section 4.f.1). DSWD, however, later clarified, through Memorandum Circular No. 22 series of 2020 that, “a family can only be provided with emergency subsidy **once** regardless of the number of times their area has been declared under granular lockdown, and regardless of any extension in the declared lockdown” (emphasis in the original).

### **Corruption Virus**

While all these efforts are needed to contain the virus and rebuild the lives of millions of affected Filipinos, it remains extremely important that the COVID-19 funds are properly accounted and ensure that each centavo is used for its intended purpose. This is even more pressing because of the corruption allegations that have hounded some of the officials of the Duterte administration.

Just last September, officials from the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) were admonished in the Senate for allegedly purchasing millions of personal protective equipment (PPEs) at overpriced rates. According to records, standard PPEs typically cost between Php1,200 to Php1,500 per unit, but the equipment that DBM bought were between Php1,700 to Php2,000 per unit. This means that the procurements were probably overpriced by at least Php200 per unit or Php1 billion in total.



There was also an allegation from whistleblower Thorrrson Montes Keith that several top officials of the Philippine Health Insurance Corporation (Philhealth), including its President and CEO, Ricardo Morales, had stolen Php15 billion of public funds using various fraudulent schemes. Morales denied the allegation, though he eventually resigned from his post, citing his worsening health situation.

The government's reputation has also been undermined by continuing delays in the release of hazard pay of health workers, prompting several hospital employees to hold a protest action in front of the Department of Health (DOH) central office last December 7.

### **Undermining Institutional Checks**

This series of anomalies could further worsen the Philippines' ranking in the corruption perception index (CPI) of Transparency International, which fell 14 notches from being the 99th least corrupt country in 2018 to being 113th by the following year. This is a steep drop of 18 notches since 2015, which was the last full year of the previous administration.

But instead of addressing this issue through a relentless campaign against wrongdoing, the government has taken several measures that undermine the public's ability to check and monitor their officials. The first to suffer was the country's judicial independence when Maria Lourdes Sereno was removed as Chief Justice of the Supreme Court on May 11, 2018, after eight of her fellow magistrates voted to render her 2012 appointment as null and void.

The decision was seen as politically motivated since Sereno was a known critic of the Duterte administration who opposed the President's so-called "war on drugs" and his imposition of Martial Law in Mindanao. In fact, even as the high court was still discussing the validity of Sereno's appointment, administration allies in the House of Representatives filed a separate impeachment case against the chief magistrate for failing to declare her statement of assets, liabilities and net worth (SALN) when she was still a law professor at the University of the Philippines.

Ironically, Ombudsman Samuel Martires (a Duterte-appointee) issued a memorandum circular on September 15, 2020 restricting access to the SALNs of public officials. Martires defended his decision five days later, stating that "in the experience of the Ombudsman, the SALN was weaponized. It was used as [a] means to go against someone, anyone who is an enemy in politics."

### **Responding to COVID-19 or Preparing for 2022?**

Despite all these controversies, National COVID-19 Task Force chief Carlito Galvez, Jr. seems supremely confident. In fact, during a Senate hearing last January 11, Galvez assured legislators that the country's situation is about to improve since the initial doses of the vaccine are expected to arrive within five weeks, and that the national government will begin its inoculation effort by the end of February. Those who will be prioritized include health workers and indigent senior citizens in high-risk areas, though Galvez added that mass immunization can only begin in earnest once the "main bulk" of the precious vaccine becomes available by the second half of the year.

And while he was testifying at the Senate, Malacañang announced that they have already secured 25 million doses of China's Sinovac vaccine, with an initial 50,000 doses arriving this February. The Palace further admitted that the Chinese serum is the only vaccine that will be administered for the first four months of its immunization drive, since supplies from Western and Indian manufacturers will not arrive until July.

At around the same time, researchers from Brazil admitted that the Sinovac vaccine only has a 50.4% efficacy rate against COVID-19 infections. Though interim data from Indonesia showed the Chinese serum to be 65% effective against the dreaded disease, this is still significantly lower than the 95% efficacy rate of both Pfizer and Moderna. This prompted some senators to question the government's deal with Sinovac and urged for its immediate cancellation.

But Duterte quickly came to Sinovac's defense, stating that, "*Hindi nagkulang ang Chinese. Hindi sila nagkulang sa utak. Bright itong mga Instik at they would not venture kung hindi sapat, it is not safe, sure, and secure.*" (The Chinese did not fail in producing the vaccine. They are not stupid. The Chinese are bright, and they will not venture into vaccine production if they know those will not be safe, sure, and secure.)

Galvez, unsurprisingly, followed the President's lead, insisting that, "*Kaya po namin pinili ang Sinovac, dahil medyo mura po ito.*" (We chose Sinovac because it's slightly more affordable.)

But data from the Department of Health show the complete falsity of Galvez's claim, since the vaccine with the lowest cost is not from Sinovac but from Novavax of India which is priced at Php366 per two doses. And while Sinovac's price tag of Php3,629.50 is slightly lower than the Moderna vaccine which ranges from Php3904 to Php4,504, it is still more expensive than Pfizer's which is pegged at Php2,379. Admittedly, Pfizer and Moderna's logistical requirements of ultra-cold supply chain would be a challenge for the Philippine's tropical climate, but AstraZeneca's may be easier to comply with.

Another cause for concern is Sinovac's questionable reputation, since it was previously involved in several bribery scandals in the past. In 2017, for instance, the deputy director of China's Food and Drug Administration, Yin Hongzhang, was given a 10-year prison sentence after receiving \$83,000 in bribes from Sinovac's founder and CEO, Yin Weidong, to facilitate the approval of the company's SARS and avian flu vaccines.

Because of Malacañang's inability to address the doubts regarding Sinovac, several local governments have decided to acquire vaccines on their own. To date, over 30 provinces and cities have already set aside funds to buy vaccines from AstraZeneca, which cost Php610 per two doses.

But while these initiatives are truly commendable, it also raises several disturbing questions: How about those low-income municipalities that are unable to buy their own vaccines? And what will happen to indigent families and medical frontliners? Can the national government simply deprive them of any option apart from the more expensive yet less effective vaccine that they are offering?



## Citizen Action

In times of crisis, citizens are even more entitled to access quality services from the government, since these services make the difference between life and death. Ensuring equitable access to quality vaccine is exceedingly important because COVID-19 will not be defeated if only a small portion of the population is inoculated. In a recent study by a team of researchers from the University of Texas at Austin and The Santa Fe Institute, New Mexico, it was established that a herd immunity threshold of 60% to 80% is needed to decisively overcome the virus. However, the minimum threshold for herd immunity remains a big debate, with 60-80% being on the low side of what are being proposed, especially in consideration of the rapid spread of new and more contagious variants.

Unfortunately, the current government's attitude of forcing people to accept whatever vaccine it is offering is rooted to the country's political culture of clientelism and bossism—a governance mindset wherein people are not treated as citizens, but as beggars who cannot be choosers when it comes to government services.

This is the system that citizen empowerment and accountability efforts are trying to change. People must have the power to demand quality services from their governments, and they must do so without any fear of reprisal. It begins by educating citizens on what they should expect and demand from government—in this case, safe, quality and affordable vaccine.

At the same time, Filipinos must demand a thorough accounting of the COVID-19 funds. The Commission on Audit (COA) has announced it will be auditing the said funds, but it has yet to release its findings. Both chambers of Congress should also begin their inquiry, and ensure that their subsequent reports are understandable and accessible to the public. But all these can only be accomplished if there is a strong demand from ordinary citizens.

This coming February 14, Government Watch (G-Watch) will hold its 4th *Ako Ikaw Tayo May Pananagutan* with the theme 'Love and Accountability in the Time of Pandemic.' This simultaneous effort by all nine G-Watch sites shall serve as a collective platform to call for *Safe and Quality Vaccine for All* and *Demand Accountability in the COVID-19 Funds*. On this day, G-Watchers all over the country will conduct a wide variety of activities to advance our collective calls and to remind everyone of the importance of accountability, especially today when the country is still struggling against the pandemic.

Because the best way to love during the time of a pandemic is to hold power to account!