

BAGSAK!
*A Comprehensive Review of Independent Performance Assessments
on the Philippine Government's COVID-19 Response*



Translation: ‘Bagsak’ in English means ‘fail’ or a failed mark, which describes the general mark given by the independent assessments reviewed.

Photo: Healthcare workers gesture towards a protester acting as Health Secretary Francisco Duque behind bars during a protest in Manila, Philippines [Eloisa Lopez/ Reuters] (Text and photo source: Aljazeera)

Acknowledgement: Government Watch (G-Watch) thanks all the organizations and institutions that had independently documented and assessed the COVID-19 response of the Duterte administration. We are optimistic that our efforts have been worthwhile in shedding light to the Philippine pandemic response leading to a more accountable and responsive disaster governance in the country. Thank you also to Accountability Research Center (ARC) (www.accountabilityresearch.org) for its continuing support and assistance to G-Watch’s action research on strategic approaches to accountability.

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Summary

As part of its effort to advance accountability amid the pandemic, G-Watch has undertaken this review of independent performance assessments on the government's COVID-19 response. The goal is to serve as a reference on what is the general independent verdict on the government's performance in responding to COVID-19. In light of the growing problems on misinformation and fake news, it is the aim of this paper to form part of an oversight that speaks truth to power.

In this paper, G-Watch has reviewed 49 independent assessments so far on the Philippine approach in addressing COVID-19. These reviews include assessments on the following sectors: Healthcare and public health response; Social welfare and protection; Economy; and Education and Human rights.

Nine (9) of these assessments were published by local media; seven (7) published by international media; 13 published by think tanks and academic institutions; and 20 published by international and local NGOs. G-Watch has written assessments on health, social assistance and vaccination, producing four reports/ assessments.

Out of the 49 independent assessments reviewed, majority indicated the Duterte government's COVID-19 response as failing. While some assessments have mixed ratings and neutral conclusions, there are almost no positive assessments, except one positive to neutral on the Philippines' transparency measures for emergency fiscal policy packages.

There are notable consistencies among the assessments above of the Philippines' response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as points of divergence. Overall, however, assessments on the Philippines' COVID-19 performance across the sectors included in this report are negative, or critical of government response—with many assessments providing a set of recommendations for improvement.

The pandemic is a public health problem. A public health problem merits a public health solution. Evidently, the government's failure to fix gaps in its healthcare system and lack of full implementation of measures that prioritize the health of its people, jeopardizes not only health, but also the economy, education, social welfare, and the human rights situation of the Philippines.

The critical nature of the assessments made so far urgently signals government and policymakers to consider evidence-based recommendations put forward by civil society in improving COVID-19 response plans. *First* is the urgent and stark need to prioritize evidence-based healthcare interventions instead of military interventions. *Second* is the need to provide for a larger fiscal stimulus focusing on underprivileged and vulnerable sectors of society. *Third*, the assessments above have placed due emphasis to prioritizing people over infrastructure. The clear message to government is to urgently focus on people and their welfare.

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to review and consolidate the published independent assessments on the Duterte government's COVID-19 response. The aim is to see if there is a pattern in the assessments published (generally, from 2020 to 2021) in terms of what they covered and whether they find Duterte's COVID-19 response as succeeding or failing.

As of March 2, 2022, the Philippines' daily COVID cases hit a "new low," with the Department of Health (DOH) recording only 866 additional COVID cases.¹ Of the total number of cases recorded in the Philippines so far—3,663,920 cases—1.4% or 50,827 are active cases, 97.1% or 3,556,589 have recovered, and 1.54% or 56,504 died.²

Nearly two years ago, President Rodrigo Duterte initially responded to threats of local COVID-19 transmission by downplaying the impact of COVID-19. Yet, the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases, first created in 2014, already released a resolution on January 28, 2020 highlighting the high risk of the spread of COVID-19, recommending (but not yet implementing) a travel ban for travelers coming from Hubei, China.³ This was implemented by January 30, 2020.⁴

On March 8, 2020, the President declared the Philippines under a state of public emergency, and four days later, raised alert levels for COVID-19 and mandated the imposition of strict social distancing measures for thirty (30) days. On March 16, 2020, Luzon was placed under enhanced community quarantine and the whole country was placed under a state of calamity. It was only by March 20, 2020, after cases hit 5,404 (a seven-month high), that a ban on all overseas arrivals was announced.⁵ On March 24, 2020, the government created a separate task force⁶—the National Task Force (NTF) on COVID-19—to "unify the mobilization of government assets in addressing the COVID-19 situation."

Generally, while the national government imposed minimum public health standards and other preventive measures against COVID-19, the government response⁷ after the virus spread throughout the country is highly militarized and dependent on various versions of quarantines and lockdowns. Along with the imposition of strict lockdowns and checkpoints are presidential instructions to shoot down quarantine violators⁸—amid an already precarious national situation

¹ Crisostomo, S. (2022), "Daily COVID cases hit new low this year," *One News*, March 3, 2022, at <https://www.onenews.ph/articles/daily-covid-cases-hit-new-low-this-year/>

² Department of Health Facebook Page (2022), "DOH COVID-19 Case Bulletin #718," March 2, 2022, at <https://www.facebook.com/OfficialDOHgov/posts/331444199022359>

³ Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Infectious Diseases (IATF), Resolution No. 01, Series of 2020 (28 January 2020), at <https://iatf.doh.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/IATF-Resolution-No.-1.pdf>

⁴ IATF, Resolution No. 02, Series of 2020 (31 January 2020), at <https://iatf.doh.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/IATF-Resolution-No.-2.pdf>

⁵ Agence France-Presse (2020), "Philippines to shut border to foreigners as COVID-19 cases surge," *Philstar.com*, March 17, 2020, at <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2021/03/17/2084964/philippines-shut-border-foreigners-covid-19-cases-surge>

⁶ IATF, Resolution No. 17, Series of 2020 (30 March 2020), at <https://iatf.doh.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/IATF-Resolution-No.-17.pdf>

⁷ Hartung, D. (2020), "Duterte uses COVID-19 response to broaden reign of fear and oppression," *CNN*, April 20, 2020, at <https://edition.cnn.com/2020/04/20/opinions/duterte-covid-19-philippines-repression-hartung/index.html>

⁸ CNN Philippines Staff (2020), "PNP to shoot quarantine violations only as 'last resort,'" *CNN Philippines*, April 20, 2020 at <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/4/20/pnp-quarantine-violators-duterte-order.html>

that has routinely seen multiple violations of human rights in the context of “winning” a drug war.



Philippine military personnel stand in a formation during a send off to different parts of Metropolitan Manila after president Duterte ordered a lockdown to contain the novel COVID-19 virus on March 14, 2020 in Manila. Jes Aznar—Getty Images (Text and photo source: <https://time.com/5945616/covid-philippines-pandemic-lockdown/>)

While civil society called for mass testing and aggressive contact tracing to generate data for a public health response, government officials clarified⁹ that mass testing cannot be conducted in the country. Contract tracing has been virtually non-existent in some regions, with contact tracers tired and overwhelmed—as well as undermanned, underequipped, and unsynchronized.¹⁰ Funding is an issue, with national government slashing funds for contact tracing, and funds unavailable in local governments. The contact tracing czar even admitted in May 2021 that this is the “weakest link” in the Philippine COVID-19 response.¹¹

To address funding for COVID-19 response, the Philippine government sought numerous foreign loans that amounted to US\$25.79 billion as of January 2022,¹² from sources including the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank, bilateral sources, and corporate sources that bought government bonds. While economic managers

⁹ Mercado, A. (2020), “Duque admits no COVID-19 mass testing ever conducted since outbreak,” *Inquirer.net*, May 21, 2020, at <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1278855/duque-admits-no-covid-19-mass-testing-ever-conducted-since-outbreak>

¹⁰ Talambong, R. & Ines, J. (2021), “How Philippine contact tracers lost track of the virus,” *Rappler*, April 8, 2021 at <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/covid-19-contact-tracers-philippines-lost-track>

¹¹ Galvez, D. (2021), “Magalong: Contact tracing remains weakest link in PH COVID-19 response,” *Inquirer.net*, May 4, 2021, at <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1427015/magalong-contact-tracing-remains-weakest-link-in-ph-covid-19-response>

¹² Agcaoili, L. (2022), “Government foreign borrowings down to \$13 billion in 2021,” *PhilStar.com*, January 27, 2022, at <https://www.philstar.com/business/2022/01/27/2156552/government-foreign-borrowings-down-13-billion-2021>

expected the country's debt stock to reach Php11.98 trillion by the end of 2021, questions on transparency and accountability mechanisms to monitor loan spending remain unanswered.¹³

While Congress facilitated the passage of at least two major laws granting special powers to the President, the first dubbed the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act (Bayanihan 1), and the second the Bayanihan to Recover as One Act (Bayanihan 2), to govern the national COVID-19 response, civil society has questioned the existence of over Php18.4 billion in undisbursed funds as Bayanihan 2 expired in June 2021, among others.¹⁴ These are funds that should have been used for critical healthcare facilities, student allowances and smart campuses, recovery interventions, subsidies, programs for formal and informal workers, contact tracers, and service contracts for public transport workers.

The President's latest, and final State of the Nation Address (SONA) on July 2021 failed to address gaps in the country's pandemic plan, with the Chief Executive dedicating a mere 20 minutes to the COVID-19 crisis in his three-hour long speech. Instead, his second SONA during the pandemic focused on his "drug war," his tirades against communist rebels, as well as the futility of going to "war" with China over the West Philippine Sea.¹⁵

In the context of the Philippines' performance in addressing COVID-19, G-Watch has reviewed 49 independent assessments so far on the Philippine approach in addressing COVID-19.¹⁶ These reviews include assessments on the following sectors:

- Healthcare and public health response
- Social welfare and protection
- Economy
- Education
- Human rights

In reviewing these assessments, G-Watch seeks to consolidate various issues brought forward by civil society and the media in the government's COVID-19 response, highlighting not only public health management and governance issues, but also issues in related sectors in education, social welfare, the economy, and human rights. While the sectors identified are not the only areas available for assessment in terms of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and

¹³ Bueno, A. & Acheron, J. (2020), "Exacting Accountability in Philippine COVID-19 Loans," from *TPA Now! A Paper Series on Transparency, Participation, & Accountability (G-Watch)*, Issue 3, December 2020, at <https://www.g-watch.org/resources/vertical-integration-research/tpa-now-exacting-accountability-philippine-covid-19-loans>

¹⁴ Citizen's Budget Tracker (2021), "President Duterte, Senate President Sotto, House Speaker Veloso: Please do not commit the deadly blunder of allowing Bayanihan 2 to expire on June 30, 2021," June 18, 2021, at <https://www.facebook.com/covidbudget.ph/posts/317354729966081>

¹⁵ Rappler (2021), "WATCH: Drug war, communists, China overshadow pandemic in SONA 2021," at <https://www.rappler.com/nation/video-sona-2021-summary-duterte-drug-war-communists-china-overshadows-pandemic-plan>

¹⁶ **A note on the assessments cited:** Some of the NGOs and civil society think tanks that published the assessments provide a disclaimer that the assessments written by individual authors, including views and opinions therein, may not necessarily reflect the opinion of the NGO / think tank. For reference, please check each individual assessment for the relevant disclaimers, as well as the individual methodologies used (if applicable) to come up with the assessment. As a rule, citations made by G-Watch are indicated and should be read as crediting the NGO / civil society think tanks as a *source of publication*, and not necessarily as attributions to the views / opinions of the institutions.

outcomes of government response, these are some of the most critical sectors consistent with G-Watch’s priorities.

This undertaking is part of G-Watch’s effort to fill in the gaps on accountability in the government’s COVID-19 response as part of G-Watch’s monitoring of citizen entitlements during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Healthcare and Public Health Response

Aside from its own assessments, G-Watch reviewed assessments published by the Lowy Institute, Alliance of Health Workers Philippines, the ADR Stratbase Institute, IBON Foundation, the Nikkei COVID-19 Recovery Index, as well as reports from Rappler, *The Lancet*, *South China Morning Post*, ABS-CBN News, *Bulatlat*, *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, *BusinessWorld*, and Al Jazeera to determine the Philippines’ performance in healthcare and public health response against COVID-19. A table summarizing the assessments’ findings is found below.

Main Observations	Assessment	Source Publication
<i>Overall Public Health Response</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Despite the significant contribution of the ‘sin taxes’ to the Philippine’s health budget, the country’s public health system continues to deteriorate and fails to respond well to the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁷ 	Negative	G-Watch (as published in Rappler, March 2020)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Philippines ranks 81 out of 102 countries ranked as to performance in managing the COVID-19 pandemic, in the 43 weeks following their hundredth confirmed case of the virus.¹⁸ The Philippines’ average score is 32 (highest is 100) based on data availability across six indicators: (1) confirmed cases, (2) confirmed deaths, (3) confirmed cases per million people, (4) confirmed deaths per million people, (5) confirmed cases as a proportion of tests, and (6) tests per thousand people. 	Negative	Lowy Institute (March 2021)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The pandemic “has shown the major inadequacies of the Philippines’ public health system, not only in terms of medical facilities but also in terms of protocols of medical emergencies.”¹⁹ A “trial-and-error management style,” one that relied 	Negative	ADR Stratbase Institute (November 2020)

¹⁷ Aceron, V. & Maglanque, V. (2020), “[ANALYSIS] Amid the coronavirus crisis, where have all the sin tax funds gone?”, *Rappler*, March 12, 2020, at <https://www.rappler.com/voices/imho/analysis-where-sin-tax-funds-coronavirus>

¹⁸ Lowy Institute (2021), “Covid Performance Index: Deconstructing Pandemic Responses,” at <https://interactives.lowyinstitute.org/features/covid-performance/>

¹⁹ Santiago, E., & Rañosa, V. (2020), “The Social Amelioration Program in the Philippines: Lessons on Financial Inclusion and the Use of ICT,” from *Stratbase + ADR Publications*, Occasional Paper Issue 13.11, November 2020, at <https://adrinstituteblog.files.wordpress.com/2020/12/stratbase-adr-institutes-november-2020-occasional-paper-the-social-amelioration-program-in-the-philippines-lessons-on-financial-inclusion-and-the-use-of-ict.pdf>

heavily on obedience and law enforcement, revealed the scarce experience of government in crisis management.		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The country's weak contact tracing program is a contributory factor to the community transmittal of the virus and the rapid increase of cases—thus justifying the need for proactive, rather than reactive policies.²⁰ The government has increased the number of contact tracers as of January 2021 to 255,854—above the ideal number of 135,000 as recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO). 	Neutral	ADR Stratbase Institute (February 2021)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> While systems and facilities for contact tracing, isolation, and treatment exist, they have been described as “late and in slow motion,” with a former public health secretary commenting that response “could have been more efficient.”²¹ 	Negative	<i>South China Morning Post</i> (February 2021)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Philippine COVID-19 government response is the weakest in Southeast Asia. The “original and continuing sin” of the government is its lack of “rational and calibrated measures,” beginning with the missed opportunities of immediate border controls, judicious quarantines, and speedy isolations at the outset. This “set the stage for deep economic collapse.”²² 	Negative	IBON Foundation (February 2021)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discrepancies exist between official statistics that indicated available space for COVID-19 patients in facilities, and the situation on the ground.²³ For example, the DOH showed healthcare utilization was “moderate” or at 65.4%, even as news reports at that time highlighted hundreds of COVID-19 patients waiting for admission in hospitals already overwhelmed by a surge in coronavirus cases. 	Negative	Rappler (April 2021)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a lack of an effective referral network, especially among local government units, to address coronavirus surges and the resulting waves of patients needing urgent care.²⁴ The existing One Hospital 	Negative	Rappler (April 2021), citing Health Professionals

²⁰ Manalansan, A. & Pangalangan, F. (2021), “The Extended Covid-19 Crisis: An Issue of Governance and Health System Management,” from *Stratbase + ADR Publications*, Occasional Paper Issue 14.2, February 2021, at <https://adrinstituteblog.files.wordpress.com/2021/05/stratbase-adr-institutes-february-2021-occasional-paper-the-extended-covid-19-crisis-an-issue-of-governance-and-health-system-management.pdf>

²¹ Robles, A. & Robles, R. (2021), “Analysis | ‘Late and slow motion’: where the Philippines’ pandemic response went wrong,” *South China Morning Post*, February 18, 2021, at <https://www.scmp.com/week-asia/health-environment/article/3122257/late-and-slow-motion-where-philippines-pandemic>

²² IBON Foundation (2021), “IBON 2021 Yearstarter Birdtalk Briefing Paper: Solving the pandemic crisis,” *IBON*, February 21, 2021, at <https://www.ibon.org/ibon-2021-yearstarter-birdtalk-briefing-paper-solving-the-pandemic-crisis/>

²³ Tomacruz, S. (2021), “Over 300 COVID-19 patients wait or days for admission in Metro Manila hospitals,” *Rappler*, April 12, 2021, at <https://www.rappler.com/nation/patients-wait-days-admission-metro-manila-hospitals-april-2021>

²⁴ Tomacruz, S. & Magsambol, B. (2021), “Doctors plead with gov’t: ‘We can’t fight this virus with antiquated methods,’” *Rappler*, April 18, 2021, at <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/philippines-covid-19-surge-health-experts-proposed-solutions-cannot-fight-virus-with-antiquated-methods>

Command Center (OHCC) did not include local governments with resources for quarantine centers, ambulances, barangay health centers, and hospitals in their respective areas.		Alliance Against COVID-19 (HPAAC)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> While public and private health systems are supposed to provide complementary health service delivery, no effective measures exist to regulate the expanding private sector—leading to high out-of-pocket expenses for healthcare. Along with a fragmented public health system already under pressure, insufficient government response has resulted to delays in contact tracing and mass testing, an overwhelmed medical system, and slow vaccine roll-out.²⁵ 	Negative	The Lancet Regional Health – Western Pacific (April 2021)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Philippines placed last among 121 countries ranked based on their infection management, vaccine rollouts, and social mobility. Only less than 30% of the population is fully vaccinated, which is low even among ASEAN countries.²⁶ 	Negative	<i>Nikkei Asia</i> (October 2021), citing the COVID-19 Recovery Index (September 30, 2021)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The country faces a “perfect storm” in that it is dealing with the Delta variant while its testing remains inadequate and as it grapples with its economic problems. The Philippines scores low on all metrics related to reopening, vaccination coverage, and lockdown severity.²⁷ 	Negative	ABS-CBN News (September 2021), citing the Bloomberg COVID Resilience Ranking as of September 2021
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> On October 2021, the Philippines ranked last in the COVID resilience ranking for a second month. (However, of February 2022, it has moved up the ranking by three places, placing fourth to the last among 53 countries, faring better in the number of 1-month cases recorded per 100,000, 3-month case fatality rate, and total deaths per million.)²⁸ 	Negative	Bloomberg COVID Resilience Ranking (February 2022)
<i>Healthcare Workers’ Welfare</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A robust public health system and sufficient workforce are prerequisites of an effective government response—but these were inadequate and insufficient 	Negative	The Lancet Regional Health – Western Pacific (April 2021)

²⁵ The Lancet Regional Health - Western Pacific (2021), “COVID-19: An ongoing public health crisis in the Philippines,” from *The Lancet Regional Health - Western Pacific*, Editorial, Volume 9, 100160, April 1, 2021, at [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanwpc/article/PIIS2666-6065\(21\)00069-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanwpc/article/PIIS2666-6065(21)00069-9/fulltext)

²⁶ Li, G. (2021), “China falls from top spot in Nikkei COVID recovery ranking,” *Nikkei Asia*, October 6, 2021, at <https://asia.nikkei.com/Spotlight/Coronavirus/COVID-19-Recovery-Index/China-falls-from-top-spot-in-Nikkei-COVID-recovery-ranking>

²⁷ ABS-CBN News (2021), “Philippines drops to bottom of Bloomberg’s COVID Resilience Ranking,” *ABS-CBN News*, September 29, 2021, at <https://news.abs-cbn.com/business/09/29/21/philippines-at-bottom-of-bloomberg-covid-resilience-ranking>

²⁸ Bloomberg (2022), “The COVID Resilience Ranking: The Best and Worst Places to Be as The Omicron Threat Fades,” *Bloomberg*, February 24, 2022, at <https://www.bloomberg.com/graphics/covid-resilience-ranking/>

<p>even before the pandemic. The lack of investment in healthcare facilities and the shortage of workers curtail the public health system, while inequalities in healthcare delivery prevent access to services.²⁹</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Doctors, nurses, and other healthcare workers are left exhausted since they have to work longer shifts and monitor more patients. Hospitals have had to reduce the number of doctors and nurses per shift to allow quarantine time for those who may get exposed to the virus. During the pandemic, some 10,000 Filipino nurses left abroad, according to government data—contributing to the shortage of health personnel. In the Philippines, salaries of medical staff in the private sector are low, pushing many of them to seek opportunities abroad.³⁰ 	<p>Negative</p>	<p>Al Jazeera (April 2021)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Plummeting revenues of hospitals are reported (due to people preferring to stay at home when possible) and many private hospitals are still owed billions of pesos in reimbursements by the country’s health insurance agency—PhilHealth. A representative from the Philippine Hospital Association stated that while government hospitals receive support from the government, private hospitals receive “practically no support.”³¹ 	<p>Negative</p>	<p>CNN Philippines (April 2021), citing the Philippine Hospital Association</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> While health workers are touted as “modern day heroes,” their concerns are not heard.³² A year since the COVID-19 crisis, health workers still suffer from low wages; benefits that are unimplemented and withheld; and threats to their safety and protection even as they air their concerns. “Acute problems of lack and overworked health personnel as well as insufficient facilities, supplies and medicines hound us,” according to an Alliance of Health Workers press statement in May 2021. “Due to the ineptness of the government’s COVID-19 response, a more suffering sad plight of public hospitals has engulfed us.”³³ 	<p>Negative</p>	<p>Alliance of Health Workers - Philippines (May 2021)</p>

²⁹ The Lancet Regional Health – Western Pacific (2021), “COVID-19: An ongoing public health crisis in the Philippines,” from *The Lancet Regional Health – Western Pacific*, Editorial, Volume 9, 100160, April 1, 2021, at [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanwpc/article/PIIS2666-6065\(21\)00069-9/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanwpc/article/PIIS2666-6065(21)00069-9/fulltext)

³⁰ Gotinga, J. (2021), “‘We’ve cried ourselves dry’: COVID overwhelms Manila hospitals,” *Al Jazeera*, April 19, 2021, at <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/4/19/for-kate-patients-die-as-covid-overwhelms-philippine-hospitals>

³¹ CNN Philippines Staff (2021), “Private hospitals cry for help amid lack of manpower, unpaid claims for COVID-19 patients,” *CNN Philippines*, April 8, 2021, at <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2021/4/8/PHA-private-hospitals-COVID-manpower-unpaid-claims.html>

³² Alliance of Health Workers – AHW National (2021), “Press Release: Health Workers’ Day 2021: Honoring Our New Heroes and Continuing the Fight for Safety, Protection, Rights and Welfare,” May 7, 2021, at <https://www.facebook.com/ahwphils/posts/2857227751257541>

³³ Alliance of Health Workers – AHW National (2021), “Press Release: Health Workers’ Day 2021: Honoring Our New Heroes and Continuing the Fight for Safety, Protection, Rights and Welfare,” May 7, 2021, at <https://www.facebook.com/ahwphils/posts/2857227751257541>

<i>Vaccination, Testing, and Contact Tracing</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Despite announcing that they are gearing up for mass testing, the DOH has continued failing in reaching its daily testing targets. The government aimed to conduct 30,000 tests per day by end of May but failed to do so. It is also dealing with the issue of backlog in testing, as well as validation of positive cases.³⁴ • Contact tracing also proves to be one of the challenges faced by the government as 95,000 more contact tracers are needed to be hired in order to attain the ideal ratio set by the World Health Organization.³⁵ 	Negative	G-Watch (June 2020)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The government is still failing to reach its daily testing target of 50,000. Testing also remains to be out of reach for many Filipinos, with at least 38 provinces still without testing centers. Most of the testing centers are in Metro Manila and in other big cities. Budgets for public health agencies vital in detecting, testing, databasing, and reporting cases had also been cut.³⁶ • In terms of contact tracing, the Philippines can only identify an average of 1:7 contacts per COVID-19 patient, far from its 1:30-35 target. Contact tracing is left in the hands of the local government, particularly among village health workers, leaving the country with one contact tracer per 800,000 of the population. The budget for disease surveillance has also been further decreased.³⁷ 	Negative	Bulatlat (March 2021), citing Coalition of People's Right to Health
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The government continues to fail in testing and contact tracing. A year into the pandemic, it has still not reached its daily testing targets and the ideal ratio for contact tracers per population.³⁸ • While the Philippines was one of the earliest countries to signify participation in the COVAX facility, the government was slow in attending to its prerequisites, in particular an indemnity agreement between the government and the vaccine manufacturers.³⁹ 	Negative	IBON Foundation (April 2021) published in Bulatlat

³⁴ Acheron, J. & Maglanque, V. (2020), "Citizen Health Entitlements in COVID-19 Pandemic," *G-Watch*, June 2, 2020, at https://www.g-watch.org/think-piece/citizen-health-entitlements-covid-19-pandemic#_ftn6

³⁵ Acheron, J. & Maglanque, V. (2020), "Citizen Health Entitlements in COVID-19 Pandemic," *G-Watch*, June 2, 2020, at https://www.g-watch.org/think-piece/citizen-health-entitlements-covid-19-pandemic#_ftn6

³⁶ Ellao, J. (2021), "After a year of lockdown: Gov't mishandles pandemic response," *Bulatlat*, March 14, 2021, at <https://www.bulatlat.com/2021/03/14/after-a-year-of-lockdown-govt-mishandles-pandemic-response/>

³⁷ Ellao, J. (2021), "After a year of lockdown: Gov't mishandles pandemic response," *Bulatlat*, March 14, 2021, at <https://www.bulatlat.com/2021/03/14/after-a-year-of-lockdown-govt-mishandles-pandemic-response/>

³⁸ Guzman, R. & Piedad, M. (2021), Mass vaccination PH: Throwing away our shots (Part I)," *Bulatlat*, April 15, 2021, at <https://www.bulatlat.com/2021/04/15/mass-vaccination-ph-throwing-away-our-shots-part-i/>

³⁹ Guzman, R. & Piedad, M. (2021), Mass vaccination PH: Throwing away our shots (Part II)," *Bulatlat*, April 15, 2021, at

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While vaccination at the local level is progressing across localities and regions in the country, it is at an uneven and slow pace. Overall, the compliance to citizen entitlements in the implementation of the vaccination program against COVID-19 is still inconsistent, with critical entitlements not fully guaranteed at all times in all localities.⁴⁰ • Other issues on the government’s vaccination include (1) citizens not being able to choose their brand of vaccine, (2) gaps in information dissemination about the vaccine in the local level, (3) smuggling of and illegal sales of vaccines, (4) expiring vaccines, and (5) low vaccine confidence among the people.⁴¹ 	Negative	G-Watch (June 2021)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Philippines’ vaccination rate still trails its neighbors, ranking 11th out of 18 East and Southeast Asia countries.⁴² 	Negative	BusinessWorld Online (August 2021)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The country’s contact-tracing efficiency remains dismal, according to contact tracing chief, Benjamin Magalong. As of October 2021, the country’s contact tracing ratio has deteriorated to 1:4 to 1:5, very far from the ideal 1:37. This leads to a low testing rate, which affects the country’s ability to determine the extent of infection in the areas concerned.⁴³ 	Negative	<i>Philippine Daily Inquirer</i> (October 3, 2021), citing Baguio City Mayor Benjamin Magalong (contact tracing czar)

Social Welfare and Protection

Aside from its own assessment, G-Watch reviewed assessments from Our World in Data, IBON Foundation, ADR Stratbase Institute, Philippine Institute for Development Studies, and a Rappler report to determine the Philippines’ performance in social welfare and protection programs during COVID-19.

Main Observations	Assessment	Source Publication
<i>Lockdown Restrictions vis-à-vis Social Relief</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While the Philippines imposes stricter school and workplace closures, cancellation of public events and gatherings, and stay-at-home restrictions compared to the rest of the world, its citizens either have non- 	Negative	Our World in Data (as of March 2022)

<https://www.bulatlat.com/2021/04/15/mass-vaccination-ph-throwing-away-our-shots-part-ii/>

⁴⁰ Government Watch Philippines (2021), “G-Watch Report on the State of Vaccination in the Philippines,” June 9, 2021, at <https://www.g-watch.org/resources/vertical-integration-research/g-watch-report-state-vaccination-philippines>

⁴¹ Government Watch Philippines (2021), “G-Watch Report on the State of Vaccination in the Philippines,” June 9, 2021, at <https://www.g-watch.org/resources/vertical-integration-research/g-watch-report-state-vaccination-philippines>

⁴² BusinessWorld, “Philippines’ full vaccination rate reaches 11.47%, still trails neighbors,” *BusinessWorld*, August 18, 2021, at <https://www.bworldonline.com/philippines-full-vaccination-rate-reaches-11-47-still-trails-neighbors/>

⁴³ Salaverria, L. & Chiu, P. (2021), Only 4-5 people traced per COVID case detected – Magalong,” *Inquirer.net*, October 3, 2021, at <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1496155/only-4-5-people-traced-per-covid-case-detected-magalong>

<p>existent income support (or enjoy support worth less than 50% of their salary) and are provided non-existent to narrow debt relief.⁴⁴</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The country has emergency subsidies to alleviate the socio-economic impact of continued lockdowns, especially to the poor. But not all those entitled to emergency aid received it on time nor was proper aid given (if they received aid at all) under the program, and grievance mechanisms for the program have been largely unutilized.⁴⁵ Particular key findings state that (1) not all in the published SAP list received SAP assistance, (2) there are indications that some beneficiaries did not receive the right amount of assistance, (3) a significant percentage of the target SAP beneficiaries did not receive their assistance on time, and (4) it is highly perceived that there has been inclusion and exclusion errors in the selection of SAP beneficiaries, which indicates that not all the right beneficiaries received assistance. While basic standard processes in the implementation of SAP were complied with most of the time, they were not followed at all times. The hotlines/GRS have been largely unutilized.⁴⁶ 	Negative	G-Watch (August 2020)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Emergency cash assistance has fallen to “token levels disproportionate to the extreme social crisis at hand,” with cash assistance dwindling to almost nothing. The Php239.3 billion disbursed under Bayanihan 1 fell to a mere Php 22.8 billion budget, which was not even entirely used by the end of 2020. Support to distressed micro, small, and medium enterprises (MSMEs) was described as “very sparing.”⁴⁷ 	Negative	IBON Foundation (February 2021)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> “While the targets and implementation guidelines are well detailed in various government issuances and other circulars from the implementing agencies, the distribution of emergency assistance has experienced various issues”—such as “slight” and “major” delays in distribution (which was done in two tranches), accuracy gaps in the number of individuals entitled to the 	Neutral	Philippine Institute for Development Studies (December 2020)

⁴⁴ Ritchie, H., Ortiz-Ospina, E. et al, (2020), –“Coronavirus Pandemic (COVID-19),” *OurWorldInData.org*, at <https://ourworldindata.org/policy-responses-covid>

⁴⁵ G-Watch Philippines (2020), “G-Watch Independent Validation of the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) Report on Field Survey Findings,” *G-Watch*, August 12, 2020, at <https://www.g-watch.org/resources/vertical-integration-research/g-watch-independent-validation-social-amelioration-program>

⁴⁶ G-Watch Philippines (2020), “G-Watch Independent Validation of the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) Report on Field Survey Findings,” *G-Watch*, August 12, 2020, at <https://www.g-watch.org/resources/vertical-integration-research/g-watch-independent-validation-social-amelioration-program>

⁴⁷ IBON Foundation (2021), “IBON 2021 Yearstarter Birdtalk Briefing Paper: Solving the pandemic crisis,” *IBON*, February 21, 2021, at <https://www.ibon.org/ibon-2021-yearstarter-birdtalk-briefing-paper-solving-the-pandemic-crisis/>

program, duplicates, and ineligible beneficiaries. Delays defeated the purpose of the emergency aid, which is to provide temporary and immediate relief. ⁴⁸		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is a need to optimize information and communications technology (ICT) and to aggressively pursue financial inclusion for SAP implementation, since the manual system of distribution is inefficient and is prone to corruption. Aside from manual registration possibly facilitating fraud, it also defeated the purpose of physical distancing.⁴⁹ 	Negative	ADR Stratbase Institute (November 2020)

Economic Response

Aside from its own assessment, G-Watch reviewed assessments from the IBON Foundation, International Labor Organization, International Budget Partnership, Citizen Budget Tracker, We Solve Data, ADR Stratbase Institute, Ateneo de Manila University / Ateneo Center for Economic Research and Development, and reports from SciDev.Net, The Economist, East Asia Forum and Bulatlat to determine the Philippines' economic response against COVID-19.

Main Observations	Assessment	Source Publication
<i>Economic Stimuli, Jobs, and Income</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Philippine government needs to improve its COVID-19 public health response and its economic response by establishing a stronger fiscal stimulus to a collapsing economy, as “it has one of the weakest economic stimuli in the world.” The strong peso in March 2020 up to August 2020, brought by a significant trade surplus and inflow of foreign debts, is not a sign of a confidence in our economy—but “a sign of a collapsing economy with drastic import declines and large inflows of foreign debt money to address the COVID pandemic.”⁵⁰ 	Negative	Ateneo de Manila University / Ateneo Center for Economic Research and Development (September 2020)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Broad-based and targeted policy measures are needed to manage the disruptive impact of COVID-19 on jobs in the Philippines—this involves a concerted and coordinated response involving multiple stakeholders that includes government, employers' and workers' 	Neutral	International Labor Organization (November 2020)

⁴⁸ Reyes, C., Asis, R., et. al. (2020), “Mitigating the Impact of COVID-19 Pandemic on Poverty,” *Philippine Institute for Development Studies*, Discussion Paper Series No. 2020-055, December 2020, at https://serp-p.pids.gov.ph/publication_detail?id=7184

⁴⁹ Santiago, E., & Rañosa, V. (2020), “The Social Amelioration Program in the Philippines: Lessons on Financial Inclusion and the Use of ICT,” from *Stratbase + ADR Publications*, Occasional Paper Issue 13.11, November 2020, at <https://adrinstituteblog.files.wordpress.com/2020/12/stratbase-adr-institutes-november-2020-occasional-paper-the-social-amelioration-program-in-the-philippines-lessons-on-financial-inclusion-and-the-use-of-ict.pdf>

⁵⁰ Lim, J. (2020), “The Philippine Economy During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Ateneo de Manila University Department of Economics, Ateneo Center for Research and Economic Development*, Working Paper No. 2020-16, September 8, 2020, at <http://ateneo.edu/ls/soess/economics/wp-2020-16-philippine-economy-during-covid-pandemic>

<p>organizations, industry, the academe and beyond, to ensure that all voices are heard and that specific and unique needs by certain groups are aptly addressed.⁵¹</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While it is “hyped as the main stimulus that the economy needs for recovery,” the “Build, Build, Build” program is not the answer. The main cause of economic suffering and biggest fetter to aggregate demand during COVID-19 is “the extreme collapse in household incomes especially due to soaring unemployment,” upon which infrastructure spending—via the “Build Build Build” program—has limited impact because projects, especially big-ticket ones, are capital- and import-intensive.⁵² • The lack of real fiscal stimulus worsened the economic situation of the Philippines. Spending was unexceptional just when the economic collapse was at its worst. These dampened economic activity, worsened contraction, and overall deprived Filipinos of urgent goods and services. The result is prolonged suffering and recovery.⁵³ 	<p>Negative</p>	<p>IBON Foundation (February 2021)</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No tripartite dialogue has been conducted for government policy issuances on labor; instead, separate bilateral dialogues with employers and workers were conducted. The only policy that involved inputs from workers was the COVID-19 Adjustment Measures Program (CAMP). Unions participated in hearings for the Bayanihan Act and workers’ groups submitted various representations calling for guaranteed income for affected workers, free treatment, budget for mass testing, and protection and support for health workers.⁵⁴ 	<p>Negative</p>	<p>International Labor Organization (September 2021), citing sources from local organizations</p>

⁵¹ International Labour Organization (2020), “COVID-19 labour market impact in the Philippines: Assessment and national policy responses,” *International Labour Organization Country Office for the Philippines*, November 27, 2020, at https://www.ilo.org/manila/publications/WCMS_762209/lang--en/index.htm

⁵² IBON Foundation (2021), “IBON 2021 Yearstarter Birdtalk Briefing Paper: Solving the pandemic crisis,” *IBON*, February 21, 2021, at <https://www.ibon.org/ibon-2021-yearstarter-birdtalk-briefing-paper-solving-the-pandemic-crisis/>

⁵³ IBON Foundation (2021), “IBON 2021 Yearstarter Birdtalk Briefing Paper: Solving the pandemic crisis,” *IBON*, February 21, 2021, at <https://www.ibon.org/ibon-2021-yearstarter-birdtalk-briefing-paper-solving-the-pandemic-crisis/>

⁵⁴ International Labour Organization (2021), “Covid-19 and the world of work: Country policy responses,” *page for the Philippines last updated 29 September 2021* at <https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/coronavirus/regional-country/country-responses/lang--en/index.htm#PH>

<i>Emergency Procurement</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using a novel dataset on coronavirus-related government contracts worth Php20 billion (representing nearly 60% of the total value of publicly available contracts as of August 2020), researchers found that: “(i) medical and social amelioration goods comprise 99% of the value of sampled contracts, (ii) the typical (median) procurement from award date to reported delivery took 9 days, (iii) around 71% of items were procured at high prices and which warrant a second look from authorities, (iv) more than 60% of items by value had data quality issues, and (v) more than 66% of items by value did not have sufficient descriptions or specifications to warrant price comparisons.” These findings highlight the need for systematically improving data quality, making open contracting inclusive, and strengthening civic movements to verify and check procurement data.⁵⁵ 	Negative	Citizen Budget Tracker’s Procurement Research Team and WeSolve Data Empowerment Program (May 2021)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Philippines handled vaccine procurement “shambolically,” as it “dithered over signing a deal with Pfizer, an American firm, and ended up scrambling to secure shots from Sinovac, a Chinese one, at what many suspect are inflated prices.” It also recorded reports of smuggled vaccines being used by government officers.⁵⁶ 	Negative	<i>The Economist</i> (January 2021)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Certain missteps in the Philippines’ procurement of COVID-19 vaccines were recorded. While the Philippine National Vaccine Roadmap for the procurement of vaccines was approved in November 2020, government was only able to secure, as of December 2020, a singular commitment—from China—for the provision of vaccines, saying that other manufacturers’ vaccines are expected to arrive only in the second and third quarter of 2021. As to vaccines from the COVAX facility, the government was largely criticized for delays in their delivery on account of a pending requirement on indemnification agreements.⁵⁷ 	Negative	ADR Stratbase Institute (February 2021)

⁵⁵ Abante, K., Go, L., et al (2021), “Strengthening Procurement in the Time of a Pandemic: Evidence from the Philippines,” *Philippine Open Covid Contracts Dataset (phlcovidcontracts)*, WeSolve Data for Empowerment and Citizens’ Budget Tracker Working Paper, May 18, 2021, at <https://wesolve.ph/research/strengthening-procurement>

⁵⁶ The Economist (2021), “Asian governments are needlessly hampering vaccination drives,” *The Economist*, January 21, 2021, at <https://www.economist.com/asia/2021/01/21/asian-governments-are-needlessly-hampering-vaccination-drives>

⁵⁷ Manalansan, A. & Pangalangan, F. (2021), “The Extended Covid-19 Crisis: An Issue of Governance and Health System Management,” from *Stratbase + ADR Publications*, Occasional Paper Issue 14.2, February 2021, at <https://adrinstituteblog.files.wordpress.com/2021/05/stratbase-adr-institutes-february-2021-occasional-paper-the-extended-covid-19-crisis-an-issue-of-governance-and-health-system-management.pdf>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Philippines is one of the countries where malpractice in the procurement of vaccines and protective equipment has been recorded. This includes the lack of transparency—i.e., the utilization of direct procurement legislation due to emergency needs.⁵⁸ 	Negative	SciDev.Net (June 2021)
<i>Loan Allocation and Accountability</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Loans contracted by the Philippines for COVID-19 response have been allocated to four major sectors: social assistance, infrastructure, local government revenue, and disaster resilience. While many of these loans have been tagged as “COVID-19 Financing” by the Department of Finance, the letter of the loans (especially those for infrastructure, local government revenue, and some social assistance loans) do not expressly state that the funds shall go for COVID-19 response.⁵⁹ Local mechanisms for transparency, accountability, and citizen participation in the loan agreements are sorely lacking. The DOF website itself only contains links to the agreements themselves but no further information on spending or progress of disbursement, among others, is indicated. Citizens may have a difficult time monitoring these loans due to the lack of these mechanisms.⁶⁰ 	Neutral	G-Watch (December 2020)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> While the DOF tagged numerous loans as “COVID financing,” only around 8% of the loans to date was actually allotted for projects intended to address the health crisis. Further, there is a lack of transparency on how funds from the loans are spent and their purpose, among others.⁶¹ 	Negative	Bulatlat (March 2021), citing IBON Foundation
<i>Budget and Spending</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The prioritization of health entitlements of citizens remains highly questionable. The Department of Health was only allotted Php1.9 billion out of the Php 254 	Negative	G-Watch (June 2020)

⁵⁸ Buguzi, S. Broom, F., et al (2021), “COVID-19, lies and statistics: corruption and the pandemic,” *Sci Dev Net*, June 4, 2021, at <https://www.scidev.net/global/scidev-net-investigates/covid-19-lies-and-statistics-corruption-and-the-pandemic/>

⁵⁹ Bueno, A. & Acheron, J. (2020), “Exacting Accountability in Philippine COVID-19 Loans,” from *TPA Now! A Paper Series on Transparency, Participation, & Accountability (G-Watch)*, Issue 3, December 2020, at <https://www.g-watch.org/resources/vertical-integration-research/tpa-now-exacting-accountability-philippine-covid-19-loans>

⁶⁰ Bueno, A. & Acheron, J. (2020), “Exacting Accountability in Philippine COVID-19 Loans,” from *TPA Now! A Paper Series on Transparency, Participation, & Accountability (G-Watch)*, Issue 3, December 2020, at <https://www.g-watch.org/resources/vertical-integration-research/tpa-now-exacting-accountability-philippine-covid-19-loans>

⁶¹ Peña, D. (2021), “Majority of COVID-19 loans not used for pandemic response,” *Bulatlat*, March 19, 2021, at <https://www.bulatlat.com/2021/03/19/majority-of-covid-19-loans-not-used-for-pandemic-response/>

<p>billion, as reported in the Executive’s 5th Bayanihan report.⁶²</p>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The proposed 2021 health budget shrinks and neglects public health. This will keep healthcare inaccessible and expensive for too many Filipinos.⁶³ 	Negative	IBON Foundation (September 2020)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a “valley of spending” that the government should not have been in its COVID-19 budget: a four-month delay from Bayanihan 1 expiration to the release of budget in Bayanihan 2. The result: agencies cramming spending for two months to meet the December 19 deadline (before Bayanihan 1 expired) and the failure to flatten the budget curve. • Bayanihan 2 was also a “missed opportunity to create a precedent for decisive countercyclical fiscal policy,” when government limited the Bayanihan budget to Php140 billion and slashed critical sector funding addressing social determinants of health. This was due to a perceived constraint in the Constitution regarding special appropriation bills. However, “the constraint is neither cash nor the Constitution, but the capacity of agencies to implement.”⁶⁴ 	Negative	Citizen’s Budget Tracker (November 2020)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The 2021 government budget is “funding its way out of the crisis” by continuing to invest in improving infrastructure. However, the budget gives a lower spending priority to health and social welfare, over national defense and the maintenance of peace and order.⁶⁵ • Government plans to reduce corporate taxes and rationalize incentives via legislation may be poorly timed, and puts into question the government’s weak capacity to implement such a complex reform.⁶⁶ 	Negative	East Asia Forum (December 2020)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Philippines has an “adequate” level of accountability in early COVID-19 fiscal responses, in a study that assessed the transparency, extent of public engagement on, and oversight of emergency fiscal policy packages introduced by the government in 	Positive to Neutral	International Budget Partnership (2021)

⁶² Aceron, J. & Maglanque, V. (2020), “Citizen Health Entitlements in COVID-19 Pandemic,” *G-Watch*, June 2, 2020, at <https://www.g-watch.org/think-piece/citizen-health-entitlements-covid-19-pandemic>

⁶³ IBON Foundation (2020), “Proposed 2021 health budget shrinks, neglects public health—IBON,” *IBON*, September 2020, at <https://www.ibon.org/proposed-2021-health-budget-shrinks-neglects-public-health/>

⁶⁴ Abante, K. (2020), “A Review of Philippine Government Spending for Coronavirus Response and Recovery in 2020,” presentation made at the 58th Philippine Economic Society Annual Meeting and Conference, November 10, 2020, at https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1OluWwKjCrzjpLAndF-4ASlrgpr5s_5GwtmLGa4ImqO0/edit#slide=id.ga8b8d5fbb5_0_172

⁶⁵ Albert, J. (PIDS) (2020), “Were the Philippines’ COVID-19 responses sufficient?,” *East Asia Forum*, December 22, 2020, at <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/12/23/were-the-philippines-covid-19-responses-sufficient/>

⁶⁶ Albert, J. (PIDS) (2020), “Were the Philippines’ COVID-19 responses sufficient?,” *East Asia Forum*, December 22, 2020, at <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2020/12/23/were-the-philippines-covid-19-responses-sufficient/>

<p>response to the COVID-19 pandemic (introduced from 1 March to September 2020). The report lauded the weekly reports on COVID response actions sent to the Joint Congressional Oversight Committee that oversees the implementation of the Bayanihan 1 Act. It also highlighted the Congressional Policy and Budget Research Department’s (CPBRD) results-based assessment of this Act.⁶⁷</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The study reported that the Philippines, in addition, has “substantive information” on transparency measures, as well as “substantive” oversight measures. However, it flagged “limited” participation by citizens in its emergency fiscal policy packages.⁶⁸ 		
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Education

G-Watch reviewed assessments from the Asia Society and Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT) – Philippines and the Movement for Safe, Equitable, Quality, and Relevant Education, and reports from UNICEF, Rappler and CNN Philippines, to determine how the Philippines’ handled issues in education amid COVID-19.

Main Observations	Assessment	Source Publication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • While the blend of online, broadcast, and modular learning is designed to ensure the safety of both students and teachers, the rushed adaptation and/or development of curricula and materials for blended modalities, gaps and even risks (especially for the physical materials to be passed on) are unavoidable realities. These gaps and risks include the digital divide, worsening of inequalities, challenges in teaching in online platforms, mental health issues, and financial and logistical barriers for the provision of teaching and learning resources.⁶⁹ • The DepEd Commons platform is available to educators as an online resource and does not incur data charges. DepEd also works with public and private television, radio, and cable operators to broadcast educational materials. To fill in the gaps, private sector and civil society support play important roles—such as 	Neutral	Asia Society (undated)

⁶⁷ International Budget Partnership (2021), “Managing Covid funds: the accountability gap,” at <https://internationalbudget.org/covid/>

⁶⁸ International Budget Partnership (2021), “Managing Covid funds: the accountability gap,” *Data summary*, at https://internationalbudget.org/covid/wp-content/uploads/2021/05/Data-Summary_English.pdf

⁶⁹ Asia Society Philippines (undated), “Back-to-School: Challenges for the Philippines and responses from around Asia,” *Asia Society*, at <https://asiasociety.org/philippines/asian-perspective>

telecommunications companies subsidizing data charges and local governments augmenting expenses for gadgets and laptops. ⁷⁰		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Department of Education's (DepEd) blended learning/ distance learning approach in a pandemic—where students learn from online, television, radio, and printed materials—has been criticized as unsafe, unaffordable, as well as an approach that disregards the digital divide and places a heavy burden on teachers and parents alike.⁷¹ 	Negative	Rappler (May 2020)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers who responded to the survey noted that DepEd failed to adequately provide for the needs of distance learning. Some respondents also think that the pieces of training given to them to prepare for distance learning are inadequate, and that DepEd has not adequately ensured their safety and health protection.⁷² The survey also showed dwindling student participation, drop in online class attendance, declining confidence on distance learning, ineffective modules, inadequate familiarization on the modality, burdensome costs of distance learning, wanting of adult guidance, and negative physical and mental health impact on students.⁷³ 	Negative	Movement for Safe, Equitable, Quality, and Relevant Education (February 2021)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A survey found that teachers are “overworked, undersupported, and burned out.” A sizable number of teachers outside Metro Manila are made to report to schools more frequently; government support for distance learning needs are largely inadequate; and teachers’ physical and mental health have suffered for putting in extra work hours this pandemic.^{74,75,76} 	Negative	Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT) – Philippines (May 2021)

⁷⁰ Asia Society Philippines (undated), “Back-to-School: Challenges for the Philippines and responses from around Asia,” *Asia Society*, at <https://asiasociety.org/philippines/asian-perspective>

⁷¹ Magsambol, B. (2020), “No student left behind? During pandemic, education ‘only for those who can afford’,” *Rappler*, May 22, 2020, at <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/education-only-for-people-who-can-afford-coronavirus-pandemic>

⁷² Movement for Safe, Equitable, Quality, and Relevant Education (2021), “INFOGRAPHICS: Failing Distance Learning and the Need for Urgent Gov’t Action: An assessment on the conduct of distance learning for the First Quarter of S.Y. 2020-2021,” February 3, 2021, at <https://www.facebook.com/SEQuReEducationMovt/posts/231250602043617>

⁷³ Movement for Safe, Equitable, Quality, and Relevant Education (2021), “INFOGRAPHICS: Failing Distance Learning and the Need for Urgent Gov’t Action: An assessment on the conduct of distance learning for the First Quarter of S.Y. 2020-2021,” February 3, 2021, at <https://www.facebook.com/SEQuReEducationMovt/posts/231250602043617>

⁷⁴ Alliance of Concerned Teachers – Philippines (2021), “Underworked, Undersupported, Burned Out: An Assessment of the Labor Situation of Public School Teachers under Duterte’s Distance Learning Program,” May 12, 2021, at <https://www.facebook.com/actph1982/photos/pcb.4237047453001080/4237012993004526>

⁷⁵ Alliance of Concerned Teachers – Philippines (2021), “Underworked, Undersupported, Burned Out: An Assessment of the Labor Situation of Public School Teachers under Duterte’s Distance Learning Program,” May 12, 2021, at <https://www.facebook.com/actph1982/photos/pcb.4244302258942266/4244284332277392>

⁷⁶ Alliance of Concerned Teachers – Philippines (2021), “Underworked, Undersupported, Burned Out: An Assessment of the Labor Situation of Public School Teachers under Duterte’s Distance Learning Program,” May 12, 2021, at <https://www.facebook.com/actph1982/photos/pcb.4255737437798748/4255696104469548>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Vice President stated that the Philippines must declare a “crisis in education” especially as the pandemic exacerbated issues in the Philippines’ educational system—including the lack of support to teachers, malnutrition, widening gaps between public and private schools, and challenges in the distance learning setup. Additionally, education is given less priority in the budget than other government programs, such as public sector works.⁷⁷ 	Negative	CNN Philippines (July 2021), citing a statement from the Vice President
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Schools globally were closed for an average of 79 teaching days, but the Philippines (along with other countries) closed schools for more than a year, forcing students to enroll in online modalities. This may lead to consequences associated to school closures such as learning loss, mental distress, missed vaccinations, and heightened risk of drop out, child labor, and child marriage.⁷⁸ 	Negative	UNICEF (August 2021)

Human Rights

G-Watch reviewed assessments from the Foundation for Media Alternatives, *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Freedom House, and reports from *Time* and Human Rights Watch to determine the Philippines’ observation of human rights amid COVID-19.

Main observations	Assessment	Source Publication
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> While lockdowns have prevented hospitals from being overwhelmed, “they also constitute what the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights Michelle Bachelet described as a ‘highly militarized response’ to the pandemic,” one that has seen 120,000 people arrested at the outset for violating curfew.^{79,80} 	Negative	<i>Time</i> (March 2020)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Government response to COVID employs the “same heavy-handed security approach that was used in the campaign against illegal drugs and counter-insurgency imperatives.” It is also characterized by “threats of martial law,” use of force in enforcing quarantine 	Negative	UN Human Rights Office (June 2020)

⁷⁷ CNN Philippines Staff (2021), “Robredo says gov’t must declare ‘crisis’ in education,” *CNN Philippines*, July 11, 2021, at <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2021/7/11/Robredo-says-gov-t-must-declare--crisis--in-education--.html>

⁷⁸ UNICEF Philippines (2021), Filipino children continue missing education opportunities in another year of school closure,” *UNICEF*, August 25, 2021, at <https://www.unicef.org/philippines/press-releases/filipino-children-continue-missing-education-opportunities-another-year-school>

⁷⁹ UN News (2020), “‘Toxic lockdown culture’ of repressive coronavirus measures hits most vulnerable,” *United Nations*, April 27, 2020, at <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1062632>

⁸⁰ See, A. (2021), “Rodrigo Duterte Is Using One of the World’s Longest COVID-19 Lockdowns to Strengthen His Grip on the Philippines,” *Time*, March 15, 2021, at <https://time.com/5945616/covid-philippines-pandemic-lockdown/>

regulations, and stifling dissent. ⁸¹		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The government is using “drug war” tactics to fight COVID-19. One of these tactics included the scrapped proposal to conduct house-to-house searches for potentially infected people to transfer them to isolation facilities—which only heightened the country’s militarized response to the pandemic, where the President has assigned former military officials to deal with COVID-19.⁸² 	Negative	Human Rights Watch (June 2020)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> While the government deployed measures to address the impact of the coronavirus to public health, it is the visible presence of police and military on the streets enforcing the lockdown which evinced a “militarization” of the government’s response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This “hamletting” was even made ominous by the President’s threats (i.e., “shoot them dead” or placing the country under a martial-law-like lockdown). The focus on punitively enforcing the lockdown has not produced commendable public health outcomes.⁸³ Complaints of illegal arrests and arbitrary detention in relation to quarantine regulations were also lodged to the Commission on Human Rights. The right to peaceful assembly is also threatened as the Department of Justice prohibits rallies or any form of mass protest due to movement restrictions.⁸⁴ 	Negative	The International Association of Constitutional Law (June 2020)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There has been an increase in digital surveillance in the guise of measures to protect public health. This includes obtaining access to mobile phone location data and other pieces of personal data, and social media monitoring by police to capture quarantine violators.⁸⁵ Threats to freedom of expression and of the press took the form of criminalizing “false information” under 	Negative	Foundation for Media Alternatives (2020)

⁸¹ United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (2020), *Situation of human rights in the Philippines*, A/HRC/44/22, Forty-fourth session of the Human Rights Council (15 June – 3 July 2020), at <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/PH/Philippines-HRC44-AEV.pdf>

⁸² Robertson, P. (2020), “Philippines Uses ‘Drug War’ Tactics to Fight Covid-19,” *Human Rights Watch*, July 15, 2020, at <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/07/15/philippines-uses-drug-war-tactics-fight-covid-19>

⁸³ Yusingco, M. & Pizarro, A. (2020), “The Militarized Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Philippines: An Escalating Threat to Human Rights,” *IACL-IADC Blog*, June 18, 2020, at <https://blog-iacl-aidc.org/2020-posts/2020/6/18/the-militarized-response-to-the-covid-19-pandemic-in-the-philippines-an-escalating-threat-to-human-rights>

⁸⁴ Yusingco, M. & Pizarro, A. (2020), “The Militarized Response to the COVID-19 Pandemic in the Philippines: An Escalating Threat to Human Rights,” *IACL-IADC Blog*, June 18, 2020, at <https://blog-iacl-aidc.org/2020-posts/2020/6/18/the-militarized-response-to-the-covid-19-pandemic-in-the-philippines-an-escalating-threat-to-human-rights>

⁸⁵ Foundation for Media Alternatives (2020), “State of the Digital Nation: The Digital Rights Report 2020,” *Foundation for Media Alternatives*, March 31, 2020, at <https://fma.ph/2021/03/31/state-of-the-digital-nation-the-digital-rights-report-2020/>

<p>Bayanihan 1 and arrests based on “inciting to sedition” for social media posts critical of the government’s quarantine regulations and relief efforts. Media giant ABS-CBN was forced to shut down during the pandemic, after drawing the ire of the President for its critical reporting and refusal to air some advertisements.⁸⁶</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Adding to the chilling environment for human rights and press freedom is the passage of the Anti-Terrorism Act, which “demonstrates the clear intention of this administration to build a massive surveillance state that has little to no regard for people’s civil liberties.”⁸⁷ 		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The militarized Philippine response to the pandemic is no accident, but is a “reflection of President Rodrigo Duterte’s populist brand of leadership,” wherein the virus is a “sinister menace” embodied by the undisciplined (or <i>pasaway</i>), who resembles the drug addict in the context of the administration’s “war on drugs.”⁸⁸ • The notion that Filipinos are “pasaway” is baseless and shows how government has disproportionately focused on enforcement and discipline consistent with its view of the pandemic response as a “war against COVID-19.”⁸⁹ 	Negative	<i>Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs</i> (March 2021)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over a year into the pandemic, the Philippine government’s continued failure to ensure an adequate response is a serious human rights issue. The government’s pandemic response agencies have been widely criticized for being led by military officials rather than public health experts. Groups calling for increased government support and better pandemic response have also been red-tagged by the government. Individuals and groups that set-up community pantries in their neighborhood have also been accused by police and government officials of links to ‘communist’ groups.⁹⁰ 	Negative	Amnesty International (April 2021)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In 2020, the Philippines’ drug war continued, wherein 	Negative	Freedom House

⁸⁶ Foundation for Media Alternatives (2020), “State of the Digital Nation: The Digital Rights Report 2020,” *Foundation for Media Alternatives*, March 31, 2020, at <https://fma.ph/2021/03/31/state-of-the-digital-nation-the-digital-rights-report-2020/>

⁸⁷ Foundation for Media Alternatives (2020), “State of the Digital Nation: The Digital Rights Report 2020,” *Foundation for Media Alternatives*, March 31, 2020, at <https://fma.ph/2021/03/31/state-of-the-digital-nation-the-digital-rights-report-2020/>

⁸⁸ Hapal, K. (2021), “The Philippines’ COVID-19 Response: Securitising the Pandemic and Disciplining the Pasaway,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 40, Issue 2, 2021, March 18, 2021, at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1868103421994261>

⁸⁹ Hapal, K. (2021), “The Philippines’ COVID-19 Response: Securitising the Pandemic and Disciplining the Pasaway,” *Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*, Vol. 40, Issue 2, 2021, March 18, 2021, at <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/1868103421994261>

⁹⁰ Amnesty International (2021), “Philippines: Country faces health and human rights crisis one year into the COVID-19 pandemic,” *Amnesty International*, April 26, 2021, at <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2021/04/philippines-faces-health-human-rights-crisis-covid/>

<p>killings increased by 50 percent during the initial months of the lockdown. An emergency law that contained public health measures but expanded presidential powers led to abusive law enforcement actions and free speech restrictions. Also, during the pandemic, an Anti-Terrorism Act took effect, and the press was again the subject of repressive state actions, i.e., the closure of the largest media network and the conviction of a journalist with cyberlibel.⁹¹</p>		(2021)
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Analysis, Conclusions and Recommendations

G-Watch reviewed a total of 49 independent assessments on the government’s COVID-19 response. These were assessments covering healthcare and public health response, social welfare and protection, economy, education and human rights.

Nine (9) of these assessments were published by local media; seven (7) published by international media; 13 published by think tanks and academic institutions; and 20 published by international and local NGOs. G-Watch has written assessments on health, social assistance and vaccination, producing four reports/ assessments.

The NGOs and civil society think tanks that published assessments are national organizations, some with links to social movements or mass-based organizations. While some assessments were published and authored by the NGOs and civil society think tanks as an organization, many were authored by individual members of the organizations, whose views may not necessarily reflect the view of the organization.⁹² G-Watch assessments have incorporated monitoring findings from its network of ‘accountability frontliners’ (see <https://www.g-watch.org/resources/vertical-integration-research/reversing-accountability-learning-accountability-frontliners>).

Most assessments were based on the documents, reports, and data produced and shared by the government, while some generated their own through actual field observation, news monitoring, expert interviews, and surveys.⁹³

Out of the 49 independent assessments reviewed, majority indicated the Duterte government’s COVID-19 response as failing. While some assessments have mixed ratings and neutral conclusions, there are almost no positive assessments, except one positive to neutral on the Philippines’ transparency measures for emergency fiscal policy packages.

⁹¹ Freedom House (2021), “Freedom in the World 2021: Philippines,” *Freedom House*, at <https://freedomhouse.org/country/philippines/freedom-world/2021>

⁹² See footnote 16.

⁹³ See footnote 16.

There are notable consistencies among the assessments above of the Philippines' response to the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as points of divergence. Overall, however, assessments on the Philippines' COVID-19 performance across the sectors included in this report are negative, or critical of government response—with many assessments providing a set of recommendations for improvement.

1. **On the Philippines' overall public health response**, the Philippines poor performance is stressed among assessments published by G-Watch, The Lowy Institute, IBON Foundation, ADR Stratbase Institute, *Nikkei Asia*, and Bloomberg, as well as reports from Rappler, the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, CNN Philippines, *BusinessWorld*, *The Lancet* and the *South China Morning Post*. Cross-cutting issues include the inefficiency, delay, and lack of coordination in government response.

In particular, assessments explicitly state issues with the Philippines' public health system, describing it as “fragmented” and with “major inadequacies” (*The Lancet*, ADR Stratbase Institute), even before the pandemic. The public health system continues to deteriorate and fails to adequately respond to the pandemic, despite the significant contribution of ‘sin taxes’ in the health budget (G-Watch). Government response has been tagged as “inefficient” or “could have been more inefficient” (*The Lancet*, *South China Morning Post*), with one assessment calling it “the weakest in Southeast Asia” (IBON Foundation). A global ranking, while not explicitly describing how the Philippines managed the pandemic, nonetheless ranked it 81st out of 102 countries (with a score of 32 over 100). The Philippines also placed last in the September 2021 Nikkei Recovery Index as well as the Bloomberg COVID Resilience Ranking, even though its ranking has slightly moved up (three places) as of February 2022. Other specific reports fleshed out major aspects of the “inefficiency” of government response and the “fragmented” nature of the public health system, by highlighting data discrepancies on available facilities, and the lack of an effective referral network to address surges in cases (Rappler, citing the Health Professionals Alliance Against COVID-19).



Assessments also highlighted that while measures existed to address COVID-19, they are “late and in slow motion” (*South China Morning Post*) and may not always be “rational or calibrated”—leading to missed opportunities (IBON Foundation) at the outset of the pandemic.

Meanwhile, assessments on **healthcare workers' welfare** during the pandemic are likewise negative, and focused on the inadequacy of personnel and government support for health workers, including those in the private sector. An assessment stated that a healthcare workforce is a “prerequisite of an

Health workers from the National Center for Mental Health. (Text and photo source: <https://www.bulatlat.com/2021/03/19/public-health-care-gets-pittance-from-huge-covid-19-loans/>)

effective government response,” but was insufficient even before the pandemic—thus curtailing the public health system (*The Lancet*). Another assessment described factors that worsen the shortage of healthcare personnel: longer shifts, opportunities abroad, and low salaries especially for the private sector (Al Jazeera). This is echoed by a report that states how private hospitals “receive practically no support from government” even as they wait for delayed reimbursements from PhilHealth (CNN Philippines). Compounding the issues of longer shifts, shortage, and lack of government support, healthcare workers also suffer from low wages, withheld benefits, and threats to their safety and protection when they air out concerns (Alliance of Health Workers).

Assessments on the **vaccination, testing, and contact tracing** efforts in the country all noted that the government repeatedly fails to reach its targets. For example, daily testing targets (i.e., 30,000 by May 2020 or 50,000 in March 2021) set by the administration were not consistently achieved (G-Watch; Bulatlat, citing the Coalition of People’s Right to Health).

Two years into the pandemic, the contact tracing ratio is still between 1:4 to 1:5, very far from the ideal 1:37, or even the government target of 1:15 (*Philippine Daily Inquirer*, citing contact tracing chief Benjamin Magalong).

In terms of vaccination, the government was also “slow in attending to prerequisites” for the procurement of vaccines (IBON Foundation, published in Bulatlat). While vaccination progressed, it was “at an uneven and slow pace” and faced issues such as the inability of citizens to choose the brand of their vaccines, gaps in available vaccine information, expiring vaccines, and low vaccine confidence (G-Watch). As of August 2021, the Philippines trailed behind its neighbors, ranking 11th out of 18 East and Southeast Asian countries in vaccination (*BusinessWorld*).

2. As to the Philippines’ performance in **social welfare protection**, assessments reviewed by G-Watch were mainly critical of the implementation of the emergency subsidy (or the so-called SAP). An independent study by G-Watch early on pinpointed infirmities in its implementation—including non-receipt of aid for those entitled to it, receipt of improper amounts, delay in receipt of aid, and inclusion and exclusion errors in the selection of aid beneficiaries. Broadly, another assessment stated that the manual distribution of the aid was “inefficient” and “prone to corruption”



Filipinos queue for cash subsidy from the government amid the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak, in Batasan Hills, Quezon City. REUTERS/Eloisa Lopez

(ADR Stratbase Institute). On the other hand, one assessment, while stating that the targets and implementation guidelines of the SAP were “well detailed,” enumerated similar issues in its implementation (Philippine Institute of Development Studies).

Another data-based assessment illustrated the general non-existence or insufficiency of income support and debt relief mechanisms even amid strict lockdowns in the Philippines (Our World in Data). To clarify, income support is distinct from emergency aid, as the former contemplates aid in the form of regular salary/wage subsidies in the suspension of work opportunities in the pandemic. But even this emergency aid in the Philippines has dwindled to almost “nothing,” with support to small enterprises described as “very sparing” (IBON Foundation).

- 3. Economic response** assessments reviewed by G-Watch were mostly critical, but with one neutral to positive assessment on the Philippines’ transparency measures for emergency fiscal policy packages.

An early assessment stated that the Philippines has “one of the weakest economic stimuli in the world,” with COVID-19 “reducing the multiplier effects of infrastructure investments,” and emphasized that infrastructure investments are needed, instead, in agri-rural activities, clean energy, land and water transportation, and economic activities in poor provinces (Ateneo de Manila University / Ateneo Center for Economic Research and Development). In connection, another assessment stated that the “lack of real fiscal stimulus” worsened the economic situation of the Philippines—and that the “Build Build Build” program is not the answer, as the cause of economic suffering is dwindling incomes due to unemployment (IBON Foundation).

The assessment published by Ateneo found “necessary” the government’s “lax” monetary policy to help troubled firms with debts. While also lauding portions of a stimulus bill that provided for tax cuts on corporate income, it stated however that “it is more reasonable to stimulate the economy by fiscal spending and employment of the unemployed,” among others. In relation to this, IBON pointed out that government spending was “unexceptional” just as the Philippines experienced its worst economic collapse. An assessment published by East Asia Forum, commenting on the plan to reduce corporate taxes and rationalize incentives, said it is “poorly timed” and questions the government’s capacity to implement such reform.

The Ateneo-published assessment also criticized analyses that a strong peso around March to August 2020 meant confidence in the economy—on the contrary, this means a “collapsing economy” due to the trade surplus and inflow of foreign debt money. IBON in turn, repeatedly referred to an “economic collapse” in its political and economic assessment of government response to the pandemic.

Assessments centered on **emergency procurement process** were likewise negative, but in varying degrees. In light of ongoing investigations on the government's purchase of overpriced healthcare equipment, one assessment already previously pointed out that some items "warranted a second look" for being procured at higher prices, among others (Citizen Budget Tracker's Procurement Research Team and WeSolve Data Empowerment Program). Another stated that the Philippines recorded "missteps" in its vaccine procurement on account of delays in indemnification agreements (ADR Stratbase Institute). Another report extended its assessment to state that "the Philippines is one of the countries where malpractice and lack of transparency" in the procurement of vaccine and protective equipment has been recorded (SciDev.Net). Citing the same delays in vaccine procurement cited in previous assessments, another report stated that "the Philippines handled vaccine procurement 'shambolically'" (*The Economist*).

On **loan allocation and accountability**, both an assessment by G-Watch and a Bulatlat report (citing IBON Foundation) found that majority of the loans contracted by government were not allocated for COVID-19 response efforts, even as all of them were tagged as "COVID-19 financing" by government. Both assessments likewise tagged the lack of transparency mechanisms for enabling citizens to monitor loan spending and their purpose, among others.

Assessments that focused on **budget and spending** pointed out how laws "slashed critical sector funding addressing social determinants of health" (Citizens' Budget Tracker) and how it gave "lower spending priority to health and social welfare over national defense and maintenance of peace and order" (East Asia Forum). Lower health budget "will keep health care inaccessible and expensive for too many Filipinos (IBON Foundation). Based on the Executive branch's 5th Bayanihan report, the Department of Health was only allotted less than one percent (1%) of the Php245 billion budget under Bayanihan 1 (G-Watch). One assessment also particularly identified a "valley of spending" between Bayanihan 1 and Bayanihan 2 that should not have been in the COVID-19 budget, and described Bayanihan 2 as a "missed opportunity" for decisive countercyclical fiscal policy (Citizen Budget Tracker). Notably, another assessment recommended, in the context of the size and nature of the fiscal stimulus, that "economic managers rethink their overly conservative positions, allow more fiscal deficits and monetization of the fiscal deficit" (Ateneo de Manila University / Ateneo Center for Economic Research and Development).

Among a group of assessments highly critical of the Philippines' economic response, an assessment by the International Budget Partnership, however, positively ranked the Philippines as one of four countries assessed to have "an "adequate" level of accountability in early COVID-19 fiscal responses, and lauded the weekly report on COVID response actions on the Bayanihan 1 Act and the CPBRD's assessments of the Act.

It did, however, flag “limited” participation by citizens in emergency fiscal policy packages.

4. Assessments reviewed by G-Watch on the **education sector** all enumerated the long list of challenges associated with online/blended learning. An assessment mentioned gaps such as the digital divide, inequalities, challenges in teaching in online platforms, mental health issues, as well as financial and logistical barriers for teaching online (Asia Society). Another criticized the online/blended learning approach as “unsafe, unaffordable,” one that disregards the “digital divide” and the heavy burden on parents and teachers (Rappler). Similarly, a report stressed the pandemic merely exacerbated long-standing issues in the educational system, such as lack of support to teachers, malnutrition, widening gaps between public and private schools, and challenges with distance learning (CNN Philippines). The same report quoted the vice president who stated that the country must declare a “crisis in education.”



Meanwhile, one report wholly focused on the plight of teachers, and conducted a survey which found that teachers are “overworked, undersupported, and burned out” (Alliance of Concerned Teachers – Philippines). Participants of one survey report (Movement for Safe, Equitable, Quality, and Relevant Education) noted that the DepEd failed to adequately provide for the needs of students and teachers in distance learning (i.e., inadequate training, safety and health protection, ineffective modules, burdensome costs of learning, etc.). Another report emphasized the

Philippines’ extended closure of schools, which “may lead to consequences associated to school closures such as learning loss, mental distress, missed vaccinations, and heightened risk of drop out, child labor, and child marriage” (UNICEF).

While enumerating gaps in online learning, one report (from Asia Society) nevertheless identified the DepEd Commons platform, an online resource, as a positive aspect of the program. It also mentioned efforts by DepEd to broadcast educational materials via other platforms, and recommended private sector and civil society fill in gaps in subsidizing data charges and expenses for gadgets.

5. Assessments on the **human rights situation** all center on criticism on the Philippines’ “highly militarized” response to the pandemic, as described by the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (*Time*). Two reports stated that the government uses

“drug war tactics,” “counter-insurgency tactics,” and “threats of martial law” to fight COVID-19, which only heightens this militarized response (Human Rights Watch, UN Human Rights Office). This is no accident, according to another assessment, which stated that the militarized response is but a reflection of the president’s “populistic brand of leadership, wherein the virus is a ‘sinister menace’ embodied by the undisciplined (or *pasaway*), who resembles the drug addict” in the administration’s war on drugs (*Journal of Current Southeast Asian Affairs*).

Three reports similarly report repressive undercurrents of the highly militarized response, via threats to freedom of expression (Freedom House, Foundation for Media Alternatives, and The International Association of Constitutional Law), such as hastily criminalizing ‘false information,’ abusive law enforcement and arrests based on critical social media posts, the shutdown of a major network, the conviction of a reporter for cyberlibel, and the passage of the Anti-Terrorism Law. One report highlighted that killings even increased by 50 percent during the lockdown (Freedom House), while another also cautioned against increased surveillance during the pandemic (Foundation for Media Alternatives). One analysis also mentioned that the constitutional right of the citizens to conduct peaceful assembly is threatened as the government prohibits rallies or any other form of mass protest due to quarantine restrictions (The International Association of Constitutional Law). Red-tagging also continues amid the pandemic (Amnesty International).

Moving forward, the critical nature of the assessments made so far urgently signals government and policymakers to consider evidence-based recommendations put forward by civil society in improving COVID-19 response plans. While the overall tone of the assessments made were negative, there are clear points for improvement which—to say the least—have already been made at the outset of the pandemic.

First is the urgent and stark need to prioritize evidence-based healthcare interventions instead of military interventions, which will achieve a multi-pronged goal that will cascade to all other sectors, such as education, social welfare, the economy, and human rights. *Second* is the need to provide for a larger fiscal stimulus focusing on underprivileged and vulnerable sectors of society, which will aid not only in augmenting incomes and unemployment but will increase social protection during the pandemic. *Third*, the assessments above have placed due emphasis to prioritizing people over infrastructure, evident in how healthcare personnel, teachers, parents, families, and individuals have taken on much of the burden of managing the pandemic. The clear message to government is to urgently focus on people and their welfare.

The pandemic is a public health problem, as stated by the assessments reviewed by G-Watch. A public health problem merits a public health solution. Evidently, the government’s failure to fix gaps in its healthcare system and lack of full implementation of measures that prioritize the health of its people, jeopardizes not only health, but also the economy, education, social welfare, and human rights situation of the Philippines.

Even as the ‘end of the pandemic’ seems to be near, the continued delay and inefficiency in providing the appropriate public health response, despite numerous and oft-repeated calls and recommendations for improvement by civil society and the people, may constitute a betrayal of public trust—with each illness and death from COVID-19 constituting a preventable tragedy for which the government must be made answerable.

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