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The Impact of COVID-19 on Peace and Stability in Mindanao: Nested Protection and Downside Risks

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The Impact of COVID-19 on Peace and Stability in Mindanao:

Nested Protection and Downside Risks

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Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a paradigm shift for the Mindanao peace process between the Philippine national government and the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM). To combat COVID-19 as a common threat, the working relationship between the Duterte Administration and the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) was much smoother and more collaborative than expected. The BTA and local government units (LGUs) also reached out to each other in response to the pandemic. This was the bright side of the transitional period for the BARMM. However, the livelihood of the BARMM as the poorest region in the Philippines has been aggravated not so much by the pandemic itself compared to other parts of the country but by the government's containment measures such as the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) and other methods of community quarantine. Among the vulnerable communities in the BARMM, Marawi City was outstanding as a result of the siege it endured in 2017, which battle forced more than 20,000 people to flee from their homes. Delayed rehabilitation of the city on top of the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the situation of insecurity for internally displaced persons in Marawi City and neighboring areas. While top-down protection prevailed during the initial period of the pandemic, the Bangsamoro community started helping themselves at the local level by producing their own food and by disseminating health protection knowledge among people in their community. The top-down protection together with some regionally customized measures could be the key to increasing the credibility of the BTA for the forthcoming parliamentary election, although potential threats to the consolidation of

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peace should always be identified and taken care of in the BARMM.

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1. The COVID-19 Pandemic as an Additional Challenge for BARMM

The COVID-19 pandemic has become an immense threat to the world since early 2020. No country or region has escaped this invisible danger. The Philippines including the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region for Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), the newly established autonomous region in Mindanao, is no exception. As of 27 February 2021, 574,247 persons had reportedly been infected, with a death toll of 12,289 in the country (WHO 2021). On the same day 4,089 residents of the BARMM were counted as infected and the death toll reached 155 (Bangsamoro IATF 2021a). The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted not only in a health and life crisis, but also a deep economic recession. The GDP of the Philippines declined 9.5 percent in 2020 (Nikkei Asia 2021), which hit vulnerable population sectors harder and was anticipated to raise the poverty rate in the country.

The peace process between the Philippine government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) had shifted to a new stage in early 2019 before the pandemic struck when the MILF-led interim government, the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) was established by approving the Bangsamoro Organic Law through a two-part plebiscite. This marked the transfer of administrative power from the national government to the BARMM. As a result of the pandemic the BTA had to forgo some public services that were deemed non-urgent while it employed a whole-of-government approach to tackle COVID-19 (Baraguir 2020). While the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ),² equivalent to a “total lockdown” (Bajo 2020), was imposed by the national government on the BARMM during the initial stage of the pandemic, the Bangsamoro Inter-Agency Task Force (BIATF) released 1.9 billion pesos worth of funds for responses to the pandemic (Baraguir 2020). Like any other government, the BTA struggled to balance the two

² ECQ is the strictest measure of community quarantine and includes the following measures: 1) strict home quarantine; 2) limitation of movement in accessing basic necessities; 3) regulation of provision for food and essential health services; 4) prohibition of mass gathering; and 5) suspension of public transport.

values of life and livelihood in the middle of the pandemic.

The result of JICA's early assessment on the impact of COVID-19 in the BARMM concluded that all the residents in this region have been affected by the pandemic, regardless of occupation, due to the strict home quarantine (JICA and Ministry of the Interior and Local Government of BARMM 2020). Among the already vulnerable populations in the BARMM, people in Marawi City in Lanao del Sur are highlighted due to their conflict-affected and displaced positions. In March 2020, Marawi City, together with other parts of Lanao del Sur were placed under the ECQ, which was the first ECQ measure imposed inside the BARMM (Jesuit Refugee Service Philippines 2021). After a ten-month-long lockdown, Lanao del Sur and its component city, Marawi remained under the Modified Enhanced Community Quarantine (MECQ)³ in the month of October 2020, while other areas of the Philippines were under the General Community Quarantine (GCQ)⁴ or other more moderate measures (Arguillas 2020). The more severe quarantine measures imposed by the national IATF aggravated the living conditions of internally displaced persons (IDPs) on top of the destructive result of the Marawi siege in 2017.

The BARMM has also been under the pressure of the risk of the resurgence of the conflict. In general, the risk of conflict resurgence caused by COVID-19 in post-conflict and fragile areas had been forewarned by such complex elements as: 1) elevated anxiety over health and economy (Mustasilta 2020); 2) strengthened system of national surveillance (Youngs and Panchulidze 2020); 3) resurgence of terrorist activities (TRT World 2000); and 4) slowdown or even retrogression of the process of reconciliation (IDEA 2020). Some staff members of the LGUs

³ MECQ is characterized as: 1) strict home quarantine; 2) mass gathering not more than 5 people; 3) suspension of public transport; 4) biking and non-motorized transport encouraged; and 5) work from home except for skeleton workforce.

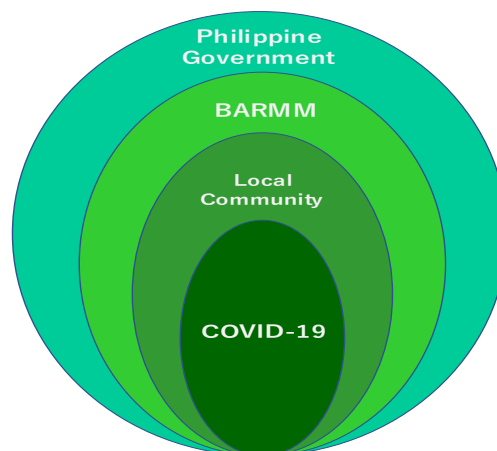
⁴ GCQ is understood as: 1) stay at home by elderly and youth; 2) mass gathering not more than 10 people; 3) public transport allowed with strict social distancing; and 4) alternative work arrangements.

have, in fact, expressed their concerns over the issues of peace and order due to the insufficient service of the BTA and LGUs (JICA and Ministry of the Interior and Local Government of BARMM 2020).

This paper illustrates the impact of COVID-19 on people in the BARMM under the special period of power transition. As indicated in Figure 1, a nested paradigm of response foci (Dugan 1996) helps understand the top-down structure when facing such an issue (COVID-19), relationships (COVID-19 and local community), subsystems (BARMM) and the system (Philippine Government) for COVID-19 responses. The paper examines, in accordance with the nested structure, the following three questions to articulate the impact of COVID-19 on the BARMM:

- (1) What are the policies of the Duterte Administration vis-à-vis COVID-19 and how has the Administration dealt with the BARMM under the current power transition?
- (2) How has the BTA attempted to protect the local community inside the BARMM and what are the impacts of COVID-19 on the BTA in terms of the consolidation of peace and stability?
- (3) What are the downside risks to the local community in BARMM, and who are left behind and in what contexts?

Figure 1. Nested paradigm of COVID-19 response foci



Source: Dugan, 1966, modified by the Author.

The methodology for this research is a literature review, data analysis and an online survey because of the current travel restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The target groups for survey are the leaders of civil society, NGOs, and officials of the BTA. **Section 1** provides an introduction that illustrates the general impact of COVID-19 on the Philippines including the BARMM. This is followed by a discussion of the objectives and methodologies for this paper. Since top-down measures have been dominant in the initial stage of the pandemic, the paper will start with discussing the policies and implementation measures of the Philippine government as well as those of the BTA in **Section 2**. The working relationship between the Duterte Administration and the BTA will also be examined. **Section 3** focuses on the downside risks to the local community in BARMM and who are left behind and in what context. Special attention is paid to Marawi City, which can be classified as one of the most vulnerable groups vis-à-vis the COVID-19 pandemic. **Section 4** provides some conclusions and discusses the limitations of this research.

2. Top-down Protection for Combatting the COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic as a common enemy has made the national government and the BTA work closely in line with the policies and guidelines of the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Disease (IATF-MEID). The working relationship between the BTA and LGUs is also collaborative in the face of the pandemic. Philippine laws have granted President Duterte wide authority to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. The Duterte Administration securitized the pandemic on 8 March 2020 by declaring a national public health emergency. This was followed by the *Bayanihan (communal work) to Heal as One Act*⁵ known as the Bayanihan Act on 25 March, granting President Duterte additional authority to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. The *Bayanihan to Recover as One Act*⁶ known as Bayanihan 2 was set

⁵ *Bayanihan to Heal as One Act* is officially designated the Republic Act No.11469.

⁶ *Bayanihan to Recover as One Act* is officially designated Republic Act No. 11494.

in place on 15 September 2020 which gave the President the ultimate authority to continue combatting the pandemic. Aside from the two versions of the Bayanihan Act, the Duterte Administration cited Republic Act 10212 known as the *Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act* of 2010 as the basis of the country's measures to deal with the pandemic. There are three significant points in Duterte's top-down operation vis-à-vis the pandemic.

Firstly, the deployment of the military was justified under the securitized circumstances. Duterte initially placed more importance on containment measures such as ECQ and deployed the military as well as the police to monitor the implementation of community quarantine. By prioritizing quarantine measures the Administration was criticized as less competent with testing, contact-tracing, or a strategy to balance between health risks and reopening the economy (Pesek 2020). Secondly, a whole-of-government approach was applied and cross-departmental management was organized (IATF-MEID 2020). There are three tiers of task forces in the government. At the policy-making level IATF-MEID, which consists of executive departments, was tasked to orchestrate government responses. The overall chairperson is President Duterte while the actual chairman is the Secretary of the Department of Health. Under the IATF-MEID there is a National Task Force led by the Secretary of Defense at the operational level. At the bottom of this mechanism at the technical level, there are Regional Disaster Risk Reduction Management Committees (RDRRMC) together with Regional Task Forces. This mechanism endorsed and supported Duterte's idea on robust social control by including the security cluster in the task forces. The whole-of-government approach also indicated that some of the government services would be forgone while measures tackling the pandemic became the priority. Thirdly, the President under the Bayanihan Act has power to create a social amelioration program (SAP) to mitigate the adverse economic impact by providing emergency assistance to the poor segment of the population (Philippine Government 2020). For example, 18 million low-income households receive an emergency monthly subsidy (5,000-8,000 pesos) depending on regional minimum

wage rates (Tingo 2020).

Under such nation-wide arrangements to tackle the pandemic, the working relationship between the Duterte Administration and the BTA is an indicator of the degree of autonomy of the BARMM and is also a key factor for satisfactory protection given to the local community in the autonomous region. The BTA has faced a huge challenge in how to respond to the pandemic under the transition to a parliamentary government system, which is still reliant on the national government (Mallari et al. 2020). In fact, the working relationship between the national government and the BTA is deemed to be fine in the context of combatting COVID-19. Although the working arrangements of the BARMM and the national government are defined by the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), the Duterte Administration has organized a special arrangement for the BTA to easily access the national government's support.⁷ For example, President Duterte allowed the representative of BIATF to participate in the national IATF-MEID meetings and issued a "marching order" to all relevant national government agencies to assist the BARMM as the region facing many daunting challenges aggravated by the pandemic.⁸ As mentioned earlier, the BIATF could allocate 1.9 billion pesos to LGUs and referral hospitals for COVID-19 responses during the early stage of the pandemic (Baraguir 2020). The funds came from the annual block grant given by the national government as part of the BARMM's Quick Response Fund⁹. While the Chief Minister of BARMM is directly under the supervision of the president in accordance with the BOL, the BIATF operation for COVID-19 has semi-independent policies and protocols without violating the national IATF policies¹⁰ due to the uniqueness of the culture and traditions of the Bangsamoro people.¹¹ These can be observed particularly in terms of religion related issues,

⁷ Author obtained written statements from Dr. Mohammad S. Yacob, Minister of Agriculture, BTA on 19 February 2021.

⁸ Author obtained written statements from Dr. Mohammad S. Yacob, 19 February 2021.

⁹ Author obtained written statements from Dr. Mohammad S. Yacob, 19 February 2021.

¹⁰ Author obtained written statements from Mr. Guiamel Alim, Chairman of CBCS on 21 February 2021.

¹¹ Author obtained written statements from Dr. Mohammad S. Yacob, 19 February 2021.

such as suspension of Friday prayers and prohibition of mass gathering during the holy month of Ramadan (Baraguir 2020).

The working relationship between the BTA and LGUs is another level of protection that matters. It was observed that LGUs abided by the policies and guidelines provided by the BTA and the BTA and LGUs closely worked together to mitigate daunting situations and to assist communities despite the uncertainty of the supervisory or oversight functions of the BTA over the LGUs in its territory.¹² During the early stage of the pandemic, the BTA issued guidelines to the LGUs on how to respond to COVID-19 including LGU adaptation of the policies during the ECQ (JICA and Ministry of the Interior and Local Government of BARMM 2020). Food packages were provided to all BARMM LGUs and even to those outside the autonomous region by the BTA.¹³ The BTA also diligently facilitated the Returning Overseas Filipinos (ROFs) and Locally Stranded Individuals (LSIs) who were returning to the region and mandated all provincial governments to establish isolation areas including their component cities and municipalities (JICA and Ministry of the Interior and Local Government of BARMM 2020).

The nested structure of the Philippine administration including the BTA and LGUs seems to have functioned reasonably in combatting the COVID-19 pandemic. The securitized responses to the deadly virus with the strict policies and guidelines of the national IATF were vertically conveyed to the BTA or BIATF and then to LGUs in the BARMM. While national policies and guidelines were well abided by, the BTA and LGUs took additional customized measures without violating the national policies. These customized measures are deemed to be the method of empowerment of the BTA vis-à-vis the national government and those of LGUs vis-à-vis the BTA.

¹² Author obtained written statements from Mr. Guiamel Alim, 21 February 2021.

¹³ On 8 February 2021 the author obtained written statements from Ms. Samrah Karon, a former staff member of JICA Cotabato Project Office and currently a consultant to the BTA.

Effectiveness of these protection measures is another issue. In the following section, the paper illustrates how local communities are vulnerable to the pandemic and to the strict protection measures imposed on them.

3. Handing Vulnerability between the Containment Measures and the People's Economic Welfare

One of the consolations under the pandemic is that the number of infected cases has rather been small in the Bangsamoro region compared to the rest of the country, partly because this geographical location is away from thickly populated cities. As of 3 March 2021, the total number of infected cases in the BARMM was 4,122 out of which 93 cases were counted as active, and 156 as deceased since the beginning of the pandemic (Bangsamoro IATF on COVID-19 2021b). Total cases occupy only 0.1 percent of the entire population of 4 million in the BARMM area (UNFPA Philippines 2019), while 0.5 percent of the entire population in the country has reportedly been infected. It seems, in general, that the socio-economic impact of the ECQ was felt to be a more serious concern by residents of the BARMM than the health threats caused by the virus. The JICA assessment articulated daunting daily life within the economic recession in the region due to severe measures such as ECQ imposed by the national IATF (JICA and Ministry of the Interior and Local Government of BARMM 2020). For example, 90 percent of interviewees claimed limited mobility due to the suspension of public transport, while 88 percent observed a surge in the price of basic needs due to the insufficient supply of goods. The suspension of public transport made it difficult for people to bring their goods and services to markets, which could aggravate the poverty ratio. Overall, 81 percent claimed that their household income was not sufficient to cover its needs, while the same claim was made by 51 percent of interviewees prior to the pandemic. The assessment concluded that the all the people in the BARMM regardless of their professions have been affected by the pandemic, and more precisely by the ECQ (JICA and

Ministry of the Interior and Local Government of BARMM 2020).

Among the provinces and municipalities in the BARMM, Marawi City in Lanao del Sur is remembered as an entity heavily bombed and destroyed during the, so called, Marawi siege in 2017. This five-month long armed conflict was carried out in the context of a war on terrorism from 23 May to 23 October 2017. At this time the Philippine government forces attempted to eradicate the Maute and Abu Sayyaf groups (MindaNation 2017). On 23 May 2017 President Duterte issued Proclamation 216 placing the whole of Mindanao under martial law, which only lapsed two and half years later (Tingo 2020). The long battle turned the city into ruins. It was reported that 95 percent of structures in the main battlefield were destroyed (Malicdem 2017). More than 200,000 residents of Marawi had to evacuate to neighboring cities and towns to avoid the hostilities (Mateo 2017). Although around 70 percent had returned home by May 2018 (Felongco 2018), the remaining population staying in tents were gradually moved to evacuation centers and temporary shelters by January 2020 (MSF 2020). Some 12,835 individuals, as of August 2020, were still displaced (UNHCR Philippines 2020).

The first COVID19 patient in the Philippines was reportedly a man in Lanao del Sur who came home from Metro Manila and died on 13 March (Butardo 2020). That was why Lanao del Sur including Marawi City was immediately placed under ECQ in March, the first ECQ in the territory of Bangsamoro to have this happen. Under such circumstances displacement brought by conflicts aggravated the pandemic concerns for residents (Baraguir 2020). First, on the medical side, lack of social distancing in evacuation centers increased the risk of contagion. In the middle of September 2020 suddenly the number of infected cases spiked up to 441 (Jennings 2020). Although there had been outbreaks of measles, dengue fever and polio in Marawi City since the end of the siege in October 2017, medical consultations at health facilities were suspended due to the ECQ (MSF 2020). It was also claimed to be a challenge to access clean water. Secondly, on

the livelihood side, IDPs residing in Marawi claimed, as people in other areas of the BARMM did, that there was a lack of basic items that they needed to survive the lockdown (Jesuit Refugee Service Philippines 2021).

There is a national government task force, Task Force Bangon Marawi (TFBM), to facilitate the rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts in Marawi. It also seeks to help IDPs to recover from the tragedy caused by the siege in 2017 (Kabagani 2020). The significant delay of rehabilitation programs under its jurisdiction has been criticized by local media (Cruz 2019; Vera 2020; Umel 2020). This was partly due to a slow process of budget approvals that resulted in returning some portions of the budget to the treasury, and partly due to the donation influx that could not be efficiently handled by the local authority (Cruz 2019). Many IDPs have expressed their anger at the irony that they can't receive assistance despite ample budget funds being available (Umel 2020). The 2020 budget for Marawi rehabilitation amounting to 3.56 billion pesos was allotted in May 2020. Out of nine planned projects within the annual budget at least four projects were directly related to basic human needs such as shelters and water supply (Kabagani 2020). Although the BTA is not a member of TFBM, it has created its own task force consisting of the parliament members for IDPs in Marawi to oversee the implementation programs and projects.¹⁴ The working arrangement between the BTA and the TFBM is complementary.¹⁵ The BTA has also created the *Sagip Kabuhayan Program* (Saving Livelihood Program) to provide socio-economic assistance to IDPs in Marawi.¹⁶

It has been observed that the containment measures such as ECQ and other levels of community quarantine affected people's livelihood in the region, especially those IDPs in Marawi with a

¹⁴ Author obtained written statements from Mr. Guiamel Alim, 21 February 2021.

¹⁵ Author obtained written statements from Dr. Mohammad S. Yacob, 19 February 2021.

¹⁶ Author obtained written statements from Dr. Mohammad S. Yacob, 19 February 2021.

conflict specific background. It is thus imperative for the BTA and LGUs to maintain a good working relationship and to carry out collaborative efforts help address the challenges of mitigating the negative outcomes from community quarantines (Baraguir 2020). This is also connected to the issue of consolidation of peace and stability in the region. Horizontal conflicts such as clan wars remain prevalent regardless of the COVID-19 pandemic (Baraguir 2020). Extremism is still a potential threat while the Ab Sayyaf group, Bangsamoro Islamic Freedom Fighters (BIFF) and IS related groups remain willing to attack communities and government troops¹⁷ if the assistance extended by the BTA and LGUs to support the livelihood and health of the people in the region fails. Delayed support could also affect those who have been waiting for long time for the normalization process, which could be another threat to the BARMM.

4. Conclusions

There are two major findings from this initial stage of the research on the topic. First, on the bright side, the COVID-19 pandemic as a common enemy has made the national government and the BTA work closely in line with the policies and guidelines of the IATF-MEID. The working relationship between the BTA and LGUs is also collaborative toward the pandemic. The top-down effect of the whole-of-government approach is observed in the BARMM. This top-down approach also leaves some room for the BTA and LGUs to take their own measures in specific local contexts. Second, the socio-economic impact of ECQ and other modes of community quarantine are classified as presenting greater downside risks than the pandemic in a medical sense. These risks adversely affect the level of livelihood of people in the BARMM. While the number of infected cases is rather small in the BARMM, community quarantine limits the movement of people and goods, which affects the daily life of people and economy in the region. Under such a helpless situation, the IDPs of Marawi City who fled from hostilities during 2017

¹⁷ Author obtained written statements from Ms. Samrah Karon, February 2021.

Marawi siege have been spotted in more vulnerable positions. Community quarantine hinders the rehabilitation projects and the difficult social distancing in temporary evacuation centers has increased the threat of contagion. Delayed service-delivery to people could be a potential threat to the consolidation of peace and stability in the region where a number of triggers for further conflict have already been recognized.

Lastly, some limitations of this research should be indicated. Due to the travel restrictions resulting from the pandemic, this paper was written mostly based on information available in papers, through online media reports, and by the author's own correspondence with local resource persons in the BARMM. The paper also concentrates on top-down protection by the national government, the BTA and the LGUs as well as the downside risks of local communities in the BARMM. Assistance from donors needs to be included in this network to illustrate a complete picture of combatting the pandemic in the BARMM in the next stage of research.

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