

Challenges and Lessons Learned in the Implementation of Government Policies during the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

Subnational governments, such as Local Government Units (LGUs), are currently faced with a health crisis that entails significant economic, social, and budgetary ramifications. In order to address the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Local Government Unit of Malita Davao Occidental has implemented various interventions through its Municipal Inter-Agency Task Force (MIATF) on Emerging Infectious Diseases. Results revealed emerging (8) themes as follows: limited access to healthcare services and medical providers; capacity and training needs; cultural and socio-economic gaps; poor communication and information dissemination; improve overall healthcare system; empower the Local Government Units; communication strategies; the holistic and sustainable development programs and needs. The purpose of this study was to identify the challenges and lessons learned of the MIATF in the implementation of government policies during the COVID-19 pandemic using qualitative method.

Keywords: Challenges, Lessons Learned, Local Government Unit, COVID-19

Introduction

The emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic was an extraordinary and unparalleled occurrence, prompting governments worldwide to swiftly implement emergency measures such as social distancing protocols, public education initiatives, testing and isolation strategies, and economic assistance programs (Ashraf, 2020). According to Wang's (2021) findings, the implementation of government measures such as the closure of workspaces, public transit, and domestic travel limitations has been shown to have a substantial impact on promoting social distancing.

The effective control and management of infections in both workplace and domestic settings are contingent upon the implementation of comprehensive measures for pandemic preparedness (Hale *et al.*, 2021). Vietnam serves as an illustrative case of a favorable response within low- and middle-income countries (LMICs). Notably, Vietnam has implemented a range of measures, such as widespread testing, contact tracing, and adherence to social distancing guidelines, all under the government's rallying cry of "Fighting the epidemic is like fighting against the enemy." These efforts have proven effective in curtailing the spread of COVID-19, as evidenced by a mere 355 confirmed cases reported by June 2020, with no documented deaths directly attributed to the virus (Shah *et al.*, 2020).

The initial policy decision undertaken by the Philippine government involved the implementation

of a selective quarantine measure. On February 2, 2020, the aforementioned action was undertaken specifically for the purpose of facilitating the return of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs), while concurrently allowing for the continuation of international aviation travel. The Department of Health (DOH) reported the occurrence of the initial instance of local transmission on March 7, 2020. This case involved a patient who did not have a history of travel and presented with comorbidities. The Department of Health has elevated the alert level to Red sublevel 1 in order to proactively address the anticipated surge in local COVID-19 infections. On March 8, 2020, President Duterte issued Proclamation 922 in response to the advice of the Health Secretary, proclaiming a state of national emergency in light of the COVID-19 danger. According to this decree, it is mandatory for all agencies to provide comprehensive support in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic. The Secretary of Health, in their capacity as the leader of the Inter-agency Task Force for Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID), possesses the authority to request the support of law enforcement authorities in executing quarantine protocols and other necessary interventions aimed at mitigating the transmission of diseases. The Inter-Agency Task Force on Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-EID), in accordance with Resolution No. 16, established a technical working group (TWG) comprised of government department representatives and members of the Armed Forces of the Philippines (Vallejo & Ong, 2020).

As per the findings of United Cities and Local Governments (2020), local governments exhibited proactive efforts in allocating their resources towards bolstering the provision of health services and facilities. Additionally, they gave aid to the most susceptible individuals, with the aim of ensuring their safety and well-being. According to Paydos (2020), government employees across various nations demonstrate a visible commitment to addressing the pandemic and actively strive towards safeguarding the well-being of their respective populations. From the study of Talabis *et al.* (2021), in the Philippines, the responsibility of adopting, coordinating, and implementing guidelines related to COVID-19 falls upon the local government units. These guidelines are based on the province and municipal quarantine protocols issued by the national government. According to Barbieri *et al.* (2020), a significant number of government personnel demonstrated good leadership and made great sacrifices as frontline workers in response to the epidemic.

Similarly, a comparable scenario occurred in Malita, Davao Occidental. The passion and courage exhibited by the Municipal Inter-Agency Task Force against COVID-19 (MIATF) in meeting the needs of the people is readily apparent. They show dedication and exerted diligent effort in order to safeguard the well-being and safety of the entire populace. Therefore, the objective of this study was to investigate the difficulties and insights acquired by the MIATF in the midst of the epidemic.

Research Questions

The main purpose of this study was to explore the challenges and lessons learned in the implementation of policies during COVID-19 pandemic in the Local Government of Malita, Davao Occidental. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the challenges in the implementation of policies during COVID-19 pandemic in the province of Davao Occidental?
2. What are the lessons learned in the COVID-19 pandemic policies' implementation?

Significance of the Study

The following entities were identified to benefit from this study:

Local Government Unit of Malita. The outcomes of this study will be crucial for government officials in conducting a requirements analysis on the implementation of appropriate measures in the event of another epidemic.

Government Frontliners. The results of this study enable participants to gain a comprehensive understanding of their respective roles and contribute to the planning and execution efforts of the MIATF.

Citizens. This study aims to enhance the understanding of the general public regarding the challenges encountered by the MIATF (Municipal Inter-Agency Task Force) during the COVID-19 pandemic strike. This will additionally function as a prompt for individuals to adhere to the protocols established by the government.

Theoretical Framework

Based on the available literature, the researchers propose the developed theory of the decision-maker roles in crisis management (COVID-19 pandemic as a model) from Dr. Zeyad Samir Al-Dabbagh, that contains eight theoretical concepts, as follows:

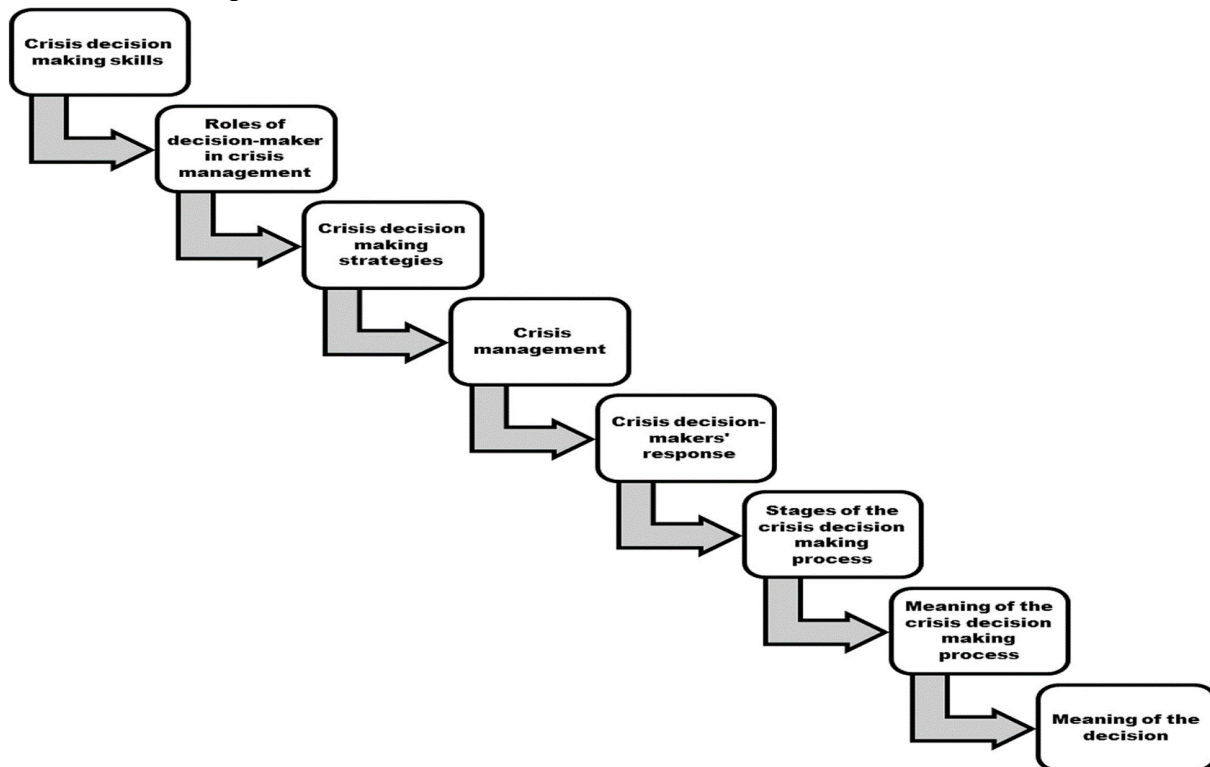


Figure 1. Theory of the decision-maker roles in crisis management

This theory encompasses several key components, including the definition of decision, the understanding of the decision-making process, the various stages involved in decision-making, the response of decision-makers during times of crisis, the field of crisis management, the strategies employed in crisis decision-making, and the essential skills required for effective decision-making. These concepts serve as a foundation for the development of training programs aimed at enhancing decision-makers' capacity to make informed decisions amidst crisis and disaster situations. Therefore, it is imperative to do further research on decision-making during times of crisis, including an examination of the influencing factors, the necessary skills and stages involved. This research should encompass a range of qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches. Furthermore, it is essential to conduct research on the

efficacy of training programs for decision-makers in enhancing their decision-making abilities during periods of crisis (Al-Dabbagh, 2020).

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study employed a phenomenological research approach to examine the difficulties and insights gained by the Municipal Inter-Agency Tasked Force (MIATF) of Malita in their efforts to implement government policies within the COVID-19 pandemic. This approach centers on the collective experiences of individuals within a specific cohort. This technique may enable the researchers to establish the universal significance of the event, situation, or experience, leading to a more comprehensive comprehension of the phenomena (Creswell, 2013).

The chosen research approach is appropriate for this study since it specifically examines the potential experiences and challenges encountered by local government officials in relation to their duties and obligations amidst the COVID-19 outbreak.

Sampling Design and Technique

The participants were selected via the purposive sampling methodology. The strategy described is a qualitative research method that aims to find and select circumstances that contain a wealth of information, hence optimizing the utilization of limited resources (Patton, 2002). This process involves identifying and choosing individuals or groups who possess a high level of education or expertise in a certain area of interest (Creswell & Clark, 2011).

Scope and Limitations

The scope of this study was limited exclusively to the individuals who are part of the Municipal Inter-Agency Task Force (MIATF) responsible for combating the COVID-19 pandemic within the Local Government Unit of Malita. The present study employed purposive sampling as the sample technique. Therefore, the results obtained from this research are not representative of the collective perspectives held by the entire population of Malita. The veracity of the conclusions of this investigation is limited to the individuals that participated in the research. The present investigation was conducted over the period of July 2022 to August 2023. The research was conducted by employing an interview guide questionnaire, which was administered during the in-depth interviews with the participants.

Research Instrument

The research instrument utilized in this study was a questionnaire developed by the researchers, which was designed to align with the research topics outlined in the study. The inquiries centered on the difficulties and insights acquired regarding the governmental policies used by the MIATF during the COVID-19 epidemic. In addition, probe questions were incorporated to prompt participants to provide further details and expand upon their responses. During the course of the study, the researchers devised questionnaires and schedules, and collected additional data from the participants, who were given the freedom to respond to the inquiries. Prior to the commencement of the interview, the research instrument underwent a process of validation by professionals in order to ascertain its reliability, linguistic clarity, topic organization, purpose, and objectivity.

Research Participants

The study included nine (9) individuals who were members of the Municipal Inter-Agency Task Force (MIATF) responsible for addressing the COVID-19 pandemic in the Local Government Unit of Malita. These individuals held various positions within the municipality, including the Municipal Mayor, Municipal Local Government Operation Office, Municipal Health Office, Municipal Social Welfare and Development Office, Municipal Disaster Risk and Reduction Management Office, Municipal Treasurer's Office, Municipal Accounting Office, Bureau of Fire Protection, and the Philippine National Police. Crouch and Mckenzie (2018) argue that employing a sample size of less than 20 participants in qualitative research yields more robust data. The researchers further asserted that establishing a robust and intimate rapport with the participants will facilitate the cultivation of more authentic dialogues and yield superior quality data.

Data Gathering Procedure

The data collection process involved the implementation of the following phases. Initially, a formal correspondence was dispatched to the Municipal Health Office with the purpose of acquiring information regarding the composition of the Municipal Inter-Agency Task Force (MIATF) responsible for addressing the COVID-19 epidemic within the jurisdiction of the Local Government Unit of Malita. A formal request letter was submitted to the Mayor's Office seeking permission for the implementation of the study. Upon receiving approval, the informed consent form was disseminated to the participants, providing them with information regarding their involvement in the study. The participants were subsequently administered In-depth Interviews (IDIs) based on their availability. The acquired data underwent transcription, coding, and further thematic analysis. Finally, the individuals involved in the study were assigned unique codes in order to safeguard their anonymity, maintain confidentiality, and protect their privacy.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Credibility. The researchers were able to establish credibility in their work by seeking the assistance of the Research and Extension Review and Monitoring Committee (RERMC). In addition, the researchers selected participants who were capable of providing accurate and reliable information.

Dependability. In order to verify the reliability of the findings, the researchers diligently safeguarded and systematized the collected data, and sought the expertise of a specialist to validate the interpretation of the outcomes.

Transferability. Transferability was established through the careful selection of subjects who possessed firsthand experience with the COVID-19 epidemic, hence enabling the researchers to obtain crucial and verifiable data.

Conformability. The researchers took measures to guarantee that the conclusions of the study were free from bias and maintained objectivity. The data recordings were additionally protected.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure ethical consideration in this study, the researchers established the following research ethics:

Informed Consent. The concept of informed consent serves as a means of facilitating transparent and truthful communication between researchers and individuals participating in a study. This study developed an agreement between the researchers and the informants regarding their voluntary

participation by obtaining informed consent through a formal signature process.

Confidentiality. The participants were apprised by the researchers on the confidential nature of the information disclosed by the respondents in this study. The confidentiality of respondents' involvement was maintained until it was deemed necessary. Despite the inclusion of a box for names in the survey questionnaires, it is important to note that providing one's name is not mandatory. The researchers took measures to guarantee that upon the completion of the study, any data containing personal information was securely disposed of either shredding, destruction, or electronic file and media erasure, therefore rendering the data unreadable and irretrievable.

Transparency. As previously indicated in the section on trustworthiness, the researchers provided a detailed explanation of the study's objectives to the participants. Furthermore, it is worth noting that the participants and researchers possessed prior familiarity with one another, thereby mitigating the potential for enmity to arise. Both parties had previously generated propulsive force.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate the thematic patterns derived from the data collected through participant replies. Additionally, the study's findings were explicated, and relevant scholarly material pertaining to the outcomes was incorporated. The themes of this study were derived by the researchers through a careful examination of the significant sentences and phrases that surfaced in the transcripts. The aforementioned elements were employed and transformed into theme assertions. The items were systematically categorized and organized in order to identify recurring patterns and establish correlations among different thematic elements. The methodology employed in formulating the topic statements involved the utilization of a presentation format.

Challenges in the Implementation of Government Policies during the COVID-19 Pandemic Limited Access to Healthcare Services and Medical Providers

The issue of healthcare access is a complex and diverse subject pertaining to public health. The urgency of this issue has escalated in light of the onset of the coronavirus pandemic. Quantifying access-related characteristics, particularly those that influence the acceptability and appropriateness of healthcare interventions, can provide a significant challenge. These factors pertain to the patient's willingness to receive the treatments they will be provided with, as well as ensuring that there is a suitable alignment between the services and the patient's specific healthcare need. The aforementioned dimensions of accessibility are particularly evident within rural healthcare systems, where additional structural barriers contribute to the increased difficulty in accessing medical services. Hence, it is imperative to examine the barriers to healthcare access in rural areas in order to appreciate their underlying factors and potential remedies (Coombs *et al.*, 2022).

Congruently, related views were shared by participants that the province of Davao Occidental was not prepared for the pandemic. There was a feeling of anxiousness about the high number of cases of transmitted disease because there was no adequate health care system. Additionally, few participants gave their evaluations as to the provision of healthcare and medical services during the lockdowns and the entire course of the health emergency. Isolation and quarantine facilities were overwhelmed with locally stranded individuals, OFWs, and even local residents with an increasing number of cases. In terms of the budget, few participants ascertained the financial conditions experienced by the municipality. The fund allocation is insufficient; isolation facilities, resources, and vehicles are lacking.

In accordance with the findings of Bayani and Tan (2021), it can be concisely said that lockdown measures and regulatory policies exert substantial impacts on the healthcare system, the economy, and society at large. Health systems in low-to-middle-income nations may exhibit less resilience in the face of pandemics due to limited resources and capacity. The implementation of community quarantines, with travel and border restrictions, has had a significant impact on health services everywhere. In order to enhance the capabilities of regional health organizations, the implementation of telemedicine services was initiated to replace in-person consultations, while tertiary care was facilitated through the establishment of referral networks. The impact of the health system in the Philippines is contingent upon the financial status and geographical characteristics of each municipality, leading to evident disparities in the allocation of resources.

Capacity and Training Needs

The global impact of the COVID-19 epidemic has resulted in significant devastation to communities worldwide, inflicting severe consequences on both individuals and collective social units. The given circumstance exerts a substantial adverse impact on international aid groups. To enhance the effectiveness of program execution, it is imperative for the sector to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the workforce's capacity requirements, taking into account the distinct challenges posed by the ongoing pandemic. Various initiatives within the area have undertaken evaluations of the issue, considering both organizational and human perspectives, in order to inform and shape actions and programs. These evaluations persist in their ongoing efforts.

The International Labor Office's report conducted in 2021 highlights the significance of skills in addressing the difficulties brought about or expedited by the epidemic. The attainment of equal opportunities, the promotion of social cohesiveness, and the adaptation to evolving business and labor markets are all contingent upon the enhancement of skill development. The development of skills is necessary to address the long-term challenges posed by global change agents such as climate change, globalization, and population transitions.

In like manner, few participants mentioned the usual scenarios that brought about the pandemic and how technical skills are important in the implementation of vital programs in the plight to curtail the influx of the pandemic. Throughout the two years of implementation of these policies, there were pressing concerns, particularly about the lack of technical personnel as well as health care providers, which should have been sufficient in the first place to adequately respond to the problem. Also, the capacity of the local employees is limited because they are not trained.

Furthermore, it is important to note that there exist shortages in not only the broader health care sector, but also in various related domains. These include areas such as infection control, safety and prevention strategies in public services, occupational safety and health in the workplace, production of protective kits, sanitation products, and medical supplies and equipment. Additionally, there are shortages in diverse economic activities such as providing meals for low-income families, offering care for the elderly, and delivering emergency medical services. The United Nations issued an appeal for swift and coordinated global action in March 2020 to mitigate the shortage of services and goods resulting from the COVID-19 health catastrophe (UN, 2020).

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to light significant labor and skill deficiencies among several crucial industries. The scarcity of personnel in national health care systems has emerged as a persistent concern impacting numerous countries. The scarcity has had an impact on a diverse range of

healthcare professionals, encompassing individuals in roles such as cleaners, hygienists, technicians, radiologists, nurses, doctors, laboratory staff, mental health support persons, and call center operators.

Cultural and Socio-economic Gaps

The expeditious dissemination of the COVID-19 virus has posed a significant threat to human life, caused disruptions in various economic activities, and exerted profound effects on global trade, the economy, and commercial enterprises. The global economy has begun to encounter substantial disturbances and is progressing towards a profound recession and an unprecedented economic crisis. The entire economy has been significantly affected by the COVID-19 epidemic as a result of the extensive interconnection and integration within global supply networks.

South Asian countries have encountered significant challenges due to factors such as their sizable populations, inadequate healthcare infrastructure, elevated poverty rates, unfavorable socioeconomic conditions, weak social protection systems, limited availability of water and sanitation facilities, and insufficient living space. These circumstances have hindered the ability to effectively implement measures such as maintaining physical distance and adopting other necessary precautions to contain the spread of the pandemic (Rasul *et al.*, 2021). Approximately one-third of the global population living in extreme poverty resides in South Asian nations. The implementation of stringent lockdown measures in these countries, aimed at curbing the transmission of the virus, has resulted in adverse consequences for the well-being and economic sustenance of millions of individuals.

Similar experiences were narrated by a few participants who followed the health and safety protocols in place. It is very difficult to implement minimum public health protocols, particularly social distancing. As Filipinos, we are accustomed to having close family ties, and our interactions and gatherings are usually done in close spaces, which makes it harder to observe the required social distance.

Other participants recounted some instances of resistance at the border points or even in the communities. Some residents are hard-headed. They did not follow the protocols because they thought that the problem at hand was not true. They just believe it when they personally experience it themselves or when a surge in their place is reported.

The COVID-19 pandemic outbreak has resulted in an unparalleled calamity, surpassing the impact of the 2008 financial crisis. This event has transitioned from being a health and social shock to the most catastrophic global economic downturn in almost a century. The implementation of quarantine and self-isolation legislation by numerous nations in order to mitigate the transmission of cases has resulted in the cessation of operations for numerous firms. This has consequently led to a decline in worldwide employment rates and economic activity.

On the other hand, the emergence of SARS-CoV-2 has shown various vulnerabilities resulting from the process of globalization. This highlights the necessity of reevaluating production techniques that reduce the physical separation between different species, hence increasing the likelihood of zoonotic diseases. Examples of such practices include deforestation, intensive agriculture, cattle farming, and the ongoing phenomenon of global warming. Hence, the presence of substantial populations, disparities in socioeconomic status, the vulnerability of a significant segment of the economy, and frequent instances of leisure and professional travel collectively contribute to an increased probability of rapid transmission of novel viruses. Clemente-Suárez *et al.* (2021) emphasized the importance of implementing ethical and equitable strategies and social policies in order to mitigate the social consequences experienced by the most vulnerable populations. They argue that the development of effective care solutions should be

informed by rigorous scientific research.

Poor Communication and Information Dissemination

Risk and crisis communication plays a pivotal role in effectively controlling and mitigating the detrimental and adverse consequences of the COVID-19 epidemic. Lachlan *et al.* (2016) emphasized the need of addressing the information demands of the public in order to effectively respond to the immediate and possible consequences of a catastrophe or emergency.

Few participants recalled the municipality’s experience in terms of information dissemination and correspondence. One of the problems encountered is poor communication and information dissemination coming from the national government. The MIATF, we’re bombarded with a lot of queries, and at times, people aren’t properly answered because there is a lack of personnel to do so. More so, some participants recounted the LGU’s concerns about poor communication and the spread of false information. Wrong information dissemination caused confusion and unnecessary panic among the people.

Crisis management and response strategies employed by local government units (LGUs) prominently incorporate crisis communication as a pivotal component. The matter at hand encompasses not just the execution of a task, but also the accuracy and appropriateness of its execution. In order to achieve this objective, crisis communicators are typically required to possess the requisite expertise and drive to effectively push their respective Local Government Units (LGUs) towards promoting collaboration and synergy during periods of public health crises. According to the research conducted by Flores and Asuncion (2020), the establishment of mutual trust among individuals, businesses, and other societal sectors is contingent upon their ability to effectively address the evolving requirements of their constituents and adapt to more feasible policies. During this period of health crisis, local government units (LGUs) can leverage the findings of the study to inform their decision-making about the content and manner of public communication.

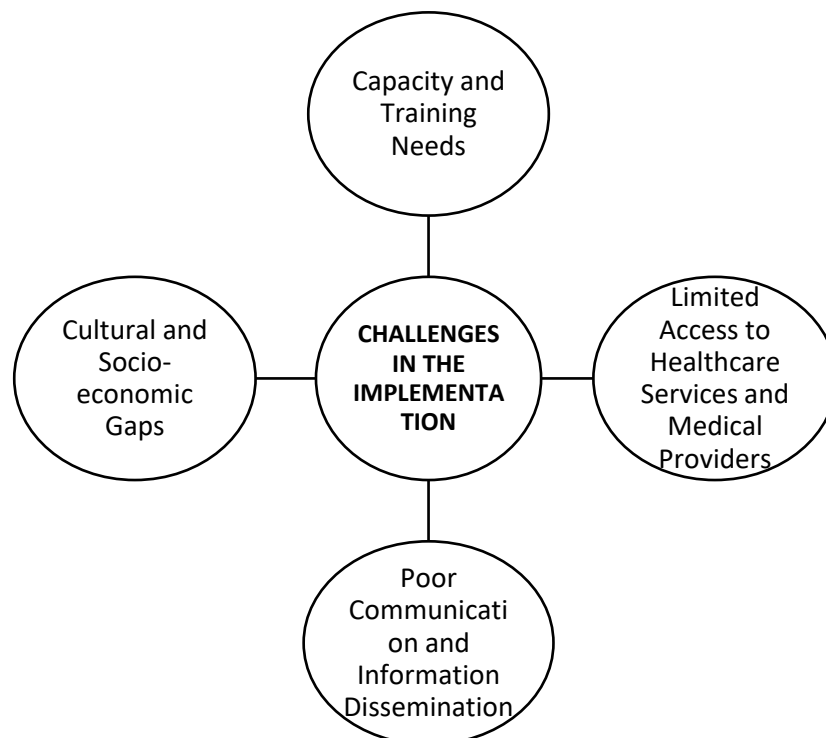


Figure 2. Challenges on the Implementation of Government Policies

Lessons Learned in the Implementation of Government Policies during the COVID-19

Improve Overall Healthcare System

The COVID-19 pandemic has served as a sobering assessment of various facets, including the healthcare systems at large, particularly in developing nations like the Philippines. Jazieh and Kozlakidis (2020) argue that the COVID-19 pandemic has acted as a catalyst, expediting the implementation and adoption of alterations to public health measures. Consequently, a novel healthcare paradigm emerges, characterized by an emphasis on preventive strategies, distant healthcare delivery, and reliance on technology. The expeditious assimilation of novel technology, concerns pertaining to mental health, ethical considerations regarding resource allocation, and safeguarding privacy and personal data in times of crisis are juxtaposed with the persistent technological obstacles encountered in addressing the increased demand for laboratory testing capabilities. The elements that are expected to be most affected in the era following the COVID-19 pandemic, taking the aforementioned factors into account, are as such.

On this view, few participants cited recommendations in order to combat future emergencies. It is imperative to improve the capacity of LGU enabling mechanisms, particularly health care systems, which encompass structure, service delivery, and resource mobilization, since this is construed as the most pressing problem. When asked about the status quo of the healthcare system as the country tries to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, a few participants were highly encouraged that public health policies must be revisited regularly to ensure if they are still applicable to the current situation or if they are implemented well.

The issue of financing the health sector has consistently been a challenge to development when examined in a comparative context. To achieve the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets pertaining to universal health care (UHC) in low- and middle-income nations, the World Health Organization (WHO) has projected a need for an extra annual funding of USD 370 billion specifically allocated to primary healthcare (WHO, 2019). According to the analysis conducted by Jazieh and Kozlakidis (2020), it is crucial to consider certain criteria when incorporating advanced technologies into healthcare design and delivery. One key criterion is recognizing the feasibility and effectiveness of implementing technologically enhanced solutions. Optimal outcomes can be attained when patients and healthcare providers engage actively in this collaborative endeavor. In order to achieve this objective, it is imperative to acknowledge and confront the ethical, governmental, and legal challenges that have emerged in the context of this pandemic. The current global experiences serve as a foundation for a comprehensive healthcare reform in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, enabling healthcare systems to enhance their preparedness in addressing future global threats in the 21st century.

Empower the Local Government Units

Dutta and Fischer (2021) conducted an analysis of many situations to illustrate the modalities via which COVID-19 responses have been orchestrated, involving the collaboration of local elected officials, state agencies, and additional civil society and governmental entities. In aggregate, these endeavors constitute a substantial undertaking that has, at present, significantly augmented the obligations and duties of regional governing bodies and engendered innovative institutional collaborations with administrative entities of various scales. The data presented in this study holds significant implications for understanding the institutional dimensions of contemporary policy response initiatives.

Describing how the local government units can prepare for future health crises, a few participants shared that there is a dire need to create contingency plans, identify appropriate intervention programs,

and craft capacity development plans and comprehensive plans. As a supplement to the aforesaid, other participants pointed out a recommendation for local government units to upskill the personnel, especially the frontliners. Otherwise, the implementation of programs will still be hampered. Another thing is to provide technical assistance, capacity building, and enhanced training to the personnel.

According to the United Nations Development Programme (2021), the assertion that Covid-19 has underscored the importance of local governments' structures, delivery systems, services, and data in effectively addressing a pandemic has been debunked. Decentralized systems, along with the allocation of resources and responsibilities, will foster more community engagement in decision-making processes and enhance the responsiveness of service delivery to local demands. Furthermore, it is imperative to establish dynamic legal structures and enhance operational capacities to enable local authorities to effectively address emerging challenges and uphold the trust of their constituents. This is particularly crucial in the face of growing expectations for local governments to effectively respond to various issues, including but not limited to gender-based violence, mediation, and economic development.

Communication Strategies

The nation's reaction to the COVID-19 outbreak is being spearheaded by local government units (LGUs). The primary responsibility of crisis and risk communication is to mitigate public anxieties, minimize the adverse effects of the pandemic, and promote the adoption of health and safety protocols to curtail the transmission of COVID-19. However, there is a scarcity of data pertaining to the COVID-19 experience of local governments, and a full study examining the crisis and risk communication strategies employed by Philippine LGUs has yet to be conducted.

Therefore, some participants affirmed that there is a shortage of personnel equipped with adequate knowledge in terms of implementing health protocols. There was a point where the communication and data systems collapsed. Also, strengthen information fact-checking to avoid misinformation and disinformation.

Siar and Lorenzo (2022) found that several challenges hindered the effective and efficient performance of local government units' (LGUs) communication functions during the pandemic. These obstacles encompassed delays in receiving official memos from the national government regarding new policies and guidelines, frequent changes in guidelines, insufficient training in science, risk, and crisis communication, limited resources, the potential health risks posed by COVID-19, and inconsistencies in COVID-19 case reporting.

Holistic and Sustainable Development Programs and Needs

The COVID-19 pandemic poses a significant threat to our ongoing efforts in achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) across social, ecological, and economic domains. Limited research has been conducted thus far regarding the impact of this phenomenon on sustainable development inside developing nations, as well as in quickly progressing areas such as Southeast Asia and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).

In an addendum, a few participants characterized the recent global havoc as the lack of livelihood opportunities among residents plus the perceived agricultural crisis in the coming years. The major bottleneck is the lack of livelihood and the introduction of various work arrangement schemes without security of tenure. This has affected workers, especially those with meager incomes. As a response, the Municipal Agriculture Office is now benchmarking strategies that would ensure sustainability in terms of

food supply. Some participants commended the need to ensure agricultural and food security and to develop the sustainability of upland barangays.

In conclusion, Suriyankietkaew and Nimsai (2021) propose the need to achieve a balance in recovery strategies as a means to effectively tackle the COVID-19 issue in the ASEAN region. In light of the post-COVID pandemic, we present four novel regional sustainability initiatives. The objectives encompassed: (1) the exploration of novel opportunities for fostering collaborative regional sustainability development; (2) the advancement of a collaborative trade strategy within the ASEAN area; (3) the formulation of an ASEAN-BCG strategy aimed at promoting the green economy in ASEAN; and (4) the facilitation of partnerships including the governmental, corporate, and civil society sectors.

By including measures for pandemic preparedness into the framework of sustainable development planning, it is possible to establish a harmonious relationship between biodiversity, agriculture, and society (Fenner & Cernev, 2021).



Figure 3. Lessons Learned in the Implementation of Government Policies

Summary

The summary presented was drawn based on the findings of the study.

The main purpose of the study was to determine the challenges and lessons learned of the Municipal Inter-Agency Task Force (MIATF) of the Local Government Unit (LGU) of Malita, Davao Occidental on the policies during COVID-19 pandemic using a phenomenological research design. The study included a total of nine (9) individuals who were members of the MIATF.

In the challenges of the MIATF in the implementation of government policies, the findings revealed four (4) themes as follows: first, limited access to healthcare services and medical providers; second, capacity and training needs; third, cultural and socio-economic gaps; and fourth, poor communication and information dissemination.

Meanwhile, in the lessons learned of the MIATF in the implementation of government policies, the findings also revealed four (4) themes as follows: first, improve overall healthcare system; second,

empower the Local Government Units; third, communication strategies; and fourth, the holistic and sustainable development programs and needs.

Conclusions

The following conclusions are drawn from the findings of the study:

1. *Limited access to healthcare services and medical providers.* Ensuring access to medical care is of utmost importance in mitigating the occurrence of diseases and fatalities arising from both COVID-19 and non-COVID-19 instances within health systems that are already vulnerable. Enhancing the continuity of healthcare access through the implementation of strategic reinforcing and proactive measures is crucial for mitigating the future impact and transmission of COVID-19.
2. *Capacity and training needs.* The Local Government of Malita may also invest in supporting, creating and expanding training programs, for example in the area of preparedness and mitigation.
3. *Cultural and socio-economic gaps.* In order to restore equilibrium and revitalize the economy in the aftermath of this catastrophe, it is imperative to engage in medium- and long-term planning. A comprehensive socioeconomic development strategy encompassing sector-specific strategies and a supportive ecosystem that fosters entrepreneurial activities is vital to facilitate the growth and success of individuals with resilient and sustainable organization models.
4. *Poor communication and information dissemination.* The current global pandemic necessitates the enhancement of the personal significance of successful communication. It is imperative to engage in proactive measures for the anticipation and mitigation of dynamic risk events and the management of uncertainty in the context of a pandemic. It is essential for individuals to acquire information regarding COVID-19 exclusively from reputable sources. Moreover, it is crucial to actively adhere to governmental guidance, taking practical measures and formulating strategies to safeguard vulnerable communities.
5. *Improve overall healthcare system.* It is quite likely that further measures and innovative approaches will continue to be developed in order to effectively address and minimize the impact of future pandemics.
6. *Empower the Local Government Units.* The effective containment of the pandemic by these local government units (LGUs) may be attributed to many key measures, namely stringent border control, prompt implementation of lockdowns, development of dedicated quarantine facilities, efficient communication strategies to disseminate information to the public, and diligent monitoring efforts. These aspects played a crucial role in mitigating the adverse impacts of the epidemic inside their respective jurisdictions. The standardization of these rules will enhance the level of readiness of any nation in anticipation of future health emergencies. Furthermore, it is recommended that the Local Government Unit (LGU) of Malita consider reassessing its contingency strategy and comprehensive development plan in order to better address future intervention needs.
7. *Communication strategies.* The local government unit (LGU) of Malita may contemplate the establishment of a Municipal Information Office (MIO) as the principal avenue for the dissemination of information.
8. *Holistic and sustainable development programs and needs.* The ongoing proliferation of the pandemic has the potential to precipitate a further cycle of economic decline and financial catastrophe. Hence, it is imperative for the Local Government Unit to implement a comprehensive and long-term plan aimed at revitalizing the economy and infusing it with renewed vigor.

Implications

In light of the global spreading of the COVID-19 virus, individuals occupying both professional and non-professional roles on the frontlines are confronted with unparalleled difficulties in navigating complex decision-making processes and operating within very demanding circumstances. In the current challenging circumstances, there exist favorable conditions for the Municipal Inter-Agency Task Force (MIATF) to effectively contribute their expertise and fulfill their professional duties to the advantage of the community they are dedicated to serving.

Moreover, this catastrophe served as a significant milestone in their personal narratives, solidifying their status as heroic figures. This serves to maintain their motivation, empowerment, and positivity as they navigate their personal journeys, enabling them to contribute their most valuable life experiences towards their development as esteemed contributors to the community.

Furthermore, the experiences of frontliners within local government units serve to enhance the community's comprehension of the significance of their presence and the pivotal responsibilities they undertake, particularly in times of health emergencies. The provision of transparent, honest, and quality services by local government workers creates open opportunities that benefit both local leaders and the broader community.

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