

PANDEMIC, ICT, AND LEADERS

Alexander Antonio V. Abelar (Philippines)

The Philippines has suffered from one of the biggest blows brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, especially in terms of economic dislocations and hardships besides health-related concerns.

According to the National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) of the Philippine Government, the nation's economic activity has contracted by 9.5 percent in 2020.¹ The recession further continued in the first quarter of 2021 with a decrease of 4.2 percent in GDP.² The statistics are just reflections of a seemingly hopeless situation of job losses and business closures, worsened by economic uncertainties in the immediate horizon and by the national government that had its share of lapses with erring officials flouting quarantine rules among other negative things.

But then again, people have risen to the challenges brought about by the pandemic and initiatives have been made viral, largely through Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

Community pantry and social media

What started as a personal and a modest effort by a young woman to help marginalized people in her locale turned into a nationwide movement of community pantries, providing poor people with a day's worth of food and a glimmer of hope to look forward to the next day, the next week, and so on. Patricia Non, a young entrepreneur whose fledgling furniture business was affected by the mobility and quarantine restrictions brought about by COVID-19, started her community pantry on a street that was a popular dining hangout during the pre-pandemic period. From a small bamboo rack about the size of a small TV stand containing vegetables and basic provisions, her project inspired hundreds of other community pantries in Metro Manila - the National Capital Region of the Philippines. Eventually, the movement spread throughout the country, with new iterations such as a combined food and medical community pantry³ and even a community pantry for pets.

Ms. Non's effort of course has been noticed and made popular mainly because of social media, and people have used ICT to help in any way they can, from buying directly from farmers at a better, fair market price,⁴ to creating an app for citizens in search of a nearby community pantry where they can drop their donations in kind,⁵ and to donating money from the safety of people's houses via fintech.⁶

¹ NEDA, www.neda.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Report-on-National-Income-Accounts-Q4-2020.pdf

² Rappler, 11 May 2021, www.rappler.com/business/gross-domestic-product-philippines-q1-2021

³ BusinessWorld, 26 April 2021, www.bworldonline.com/an-epidemic-of-community-pantries/

⁴ NOLISOLI, 26 April 2021, <https://nolisoli.ph/96788/buy-community-pantry-bulk-vegetables-farmers/>

⁵ Philstar Global, 29 April 2021, www.philstar.com/lifestyle/gadgets/2021/04/29/2094677/filipino-couple-launches-free-community-pantry-finder-app

⁶ Lifestyle.INQ, 24 April 2021, <https://lifestyle.inquirer.net/382058/help-community-pantries-from-your-home/>

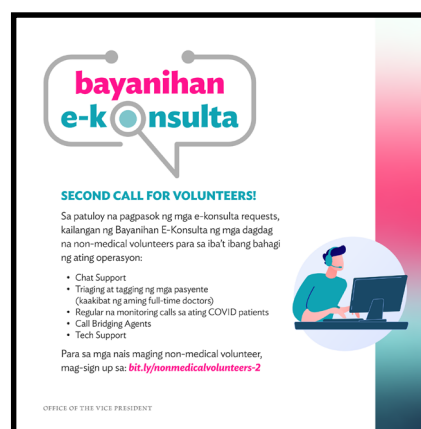


ANA PATRICIA NON helps a vendor pack vegetables from her community pantry along Maginhawa St., Quezon City on April 15. — PHILIPPINE STAR/ MICHAEL VARCAS

Good governance

Barring those traditional politicians, demagogues and political butterflies, there have been some shining stars in the government both at the national and local levels.

The Vice-President of the Philippines and her office, for example, has turned to ICT to maximize her reach in helping out Filipinos in this pandemic, given her office's limited mandate and an equally limited financial resources. She rolled out projects such as E-Konsulta, a teleconsultation platform using Facebook Messenger (the most popular and most cost-effective messaging app in the Philippines), which has already helped thousands of people in need of free medical consultations and referrals.⁷



A call for volunteers announcement of E-Konsulta⁸

⁷ Inquirer.net, 26 April 2021, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1424100/robredo-formally-calls-for-more-doctors-volunteers-for-bayanihan-e-konsulta>

⁸ Bayanihan E-Konsulta, 26 April 2021, Facebook, <https://web.facebook.com/OVPBayanihanEKonsulta/photos/pcb.113563950845922/113562700846047/>

Another project was a series of YouTube videos for students, educators, and even parents to watch and learn to help ease the challenges of remote education. The Office of the Vice-President also distributed gadgets, both new and pre-loved, to marginalized students.⁹

In the small City of Pasig, one of the seventeen municipalities that comprise Metro Manila, a young, first-term Mayor has used ICT to improve local government services to his constituents. Without the compulsion to "plaster" his face into the city projects (as was done in the past and is still being practiced by many traditional politicians) but with new initiatives such as a contact tracing app (one of the earliest in the whole country), an online registration system for "ayuda" (social assistance through cash transfers and in-kind donations) and vaccinations, and even livestreaming of bids/government tenders,¹⁰ the Mayor has shown that, indeed, good governance can be developed in tandem with technology.



Logo of the Pasig Pass contact tracing program¹¹

The pandemic has brought out the worst and the best in people, and Information and Communication Technology can be harnessed in a positive way to help accelerate the latter. It can also be utilized to take on the challenges of an ever-increasing VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, and Ambiguous) world, provided citizens recognize the true leaders.

⁹ GMA News Online, 3 October, 2020, www.gmanetwork.com/news/news/nation/758303/ovp-delivers-220-tablets-to-5-public-schools-under-its-bayanihan-e-skwela-program/story/

¹⁰ Ugnayan sa Pasig, 4 November 2019, Facebook, https://www.facebook.com/2578780215474602/posts/live-streaming-opening-of-bids/2792834927402462/?rdc=2&_rdr

¹¹ Pasig Pass, accessed 15 May 2021, <https://pasigpass.pasigcity.gov.ph/>