Social Cohesion in times of Pandemic: A View from the Frontliners of the Local Government Units in CALABARZON

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Abstract

The study was an attempt to determine how social cohesion is maintained in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as perceived by frontliners in the local government units in CALABARZON. It also looked into the challenges that local government units faced in achieving social and economic development and provides baseline data on how policies on social cohesion are integrated with their efforts to respond to the pandemic. The study employed the descriptive evaluative in the study in assessing and describing how social cohesion is maintained in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, as perceived by frontliners in the local government units in CALABARZON. Convenience sampling was used in the selection of the frontliners in the local and provincial levels of the local government units of CALABARZON who have direct engagement and involvement in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. An online survey was used using the Modified Social Cohesion Integration Diagnostics Tool (SCIDAT, 2017). Data were analyzed using frequency counts and percentages and reflective thematic analysis in examining themes or patterns of meaning within the data. Reflective thematic analysis was used in support of the validation of the written responses on the challenges that local government units faced in achieving social and economic development and provides baseline data on how policies on social cohesion are integrated with their efforts to respond to the pandemic.

Majority of the frontliners in the LGUs witnessed the integration of social cohesion in this time of COVID-19 pandemic to a limited extent but they recognized the opportunities that arise from having a supportive and adaptive region to the changing economic, health, environmental, and social challenges. For social cohesion integration to exist in this time of COVID-19 pandemic, the national government has to work hand-in-hand with the local and provincial LGUs towards a clear and recognizable elements and dynamics of a stronger social cohesion within the level of individual, community and institution. Fostering social cohesion in the region means creating societies where people have the opportunity to live together with all their differences, and, on the other hand, the way to approach unity and diversity. Social cohesion could also be built through having a pool of government leaders and personnel in the LGUs who are capable of building cooperation and networks and recognize everyone's security and safety that involves the whole-of-nation approach, focusing on internal stability, capability and preparedness against pandemic.

Keywords: frontliners, local government units, pandemic, phronetic leadership, social cohesion

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic is an unprecedented challenge with severe socio-economic consequences all over the world. Metaphorically, it is like a Black Swan event that opens the door to vari-

ous levels of anxiety over the uncertainties and unpredictable effects paralyzing the entire society. At the onset of this serious pandemic, government leaders from all the affected countries have stepped up massive and intensive efforts with the fervent hope of combatting or at least mitigating the worst scenarios that might take place. The European Council for instance has coordinated actions at the level of the Member States, the EU, and Euro area towards a comprehensive economic policy to combat the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of flexibility of the EU rules, use of the EU budget, monetary policy and financial stability, emergency support, and other recovery measures all aimed to safeguard the health and lives of European citizens and to tackle the immediate economic challenge (European Council, April 09, 2020).

In an article dated March 26, 2020 on Southeast Asia's Responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, Siahaan (2020) argued that Southeast Asian nations have had varied responses to the COVID-19 pandemic. Singapore shows great competence in handling the outbreak, while the majority of Southeast Asian nations struggle with the lack of technical capacity, unprepared healthcare systems, and low public awareness. The first case of COVID-19 in Southeast Asia was found in Singapore on the 23rd of January. This came as no surprise for Singapore as it had been preparing for the virus outbreak since late December. The result has been a low COVID-19 mortality rate. In contrast, Indonesia repeatedly denied having any COVID-19 cases until March 2, and since then, the numbers grew to an overwhelming number rapidly. Indonesia has the highest number of COVID-19 deaths in Southeast Asia, followed by the Philippines and Malaysia. Malaysia's skyrocketing number of COVID-19 patients is mainly due to the delayed ban of religious gatherings. Malaysia then implemented a nation-wide lockdown and similarly, the Philippines issued a lockdown policy in the Luzon area, including Manila. Meanwhile, Laos and Myanmar continue to deny any confirmed cases of COVID-19. The lack of technical capacity and preparedness in the healthcare system is a challenge faced by the majority of Southeast Asian nations, namely Thailand, the Philippines, and Malaysia. This has resulted in surging numbers of cases and high death tolls in these countries. Many more cases are still undetected.

In a report in the Strait Times (March 31, 2020), Hoang Thi Ha wrote that COVID-19 challenges ASEAN countries to act as one. Since last month, its foreign ministers and defense ministers have discussed the outbreak and statements have been issued stressing the importance of "ASEAN solidarity and unity to effectively respond to challenges from the outbreak of COVID-19." Asean foreign ministers also met their Chinese counterpart on Feb 20, committing to ASEAN-China joint emergency responses to COVID-19. ASEAN health sector officials have convened several video conferences, including with their Chinese, Japanese, and South Korean counterparts under the ASEAN Plus Three framework, to exchange information and best practices on epidemic prevention and control, diagnosis, and treatment. Another teleconference involving ASEAN senior officials in the sectors of foreign affairs, transport, finance, information, defense, and immigration is scheduled, in a bid to muster a cross-sectoral coordinated approach among ASEAN member states. Yet, responses by individual ASEAN member states in the early stages of the outbreak were disjointed and uneven. Singapore and Vietnam swiftly took actions including extensive contact tracing, clear and constant communication with the public, and locally developed test kits for early containment.

The COVID-19 pandemic is straining the health system worldwide. To help countries navigate through these challenges, the World Health Organization (WHO) has updated operational planning guidelines in balancing the demands of responding directly to COVID-19 while maintaining essential health service delivery, and mitigating the risk of system collapse. This includes a set of targeted immediate actions that countries should consider at national, regional, and local level to reorganize and maintain access to high-quality essential health services for all. Countries should

identify essential services that will be prioritized in their efforts to maintain continuity of service delivery and make strategic shifts to ensure that increasingly limited resources provide maximum benefit for the population. They also need to comply with the highest standard in precautions, especially in hygiene practices, and the provision of adequate supplies including personal protective equipment This requires robust planning and coordinated actions between governments and health facilities and their managers (WHO, March 20, 2020).

In the Philippines, the ***Bayanihan*** to Heal as One Act is expected to expedite the implementation of measures to address the COVID-19 pandemic in the country. The National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) said the ***Bayanihan*** Act, recently signed by President Rodrigo Duterte, is aligned with the WHO's guidelines for preventing the further transmission of COVID-19 virus through "effective education, detection, protection, and treatment." "This law enables the government to act swiftly in identifying programs and targeted measures, together with sources of funds that can be quickly disbursed," said Former Socioeconomic Planning Secretary Ernesto M. Pernia (NEDA, March 28, 2020).

In this time of global crisis, the need for a solid integration and socially cohesive ties among leaders, agencies and the community is by far the most compelling drive to achieve societal recovery. The question of social cohesion is by no means a new theme. It is a classic concern in social science that the bonds that keep society might erode during times of crisis or difficult times (Christian Larsen, 2013). Social cohesion involves building shared values and communities of interpretation, reducing disparities in wealth and income, and generally enabling people to have a sense that they are engaged in a common enterprise, face shared challenges, and are members of the same community (Maxwell, 1996).

Durkheim (cited in Xavier, et.al (2018) defined social cohesion as a characteristic of society that shows interdependence among individuals of that society with shared loyalties, mutual moral support, strong social bonds, social capital, trust, and lack of conflict. Hence, social cohesion can be compared to an orchestra where there are different musicians and musical instruments that produce a unique sound or music yet when combined together at the same time it gives harmonious and wonderful masterpiece.

Given the serious threat of this COVID-19 pandemic, there is a need for a strong and cohesive society that will integrate all the elements to achieve positive results despite threats and challenges. This study assesses the extent of social cohesion integration among the frontline leaders and personnel of the local government units in CALABARZON who are directly involved in the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic was confirmed to have spread to CALABARZON, Philippines on March 7, 2020, when the first case of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) was confirmed in Cainta, Rizal. All provinces in the region have confirmed cases. CALABARZON became the third most affected region in the country, behind Central Visayas and Metro Manila, with more than 1,500 confirmed cases and at least 100 deaths (Wikipedia). (Note: Wikipedia is not a scholarly source. The writers should find a more reliable source)

Social cohesion, in the present study, refers to strong social bonds, trust, and norms of reciprocity between and among civil society groups and citizens, and between citizens and the state. The essence of a socially cohesive society is one where there is an "abundance of associations that bridge social divisions" and where robust civic institutions exist to make democracy more responsive, inclusive, transparent and accountable" (Colleta & Cullen, 2000). According to this definition, a socially cohesive society will have vibrant, horizontal bridging mechanisms that reinforce social organization across income inequality, development disparities, ethnic divisions, religious divisions and other socio-cultural economic divides. It will also demonstrate reciprocal, vertical linkages be-

tween citizens and their state, and between consumers and markets. The stronger and more numerous these horizontal and vertical ties, the more likely that societies and polities will possess the tools and capacities necessary to mediate and mitigate conflict. In the case of other countries, because fragile states tend to be socially fragmented, they also exhibit high levels of exclusion, inequality, low consensus, and uneven development. States characterized by poor governance are at higher risk for violent conflict, and therefore could be priority targets for social cohesion strengthening.

Equally important, the study looked at the extent of social cohesion integration of the national government programs implemented at the local and provincial LGUs during the COVID-19 pandemic; challenges on maintaining social cohesion encountered by the frontliners; best and innovative practices in maintaining social cohesion in their respective local and provincial LGUs; and the roles and attributes of the LGU officials/leaders in contributing to practical decisions and actions in handling a global health crisis.

The study addresses a grand challenge in public administration in the area of strengthening social and economic development. More specifically, it is expected to provide baseline data on how policies on social cohesion are integrated with efforts to respond to the pandemic on a greater scale and empower the local government units in the exercise of their duties and responsibilities towards a common goal of ensuring safety and welfare of the society. Along the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the challenges in times of COVID-19 pandemic within the context of a social cohesion is an important area of research that will promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development. The baseline data will help tackle challenges and build more peaceful and inclusive societies.

Methodology

This study used the mixed-method of research design with the aim of generating findings from both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Convenience sampling was used in the selection of the respondents of the study comprising the frontliners in the local and provincial levels of the LGUs in CALABARZON who have direct involvement in the current fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

The study used the Modified Social Cohesion Integration Diagnostics Tool (SCIDAT, 2017) to determine the extent of social cohesion integration and readiness and set of open-ended questions to elicit responses on the views and opinions of participants on the challenges in maintaining social cohesion encountered; best and innovative practices in maintaining social cohesion in their respective LUGs; and the roles and attributes of LGU officials/leaders in contributing to practical decisions and actions in handling a global health crisis. With permission granted by pertinent authorities and the implementation of proper research and ethical protocols, data gathering in the entire region was done using online survey platform.

Results and Discussion

Profile of the Respondents

Using convenience sampling, the study included the frontliners composed of the governor, mayor, barangay chairman and officials, chief of police, health officer, rural health unit personnel, medical staff, PNP and BFP personnel, bank personnel, and various service and logistics personnel who have direct involvement in the current fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Respondents from the 38-45 and the 53 and above y/o age brackets were equally represented (both 31%). Both 15% were from age brackets of 30-37 y/o and 46-52 y/o. The rest belong to the 20-29 y/o age bracket. Majority of the respondents (67%) are female, married (68%), with a bache-

lor's degree (36%), and had worked at their respective LGUs for 7-15 years (51%) as rank and file employees, mostly police personnel. About one-third (33%) of the respondents are from the province of Laguna, while 26% are from Cavite, 21% from Quezon Province, 13% from Rizal, and 7% from Batangas.

Generally, the study was an attempt to assess the extent of social cohesion integration of the national government programs implemented at the local and provincial LGUs during the COVID-19 pandemic; determine the challenges on maintaining social cohesion encountered by the frontliners; determine the best and innovative practices in maintaining social cohesion in their respective local and provincial LGUs; and describe the roles and attributes of the LGU officials/leaders in contributing to practical decisions and actions in handling a global health crisis.

Problem 1. Extent of Social Cohesion Integration of the National Government Programs Implemented at the Local and Provincial LGUs during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Colleta and Cullen (2000) emphasize strong social bonds, trust, and norms of reciprocity between and among civil society groups and citizens, and between citizens and the state as important components of social cohesion. In the study, social cohesion refers to the bonds and ties connecting the communities and local government leaders and frontliners towards a common and inclusive goals to maintain a solid and stronger governance in this difficult time of COVID-19 pandemic.

The extent of social cohesion integration of the national government programs implemented at the local and provincial LGUs was drawn on the basis of the following principles of social cohesion integration in SCIDAT (2017): 1) The social cohesion components should be important and clearly recognizable among others.; 2) Intended changes in unjust structures or policies or in a conflict (violent or latent) should be specified.; 3) There should be professional competency in social cohesion and its integration. ; 4) Coherence and similarities should be built between social cohesion and other sectors and processes.; 5) Results of social cohesion integration should be demonstrable and evidence-based.; and 6) Significant resources should be dedicated to social cohesion integration.

Principle 1. The social cohesion components should be important and clearly recognizable among others.

The study found that social cohesion components are clearly recognizable in national government projects that are implemented at the LGU level to a moderate extent. The respondents believed that social cohesion components exist and are included in the results framework or priority areas of the government in terms of strategic objective that is implemented at the LGU level. The social cohesion elements are perceived to be intentionally included in the national government project design and the Philippine government is an actor engaged in social cohesion whether internationally or locally.

In terms of practical integration of social cohesion in the LGU level during pandemic, the existing and foreseen obstacles encountered by the frontliners included lack of staff training on social cohesion, lack of financial resources for social cohesion, limited staff capacity, organization culture, and low organizational priority for social cohesion. Given these obstacles, the integration of social cohesion at the context of the LGU implementation may be described as a gradual phenomenon which according to Schiefer and der Noll (2017) is a tendency for societies to exhibit greater or lesser degrees of cohesion. This degree of cohesion manifests itself in the attitudes and behaviors of all individuals and groups within the local and provincial LGU levels and comprises both ideational and relational components.

Principle 2. Intended changes in unjust structures or policies or in a conflict (violent or latent) should be specified.

In terms of intended changes in unjust structures or policies or in a conflict, the respondents believed to a limited extent that national projects implemented at the LGU level do not clearly emphasize values related to social cohesion. For the activities that are part of the government plans, the respondents believed that these activities should be inclusive providing diverse and marginalized community members with equitable access to project resources, services and decision making across religious, ethnic, gender, age, and economic strata. During this pandemic, the respondents have seen at a limited extent the following elements: specific activities, indicators or other elements in the LGU projects that contribute to peace writ large i.e., changes in unjust structures or policies or in the relationships between different identity groups which, if left unaddressed, contribute to violent conflict; written project/program strategies that emphasize issues and values related to social cohesion; commitment to social cohesion; relief and development context as receptive to social cohesion activities; impact of government projects at the LGU level on existing dividers and connectors in the communities; and government program implemented at the LGU level taking advantage of opportunities to strengthen existing connectors. It goes to say then that in this time of pandemic, the intended changes in unjust structures or policies seem to be hardly met or initiated both in the local and provincial levels of the LGUs naturally because of the limited capacities, resources and opportunities in their respective jurisdictions.

Principle 3. There should be professional competency in social cohesion and its integration.

Quite interestingly, professional competency in social cohesion and its integration is perceived to be at a limited extent mainly because of limited staff training on how to integrate social cohesion at the LGU level. For social cohesion to be highly evident at the local and provincial levels, there should be at least a person, unit or department responsible for social cohesion integration and there should be capacity building activities for the staff which aimed at strengthening their competencies and skills in integrating social cohesion. Also, the national government should provide training and tools on social cohesion from planning, analysis to evaluation with the various stakeholders and partners at the local and provincial levels of the LGUs.

Principle 4. Coherence and similarities should be built between social cohesion and other sectors and processes.

Although, majority of the respondents agreed that there are numerous opportunities for integrating social cohesion at the national level, coherence and similarities built between social cohesion and other sectors and processes at the local and provincial levels of the LGUs are found to be at to some extent of integration. The respondents believed that the national government projects implemented at the LGU level should strengthen social cohesion projects such as national peace processes, interreligious platforms and conflict resolution mechanisms particularly on violations committed during quarantine. There should also be regular opportunities for formal exchanges between peacebuilding or social cohesion-focused programs; opportunities and entry points for integrating social cohesion activities on the development and humanitarian programs at the local and provincial level in the LGU; and emphasis on the integration of social cohesion in the areas of agriculture, livelihoods, health, and emergency response programs.

Principle 5. Results of social cohesion integration should be demonstrable and evidence-based.

In this time of pandemic, demonstrable and evidence-based result of social cohesion integration is perceived to be evident at a limited extent. The respondents believed to a limited extent that best practices from social cohesion dimensions in the national projects implemented at the local and provincial levels of the LGUs are not at all shared externally and shared internally. In order to attain an evidenced-based integration of social cohesion integration, the following indicators need to be

taken into consideration from the national level to the local and provincial levels of the LGUs: frequency of conflict in program areas; degree of community leader involvement in promoting social harmony; degree to which the population feels safe; readiness for cooperation across social divisions; percent of citizens report a greater sense of mutual acceptance with their communities; percent of population report that they feel better protected; number of inter-religious related conflicts reported; number of inter-social group conflicts reported; percent or number of religious leaders engaged as peacebuilders; percent of population ready to support their neighbor in emergency situations regardless of their race, ethnicity, religion, caste, gender, place of origin or another social identifier; number of conflicts resolved and number of community initiatives targeting social cohesion.

Principle 6. Significant resources should be dedicated to social cohesion integration.

The respondents further believed to a limited extent that there are significant resources such as financial, material, and/or human resources available for social cohesion integration. In order to realize this social cohesion component, the national government programs implemented at the local and provincial levels of the LGUs should cascade clear financial budget resources to support the social cohesion integration. Funding sources include private funds, international mechanisms, and in-country donors to tap for potential social cohesion-integrated projects. The donor community should express interest in social cohesion that would justify investing in social cohesion for longer than one project cycle.

Overall, the study revealed that the extent of integration of social cohesion programs of the national government in this time of COVID-19 pandemic is perceived to be integrated at a limited extent both at the local and provincial levels of the LGUs. These findings could be characterized as a social phenomenon that closely relates to Lee's (2020) statement: "in times of emergency and crisis, we are tempted to divide ourselves. We limit ourselves to those closest to us and distrust anyone outside of our immediate circle. It is in these tiny, cloistered pods that we cultivate our worst fears, prejudices and poor decisions." Under peace and security, one of the government's practices that will surely help maintain social cohesion is the government's efforts to win peace and ensure national security (Aquino, 2010). National security shall involve the whole-of-nation approach, focusing on internal stability, capability and preparedness against natural calamities, disasters, and pandemics. Amesberger and Haller (2017) suggest that promoting social cohesion at the local and provincial levels of the LGUs should consider the following elements: assuming the role model function, improving knowledge on group-specific violence and building cooperation and networks.

Problem 2. Challenges and Practices among LGUs while Promoting Social Cohesion in Times of Pandemic

In the integration of social cohesion in the middle of crisis and difficult times, the challenges rest heavily among the leaders and essential personnel who are at the forefront of the implementation of various measures and regulations. Hence, another important concern of this study included the challenges experienced by the frontliners in the local government units in this battle against COVID-19 pandemic.

In terms of personal challenges and struggles encountered by the local and provincial frontliners in the LGUs, the findings could be categorically referred to as forms of social problems that have underlying effects on the emotional, behavioral, physical, professional, religious, cultural conditions and dispositions of the frontliners. Since the pandemic is presumably the ultimate source of these challenges and struggles of the communities in the local and provincial levels of the LGUs, the respondents revealed that they have experienced physical shaming and discrimination in terms of social or economic status and the stigma attached to health workers and the rest of the frontliners.

Some of the respondents relayed that there are some community members especially the vulnerable groups who are not adhering to the rules set by the government, be it local or national, not law abiding, self centered and concerned only with their own good. This is one challenge among the local and provincial frontliners of the LGUs that create social strains and social tensions presumably because of the lack of empathy and cooperation among the members of the community and the complexity and intricacies that go into any internal organization caught in this time of pandemic. Hence, given this kind of inconsistent and loosely meshed social structure cannot help but contribute to a gradual social cohesion integration in the local and provincial levels of the LGUs.

The respondents also qualified the challenges as more of a personal and internal dilemma within themselves to experience the anxiety of the uncertainties in this time of pandemic. Given the nature of their work, they are confronted with fears on health and safety issues because of their exposure to COVID-19 cases, how to keep their family safe from being infected, how to personally deal with community people especially in both near and farflung areas; the dilemma that goes with the "no work, no pay" system and other economic and financial stability concerns.

Other challenges relate to the implementation of the national government programs to the local and provincial levels of the LGUs. Among the problems which frontliners in the LGU really find difficult to address in this time of pandemic are the following: limited physical reporting that hinders proper coordination with LGU officials and functionaries especially in areas with low internet connectivity; limited communication and connectivity; shut down of a major broadcasting company as an immediate source of news/critical info for far flung barangays; inconsistencies in following national and local directives; not all are able to follow fully due to lifestyle and cultural differences; lack of cooperation of other community members; lack of funding, shortage of staff and personnel; difficulty in the distribution of relief goods and even the lack of IATF policy that includes a system of integration of social cohesion.

Majority of the LGU frontliners experienced personal challenges such as but not limited to discrimination, health and safety issues, emotional dilemma, financial constraints, and cultural concerns. In maintaining social cohesion, participants concluded that government encountered difficulties in addressing the challenges of cooperation among community members and response of community members. As elaborated by the frontliners, these government challenges are caused by unclear policies and lack of transparent communication, limited funds and resources, and different interpretation of policies and guidelines in each LGU level. On the other hand, LGU frontliners maintained courage and hope in coping with the current threat of COVID 19 pandemic by following and cooperating with the IATF guidelines, practicing and DOH health protocols, and keeping their faith.

In this time of health crisis, it could be safe to assume that a basic understanding or knowledge of other cultures, perspectives, and practices within a community is a critical social skill that LGUs should emphasize among its constituents in order to lead to empathy and understanding of others. UNDP (2020) pointed out that strengthening social cohesion is essential to countering troubling contemporary concerns about increased enmity, hate speech, and conflict along identity lines. At the heart of the concept is the realization that, ultimately, trust in governance and trust within society are required if countries and communities are to realize sustainable peace. This, in turn, requires a deep commitment to living together peacefully and working together toward a shared vision of a prosperous future.

For social cohesion to exist in this unprecedented phenomena, the government may adopt a social cohesion framework that shows the connections and interdependencies among the individual, the community, and institutions, to better comprehend and integrate social cohesion in the future.

Individuals need to have motives to want to belong to a group/society, which stem from the cognitive beliefs (norms and values) they have. Perceptions of the environment and cognitive beliefs of an individual are directly linked to the informal and formal environments individuals experience and are able to experience. An individual can only feel to be in cohesion with the group and with the ability to participate and perform in it if the rest of the group provides a proper environment with compatible norms and values. Equally, individuals can only take active part in a group if public laws, regulations, norms and values allow them to. If the person faces inequality, lack of representation and support of her position within a group or any deeply rooted conflict, then her personal drive to stay in the group is likely to fade away. It is therefore difficult to impact one of the three identified levels without ending up impacting one or more factors of any other level, and as such, the framework depicts this intersection (Xavier et al, 2018).

On the issue of coping with the current fight and threat of COVID-19 pandemic, majority of the frontliners have seen that the pandemic is indeed a battle of every human and every unit of government, but to ultimately win this battle, there is a need for the collective effort and solidarity of everyone. From their end, the frontliners have seen the need to observe strict measures on health and safety protocols such as social distancing, hand washing, self-care, adhering to government, IATF and DOH protocols and have expressed the Filipino's deep religious faith in God and the power of prayers. The challenge of the pandemic has brought our frontliners in the local and provincial levels of the LGUs to become agents of strong faith, resilience and solidarity. In an interview on ABS CBN News (2020), Torneo mentioned that local governments are prepared for natural hazards but many, if not all, are ill-prepared in "dealing with a pandemic of this scale" like COVID 19. He also added that this crisis should be a learning experience on the kind of programs that the government should call for. Senator Dick Gordon, in ABS-CBN News (2020), seriously called for the integration of social cohesion due when he said that this pandemic will be survived through unity, cooperation, and social cohesion.

Problem 3. Best and Innovative Practices in Social Cohesion Integration

In the article of Bueza (2014), based on Local Government Code of 1991, LGUs are expected to be at the frontline of emergency measures in the aftermath of disasters to ensure the general welfare of their constituents. As first responders, they should be proactive in performing disaster-related activities, from preemptive evacuation to the restoration of people's livelihood.

In terms of best and innovative practices on maintaining social cohesion, majority of the respondents in the region recognize the efforts of the national government in the implementation of strict measures in the implementation of Enhanced Community Quarantine and its modifications and the health and safety protocols and policies recommended by the IATF to be implemented at the regions.

On their ends, the frontliners in the local and provincial levels have also contributed their share to combat the pandemic in various ways such as development of policy guidelines and dissemination of information about pandemic in their localities, financial assistance and provision of additional manpower. Since the national government is seriously unprepared for this pandemic, its programs and activities implemented in the local and provincial levels of the LGUs are found to be limited. The respondents have raised the need for concrete monitoring mechanism of program implementation in the local and provincial levels of the LGUs.

Furthermore, LGUs in the local and provincial levels have shown their support to the national government by doing innovative practices in their locality. These practices included the strict implementation of national government and DOH protocols, commitment to the spirit of Bayanihan to Heal as One Act and forms of volunteerism in terms of providing financial assistance, free online

health consultation, PasaBuy for medicines and other essential needs of the community and Libreng Sakay for the frontliners. The entire CALABARZON region has also started few best practices such as initiating programs and projects to adapt to the new normal and real time mass testing.

As Oreta (2020) said, the LGU is the front-line in program intervention. LGUs must: a) mobilize and engage the private sector in their localities especially in resource mobilization (e.g. funds, transportation, temporary sleeping facility for frontline workers, etc); b) manage the COVID-19 checkpoints, utilizing the Barangay tanod, neighborhood associations, and police, and tapping the military only when necessary; c) have a massive distribution of masks and put "disinfection" boxes in strategic areas of the locality; and d) in the absence of available testing kits for massive testing, deploy LGU workers and community volunteers to do house-to-house thermal scanning of residents. Oreta further states that this will not detect the asymptomatic cases, but at least will generate baseline data on how many are potential persons under investigation or persons under monitoring (PUI/PUM). He added that LGUs should allow the targeted deployment of testing kits and make vehicles available to community residents. The vehicles can be used for medical and other concerns, giving priority to the elderly and PWDs. If vehicles are few, scheduling on a per-street/ community can be done and announced in advance. The community should gather data on households in most need of assistance rather than the one-size-fits-all distribution of relief package. The data will allow LGUs to distribute assistance only to those who really need them and save on resources. The recommendation is also to create a "market-day'" schedule per community/street. Bring the "market" to communities, announcing the schedule and the available commodity to be sold in advance.

Among the first marching orders of the Philippine government to implement its paradigm is the Policy of Community Quarantine, which was spearheaded by the Armed Forces and the Police. The LGUs) were ordered to respond amidst confusing directives from the national government. Without immediate financial and logistical support from the national government, local governments were forced to use their respective calamity funds. The calamity fund of LGUs is usually intended to be used to respond to regular occurrences every year, such as typhoons and for such other emergencies such as earthquakes, the Swine Flu, the Bird Flu, long droughts and the like (Santos & Corazon, 2020).

In terms of response, LGUS that have confirmed cases, PUIs, and/or PUMs are implementing their own initiatives and specific responses to the coronavirus outbreak. Community quarantine, class suspensions, declaration of a state of calamity, and assistance for affected families are some of the responses that LGUs announced on official online platforms (Rappler, 2020).

Problem 4. Roles and Attributes of the LGU Officials/Leaders in Contributing to Practical Decisions and Actions in Handling a Global Health Crisis

In the middle of pandemic, the LGU frontliners in the study described their leaders and officials as wise decision maker, open to suggestions, dedicated, accountable, adaptable, visionary, and supportive in maintaining social cohesion. Respondents agreed that leaders in their respective LGUs during these difficult times, lead in the major decision making, promote innovative ideas, exercise political power and demonstrate being a good role model. For the respondents, leaders in this time of pandemic must decide timely and for the common good, accountable and has vision on the consequences of their actions. From their experience working with their superiors and leaders, the respondents have seen the need for the leaders to be trustworthy, patient and has the ability to communicate information and plans to people. Furthermore, respondents believed that LGU leaders and officials as frontliners during pandemic must satisfy the following quality of leaders: 1) Leaders can see goodness in times of struggles.; 2) Leaders can sense what lies behind situation.; 3) Leaders can create opportunities to learn.; 4) Leaders can communicate to all, ensuring understanding.; 5) Lead-

ers can understand the viewpoints and emotions of its people in the community.; and 6) Leaders can share practical wisdom to the community members.

UNDP (2020) raises a similar point that in times of dilemmas and difficulties in an organization or in a community, leaders must be strong, must be a wise decision-maker, and must maintain their calmness and positivity. Leadership matters in setting the social tone on key issues of cohesion, such as tolerance, inclusivity, belongingness, and the creation of symbols, rituals, and gestures that reflect social solidarity.

An article on *How Leaders Can Maximize Trust and Minimize Stress During the COVID-19 Pandemic (2020)*, reports that people look up to leaders for guidance on what to do, what to expect, and how to act. Leaders must be strong, calm, and trustworthy because people look for this kind of leadership during uncertain and fluid times. Essentially, George (cited in Stein, 2017) pointed out that for a leader to be good, he/she needs to generate and maintain enthusiasm, confidence, optimism, cooperation, and trust. Thus, a true leader must look for opportunities amidst what is happening around, whether it is positive or negative, to make wise and good action steps to help their people. Leaders must create knowledge or learning in every circumstances that is happening.

Phronetic leadership, a model that enhances our understanding of leadership as a complicated phenomenon oriented toward action, is very timely to use in times of crisis (MBA Executive, 2008). Practical wisdom has a very big role for strategic leadership development especially in the times where bonds and trust of members of the society are weak (MBA Executive, 2008).

The challenges of pandemic calls for phronetic leadership that makes judgments and take actions amid constant flux (Nonaka et al, 2011). Phronetic leaders must take a higher point of view – what is good for society – even though that view stems from individual values and principles. Phronetic leaders are wise leaders who can judge goodness, can grasp the essence, can create shared contexts, can communicate the essence, can exercise political power, and can foster practical wisdom in others.

When a sufficient number and diversity of connections are made a collective soul and purpose emerges which gives people a desire to contribute to the common good and a feeling of fulfilment in their work. This increases the organization's ability to innovate, adapt, and evolve (Lewin & Regine,1999). In the words of Toyama (2008), a good leader during difficult times should possess these abilities: (1) ability to make judgment on goodness, (2) ability to share contexts with others to create shared sense, (3) ability to perceive the reality as it is, (4) ability to articulate the essence, (5) ability to exercise political power, and (6) ability to foster practical wisdom in others.

Conclusions and Recommendations

In the light of the findings obtained from the views and opinions of the LGU frontliners, implications relate quite significantly to some principles that would enable the integration of a strengthened and renewed social cohesion programs in this time of COVID-19 pandemic at least at the context of the local and provincial LGUs and how they can mitigate other health, social, and economic pressures and conflicts that are handed down by the national government.

In looking at the extent of integration of social cohesion at the context of the national programs implemented in the local and provincial LGUs, challenges encountered by the frontliners in the local and provincial LGUs, best and innovative practices on the integration of social cohesion and the roles and attributes of LGU leaders in this time of pandemic, it could be said that social cohesion integration is not a one-size-fits-all endeavour. Approaches to integration will vary according to where a national government's integration policy lies depending on the social, economic, environmental and other conditions of the communities at the local and provincial LGUs. Moreover, the

components of integration and social cohesion policies of the national government will also differ depending on the competencies and capacities of the leaders and staff, availability of resources, and strategic measures adopted at the local and provincial LGUs. Nonetheless, the common denominator is that integration is a process that contributes to stable and inclusive societies (Integration and Social Cohesion, 2017).

For social cohesion integration to exist in this time of COVID-19 pandemic, the national government has to work hand-in-hand with the local and provincial LGUs towards a clear and recognizable elements and dynamics of a stronger social cohesion within the level of individual, community and institution. The tendency for a less cohesive society could be a result of the absence of a strong and solid foundation of trust in governments. Hence, programs and policies of the national government that entail the integration of social cohesion need to be reviewed and implemented taking into consideration the following dynamics of social cohesion integration: 1) The social cohesion components should be important and clearly recognizable among others.; 2) Intended changes in unjust structures or policies or in a conflict (violent or latent) should be specified.; 3) There should be professional competency in social cohesion and its integration. ; 4) Coherence and similarities should be built between social cohesion and other sectors and processes.; 5) Results of social cohesion integration should be demonstrable and evidence-based.; and 6) Significant resources should be dedicated to social cohesion integration.

As Grimalda and Tanzler (2018) put it "social cohesion is a crucial variable for economic governance." Social cohesion comprises both an "objective" component – i.e., the tendency by individuals to connect with others and participate in political and civic activities – and a subjective component – i.e., the perceptions that others can be trusted and relied upon in case of need. "Others" encompass both other citizens and the government. The beneficial effects of social cohesion are twofold. Social cohesion has a direct positive effect on the quality of institutions, and thus on economic growth. Moreover, feeling included in the society and knowing that one will not be left behind in case of need has a positive effect on individual well-being, both subjective and objective.

The frontliners in the local and provincial LGUs have been at the forefront of the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic that are intertwined with serious personal, economic, health, environmental, and social challenges. Hence, fostering social cohesion in the local and provincial LGUs may begin with a clear unifying mindset of positivity and calmness and culture of sharing, empathy, supportive community and accountability in order to avoid the negative norms and dispositions and instead demonstrate solidarity and resilience against the battle with the COVID-19 pandemic.

The local government unit initiatives in terms of best and innovative practices are proofs of the great efforts of the local and provincial leaders and frontliners in building a resilient society against physical, social, health and economic challenges. Fostering social cohesion in the region means creating societies where people have the opportunity to live together with all their differences, and, on the other hand, the way to approach unity and diversity, and the thresholds involved, is unknown to specialists (Novy, Swiatek & Moulaert, 2012).

Essentially, one of the driving forces of LGUs in CALABARZON in this time of COVID-19 pandemic is having a pool of government leaders and personnel in the LGUs who are capable of building cooperation and networks and recognize everyone's security and safety that involves the whole-of-nation approach, focusing on internal stability, capability and preparedness against pandemic or other calamities and disasters.

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