

Mitigating the Covid-19 Pandemic Impact on the Philippine Labor Market

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I. Introduction

On 30 January 2020, the Department of Health (DOH) confirmed the first Covid-19 case in the Philippines. The patient was a 38-year old female tourist from Wuhan, China, where the virus was first detected. Two days later, her companion died due to the virus which was considered the first fatality outside China (BBC News 2020).

With the rising Covid-19 cases, the Philippines was placed in a state of public health emergency by President Rodrigo Roa Duterte under Proclamation No. 922 on 8 March, 2020. Soon, land, air and sea travel going to and from Metro Manila was suspended. Community quarantine for the entire island of Luzon then followed. Eventually, the whole nation was placed under a state of calamity for six months. Meanwhile, to fully enforce the home quarantine, more uniformed personnel were deployed to various parts of the country.

Mobility was limited. Each household was given one quarantine pass to buy essentials such as food and medicine. In addition to hospitals, only groceries, drugstores, and markets were allowed operations. Curfews were likewise implemented except healthcare workers, those working in the BPO (business process outsourcing) industry and those with health emergency needs. Otherwise, if caught, one runs the risk of being detained. Public gatherings were not allowed even religious gatherings.

Almost two years since lockdown was first imposed in the country, the Philippine government has implemented a new system based on the alert level system. The Covid-19 Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF-MEID) released the “Guidelines on the Nationwide Implementation of Alert Level System for Covid-19 Response” on 14 December 2021. The following is the various alert levels and their corresponding description.

Alert Level 1 - refers to areas wherein case transmission is low and decreasing, total bed utilization rate, and intensive care unit utilization rate is low.

Alert Level 2 - refers to areas wherein case transmission is low and decreasing, healthcare utilization is low, or case counts are low but increasing, or case counts are low and decreasing but total bed utilization rate and intensive care unit utilization rate is increasing.

Alert Level 3 - refers to areas wherein case counts are high and/or increasing, with total bed utilization rate and intensive care unit utilization rate at increasing utilization.

Alert Level 4 - refers to areas wherein case counts are high and/or increasing, with total bed utilization rate and intensive care unit utilization rate at high utilization.

Alert Level 5 - refers to areas wherein case counts are alarming, with total bed utilization rate and intensive care unit utilization rate at critical utilization.

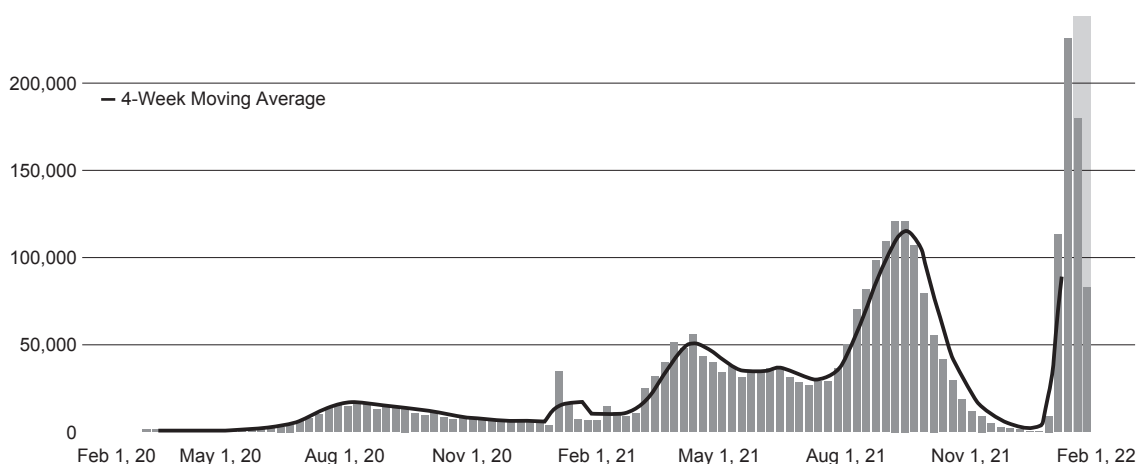
However, notwithstanding the alert level, an area may be put on granular lockdown or as described by the IATF on “a micro-level quarantine” depending on the evaluation of the Local Government Unit (LGU).

As the country struggles in its fight to allay the spread of the Covid-19 virus, its implementation of lockdowns has been dubbed as the world’s longest Covid-19 lockdowns (See 2021; Aljazeera 2021). And considering the surge of Covid-19 cases because of the highly transmissible Omicron variant, it seems that lockdowns will continue to be enforced. The Covid-19 tracker of the DOH shows the significant increase in the infections at the turn of the year as indicated in Figure 1. The DOH reported that as of 27 January 2022, there are 226,521 active cases bringing the total number of cases to 3,493,447. Of this number, 3,213,190 recovered and 53,736 died. With restrictions in mobility as well as limited business operations, these then put to question who are the most vulnerable workers affected by this situation.

II. The impact of Covid-19 pandemic on the Philippine labor market

The Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) defines the working age population of the country as those who are 15–64 years old divided by those who are in the labor force and those who are not part of it.

Table 1 shows the annual increase in the working population from 2017 to 2021. The labor force participation rate and the employment rate decreased in October 2020 but made a slight recovery in November 2021 with 45.48 million employed persons out of 48.64 million Filipinos aged 15 years old and over. However, the PSA reported that the average weekly hours of employees decreased from 41.8 hours per week in July 2021 to 39.6 hours per week in November 2021. In the same period, the underemployment rate and unemployment rate remain high at 16.7% and 6.5% respectively. Underemployment as defined by the PSA is those who are employed but want to have additional hours of work, additional job, or a job with longer hours of work.



Source: Department of Health (<https://doh.gov.ph/>).

Note: Beside the numbers above, there are 590,377 cases with unreported date of onset of illness and date of specimen collection.

Figure 1. Weekly Covid-19 infection cases by date of onset of illness

Table 1. Labor force survey 2017–2021

	2017	2018	2019	2020*	2021 (Nov)*
Population aged 15 and over (in thousands)	69,891	71,339	72,931	73,733	74,805**
Labor force participation rate (%)	61.2	60.9	61.3	59.5	64.2
Employment rate (%)	94.3	94.7	94.9	89.7	93.5
Underemployment rate (%)	16.1	16.4	13.8	16.2	16.7
Unemployment rate (%)	5.7	5.3	5.1	10.3	6.5

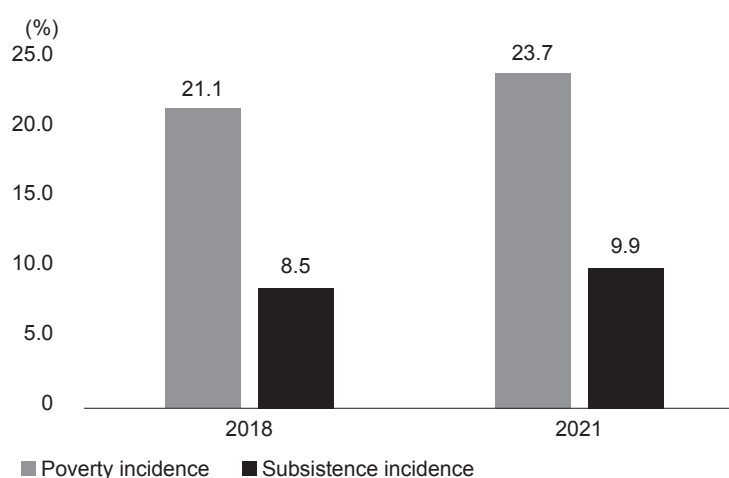
Source: Philippine Statistics Authority (<https://psa.gov.ph/>).

Note: *Estimates are preliminary and may change. **As of July 2021; estimates are preliminary and may change.

Consequently, reduced work hours mean decreased income to workers. The decrease in income, or worse, the loss of income, of millions of Filipino workers translate to higher poverty incidence as well as subsistence incidence in the country as shown in Figure 2. Poverty incidence in the first semester of 2021 was estimated at 23.7%, equivalent to 26.14 million Filipinos, while those in subsistence incidence was registered at 9.9 % or 10.94 million Filipinos. Poverty incidence according to the PSA is the proportion of Filipinos whose per capita income is not sufficient to meet their basic food and non-food needs, while subsistence incidence is the proportion of Filipinos whose income is not enough to cover even the basic food needs.

The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has indeed hugely affected Filipino workers not only on their health but also on their jobs. It is interesting to note that in terms of age group, those aged 20 to 39 years old have the highest number of Covid-19 infections according to the DOH. Presumably, these are people who are active in the labor market. As of November 2021, the number of unemployed Filipinos has reached 3.159 million.

While the Covid-19 pandemic affected all workers, it however exposed the vulnerability of some sectors. Jobs of vulnerable workers are unstable, lack formal work arrangement, and do not have social and legal protections, and thus their income is usually low. They are also described as having a higher risk of getting injured, harmed, or ill as a result of working in a more dangerous setting. These workers are usually associated



Source: Philippine Statistics Authority (<https://psa.gov.ph/>).

Figure 2. Poverty and subsistence incidence: First semesters of 2018 and 2021

with the informal economy which the International Labour Organization (ILO) defines as independent, self-employed small-scale producers and distributors of goods and services. A study by the ILO in 2020 on the impact of the Covid-19 to the labor market of the Philippines revealed that those working in manufacturing, transportation and storage, accommodation and food service activities, arts, entertainment and recreation and tourism industries have a higher risk of being displaced.

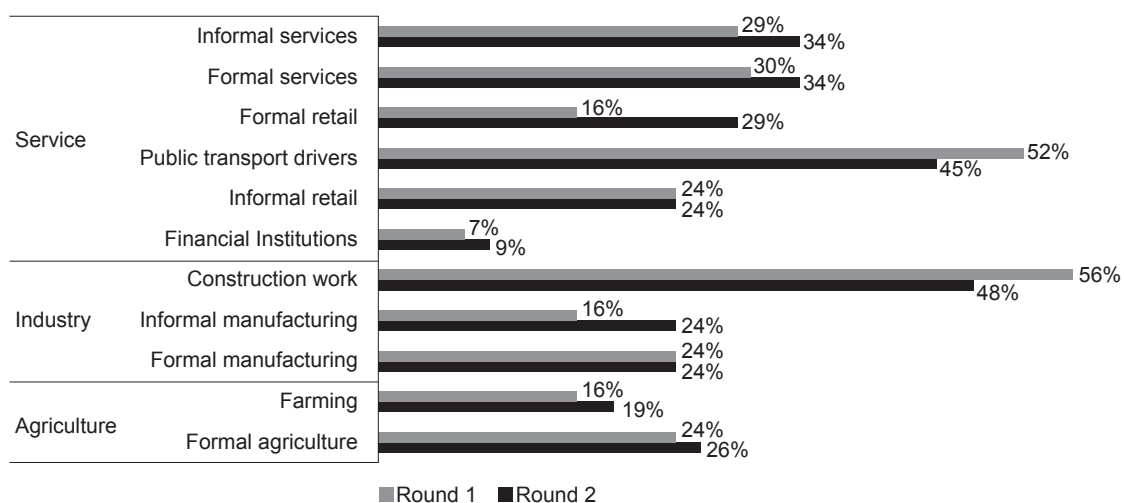
Construction workers

In the case of the construction industry, the lockdowns imposed in the country have severely affected its operations. This resulted in thousands of jobless construction workers. The monitoring survey conducted by the World Bank and the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) to poor and vulnerable rural communities, revealed that at both the first and second rounds, construction workers have the highest number of job losses as shown in Figure 3.

The construction industry is a main player in the Philippine economy. It contributed 18.5% of the growth of the gross domestic product (GDP) of the country in the fourth quarter of 2021 and 9.8% in the annual 2021 GDP (Philippine Statistics Authority 2021). However, in terms of employment, it still remains below the 4.2 million workers employed in the industry during the pre-Covid-19 pandemic. This can be attributed to the fact that: a) construction workers come from various parts of the country; b) the health measures being implemented by local governments such as permits and testing at the road border checkpoints; and c) the issue on who will shoulder the expenses incurred to comply with the health and safety protocols enforced by the government (Ibañez 2021).

Public transport drivers and delivery riders

Figure 3 shows that next to construction workers, public transport drivers experienced high job losses. With restrictions in mobility as well as strict health protocols in public transportation, air, land and sea travels operated on a very limited capacity. Alegado and Calonzo (2020) reported that around 600,000 jeepney drivers nationwide have either ventured on small online businesses or became delivery riders of on-demand delivery apps such as Grab, Lalamove, and Foodpanda. Considering the surge in demand in food delivery and courier services during the Covid-19 pandemic, this was seen as a silver lining by those who were able to engage in this work. In 2020, subscription to food delivery services increased by 61% and its gross revenue reached Php55 billion (Masigan



Source: The World Bank 2021 (<https://documents1.worldbank.org/>).

Figure 3. Incidence of severe job losses

2021). To ensure decent working conditions to these workers, the Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) issued Labor Advisory No. 14 on 23 July 2021. Despite this, their working conditions still remain to be a major concern. Since they are not recognized as regular employees by these digital platform companies, their vulnerability is a two-edged sword. Because of their work arrangement, these workers have become subject to abuses and unfair labor practices. At the same time, in terms of health and safety, they are at high risk to road accidents, injuries, and Covid-19 virus infection and even death.

Aviation industry workers

The commercial aviation industry is another sector that incurred losses during the pandemic. For example, the Philippine Airlines (PAL) lost PhP73 billion in 2020 and PhP16.6 billion in the first half of 2021. With around 12,000 workers employed in PAL and in Cebu Pacific, Masigan (2021) reported that 40% of them have been retrenched, retired, or put on leave.

Informal workers

Street hawkers, small vendors and other self-employed individuals without paid employees are among those classified as informal workers. Based on the 2018 Informal Sector Survey, an estimated 15.68 million Filipinos are employed in this sector. Because of the Covid-19 pandemic, Simeon (2021) reported that the livelihood of 80% of those in the informal sector were adversely affected. These workers are the most vulnerable. The ILO describes them as workers who work long hours, whose income is low and irregular, whose skills and productivity are low, and whose working conditions are hazardous and unhealthy with very limited access to information, markets, finance, training, and technology. In addition, considering the informality of their work, they do not have social protection and are not covered by labor legislation. These are factors that further contribute to and perpetuate the poor living conditions of their families.

Tourism industry workers

In 2019, the tourism industry contributed 12.7% to the country's GDP. In that same year, the PSA reported that for every 100 employed Filipinos, 14 are in tourism-related businesses bringing their total employment to 5.71 million. In 2020, however, its GDP share significantly dropped to 5.4% as this sector also bore the brunt of the Covid-19 pandemic. Travel restrictions, border closures, and strict health protocols all contributed to the decline of its economic contribution to the country. A huge drop in the number of foreign tourists was experienced in 2020 at only 1.5 million as compared to about 8.26 million in 2019 (Statista 2021). As operations of tourism-related establishments are affected, many of their workers were laid off. In 2020, it was estimated that their workforce is down to 4.68 million which is considered the lowest since 2012 (Tirona 2021).

Health workers

The World Health Organization (WHO) estimates a 5.9 million shortage of nurses globally in 2018. The Philippines is a leading source of nurses in the world. From 2016 to 2019, an annual average of 16,000 Filipino nurses leave for employment abroad. With the Covid-19 pandemic, more and more countries are in dire need of nurses. Better pay, benefits, and working conditions have attracted nurses to work abroad. During the pandemic, the desire to work abroad has become more intense because of long work hours, low pay, low morale, delayed release of benefits, fatigue, burnout, stress, and heightened threat of Covid-19 infection. In fact, on 15 January 2022, 6,595 or 7.2% of the 91,838 healthcare workers in Metro Manila were under quarantine due to Covid-19 infection. These conditions have left these workers with no choice but to resign. Thus, mass resignation of healthcare workers then continues.

In 2020, the Private Hospitals Association of the Philippines (PHAP) estimated that 40% of palliative care

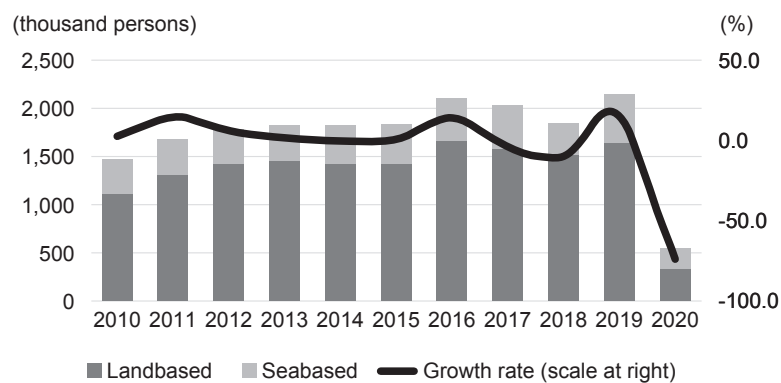
staff in private hospitals have resigned. Most of them intended to work overseas. Baclig (2021) reported that an addition of around 25% Filipino nurses have migrated to the United States to work as nurses in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic. As a measure to prevent shortage of healthcare workers in the country, the Philippines put an initial annual deployment cap of 6,500 in June 2021. However, the clamor from nurses themselves prompted the government to increase it to 7,000 in December 2021.

Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW)

From 2.2 million in 2019 to 549,800 in 2020, a significant drop in the deployment of Overseas Filipino Workers (OFW) both landbased and seabased has been recorded by the Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (POEA) as shown in Figure 4. Travel restrictions by the Philippine government, the cap set on the deployment of healthcare workers, and the visa regulations with stringent medical requirements by receiving countries have all contributed to this decline.

Meanwhile, as the world struggles to combat the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the economy, thousands of OFWs were displaced. The DOLE reported a total of about 639,000 displaced OFWs as of 11 April 2021. It also estimated that this number may reach more than a million by December 2021. This is a major blow to the Philippine economy considering that OFW remittances account for 9.3% of its GDP from 2010 to 2019. However, a 5.1% increase in cash remittances in August 2021 alone amounting to US\$2.609 billion was recorded by the Bangko Sentral ng Pilipinas (BSP). And from January to August 2021, there is a 5.7% increase in cash remittances for a total of US\$20.38 billion. This is a welcomed development as it was previously predicted by the World Bank and the BSP itself that the country would suffer in 2020 from a 5% and 2% decrease in remittances respectively.

In September 2021, more than 4 million Filipinos were out of work, and two months later, it slightly recovered. However, job quality worsened considering that 7.617 million employed Filipinos were still looking for additional jobs or longer working hours (Yraola 2022). The ILO explained that job applicants may have difficulty in finding work because establishments are downsizing, reducing work hours and freezing hiring for business to survive the Covid-19 pandemic. Workers may also find their skills irrelevant because of digitalization. Lost skills also mean lost opportunities. Hence, workers are exposed to a double-tiered risk of job disruption due to digitalization and Covid-19 (ILO 2020). In light of this, it is important to future-proof Filipinos for higher employability. Dondi et al. (2021) identified a mix of foundational skills and attitudes which they call DELTAs or distinct elements of talent. Table 2 shows four general skill categories, their corresponding skill groups, and



Source: Philippine Overseas Employment Administration (<https://www.poea.gov.ph/>).

Figure 4. Overseas Filipino Workers deployment, 2011–2020

56 of foundational skills and attitudes.

BPO industry resilience

Not all industries however were adversely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic. The BPO industry for example proved its resilience during these times. The IT and Business Process Association of the Philippines (IBPAP) reported that in 2020 employment increased by 1.8% bringing the total BPO workers to 1.32 million and an increase in 1.4% revenue making its contribution to the GDP of the country a total of US\$26.7 billion. The employment forecast is also favorable in the next two years as IBPAP predicted that it will reach 1.46 million (The Manila Times 2021).

Rise of online business

Another positive development during the Covid-19 pandemic is the significant increase in online business. Filipinos are pushed to engage in online business either as their sole or additional means of livelihood. Aside from the need to earn, particularly to those who were displaced from work, the long lockdowns and the availability

Table 2. Foundational skills and attitudes needed in the future of work

Cognitive		Interpersonal	
Critical thinking <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Structured problem solving • Logical reasoning • Understanding biases • Seeking relevant information 	Planning and ways of working <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work-plan development • Time management and prioritization • Agile thinking 	Mobilizing systems <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Role modeling • Win-win negotiations • Crafting an inspiring vision • Organizational awareness 	Developing relationships <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy • Inspiring trust • Humility • Sociability
Communication <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Storytelling and public speaking • Asking the right questions • Synthesizing messages • Active listening 	Mental flexibility <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creativity and imagination • Translating knowledge to different contexts • Adopting a different perspective • Adaptability • Ability to learn 	Teamwork effectiveness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fostering inclusiveness • Motivating different personalities • Resolving conflicts 	
Self-leadership		Digital	
Self-awareness and self-management <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understanding own emotions and triggers • Self-control and regulation • Understanding own strengths 		Digital fluency and citizenship <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital literacy • Digital learning • Digital collaboration • Digital ethics 	
Entrepreneurship <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Courage and risk-taking • Driving change and innovation 		Software use and development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Programming literacy • Data analysis and statistics • Computational and algorithmic thinking 	
Goals achievement <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ownership and decisiveness • Achievement orientation 		Understanding digital systems <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data literacy • Smart systems • Cybersecurity literacy • Tech translation and enablement 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrity • Self-motivation and wellness • Self-confidence • Energy, passion, and optimism • Breaking orthodoxies • Grit and persistence • Coping with uncertainty • Self-development 			

Source: Dondi et al. (2021).

of courier services have given Filipinos an opportunity to engage in online business. The Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) recorded a dramatic increase in online business registration from 1,700 in the first quarter of 2020 to about 88,000 at the end of the year. A total of US\$12 billion or 3.4% of the Philippine GDP in 2020 came from e-commerce. This is a noteworthy accomplishment considering the vulnerability to economic shocks of micro, small and medium sized enterprises.

III. Policy responses of the Philippine government

Vibrant, robust, and dynamic were the words used to describe the Philippine economy in the pre-Covid-19 pandemic. The World Bank (2021) reported an increase in the average annual growth rate from 4.5% between 2000 and 2009 to 6.4% between 2010 and 2019. Inclusive growth was manifested in the reduction of poverty at 16.6% in 2018 from 23.3% in 2015 as well as the decline of Gini coefficient in the same period from 44.9 to 42.7. However, the Covid-19 pandemic hit the good economic performance of the country the hardest. The country experienced its first recession in 29 years as economic activities were severely hampered due to limited mobility of people and business operations. Establishments were either temporarily or permanently closed. According to the DTI, 25.9% of businesses they surveyed have stopped operations while some closure was just temporary. With more people out of work, household expenditures consequently went down.

The Philippine government then launched its economic recovery measures which are anchored on the following 4-pillar socioeconomic strategy:

Pillar I: Emergency support for poor and low-income households, small business employees, and other vulnerable groups through various assistance programs and wage subsidies.

Pillar II: Expanded medical resources to fight Covid-19 and ensure the safety of frontliners (health insurance coverage for all Covid-19 patients; special risk allowance, hazard pay, and personal protective equipment (PPE) for frontline health workers; increased testing capacity; etc.).

Pillar III: Monetary actions to keep the economy afloat and other financing support for emergency response and recovery initiatives.

Pillar IV: An economic recovery program to create jobs and sustain growth, including Bayanihan II (Bayanihan to Recover as One Act).

Source: Department of Finance (<https://www.dof.gov.ph/>).

To address the employment problem and help the country recover faster from the national crisis, the government used the “whole-of-society” approach to come up with solutions that are better, balanced, appropriate, inclusive, and more responsive to the needs of various constituents. To achieve these, focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted and were participated by employer groups, labor sector, government representatives and other stakeholders. The discussions focused on restarting economic activities, restoring business and consumer confidence, upgrading and retooling the workforce, and facilitating labor market access.

These sectoral dialogues helped in crafting the plan of action under the National Employment Recovery Strategy (NERS) 2021–2022. On 25 June 2021, President Duterte signed Executive Order No. 140 adopting the NERS and reinforcing job generating programs through the NERS Task Force. Under EO No. 140, the NERS is focused on: i) the creation of a policy environment that encourages generation of more employment opportunities with improved access to employment, livelihood, and training opportunities; ii) the improvement of employability,

wellness, and productivity of workers; and iii) the provision of support to existing and emerging businesses, ensuring the preservation of employment.

Economic relief programs were launched by the government such as the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) and the Tulong Panghanapbuhay sa Ating Disadvantaged/Displaced Workers (TUPAD). Both SAP and TUPAD programs target those who were affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and quarantines. The SAP beneficiaries are the 18 million poorest families in the country. They receive cash assistance from the government between PhP5,000 to PhP8,000 depending on the prevailing minimum wage on the place of residence of the beneficiary. The TUPAD program is an emergency employment assistance for displaced workers, underemployed and seasonal workers both from formal and informal sectors. Under this program, employment is for a minimum period of 10 days, but not to exceed a maximum of 30 days, depending on the nature of work to be performed. The DOLE reported that as of September 2021, 2.9 million have benefitted from the TUPAD program while according to the Department of Social Work and Development (DSWD), 14,289,997 poor families have benefited from the second tranche of the SAP program as of 3 December 2021.

The decrease in unemployment rate in November 2021 at 6.5% from the previous month of 7.4% is considered a significant improvement. However, during the 18th Congress of the Senate of the Philippines, Senator Joel Villanueva, Chair of the Senate Labor Committee noted that the 780,119 jobs created from the NERS Action Agenda are merely short-term employment and not regular employment as the figure included the Government Internship Program (GIP), the Special Program for Employment of Students (SPES), and TUPAD. He said that while the displaced workers need immediate employment, it is necessary that NERS provide regular, stable and dependable employment opportunities. The target of the NERS program is to generate one million jobs from the private sector and 200,000 jobs from the public sector.

Nonetheless, the Philippine government is optimistic that recovery is on its way. The World Bank (2021) reports that although the Covid-19 virus still remains as a major threat to its economic recovery, it projected a 5.8% average growth in 2022 and 2023. The gradual opening of businesses, government spending on infrastructure, and continued Covid-19 vaccination among others will contribute to faster economic growth. To further boost its growth, The World Bank (2021) stated that it is imperative to enhance private sector participation, upskill workers, and streamline administrative procedures. The Asian Development Bank (2021) is likewise optimistic in its forecast on the Philippine economy. It projects a 6.0% growth in 2022 from its 5.1% growth in 2021. The “Build, Build, Build,” the infrastructure development program of the country as well as the increase in vaccinated Filipinos are seen as the factors that will help spur its economic growth.

Undeniably, the Covid-19 pandemic has exposed the inequality and the vulnerability of some workers in the labor market. Considering this, being the champion of workers’ rights, it is fitting for labor unions to be at the forefront in ensuring and protecting the rights of workers during and in the post-Covid-19 era. And while everyone is affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, its consequence is not the same to all. It has a domino effect and spill-over effect in all facets of life. It has not only affected the health of humanity but certainly its quality of life. Hence, to say that the effect of the Covid-19 pandemic is only on the labor market is an understatement.

Indeed, mitigating the devastating impact of the Covid-19 pandemic to the Philippine labor market is not an easy task. In this VUCA world where things are volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous, the road to economic recovery may be long, hard, and difficult. However, with the right actions and decisions of all stakeholders and armed with much optimism and determination, the country will eventually surmount this uphill battle.

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