

ENSURING FOOD SECURITY IN THE BARMM: Key Challenge of the COVID-19 Crisis for the Bangsamoro Parliament

by Robert Maulana Marohombsar Alonto
Former MILF Peace Negotiator



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Access Bangsamoro is an online and social media portal that promotes the free flow of information, analysis, and discussions for the effective implementation of the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL) and the successful transition to the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM).

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Mr. Robert Maulana Marohombsar Alonto was a member of the peace panel of the Moro Islamic Liberation Front that negotiated the Framework Agreement of the Bangsamoro and the Comprehensive Agreement on the Bangsamoro. He was also a member of the Bangsamoro Transition Commission that drafted the proposed Bangsamoro Basic Law. The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of Access Bangsamoro, its proponents, or affiliates.

INTRODUCTION

The outbreak of the novel corona virus disease (COVID-19) has taken the world by storm exhausting the healthcare systems of affected countries and rendering them paralyzed due to the overwhelming problems caused by the pandemic. Various economic experts have already projected that this would plunge the global economy into recession. In a report published by the Asian Development Bank (ADB), it is estimated that the global economy could suffer between \$5.8 trillion and \$8.8 trillion in losses – equivalent to 6.4% to 9.7% of global domestic product (GDP) because of the pandemic¹. Furthermore, it is also forecasted by the Food Security Information Network (FSIN) that the pandemic will devastate livelihoods and food security especially in fragile context and those people working in informal agricultural and non-agricultural sectors. They further concluded that a global recession would have a significant impact on food supply chains².

In the case of the Philippines, areas with confirmed cases were either quarantined or placed in a lockdown. As a result, schools were closed, various businesses were temporarily suspended, travel restrictions and other social distancing measures were put in place. Despite the National Government issuing various guidelines and directives, ultimately, the LGUs were given enough leeway to respond to the needs of their constituents. Government spending doubled as both National Government and LGUs provided for cash aid and relief goods to their people.

To briefly put it, the following were the problems identified during the period of lockdown and/or quarantine:

- While there was an adequate supply of food, travel restrictions curtailed suppliers from transporting their products thereby causing food shortages and food wastage in certain areas;
- There was a tendency by certain food-producing provinces and/or regions to lock down their borders, prevent their food traders from selling their produce to other areas outside of their boundaries, thus, disadvantaging those other provinces that are dependent on them for basic food supply. A case in point is when the Provincial Government of Bukidnon, a food-producing province, issued Executive Order 18 in March 2020 prohibiting Bukidnon's rice traders from selling their produce outside Bukidnon. This was, however, rescinded immediately due to the complains of other provinces. There is no

¹ "COVID-19 Economic Impact Could Reach \$8.8 Trillion Globally — New ADB Report," Asian Development Bank, accessed June 4, 2020, <https://www.adb.org/news/covid-19-economic-impact-could-reach-8-8-trillion-globally-new-adb-report>.

² 2020 *Global Report on Food Crises: Joint Analysis for Better Decisions*, Food Security Information Network, p. 3.

assurance, though, that this will not happen again if the pandemic worsens and food shortages ensue.

- There was an increase in the unemployment rate due to the suspension of work and businesses;
- Increased dependency of people on government support and donation; and
- Most of the LGUs have already exhausted their budget in such a short time, thereby forcing the National Government to loosen restrictions in an attempt to somehow resuscitate the economy despite the fact that there is no ‘flattening of the curve’ with respect to the pandemic.

Given that there is still no definite cure or vaccine against the virus, various experts have projected that the pandemic may remain beyond 2020 and the dire economic impact will be felt more in the succeeding years.

Bangsamoro Context

As a result of seventeen years of peace negotiations, the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM) is in the transition period of establishing a new government for the Bangsamoro. Presently as such, the Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA) is in the process of institution-building whereby the new transitional government is deliberating on the priority bills that will serve as the parliamentary layout for the new regular post-transition Regional Government. Furthermore, various peace and development programs are in place in an attempt to rehabilitate and re-establish a sense of normalcy in communities that were once upon a time plagued by conflict.

By virtue of Republic Act No. 11054, or the Bangsamoro Organic Law (BOL), the Bangsamoro Government is empowered with expanded autonomy, with new arrangements in the economic and fiscal framework, and more opportunities for development.

Unfortunately, the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic caused a major setback in the peace process, the transition, and consequently all government efforts have been redirected to addressing this crisis situation. Furthermore, what we are seeing is the emergence of a new scenario in which development plans should be recalibrated in anticipation of a “new normal” setting.

The Herculean Challenge

In the light of the foregoing, the most daunting problem we will be facing is the global food shortage that the World Food Program (WFP) has prognosticated to hit next year. Metaphorically, unless a cure and vaccine for COVID-19 are in the market soon, the coronavirus

will be 'riding in tandem' with the global food shortage, which, as mentioned earlier, the pandemic has birthed or caused to emerge. The consequence, as some pandemic experts put it, would be a "catastrophe of biblical proportion".

Already, the initial ripples of this global food shortage are being felt in 50 countries, states the WFP. The big waves are yet to come. Nonetheless, the ripples are already disconcerting governments, especially those that are vulnerable to food crisis.

In fact, Indonesia has already sounded off the alarm that its food security is threatened by the pandemic. (ASEAN Post, June 6, 2020)

In the Philippines, the picture is bleak. The Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE) has revealed that more than 2,000 companies have declared permanent closure. (ABS-CBN News, June 9, 2020).

In Davao alone, according to DOLE XI, more than 10,000 companies are set to close shop. (Philippine Information Agency, June 8, 2020.)

Add to the above the more than a million jobless Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) who are coming home from abroad in batches.

Further in this connection, the Philippines Statistics Authority (PSA) has recently disclosed that 7.3 million Filipinos have already lost their jobs.

The World Bank (WB) in its report states (June 6) that the coronavirus pandemic is taking its heavier toll on the Philippine economy compared to its neighbors in Southeast Asia (Manila Bulletin, June 9, 2020)

In this context, the BARMM will have to prepare for the coming of this 'super storm' that is unprecedented in our lifetime.

So what is the array of 'givens' open to BARMM in the face of these apparently insurmountable challenges particularly taking into account the forthcoming global food shortage?

The Bangsamoro territory is endowed with strategic resources that can feed communities in this "new normal" scenario provided that these resources can be utilized to the optimum. In the Island provinces where you will find rich marine life, aquaculture can be developed. The mainland

provinces, on the other hand, can provide for the agricultural products with their vast lands, many of which are idle. The challenge now lies in how to harness these resources.

On top of this, the overriding concern is how to feed the people.

With the BARMM in place, these challenges can easily be resolved and recalibrated in anticipation of a “new normal” situation during and after the COVID-19 scenario. The important premise is that we cannot afford to repeat what happened in Metro Manila, or revisit the Bukidnon ‘experience’, given the context that we are still in the process of rehabilitating our conflict affected areas. Furthermore, we must also reduce our dependency on donations, increase business opportunity, generate local employment and income, and at the same time secure an adequate supply of nutritious food.

Getting down to our point, a comprehensive strategy has to be formulated and then applied.

Three-Tiered Approach to Food Security

So how does BARMM survive a global food shortage pandemic and ensure food security to its constituency?

Strategic objectives have to be consensually agreed on and set into motion.

First, BARMM has to be self-productive in food. This means it produces its own food supply and needs in quantities adequate enough to feed its population.

Second, if BARMM is self-productive, then it follows that it will be self-sufficient in terms of food supply with which it can feed its own population in times of a food shortage crisis.

And third, self-sufficiency through self-production begets self-reliance, so even if in a worst-case scenario other regions or provinces lock down their borders and national government fails to meet the exigencies of the food shortage crisis, BARMM can stand alone.

These three elements in developing food security– self-production, self-sufficiency and self-reliance – will also strengthen BARMM’s economic self-determination with positive implications on its political autonomy.

At this juncture, it is important to note the uniqueness of BARMM in comparison to the other regions of the country.

Unlike other regions that are purely geo-administrative groupings of local governments in character, BARMM has a functioning constitutionally-mandated 'umbrella' regional autonomous government under which is a cluster of 5 provinces and 3 cities each with functioning local government units. This autonomous set-up equips the BARMM umbrella government with better advantage over the rest of the regions in that it is able to legislatively formulate through its Parliament regional laws and subsequently enforce such laws through a Ministerial Cabinet headed by the Chief Minister that the component provinces and cities are mandated to implement.

Hence, without going into technical details, this three-tiered approach to food security and sustainable communities is presented:

Tier 1 – There is an abundance of public domains or government-owned lands in the BARMM. The BARMM Government can utilize these lands and transform them into BARMM-run food production farms. These food production farms will also generate employment because the BARMM Government will have to hire people to man and run these facilities. They will also serve not only as food production facilities but as reservoir for food supplies containing storage barns and warehouses where produce can be stored and preserved from where supplies can be drawn in case of food shortage. Note that land-based food production farms in Mainland Mindanao will have to be complemented by marine-based food production farms in the Island Provinces. Each component province should have a food production zone.

Tier 2 – Within the BARMM, there is also the proliferation of privately-owned lands and farms. Consonant with our objective as aforementioned, the BARMM Government can form partnerships for food production with these private landowners. The BARMM can provide technical support, equipment, as well as financial incentives for this purpose.

Tier 3 – At this level, it is also necessary to induce, promote and establish backyard farming among households in the LGUs by utilizing vacant lots. This will augment the much-needed supply should there be a food shortage in the future. These household backyard farms can be consolidated at the barangay level into cooperatives or collectives for purposes of management and marketing.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the three-tiered approach to food security and sustainable communities is a comprehensive attempt to resolve food shortage whenever there are natural or man-made crisis in the Bangsamoro by way of developing food self-reliance and self-sustainability through self-

production. The role of the BARMM in the development of agriculture is crucial in this arrangement. Using the expanded autonomy as provided by law, BARMM can provide policies that are more attuned to the realities on the ground. Even in normal times, meaning without food shortage, the Bangsamoro Government has to invest in the agricultural sector, and revenues generated from these BARMM-run food production farms and partnerships with private landowners can be utilized to fund the much-needed development projects. Value adding through the development of regional agricultural industries will further enhance agricultural production and generate more employment. On the other hand, community and backyard farming can be considered a safety net should there be a deficit in supplies or food shortages. Therefore, instead of providing processed food packs/reliefs during a calamity – daily consumption of which may cause adverse health effects – people can easily obtain fresh food supply and ensure a healthy well-balanced diet.

This concludes the policy brief.