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Learning from Data: Supporting Education and Social Protection Policies during COVID-19 in the Philippines

BUILDING A CULTURE OF EVIDENCE-INFORMED DECISION-MAKING

IPA partnered with the DSWD and DepEd in the Philippines.

In 2020, IPA partnered with the Department of Social Welfare and Development and the Department of Education in the Philippines to support the government with timely data to inform its economic, social welfare, and education responses to COVID-19. Through the RECOVR survey, IPA supported these departments' programming by monitoring recipients' experiences with the government's emergency cash transfer program and by assessing teachers', parents', and learners' experiences with distance education. Results have been used by the Department of Education to shape their national distance learning plan, and by the Department of Social Welfare to inform the subsequent evaluation of the cash transfer program to inform how future cash transfer programs may be improved.

The Challenge

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted countries to rapidly adapt their policies to mitigate public health risks and promote safety, institute emergency economic assistance, and continue to provide services and public goods. In the Philippines, the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and the Department of Education (DepEd) wanted data on food security, financial security, and education. Specifically, the government wanted to know whether Filipino residents were able to access and buy basic foods and materials, their level of savings and financial security, and households' experiences with distance learning. To provide the government with data to answer these key policy questions, IPA designed and implemented the Research for Effective COVID-19 Responses survey (RECOVR) survey in the Philippines from June 18- July 1, 2020.

The Philippines experienced relative stability for the first three months of the pandemic, and enacted strict lockdown measures to stem the spread of the virus. The government instituted an Enhanced Community Quarantine in the National Capital Region from March 15-May 15, 2020, closed the country's borders in late March, and instituted a national mask mandate in early April 2020. In addition, Metro Manila reinstituted a Modified Enhanced Community Quarantine for the majority of August, and a general community quarantine was instituted from August 19-September 30. By September, the economy had already faced its worst downturn in 30 years, with daily wage laborers and other informal workers, such as jeepney drivers, particularly vulnerable to the economic fallout.

Extending Social Protection Programming: Part of the government's emergency response under the Bayanihan to Heal as One Act was to institute the Social Amelioration Program (SAP). The program aimed to reach 18 million informal and/or poor households and delivered transfers ranging from Php5,000-8,000 (\$102-\$164). The first tranche was distributed to 22 million households from April to May 2020 via local governments. During the distribution, beneficiaries had to go in person to their local government or community center and, in many instances, line up for hours to receive aid. Hours-long waits sometimes ran into curfew hours, and some beneficiaries were asked to return for a second day because of the curfew cutoff. From July to August 2020, the DSWD aimed to distribute the second tranche (via digital means) to 14.1 million beneficiaries from the first tranche, based on existing coverage of digital financial services. In the second round, DSWD provided beneficiaries the option to receive payments digitally,¹ and partnered with six financial service providers to facilitate the digital transactions. This payment scheme was added with the goal of fast-tracking the distribution of financial assistance and preventing large crowds from having to congregate (and violating social distancing protocols) at cash distribution centers, such as barangay halls, based on the experiences during the first tranche.

Ensuring Educational Continuity: On March 10, 2020, the Philippine government suspended classes at all levels in public and private schools in the National Capital Region (NCR), at which point the 2019-2020 school year was close to ending. The start of the 2020-2021 school year was subsequently delayed given ongoing health concerns.² On June 19, the DepEd instituted the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan for SY 2020-2021, which outlined various learning modalities that schools and teachers could adopt to promote educational continuity. The various modalities included modular printed materials, online learning, TV-based instruction, and radio-based instruction. These various options are reflective of differential internet access in the Philippines³, to mitigate the risk of students from households without or with unreliable internet access falling further behind in their education.

Policy Opportunity

A partnership based on co-creation

When developing the RECOVER survey, IPA Philippines met with the DSWD and Department of Education (DepEd) to identify survey questions that would address their monitoring and

policy needs. For example, in meeting with the DepEd's Policy Research and Development Unit in April 2020, IPA learned that the department was in the midst of its large-scale remote education pivot and was developing the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan. After learning that DepEd needed information on households' internet and television access, school materials students had access to at home, children's time use, and other aspects of remote learning, IPA quickly developed survey questions around these topics.

Similarly with DSWD, IPA liaised with the Policy, Development and Planning Bureau to ensure that the survey also reflected questions for policy insights. The bureau representative asked IPA to incorporate questions about the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) to better understand respondents' awareness of the program, and, specifically, whether they had received a payment from the plan. Given that the survey was implemented between the first and second tranches, it was critical for DSWD to understand beneficiary awareness of the SAP, how the funds were being used, and households' reported food and financial security. Upon learning of these priorities, IPA developed questions focused specifically on the SAP (including follow-up questions for respondents who indicated receiving a disbursement) to ensure that the survey focused on this policy priority.

Policy Influence

Sharing data and supporting continuous learning

IPA rapidly shared results and associated recommendations with DepEd and DSWD in closed-door meetings ahead of a series of public dissemination events. Through these events, DSWD learned that 89 percent of respondents indicated they had received government assistance after the onset of the pandemic, 97 percent in the form of food and 45 percent in the form of cash (more than one answer was permitted). Poorer and wealthier households were equally likely to have received support from the government, even though poorer respondents were 10 percentage points more likely to say they'd had difficulty in buying the same amount of food they usually bought because their household's income had dropped or the price of food was too high. In the dissemination meeting, DSWD officials noted that such data, particularly the disaggregation, provided timely and actionable information that they could use to inform adjustments to the SAP for future disbursements.

In the education realm, RECOVER provided the DepEd with information on the challenges to distance learning, parents' worries for their children for the upcoming school year, and the resources that households had used to manage the sudden lockdowns and distance learning at the conclusion of the 2019-2020 school year. For example, parents' principal concerns were children falling behind in their education (34 percent) or children getting sick (33 percent). Perhaps in a reflection of these tensions, 60 percent of respondents had indicated that their children had already re-enrolled in school, while of the 20 percent who indicated they would not re-enroll their children in school, 88 percent cited concerns over school safety. The DepEd had instituted its own Learner Enrollment survey during the June 1-July 15 enrollment period which mirrored RECOVER's findings on parents' concerns and expected learner enrollments.

RECOVR also provided the department with information on preferred modes for educational continuity to inform its planning for the upcoming school year. The survey found that despite nearly 80 percent of respondents citing lack of internet access as a barrier to distance learning, online learning was considered by 34 percent of respondents to be the top method for distance learning, compared to 30 percent preferring modular learning, and 27 percent preferring a combination of face-to-face and other modalities. In addition, 30 percent of respondents indicated that DepEd could support distance learning by working to provide households with internet access. These findings underscored the importance of employing an equity-based approach, with a focus on reaching lower-income households, to support learning continuity.

Supporting Continued Learning

"The findings showed us that in the long run the government will continue to need to improve the financial capacities of the Filipinos particularly building their capacity to save and take care of emergency funds that they could use to go through various crises." - Ms. Raquel Celeste, Statistician with the DSWD's Policy Development and Planning Bureau

Education | The Department of Education used RECOVR results to further iterate on its distance learning planning and resources. For example, parents designated online distance learning as the most preferred learning method for their children, which slightly differed from the DepEd's own Learner Enrollment Survey that found modular learning to be parents' preferred distance learning modality. After assessing these two survey findings, the department concluded that it needed to understand the experiences and needs of the teacher workforce.

IPA was asked by the DepEd to subsequently conduct a Teacher Needs Assessment (October-March 2021), the findings of which are contributing to the understanding of the challenges teachers face during distance learning and how DepEd can support teachers, including teacher well-being, in the time of COVID-19. IPA co-created the needs assessment with the DepEd Policy Research and Development Division to identify critical policy objectives. The results from this Needs Assessment helped inform DepEd's learning continuity plans and strategies on how to support teachers in remote teaching this school year.

In both Rounds 1 and 2 of data collection, teachers raised the importance of student engagement as well as parent involvement in modular distance learning, given limited interactions between teachers and their students. In the policy recommendations, IPA highlighted the opportunity to use low-cost interventions using mobile phones to foster two-way communication and address issues of engagement and delayed feedback/assessment with students. IPA also stressed the need to facilitate regular check-ins and updates with and among teachers which could help contribute to increased perceptions of support and inclusiveness.

Finally, IPA is now collaborating with the Department of Education and the education NGO Young Love on the implementation and evaluation of a new program called mEducation, a mobile phone-based student and parent engagement program that uses SMS and phone calls

to deliver instruction to support remote learning, which will continue to provide timely insights on the experiences of students and families during the school year.

Social Protection | During the public webinar on the RECOVER survey results, Ms. Raquel Celeste, a Statistician with the DSWD's Policy Development and Planning Bureau, stated that the results and evidence developed by the survey "will contribute to ongoing efforts of DSWD and working on social protection needs in the Philippines. The survey was able to identify opportunities on how the DSWD response and recovery mechanisms will be elevated to reach our target beneficiaries and deliver the right types of social protection packages in an effective and efficient manner... Despite the assistance provided by the government for the pandemic, it was acknowledged through the RECOVER survey that much remains to be done to improve the resilience of Filipinos physically and financially. The findings showed us that in the long run the government will continue to need to improve the financial capacities of the Filipinos particularly building their capacity to save and take care of emergency funds that they could use to go through various crises."

The information that the RECOVER survey provided on the first phase of the SAP served as an impetus for a partnership between IPA and the DSWD to implement a subsequent monitoring survey of the SAP. The DSWD was specifically interested in understanding the quality of beneficiaries' experiences with the program, as well as their usage of the payment and other financial services. Though the SAP is instituted within an emergency setting, DSWD was also interested in applying learnings about beneficiaries' access and use of funds to the Department's other programs, such as the established Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program ("4P") conditional cash transfer program. Results of the monitoring survey are being used by DSWD to understand the key challenges that persisted in the last mile delivery of these services, specifically on the beneficiaries' wellbeing and financial health, Government-to-Person (G2P) payment experience, program awareness and financial service use.

Sources

¹ DSWD, however, did not rule out direct cash payment for beneficiaries who are in conflict areas and in remote communities, who do not have cell sites or bayad centers (cash-out facilities).

² The Basic Education school year typically commences in early June. This was initially moved to August, and then revised and moved to October 5.

³ The 2019 National ICT Household Survey (Department of Information and Communication Technology) found that only 18 percent of households have their own internet access at home. <https://dict.gov.ph/ictstatistics/2019-national-ict-household-survey-results/>