



**KAYA PALA! (IT CAN BE DONE!):
How Taiwan Contained the Twin Pandemic of COVID-19 and Disinformation**

11 December 2020 (Friday)
10:00 – 11:30 (Taipei | Manila)

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Thank you for the opportunity to be part of this forum. As a frontline worker from the farthest and smallest communities in the Philippines, this is a very enriching experience for me. Thank you for giving us a platform for our small voices. On behalf of our island province, Dios mamahes jinio atavu.

With this forum, and also our experience in responding to our current pandemic, we hope that we were able to validate that (1) Health is multifactorial, (2) It cannot exist in a vacuum, and that (3) Access to information is a major determinant of our health.

As someone who is operating at the community and grassroots level, I would just like to manifest that information is not just for scientific and evidence-based decision making. In times of hardship, uncertainty, and fear, access to information keeps our community afloat by being a channel for solidarity, support, guidance, and empathy.

Batanes is the smallest province in the Philippines. We are also one of the most isolated, farthest, and poorest communities in the country. Our communities are considered as 6th class municipalities. In terms of health capacity, we are really behind compared to all other parts of the country. We only have one level 1 hospital serving all three islands of the province, which at the start of this pandemic, only have one mechanical ventilator. Because of the logistical nightmare in our islands, we also do not have easy access to PPEs, medicines, and other supplies, even if we allot enough resources to purchase them. We only have only one doctor per municipality, all of these are augmented by the National government because our LGUs cannot hire on their own. We do not have the manpower and equipment to set up diagnostics centers. Trivia: Compared to our distance from mainland Luzon, we are actually closer to Taiwan.

In an area where you have limited health capacity to detect, treat, and isolate, back then our idea is, our goal is to not let our communities get sick. I mean, it's one of the oldest teachings in the medical field: that prevention will always be better than cure!

So when we heard about this coronavirus back in January, even without orders from the National Government, we already started putting up border controls. Despite the circumstances in our province, we take pride in having one of the highest literacy rates in the country. What we did is to capitalize on this asset. An informed and educated populace will be our strongest weapon against this pandemic. From January until such time that the Philippines declared lockdowns around March, we went to all our communities, schools, and workplaces to conduct health information caravans. We do not have cellular and data connections in all our communities so we have to personally be there to inform the general public. Our goal is to help our constituents understand the disease better so they can protect themselves, provide opportunities for them to cooperate in our operations, and foster camaraderie in our communities and maintain their trust to the government and to us frontliners. So when the National Government started imposing strict community quarantine measures, our people know better and are very cooperative. There is still fear and anxiety, but they are not panicking because they know that we have a plan and they trust the government that we are doing our best.

Educating the public and keeping them informed is very tiring, but I believe we are now reaping the benefits of these actions. Together, we achieved being the last province in the Philippines to tally a COVID-19 case and have remained to have zero active confirmed cases as of today.

Health pandemic response at the community level rests on the premise that all people are equal and with basic rights that must be protected, with communities that are well informed about the situation, and that all our health services are inclusive, accessible, and responsive.

So when we have key-decision makers and frontliners, who trample on these rights and freedoms, who deny us of our opportunity to air our concerns and contribute to the operations, and when we have leaders who always keep us in the dark by not providing timely, accurate, and relevant information, we are missing our chance to better respond to this pandemic and achieve uncompromised consultations, maximum participation, and inclusive representation in all levels of our COVID-19 operations.

To conclude, I would like to share my key learnings:

1. Always go by the data. We use evidence-based, scientific methods in decision making.
2. Admit when we don't know something, or if our previous knowledge was invalidated.
3. The goal of every leader and operator is not to show how good we are, but rather for people to understand what we are talking about, and to let them talk about it also within our communities.
4. Losing the trust of our constituents is most evident at the grassroots level, if not addressed properly, People will start to not follow rules, disrespect our frontliners,

and discriminate against our patients. We should never let this happen, more so at the National level.

This way, we can engage them better and provide opportunities for them to contribute and cooperate in our COVID-19 pandemic operations.

Finally, I would like to use this opportunity to message our National leaders who are in this forum, our senators, our congressmen, and other national civil servants. Please always think about us, the small communities who rely on your information and press releases in all of our decisions and actions. We are already isolated enough, please do not let this pandemic further increase the gap between the different provinces. We are willing also to provide you with all the information you need to better help us. May this pandemic enable more cooperation from all level of this government.