



LEGISLATIVE AND
POLICY REVIEW ON
**THE IMPACT
OF COVID-19
ON YOUTH IN
PHILIPPINES**



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Abbreviations and acronyms

AICS	Assistance to Individuals in Crisis Situations
CAMP	COVID-19 Adjustment Measures Program
CHED	Commission on Higher Education
CSO	Civil Society Organization
CWC	Council for the Welfare of Children
DepEd	Department of Education
DILG	Department of Interior and Local Government
DOH	Department of Health
DOLE	Department of Labor and Employment
DSWD	Department of Social Welfare and Development
GBV	Gender-based Violence
ICPD	International Conference on Population and Development
ILO	International Labour Organization
LCPC	Local Council for the Protection of Children
LGU	Local Governance Unit
NCR	National Capital Region
NDHS	National Demographic and Health Survey
NEDA	National Economic and Development Authority
NYC	National Youth Commission
PCW	Philippine Commission on Women
PHP	Philippine peso (currency of the Philippines)
PNP	Philippine National Police
POPCOM	Commission on Population and Development
RPRH	Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health (Law)
SAP	Social Amelioration Program
SDGs	Sustainable Development Goals
SHS	Senior High School
SRH	Sexual and Reproductive Health
SWS	Social Weather Stations
TUPAD	Tulong Panghanapbuhay sa Ating Disadvantaged/Displaced Workers
TVIs	Technical-Vocational Institutions
UHC	Universal Health Care
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNFPA	United Nations Population Fund
UPPI	University of the Philippines' Population Institute
YES	Youth Engagement and Network Strengthening

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Commitments to the International Conference on Population and Development in 2019

The Philippines reaffirmed its commitment to the goals of the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) at the Nairobi Summit in 2019. The country made four commitments:

- implement laws on reproductive and universal health care;
- intensify efforts to reach the demographic dividend;
- improve the economic condition of the country; and
- increase investment on reproductive health care and other interventions.

The Philippines also laid down four modes of engagement to fulfil its commitment, mainly through legislation and policies. These four modes of engagements are: creation of national policy, full implementation of existing policies, budget allocation and programmatic action.

The first mode of engagement is through the creation of a national policy on prevention of teenage pregnancy and enacting a legislation to establish a population and development office at each local government unit (LGU). The second mode of engagement pertains to the full implementation of the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Law (RPRH Law or Republic Act 10354) and the Universal Health Care (UHC) Act (UHC Law or Republic Act 11223). These laws aim to ensure that all Filipinos have access to health services and reproductive health care, including family planning information and services. The third mode of engagement is to sustain an adequate level of budget allocation with an annual increase of 8 per cent up to 2022. The fourth mode of engagement is through programmatic action focusing on implementation and strengthening programmes, particularly the National Program on Population and Family and comprehensive sexuality education.¹ The Philippines has committed to expanding its family planning services, including safe and voluntary contraception.

¹ Nairobi Summit ICPD, *Actualizing and Sustaining the Promise of ICPD and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in the Lives of Every Filipino*, 01 November 2019, <https://www.nairobisummiticpd.org/commitment/actualizing-and-sustaining-promise-icpd-and-2030-agenda-sustainable-development-lives>.

1.2 The challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and access to services

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the all of the Philippines was placed under “community quarantine” from 16 March 2020 up to the present. The pursuance of the commitment to uphold sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services, in particular, and to the goals of the ICPD and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are challenged by reports of difficulty accessing services, the shift to work-from-home arrangements and retrenchment of employees, closing of schools, and restrictions to mobility. To address these challenges, the role of the parliamentarians is key in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic, both in terms of policies and budget allocation. The effect of the pandemic on the youth² is particularly glaring with the difficulty in accessing SRH services, and mental health challenges from being trapped inside their homes, loss of jobs, and closure of schools and universities coupled with the abrupt shift to distance learning.

The objective of this legislative and policy review is to map the policy responses to COVID-19. In particular, two key legislations were enacted by the Parliament as a response to the pandemic:

- *Bayanihan* to Health as One Act (Republic Act 11469 or Bayanihan 1), and
- *Bayanihan* to Recover as One Act (Republic Act 11494 or Bayanihan 2).

Bayanihan 1 declared a state of national emergency for the entire country and started the Social Amelioration Program (SAP), which provided emergency subsidies of around 18 million to low-income households across the country.

Bayanihan 2 addressed the reopening the economy, and allocated budget to reducing the adverse impact of COVID-19 and mitigating economic costs and losses. *Bayanihan 2* continues SAP provided for in *Bayanihan 1* and expanded the unemployment assistance to employees in various sectors.

This review aims to:

- Examine the pre-pandemic and current situation of the youth in relation to COVID-19;
- Identify the policies by the Congress of the Philippines – the national parliament – and by the key executive agencies as a response to COVID-19 to protect the youth; and
- Provide analysis of the status of the policies’ initial implementation, identify gaps and provide recommendations on policies to address the issues of the youth in the context of COVID-19.

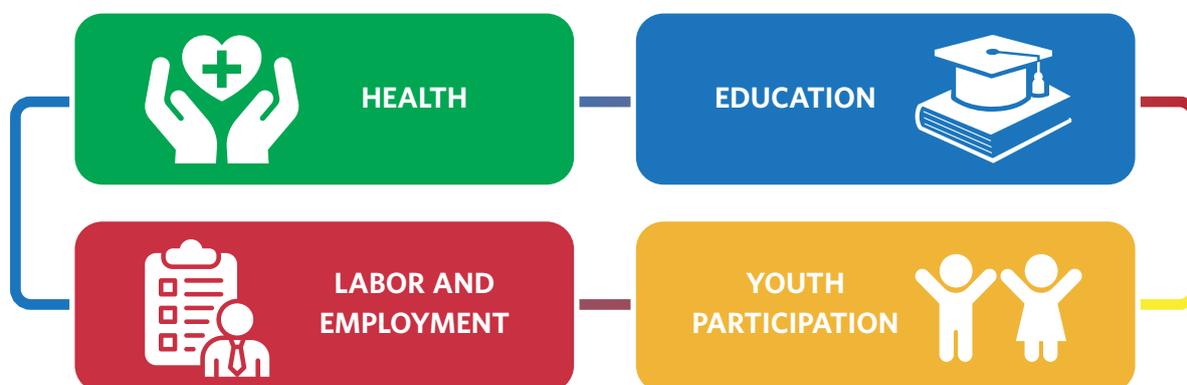
² In the Philippines, the Youth in Nation-Building Act of 1995 (RA 8044) defined youth as the sector of the population from 15-30 years old. The Philippine Statistical Authority, however, only counts the youth population as that between 15-24 years and was estimated to be at 19.9 million in 2018.

2. METHODOLOGY

This legislative and policy review was conducted through document review supplemented with data gathered from interviewing key stakeholders in March 2021. In October 2021, this report was updated to include crucial developments on youth and youth-related policies.

2.1 Document review

The documents reviewed for this study are selected national laws enacted by both the Senate and House of Representatives of the Congress of the Philippines, and policies issued by the executive agencies of the government. These laws are divided into pre-COVID-19 (existing policies enacted before the community quarantine, hence not as a response to the pandemic) and COVID-19 policy responses (enacted as a direct response to the pandemic or are enacted during the community quarantine). There are two main criteria in the selection of policies. First, for existing policies, these are recent and/or landmark laws on four aspects of youth concern: health, education, labour and employment, and participation. Second, for COVID-19 response policies, these directly respond to protection from the spread of COVID-19 (*Bayanihan 1* and *Bayanihan 2*) and/or were enacted during the community quarantine (after March 2020). Provisions of these policies are reviewed based on the four aspects of youth concern.



In addition to legislation, policies also include those that are issued by executive agencies of the government that are crucial in the implementation of the COVID-19 response laws or address a gap identified in the legislations reviewed. Policies reviewed are those from the following executive agencies: Department of Health (DOH), Commission on Population and Development (POPCOM), Department of Education (DepEd), Commission on Higher Education (CHED), Department of Labor and Employment (DOLE), Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD), Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG), Council for the Welfare of Children (CWC), and National Youth Commission (NYC). These policies are also laid down based on the four aspects of youth concern.

2.2 Interviews

Interviews are conducted to supplement the data from the documents reviewed and to provide qualitative data. Key informants were interviewed from POPCOM, DOLE, United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) Philippines and the Youth Peer Education Network – Philippines (Y-PEER Pilipinas), as well as with the office of a parliamentarian and a local chief executive. With the risks and limitations posed by the pandemic, the interviews were done remotely via Zoom. Broadly, the questions are the following:

- Do the policies and legislations enacted in response to COVID-19 reflect the issues of youth?
- Do social and economic strategies provided for these policies consider the situation of youth?
- Is young people's access to basic social services, including SRH, ensured and facilitated during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Are work opportunities and economic support for youth provided for in the policies and legislations crafted during the COVID-19 pandemic?
- Are there spaces for youth participation in crafting these policies or responding to the COVID-19 pandemic?

2.3 Structure of the review

The first and second sections of this review provide an introduction to the rationale and objectives and the methodology. The third section provides a brief background on the situation of Filipino youth before the COVID-19 pandemic and the community lockdown. The fourth section presents a quick overview of the landmark youth-related policies (before the pandemic) on health, education, labour and employment, and participation. The fifth section examines the impact of COVID-19 on Filipino youth within the framework of the four aspects of youth concern. The sixth section maps out the policy responses by the parliamentarians and executive agencies with information on its preliminary implementation and presents a case of local level implementation. The last section analyses the policies in relation to the ICPD commitment of the Philippines and the four aspects of youth concern, identifies gaps, and provides policy recommendations to different stakeholders (government, parliamentarians, and youth and civil society organizations) to respond better and ensure that no youth is left behind.



3. SITUATION OF FILIPINO YOUTH BEFORE THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

The Philippines has a total population of 109 million, based on the 2020 Census of Population and Housing. The country's population has a median age of 24.3 years indicating that half of the Philippine population are younger than this age.³ Youth make up 27 per cent of the population, which is about 29.4 million.⁴ There are 5.1 million women aged 15–19 years and 4.8 million women age 20–24 years. The number is almost the same for men, with 5.3 million men aged 15–19 years and 5 million aged 20–24 years. However, two in every 10 children (23.9 per cent) and 14.7 per cent of youth belonged to families with income below the poverty thresholds in 2018.⁵ The country has the potential to reap the benefits of the demographic dividend because the large share of young population can be harnessed to accelerate economic development. To do this, the Philippines has to increase investment in health, education, employment and empowering youth.

Even before the pandemic, the youth experienced challenges in accessing sexual and reproductive health services. The contraceptive prevalence rate for the age group of 20–24 years is 51 per cent, while the younger age group of 15–19 years is well below the national average at 36 per cent.⁶ This low contraceptive prevalence rate results in teenage pregnancies, and the Philippines has one of the highest adolescent birth rates in ASEAN. The National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) notes that 1 in every 5 girls is already a mother by the age of 15, based on the National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS). POPCOM reported that 9 per cent of women aged 15–19 years are pregnant with their first child or are already mothers (47 births per 1,000 adolescents aged 15–19 years).⁷ At younger ages, 10–14 years, there were about seven livebirths born to children every day (at least 2,411 girls who gave birth) in 2019. While the Philippines has a lower rate of women aged 20–24 years who were married before 18 (17 per cent) compared to the average in the Asia Pacific region (26 per cent) and the world (20 per cent), this still means that nearly 1 out of 5 Filipino girls are married before they reach the age of 18.⁸ These girls are at risk of adolescent pregnancy and of dropping out of school with less chance of ever returning than their male counterparts. In 2019, the former National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA) Secretary Ernesto Pernia called teenage pregnancy a “national social emergency” due to the high adolescent birth rate. NEDA estimated that with early childbearing, PHP 24 billion (USD 495 million) to PHP 42 billion (USD 86 million) in the lifetime earnings of women were lost and may lead to intergenerational poverty.⁹

³ Philippine Statistics Authority, *Philippine Population Surpassed the 100 Million Mark (Results from the 2015 Census of Population)*, 30 June 2017, <https://psa.gov.ph/population-and-housing/node/120080>.

⁴ Christina P. Juan et al., *Trends of Sexual and Reproductive Health Behaviors among Youth in the Philippines: Further Analysis of the 2008, 2013, and 2017 National Demographic and Health Surveys*, 2019, <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FA127/FA127.pdf>.

⁵ Philippine Statistics Authority, *Farmers, Fisherfolks, Individuals Residing in Rural Areas and Children Posted the Highest Poverty Incidence Among the Basic Sectors in 2018*, 03 June 2020, <https://psa.gov.ph/poverty-press-releases/nid/162541>.

⁶ Christina P. Juan et al., *Trends of Sexual and Reproductive Health Behaviors among Youth in the Philippines: Further Analysis of the 2008, 2013, and 2017 National Demographic and Health Surveys*, 2019, <https://dhsprogram.com/pubs/pdf/FA127/FA127.pdf>.

⁷ Commission on Population and Development and Philippine Legislators' Committee on Population and Development, *Dissemination Forum on the latest data on adolescent pregnancy and top concerns of women in the Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic*, 17 February 2020, <https://fb.watch/3WoEuTvvh9/>.

⁸ UNFPA, *State of the World Population 2020: Against my will*, 11 July 2020, <https://www.unfpa.org/swop>.

⁹ Matthew Reysio Cruz, *Teenage pregnancies now 'nat'l social emergency'*, *Inquirer.net*, 23 August 2019, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1156646/teen-pregnancies-now-natl-social-emergency>.

Investment in education is a way to provide information and skills to youth. Nationally, in 2019, the percentage of out-of-school children was 10.6 per cent. The number of Filipino youth in school and not economically active was nearly half of the total youth population (46.8 per cent or 19.9 million).¹⁰ In the National Capital Region (NCR), in 2013, the basic literacy rate (both male and female) for ages 10-14 years was 99.3 per cent, and for ages 15-19 years, it was slightly higher at 99.7 per cent.¹¹

Before the pandemic, the youth unemployment rate was decreasing, going from 17.6 per cent in 2010 to 14.1 per cent in 2018.¹² The majority of the youth population (ages 15-24 years) was employed (85.3 per cent) in July 2019.¹³ In the same year, employed youth were working an average of 35.2 hours per week.¹⁴ Examining the equal economic opportunities for men and women in the Philippines, there are fewer women who are part of the labour force than men. This gap only decreased by 2.4 per cent from 2005 to 2015.¹⁵

As a democratic country, one of the key arenas for participation in the Philippines is through elections. In 2016, 33 per cent of the registered voters were born in the mid-1990s and early 2000 – referred to as ‘millennials’, ‘gen Z’ or ‘Generation Z’.¹⁶ Apart from elections, youth were also able to participate politically through representation in governance. An assessment of the *Sangguniang Kabataan* in earlier years showed that the mechanism has a tremendous potential to develop the next generation of leaders, engage the youth in the community and hone their accountability.¹⁷



¹⁰ Philippine Statistics Authority, *Continuous Drop in the Share of Youth Population Who Are Not in Employment or Education (NEE) to the Total Youth Population*, 07 November 2019, <https://psa.gov.ph/content/continuous-drop-share-youth-population-who-are-not-employment-or-education-nee-total-youth>.

¹¹ Philippine Statistics Authority, *Quickstat for Children*, November 2019, http://rssoncr.psa.gov.ph/sites/default/files/Quickstat_FC_2019.pdf.

¹² Philippine Statistics Authority, *Employment Rate in July 2019 is Estimated at 94.6 Percent*, 05 September 2019, <https://psa.gov.ph/statistics/survey/labor-and-employment/labor-force-survey/title/Employment%20Rate%20in%20July%202019%20is%20Estimated%20at%2094.6%20Percent>.

¹³ Philippine Statistics Authority, *Labor Force Survey July 2020 Round (Preliminary Results)*, 04 September 2020 <https://psa.gov.ph/content/labor-force-survey-july-2020-round-preliminary-results>.

¹⁴ Philippine Statistics Authority, *Labor Force Survey July 2020 Round (Preliminary Results)*, 04 September 2020 <https://psa.gov.ph/content/labor-force-survey-july-2020-round-preliminary-results>.

¹⁵ John Ramon G. Albert and Jana Flor V. Vizmanos, Do men and women in the Philippines have equal economic opportunities? *Philippine Institute for Development Studies*, April 2017, <https://pidswebs.pids.gov.ph/CDN/NEWS/pidspn1709.pdf>.

¹⁶ Janella Paris, Youth and elections: Is there such a thing as a ‘youth vote’? *Rappler*, 25 April 2019, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/Iq/is-there-such-a-thing-as-youth-vote>.

¹⁷ Faye Balanon et al., *The Impact of Youth Participation in the Local Government Process*, UNICEF, January 2007, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282866168_The_Impact_of_Youth_Participation_in_the_Local_Government_Process.

4. YOUTH-RELATED LAWS AND POLICIES IN THE PHILIPPINES

4.1 Health

After years of advocacy and bargaining, the Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health (RPRH) Law was enacted in 2012. The landmark law upholds sexual and reproductive health for every Filipino. This law guarantees the sexual and reproductive health (SRH) rights of women, men and youth through the provision of access to reproductive health care services, including family planning, and maternal and child health care.¹⁸ However, the constitutionality of the law was challenged in the Supreme Court of the Philippines by conservative and religious groups, and in 2013, a status quo ante order postponed its implementation. A year later, the Supreme Court struck down eight provisions of the law, one that directly affects youth: it explicitly requires parental consent for minors (younger than 18 years old) seeking medical attention or who have had a miscarriage.¹⁹ Key informants interviewed for this policy review confirmed that this has affected the access of minors to SRH services particularly for obtaining contraceptives and HIV testing. Prior to the enactment of the law, civil society organizations were able to provide free reproductive health services and contraceptives to minors, but with the law making parental consent mandatory, provision of such services became more difficult.²⁰ Fortunately, in 2018, the Philippine HIV and AIDS Policy Act (Republic Act 11166), which repealed the 1998 AIDS Prevention and Control Act, allows minors aged 15–17 years to get HIV testing without parental consent. Adolescents younger than 15 years old who are pregnant or have been engaging in high-risk behaviours are also eligible for HIV testing with the proxy consent or assistance of a licensed social or health worker.²¹

In recent years, the Philippine Congress has also passed legislation on the nutrition of children in their first 1,000 days, and on universal health care (UHC). The *Kalusugan at Nutrisyon ng Mag-Nanay Act* (Republic Act 11148), known as the First 1,000 Days Law, enacted in 2018, aims to provide nutrition intervention programmes to pregnant and lactating mothers, including adolescent girls, and gives attention to the health and nutrition of adolescent females aged 10–18 years. The UHC Law, passed in 2018, automatically provides membership to every Filipino in the national health insurance programme, PhilHealth.²² Priority is given to poor Filipinos or to those living in geographically isolated areas. But in 2019, only 10.3 per cent of health expenditure was spent for youth aged 10–19 years, and almost half (47.9 per cent) of health spending of Filipino households was out-of-pocket payments.²³ Data of the claims from PhilHealth in the first half of 2020 show that a measly 4.6 per cent of claims are for those who are aged 15–19 years and 2.5 per cent of claims are for those who are aged 10–14 years. The most claims are by senior citizens (aged 60 years and older), which was 24.1 per cent of claims.²⁴ The enactment of the UHC Law is long overdue and it is still yet to be fully implemented.

¹⁸ Republic Act 10354 “The Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Act of 2012,” <https://pcw.gov.ph/republic-act-10354/>.

¹⁹ Buena Bernal, “SC declares RH law constitutional,” *Rappler*, 08 April 2014, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/supreme-court-rh-law-constitutional>.

²⁰ Interview with Y-PEER Pilipinas, 09 February 2021, conducted via Zoom.

²¹ Republic Act 11166 “Philippine HIV and AIDS Policy Act,” https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2018/ra_11166_2018.html.

²² Republic Act 11223 “Universal Health Care Act,” https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2019/ra_11223_2019.html.

²³ Philippine Statistics Authority, *Health Spending Grew by 10.9 percent in 2019*, 15 October 2020, <https://psa.gov.ph/content/health-spending-grew-109-percent-2019>.

²⁴ PhilHealth, *PhilHealth, Stats and Charts 2020* (1st Semester), 2020, https://www.philhealth.gov.ph/about_us/statsncharts/snc2020_1stSem.pdf.

Recognizing that mental health should be given adequate attention, the Mental Health Act (Republic Act 11036) was passed in 2017. The alarming results of the Young Adult and Fertility Survey (YAFS) in 2013 showed that 37 per cent of Filipino youth aged 15–24 have tried to commit suicide, and more adolescent girls (12.6 per cent) have thought of ending their lives than boys (4.5 per cent). The study also found a strong correlation between suicide ideation and attempts and depression.²⁵ The Mental Health Act aims to guarantee access to mental health services, mandates the government to develop a national mental health care system, and assumes that minors have legal capacity to access mental health treatment.²⁶ However, challenges in the capacity of implementing the law still persist. There are only five government hospitals that have psychiatric facilities for children, 84 general hospitals have psychiatric units, and 46 have outpatient facilities. Even more concerning is that there are only 2 mental professionals for every 100,000 Filipinos.²⁷

4.2 Education

The passage of the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 (Republic Act 10533), which mandates additional two years of basic education, changed the education system and influenced the labour force participation of youth. The goal of the law is to meet the basic learning needs of students, essentially bringing the number of years similar to that of the global standards.²⁸ It mandates the implementation of the “K to 12 program”, which provides for one year of kindergarten, six years of elementary and six years of secondary education (from previously four years of secondary education). It also highlights the prospect of employability for the youth after fulfilling the senior high school (SHS). Analysis of data on the first graduates of SHS showed that a small proportion of the graduates (20 per cent) entered the labour market and most continued with tertiary education. The analysis also found mixed results on the performance of graduates of SHS compared to their peers.²⁹

The tertiary education of youth from age 15 onwards should be guaranteed through the enactment of the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act or Free Tuition Law (Republic Act 10931), which began in 2016 as a strategic investment in the human capital of the country. Under the Free Tuition Law, tuition and other school fees in state universities and colleges are free, as well as fees in local universities and colleges and state-run technical-vocational institutions. This law also aims to establish tertiary education subsidy and student loan programmes, and gives priority to students who are academically able but are financially challenged.³⁰ In sum, this policy gives free tuition in public higher education institutions (HEIs) and government-run technical-vocational training institutions,

²⁵ Demographic Research and Development Foundation and University of the Philippines Population Institute, *The 2013 Young Adult Fertility and Sexuality Study in the Philippines*, 2016, <https://www.drdf.org.ph/sites/default/files/YAFS4%20Monograph.pdf>.

²⁶ Republic Act 11036 “Mental Health Act,” https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2018/ra_11036_2018.html.

²⁷ Crystal Amiel Estrada et al., *Current situation and challenges for mental health focused on treatment and care in Japan and the Philippines - highlights of the training program by the National Center for Global Health and Medicine*, 03 August 2020, <https://bmcpoc.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12919-020-00194-0>.

²⁸ Republic Act 10533 “Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013,” <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2013/05/15/republic-act-no-10533/>.

²⁹ Aniceto C. Orbeta Jr. and Maropsil V. Potestad, *On the Employability of the Senior High School Graduates: Evidence from the Labor Force Survey*, Philippine Institute for Development Studies, December 2020, <https://pidswebs.pids.gov.ph/CDN/PUBLICATIONS/pidsdps2040.pdf>.

³⁰ Republic Act 10932 “Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act,” https://www.lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2017/ra_10931_2017.html.

and provides subsidies and has a student loan program. In its first year, the government has allotted PHP 40 billion (USD 824 million) in the 2018 General Appropriations Act.³¹ In a process evaluation of the first year of its implementation, an interesting observation is that the total enrolment in HEIs declined in the year when the implementation of senior high school started (as part of the K to 12 program). In the first year of the Free Tuition Law, public HEIs where fees are free were able to recover in terms of enrolment compared to the private HEIs. The main issue identified is with the service delivery and utilization of the programme, citing challenges in the billing requirements and delays in reimbursement.

Apart from the subsidy provided for in the Free Tuition Law, the institutionalization of the cash transfer programme of the government, called *Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program* (4Ps) through the enactment of the Republic Act 11310 in 2019, keeps children in school.³² As the national poverty reduction strategy and a form of social protection to the poorest of the poor families, one of the key provisions of the 4Ps program is the cash grant for the education of children and adolescents. The law provided PHP 500 (USD 10) per child enrolled in junior high school (for 10 months annually) and PHP 700 (USD 14) per adolescent enrolled in SHS (for 10 months annually). An earlier impact evaluation of the programme has observed that 4Ps' conditionality of school enrolment has increased the enrolment of youth aged 16-17 years in beneficiary households by 19 per cent.³³

4.3 Labour and Employment

Youth unemployment in the Philippines has been influenced by the implementation of the Enhanced Basic Education Act. Youth entering the labour force are mostly SHS graduates, with fewer who graduated from Grade 10 (junior high school) or who have completed their second year of tertiary education.³⁴ One explanation for this is that the average labour force participation rate of youth declines with higher socioeconomic status. While majority of the employed population are in the 25-37 age group (27 per cent), in July 2019, the youth population still accounted for 15.3 per cent of the employed population. Youth, as a segment of the population, still enters the labour force and compete in the labour market. The law that aims to assist those who will enter the labour force is the First Time Jobseekers Assistance Act (Republic Act 11261) enacted in 2018, which aims to lessen the financial burden to first-time job seekers in securing the necessary requirements to gain employment. Documents that can be processed for free for first-time job seekers include licenses, proof of identification, clearances and certificates.³⁵ The DOLE projected that the Act would benefit 1.3 million youth every year.³⁶

³¹ Ma. Kristina P. Ortiz et al., *Process Evaluation of the Universal Access to Quality Tertiary Education Act (RA 10931): Status and Prospects for Improved Implementation*, Philippine Institute for Development Studies, December 2019, <https://think-asia.org/bitstream/handle/11540/11543/pidsdps1936.pdf?sequence=1>.

³² Republic Act 11310 "Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps)," https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2019/ra_11310_2019.html.

³³ Asian Development Bank, *Impact Evaluation of the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program*, 2019, <https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/linked-documents/52257-001-sd-02.pdf>.

³⁴ Aniceto C. Orbeta Jr. and Maropsil V. Potestad, *On the Employability of the Senior High School Graduates: Evidence from the Labor Force Survey*, Philippine Institute for Development Studies, December 2020, <https://pidswebs.pids.gov.ph/CDN/PUBLICATIONS/pidsdps2040.pdf>.

³⁵ Republic Act 11261 "First Time Jobseekers Assistance Act," <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2019/04apr/20190410-RA-11261-RRD.pdf>.

³⁶ DOLE sets rules for first-time jobseekers preparing documents, requirements, *ABS-CBN News*, 13 July 2019, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/07/13/19/dole-sets-rules-for-first-time-jobseekers-preparing-documents-requirements>.

To encourage investment, facilitate job creation and improve the employment situation in the Philippines, the Congress passed the Ease of Doing Business and Efficient Government Service Delivery Act (Republic Act 11302) in 2018. The law seeks to improve processing time, eliminate bureaucratic red-tape, and decrease graft and corruption,³⁷ which may encourage investment from the private sector that will create new jobs. According to the National Economic and Development Authority (NEDA), the full implementation of the Ease of Doing Business Act can help boost economic growth and create thousands of jobs that might benefit youth. It is estimated to have contributed a 1.5 percentage point increase in the youth labour force participation rate in 2019.³⁸

Recognizing that technological advancement has paved the way to alternative work arrangements including or non face-to-face setups, and the need to uphold the rights of the workers, the Telecommuting Act was enacted in 2018. This law gave a definition of telecommuting in the labour laws and provided for fair treatment of those who are telecommuting with comparable or the same treatment as those who are office-based or on the work premises.³⁹ This law, however, mainly covers the business processing outsource industry and excludes other industries, depending on the needs or preferences of the business owners.

4.4 Participation

The right and capacity of youth to participate is guaranteed in the Philippine Constitution. One of the mechanisms that concretely institutionalizes this is the representation of the marginalized sector, including the youth, in the legislation through elections and providing seats in the lower house of the Congress. The Constitution and the Party-List System Act of 1995 (Republic Act 7941) explicitly defines the system to enable representation for Filipinos belonging to marginalized and under-represented sectors.⁴⁰ However, in 2013, the Supreme Court ruled that the parties or organizations vying for seats in the Congress do not need to be organized along sectoral lines, nor do they have to represent marginalized or underrepresented sectors.⁴¹ This ruling, according to one parliamentarian, “is not consistent with the spirit of the law” for marginalized sectors’ representation – among them is the youth sector.”⁴²

At the local government level, youth representation in governance is through the *Sangguniang Kabataan*, which translates as Council of Youth. Initially, the Local Government Code of 1991 (Republic Act 7160) stated that youth vying for the election should be at least 15 years old but not more than 21 years old on the election day.⁴³ A more recent amendment in the *Sangguniang Kabataan* Reform Act of 2015

³⁷ Republic Act 11032 “Ease of Doing Business and Efficient Government Service Delivery Act of 2018,” https://www.lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2018/ra_11032_2018.html.

³⁸ National Economic and Development Authority, *PH employment numbers continue to improve in July 2019*, 05 September 2019, <https://www.neda.gov.ph/ph-employment-numbers-continue-to-improve-in-july-2019/>.

³⁹ Republic Act 11165 “Telecommuting Act,” https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra2018/ra_11165_2018.html.

⁴⁰ Republic Act 7941 “Party-List System Act,” <https://pcw.gov.ph/republic-act-7941-party-list-system-act/>.

⁴¹ Purple S. Romero, “SC shakes up party list in new verdict,” *Rappler*, 05 April 2013, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/sc-partylist-system-is-not-solely-for-marginalized>.

⁴² Jose Cielito Reganit, “18th Congress should ‘seriously’ review party-list system: solon,” *Philippine News Agency*, 22 May 2019, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1070408>.

⁴³ Republic Act 7160 “Local Government Code of 1991,” https://www.lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra1991/ra_7160_1991.html.

(Republic Act 10742) increased the age requirement to at least 18 years old but not more than 24 years old.⁴⁴ This reform in youth representation at the level of the barangay (village) was an effort from the parliamentarians and the government to curb corruption, as the youth officials have criminal and administrative liability due to their age; and to potentially address political dynasty, as this is the first law that has an anti-dynasty provision. An earlier assessment of the Sangguniang Kabataan Reform Act, prior to its amendment, reported that its 10-year performance has been generally weak in terms of creating local legislations, promoting development of young people, submitting of reports and holding consultation with their constituents – their fellow youth.⁴⁵

Another mechanism in governance that provides for youth participation and representation is basic sector representation at the national level in the National Anti-Poverty Council (NAPC), as mandated by the Social Reform and Poverty Alleviation Act (Republic Act 8425).⁴⁶ At the city and municipal level, potential space for youth participation is the Local Council for the Protection of Children (LCPC), as mandated by the Children and Youth Welfare Code (Presidential Decree 603). The Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) has explicitly defined that civil society organizations sitting in the LCPC can be a child or youth organization recognized by the local government unit.⁴⁷



⁴⁴ Republic Act 10742 "Sangguniang Kabataan Reform Act of 2015," <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2016/01/15/republic-act-no-10742/>.

⁴⁵ Faye Balanon et al., *The Impact of Youth Participation in the Local Government Process*, UNICEF, January 2007, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/282866168_The_Impact_of_Youth_Participation_in_the_Local_Government_Process.

⁴⁶ Republic Act 8425 "Social Reform and Poverty Alleviation Act," https://lawphil.net/statutes/repacts/ra1997/ra_8425_1997.html.

⁴⁷ Department of Interior and Local Government, *Comprehensive guidelines for the establishment, strengthening, and monitoring of the Local Council for the Protection of Children (LCPC) at all levels and for other purposes*, (n.a.), https://www.dilg.gov.ph/PDF_File/issuances/memo_circulars/dilg-memocircular-2020214_29b8e107f7.pdf.

5. FILIPINO YOUTH AMIDST THE PANDEMIC

5.1 Health

Teenage pregnancy is considered as the most important problem of Filipino women today, based on a survey in 2020. The fourth quarter of 2020 survey on Social Weather Stations (SWS) shows that 59 per cent of adult Filipinos say that following teenage pregnancy, the most important problems of women today are physical violence and unexpected pregnancy (both at 11 per cent).⁴⁸ The increase of teenage pregnancies has been steady in the country since 2011, according to POPCOM. The University of the Philippines' Population Institute (UPPI) and UNFPA project a possible increase of 18,000 teenage pregnancies in the country due to the lack of services brought about by the lockdowns. Apart from the increase in unintended pregnancies, UPPI estimates also showed a decline in access to maternal and child health services and an increase in unmet need for modern contraception, maternal mortality, and intimate partner violence.⁴⁹ The Plan International survey of girls and young women shows that there is a lack of information on where sexual and reproductive health services could be accessed during the community quarantine.⁵⁰

In addition to this, the Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS) pointed out that the pandemic has blocked the access to testing and treatment services for people living with HIV. A survey in April 2020 showed the most common barriers encountered by people living with HIV is the transportation and delivery of HIV treatment and services (67 per cent) combined with difficulty of mobility through checkpoints and crossing borders (58 per cent).⁵¹ As such, UNAIDS sees the possibility of "second wave" of HIV epidemic in the Philippines, noting the observed upward trend among the youth aged 15-24 years across Asia and the Pacific.⁵² Aside from teenage pregnancies and HIV cases, mental health concerns are aggravated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Global data indicates that those aged 5-29 years are the most vulnerable population to suffer with mental health concerns. In the Philippines, mental health crisis hotlines have seen a significant increase of monthly calls that they receive, going from 80 calls monthly pre-pandemic to almost 400 calls monthly during the community quarantine.⁵³

⁴⁸ Social Weather Stations, *Fourth Quarter 2020 Social Weather Survey Items for the Commission on Population and Development (POPCOM): Early teenage pregnancy tops the most important problems of women today*, 17 February 2021, <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmainartcldisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20210217122106>.

⁴⁹ Dona Z. Pazzibugan, "Teen pregnancies could rise during pandemic - Popcom," *INQUIRER*. Net, 11 February 2021, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1394522/popcom-covid-curbs-could-worsen-teen-pregnancies>.

⁵⁰ Plan International, *Through Her Lens: The Impact of COVID-19 on Filipino Girls and Young Women*, 15 October 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/philippines/through-her-lens-impact-covid-19-filipino-girls-and-young-women>.

⁵¹ Xavier Javines Bilon, *Treatment and care for everyone: People living with HIV in the Philippines in the time of COVID-19 - Survey results and recommendations*, 06 April 2020, <https://www.ph.undp.org/content/dam/philippines/docs/hiv-survey-covid19/HIV-COVID19%20-%20Survey%20Results%20-%202020-04-06.pdf>.

⁵² CNN Philippines, *UNAIDS sees 'second wave' of HIV epidemic in PH as COVID-19 blocks access to services*, 17 July 2020, <https://www.cnn.ph/news/2020/7/7/hiv-second-wave-epidemic-philippines-coronavirus-.html>.

⁵³ World Health Organization, *DOH and WHO promote holistic mental health wellness in light of World Suicide Prevention Day*, 10 September 2020, <https://www.who.int/philippines/news/detail/10-09-2020-doh-and-who-promote-holistic-mental-health-wellness-in-light-of-world-suicide-prevention-day>.

Even before the pandemic, three in five children had experienced physical violence, and two in five experienced sexual violence in their childhood based on the National Baseline Study on Violence Against Children in 2016.⁵⁴ Violence and abuse continue and might have been exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic brought on by the adverse effects of joblessness and fear of contracting the virus. The Philippine National Police (PNP) and Philippine Commission on Women (PCW) reported a total of 11,015 cases of violence against children from 15 March to December 2020.⁵⁵ In addition, 2,678 cases of child rights violations were reported to PNP, including rape, acts of lasciviousness, child abuse and exploitation from 15 March to 15 June 2020.⁵⁵ There also has been an increase in cases of online sexual abuse and exploitation of children by 264 per cent, as reported by the Department of Justice. Supporting these reported cases, Plan International's survey of Filipino girls and young women shows that 5 per cent of them have seen cases of violence inside their homes, while 17 per cent observed it outside their homes. Strikingly, 56 per cent of the respondents witnessed cases of violence against women and girls in social media or television.⁵⁸

5.2 Education

In the Philippines, as in most of the countries in the world, education has been greatly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The delivery of education changed to mainly remote or distance learning through modules. Despite the reservations with remote learning, there is still high enrolment rate. The enrolment in the academic year 2020-2021, as of October 2020 covered about 90 per cent (or 25.03 million students) of the 2019-2020 enrolment of 27.7 million students. Of enrolled students in 2020-2021, 22.75 million students were enrolled in the public school system (exceeding the 2019-2020 enrolment of 22.5 million), and 2.22 million were enrolled in private schools in 2020-2021, which was 51.66 per cent of the previous year's turnout). Almost half a million students were enrolled under the Alternative Learning System.⁵⁹ In a study published by the Economic Policy Research Institute in the Philippines, girls and young women are said to be more likely enrolled in academic years 2019-2020 and 2020-2021, compared to their male counterparts.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ UNICEF, *National Baseline Study on Violence against Children: Philippines*, October 2016, [https://www.unicef.org/philippines/media/491/file/National%20Baseline%20Study%20on%20Violence%20Against%20Children%20in%20the%20Philippines:%20Results%20\(executive%20summary\).pdf](https://www.unicef.org/philippines/media/491/file/National%20Baseline%20Study%20on%20Violence%20Against%20Children%20in%20the%20Philippines:%20Results%20(executive%20summary).pdf).

⁵⁵ *Report on the implementation of Republic Act No. 11494 or the Bayanihan to Recover as One Act*, 04 January 2021, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2020/12dec/20210104-Report-on-the-Implementation-of-Republic-Act-No-11494-or-the-Bayanihan-to-Recover-as-One-Act.pdf>.

⁵⁶ Dona Z. Pazzibugan, "Teen pregnancies could rise during pandemic - Popcom," *INQUIRER*. Net, 11 February 2021, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1394522/popcom-covid-curbs-could-worsen-teen-pregnancies>.

⁵⁷ Anti-Money Laundering Council, *Online Sexual Exploitation of Children: A crime with a global impact and an evolving transnational threat*, 20 August 2020, <http://www.amlc.gov.ph/images/PDFs/2020%20AUG%20AMLC%20OSEC%20AN%20EMERGING%20RISK%20AMID%20THE%20COVID19%20PANDEMIC.pdf>.

⁵⁸ Plan International, *Through Her Lens: The Impact of COVID-19 on Filipino Girls and Young Women*, 15 October 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/philippines/through-her-lens-impact-covid-19-filipino-girls-and-young-women>.

⁵⁹ Merlina Hernando-Malipot, "DepEd reaches 90 percent of last year's enrollment with 25 million enrollees," *Manila Bulletin*, 26 October 2020, <https://mb.com.ph/2020/10/26/depd-reaches-90-percent-of-last-years-enrollment-with-25-m-enrollees/>.

⁶⁰ Economic Policy Research Institute, *The Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Households in the National Capital Regions of the Philippines*, 10 December 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/philippines/reports/impact-covid-19-crisis-households-national-capital-region-philippines>.

In November 2020, the SWS Survey showed that an overwhelming majority (80 per cent) of enrolled students are participating in modular distance learning (23.8 million).⁶¹ Six in ten students (58 per cent) use devices, while four in ten do not use devices.⁶² For those who are not enrolled, lack of money and lack of the technology needed are the most common hindrances.⁶³ In-depth interviews conducted following the survey revealed that barriers for utilizing technology in remote learning include the costs for service, having old phones, and the need to share phones in their households.

During the pandemic, the number of hours spent on studying by Filipino girls and young women significantly decreased.⁶⁴ The survey conducted by Plan International showed that 20 per cent of girls and young women allot less than an hour to study a day, 28 per cent set aside one to two hours a day to study, and only 12 per cent set aside three to five hours to study a day. A rapid assessment of World Vision Philippines suggests that girls appear to spend more time (0.64) studying than boys (0.42).⁶⁵ A Plan International study revealed that Internet connectivity issues and household work are among the main challenges that make it difficult to study at home. The same respondents pointed out that education is among the aspects of their life most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, with one in two girls and young women worrying about the limited chances of going back to school.⁶⁶

School closure was also found to be one of the factors that contributed to teenage pregnancy. A study by the Department of Science and Technology – National Research Council of the Philippines showed that the COVID-19 pandemic and the subsequent closure of schools in March 2020 has made young girls vulnerable to unintended pregnancies due to the absence of the protective setting afforded to them by the schools. The pandemic may not be the sole cause of teenage pregnancy, but school closures along with issues within the family and lack of access to sexual and reproductive health and education contribute to it.

5.3 Labour and Employment

The youth unemployment rate in the Philippines increased by half in the pandemic year. In July 2019 the youth unemployment rate was 14.7 per cent, rising to a youth unemployment rate of 22.4 per cent in July 2020, reflecting a 55 per cent increase (1.7 million Filipinos aged 15–24 years).⁶⁸ The unemployed Filipino youth in 2020 accounted for 27 per cent of the youth employment population.⁶⁹ The NCR,

⁶¹ Social Weather Stations, *Fourth Quarter 2020 Social Weather Survey on Learning Delivery Modalities (Part 1): 87% of school-age Filipinos are currently enrolled in school, mostly in elementary and through Modular Distance Learning*, 24 February 2021, <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artclisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20210224084847>.

⁶² Social Weather Stations, *Fourth Quarter 2020 Social Weather Survey on Learning Delivery Modalities (Part 2): 58% of enrolled school-age Filipinos use devices for distance learning*, 01 March 2021, <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artclisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20210301220424>.

⁶³ Economic Policy Research Institute, *The Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Households in the National Capital Regions of the Philippines*, 10 December 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/philippines/reports/impact-covid-19-crisis-households-national-capital-region-philippines>.

⁶⁴ Plan International, *Through Her Lens: The Impact of COVID-19 on Filipino Girls and Young Women*, 15 October 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/philippines/through-her-lens-impact-covid-19-filipino-girls-and-young-women>.

⁶⁵ World Vision, *Impact of COVID-19 to Children and Their Families: A Rapid Assessment in the Philippines*, June 2020, <https://www.worldvision.org.ph/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/WVDF-COVID-19-Rapid-Assessment.pdf>.

⁶⁶ Plan International, *Through Her Lens: The Impact of COVID-19 on Filipino Girls and Young Women*, 15 October 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/philippines/through-her-lens-impact-covid-19-filipino-girls-and-young-women>.

⁶⁷ Department of Science and Technology – National Research Council of the Philippines (DOST-NRCP), *What causes early pregnancy in the Philippines during the pandemic?*, 11 February 2021, <https://nrpc.dost.gov.ph/latest-news/683-what-causes-early-pregnancy-in-the-philippines-during-the-pandemic>.

⁶⁸ Philippine Statistics Authority, *Labor Force Survey July 2020 Round (Preliminary Results)*, 04 September 2020, <https://psa.gov.ph/content/labor-force-survey-july-2020-round-preliminary-results>.

⁶⁹ International Labour Organization, *COVID-19 labour market impact in the Philippines: Assessment and National Policy Responses*, 27 November 2020, https://www.ilo.org/manila/publications/WCMS_762209/lang-en/index.htm.

where the strictest community quarantine protocols have been implemented, including restricting individuals age 21 years old and younger from going out of their homes,⁷⁰ garnered the worst youth unemployment rate at 32.1 per cent. In the last quarter of 2019, 9 per cent of the working youth were in their first job, which put them in a more vulnerable position as the pandemic began. The youth unemployment rate was oftentimes higher than adult unemployment rate during economic contractions due to lack of job tenure.

Most working youth affected by the COVID-19 pandemic are from wholesale and retail trades, accommodation and food service, construction, and transportation and storage.⁷¹ The assessment of the International Labour Organization (ILO) in 2020 suggests that half of the total disruption (58 per cent) is accounted for by men who are specifically at risk in jobs such as construction, transportation and storage, and manufacturing. The affected young women are mostly in wholesale and retail trades, accommodation, and food service sectors. In the Global Survey on Youth and COVID-19, published by ILO and the Global Initiative on Decent Jobs for the Youth, Filipino working youth reported a reduction of 14 per cent in their working hours. Young women had an 18 per cent decrease in their working hours compared to 9 per cent decrease in the working hours of young men.⁷² A separate study by Plan International shows that 10 per cent of working girls and young women spends one to two hours a day working, while 7 per cent works longer with three to five hours a day. Most are working as teachers or tutors, or in marketing, sales and service sectors.⁷³ With the Philippines placing sixth for fastest growing gig economy in the world,⁷⁴ many youth are also working freelance or in the gig economy, and may have lost their projects, leading to more youth in positions of financial insecurity.⁷⁵

The COVID-19 has impacted work-based learning, particularly apprenticeships and internship programmes, which mostly cater to youth. Three quarters of apprenticeships and internships in the Philippines were entirely displaced by the pandemic, as the economic downturn made it difficult for companies to continue giving wages or stipends. An ILO and Asian Development Bank study in 2020 noted that the biggest challenges faced by firms to maintain work-based learning programmes included “difficulties in delivering hands-on training, infrastructure issues... and cost.”⁷⁶ Supporting this, the Rapid Assessment Survey on the Impact of COVID-19/ECQ to Technical-Vocational Institutions (TVIs) of the Technical Education and Skills Development Authority found that 99 per cent of TVIs in the Philippines closed temporarily, while the one per cent cited permanent closures. Moreover, 34 per cent of the TVIs surveyed no longer have the capacity to continue operations.⁷⁷

⁷⁰ Bloomberg News, “Filipino youth bears brunt of PHL’s unemployment pains,” *Business Mirror*, 13 September 2020, <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2020/09/13/filipino-youth-bears-brunt-of-phls-unemployment-pains/>.

⁷¹ International Labour Organization, *COVID-19 labour market impact in the Philippines: Assessment and National Policy Responses*, 27 November 2020, https://www.ilo.org/manila/publications/WCMS_762209/lang--en/index.htm.

⁷² International Labour Organization, *Youth & COVID-19: Impacts on jobs, education, rights and mental well-being*, 11 August 2020, https://www.ilo.org/global/topics/youth-employment/publications/WCMS_753026/lang--en/index.htm.

⁷³ Plan International, *Through Her Lens: The Impact of COVID-19 on Filipino Girls and Young Women*, 15 October 2020, https://reliefweb.int/report/philippines/through-her-lens-impact-covid-19-filipino-girls-and-young-women.org/global/topics/youth-employment/publications/WCMS_753026/lang--en/index.htm.

⁷⁴ Jovee Marie De La Cruz, Lawmakers call for passage of ‘gig economy’ measures, *Business Mirror*, 13 February 2020, <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2020/02/13/lawmakers-call-for-passage-of-gig-economy-measures/>.

⁷⁵ Fritzie Rodriguez, *The Fragile State of Unemployed Youth During COVID-19*, 03 June 2020, <https://plan-international.org/blog/2020/06/fragile-state-unemployed-youth-during-covid-19>.

⁷⁶ International Labour Organization and Asian Development Bank, *Tackling the COVID-19 Youth employment Crisis in Asia and the Pacific*, p. 17, August 2020, <https://www.adb.org/publications/covid-19-youth-employment-crisis-asia-pacific>.

⁷⁷ International Labour Organization, *COVID-19 labour market impact in the Philippines: Assessment and National Policy Responses*, 27 November 2020, https://www.ilo.org/manila/publications/WCMS_762209/lang--en/index.htm.

5.4 Participation

The mobility restrictions of community quarantine protocols affected the youth participation in various spaces. However, youth's advanced knowledge and skills in navigating new technologies, the Internet, and online platforms and applications appear to serve to their advantage during the pandemic. As youth are more inclined to participate in informal political processes, such as activism, protests and campaigns,⁷⁸ youth has been active in numerous volunteer organizations. For instance, VSO Youth Network's response to COVID-19 in Mindanao in Southern Philippines supported the Youth Engagement and Network Strengthening (YES) in partnership with UNICEF and local partners. Youth leaders trained by YES started initiating their own relief efforts and sharing their voices through U-Report polls.⁷⁹ Another example of youth participation is the effort of Y-PEER Pilipinas, called #GetCondomPh, to help address the difficulty in accessing reproductive health commodities.⁸⁰ This is available in Metro Manila where youth can register on a website to request contraceptives to be delivered to their addresses. In addition, to help provide information even if youth have to stay at home, Y-PEER also launched the #QuaranTALK, a series of webinars with topics ranging from puberty and bodily changes, contraceptives and family planning commodities, to dealing with peer pressure and stress.⁸¹

Through the *Sangguniang Kabataan*, youth were also able to help respond to the pandemic and its effects through, for example, providing online sensitization by sharing infographics about COVID-19, addressing fake news and misinformation, sharing innovations to produce face masks and shields, and distributing relief goods.⁸² Another initiative, started in April 2021 a private individual in Metro Manila,⁸³ is community pantries, which are community-initiated food banks in available public spaces such as sidewalks and plazas where people can leave donations or contributions including food and other essentials, and people in need can get what they need from these locations. Several community pantries around the country were inspired by the initial community pantries, and youth organizations started their own, such as one in Cagayan in Northern Philippines⁸⁴ in Cebu,⁸⁵ and in Lanao in Southern Philippines.⁸⁶ As the community quarantine slowly eased, student and youth activism in the streets gradually become visible again, with protesting and calling for accountability in several governance concerns, such as the enactment of the Anti-Terrorism Act of 2020, which was perceived as inept handling of the pandemic and disaster response when strong typhoons hit the country, and the continued challenges in remote learning, among others concerns.⁸⁷

⁷⁸ United Nations Development Program, *Enhancing Youth Political Participation throughout the Electoral Cycle*, 30 October 2015, <https://www.undp.org/publications/enhancing-youth-political-participation-throughout-electoral-cycle>.

⁷⁹ Alice Chadwick, *Rapid research: VSO youth networks' response to COVID-19*, June 2020, <https://www.vsointernational.org/sites/default/files/2020-12/vso-youth-networks-and-covid-19.pdf>.

⁸⁰ Interview with Y-PEER Pilipinas, 09 February 2021, conducted via Zoom; UN SDSN Youth - Philippines Facebook Page, <https://www.facebook.com/SDSNYouthPH/photos/a.1656886087972359/2594867627507529/?type=3&source=57>.

⁸¹ Videos available online at Y-PEER Pilipinas Facebook page: [facebook.com/ypeerpilipinas](https://www.facebook.com/ypeerpilipinas).

⁸² Rehtie Paculba, "Youth's COVID-19, teenage pregnancy response wraps up Dagyaw 2020," *Philippine Information Agency*, <https://pia.gov.ph/news/articles/1058298>.

⁸³ "This woman set up a community pantry in Maginhawa to help those in need," *GMA News Online*, 14 April 2021, <https://www.gmanetwork.com/news/hashtag/content/783691/this-woman-set-up-a-community-pantry-in-maginhawa-to-help-those-in-need/story/>.

⁸⁴ Anjo Bagaoisan, "'Learners pantry' atbp, itinayo ng youth organization sa Cagayan." *ABS-CBN News*, 03 May 2021, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/05/03/21/learners-pantry-atbp-itinayo-ng-youth-organization-sa-cagayan>.

⁸⁵ Caecent No-ot Magsumbol, "Youth leaders set up eco pantry," *The Freeman*, 24 April 2021, <https://www.philstar.com/the-freeman/cebu-news/2021/04/24/2093438/youth-leaders-set-eco-pantry>.

⁸⁶ Riz P. Sunio, "Youths initiate setting up of community pantries in Lanao," *MindaNews*, 21 April 2021, <https://www.mindanews.com/top-stories/2021/04/youths-initiate-setting-up-of-community-pantries-in-lanao/>.

⁸⁷ Bonz Magsambol, "The personal is political: Student leaders take their voices to the streets," *Rappler*, 30 November 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/in-depth/personal-political-student-leaders-philippines-take-voices-to-streets-covid-19-pandemic>.

6. POLICY RESPONSES TO COVID-19: ARE YOUTH CONSIDERED?

The two key legislations passed as a responses to the COVID-19 pandemic are the *Bayanihan* To Heal as One Act (Republic Act 11469 or Bayanihan 1) and the *Bayanihan* to Recover as One Act (Republic Act 11494 or *Bayanihan* 2). *Bayanihan* 1 declared a state of national emergency for the entire country in response to COVID-19.⁸⁸ It has provided the President with powers to carry out temporary emergency measures. One of its most important provisions is the Social Amelioration Program (SAP) which aims to provide an emergency subsidy to around 18 million low-income households amounting to a minimum of PHP 5,000 (USD 103) to a maximum of PHP 8,000 (USD 165) a month for two months. It also upheld the earlier Executive Order of the President that limited transportation and pushed for alternative working arrangements for both the public and private sectors.⁸⁹

Bayanihan 2 addresses the reopening of the economy. In trying to deal with what is deemed as the 'new normal', it has allocated PHP 140 billion (USD 286 million) to reduce the adverse impacts of COVID-19 on the socioeconomic wellbeing of Filipinos and to mitigate the economic costs and losses.⁹⁰ With this, it continues the SAP and subsidies provided for in *Bayanihan* 1, and expands the unemployment assistance to contractual employees in various sectors.

These two policies grant special powers to the President to respond to the pandemic and provided for the biggest social protection measures through the SAP. However, in September 2021, even with the support of parliamentarians, a proposed Bayanihan to Arise as One bill (*Bayanihan* 3) that aims to provide a PHP 420 billion stimulus package for the economic recovery of the country, of which PHP 108 billion is allotted for the SAP,⁹¹ the Department of Finance Secretary said that the government is still deficit in the funding needed by this proposed bill.⁹² This suggests that while the community quarantine continues country-wide, subsidy from the government may not follow. Despite the goal of SAP to reach the poorest of the poor who are the most vulnerable during the pandemic, a survey showed that, while majority of households (58 per cent) in the NCR have received SAP, a minority (24 per cent) of households in need did not (even if they should have received it).⁹³ In addition to these two legislations, a key policy imposed by the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF) is "age-based stay-at-home restriction" on the mobility of those who are younger than 15 years old.

⁸⁸ Republic Act 11468 "Bayanihan to Heal As One Act," <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2020/03/24/republic-act-no-11469/>.

⁸⁹ Office of the President, *Memorandum from the Executive Secretary on Community Quarantine Over the Entire Luzon and Further Guidelines for the Management of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation*, 16 March 2020, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2020/03/16/memorandum-from-the-executive-secretary-on-community-quarantine-over-the-entire-luzon-and-further-guidelines-for-the-management-of-the-coronavirus-disease-2019-covid-19-situation/>.

⁹⁰ Republic Act 11494 "Bayanihan to Recover as One Act," <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2020/09/11/republic-act-no-11494/>.

⁹¹ Filane Mikee Cervantes, "Over 200 solons back Bayanihan 3 bill," *Philippine News Agency*, 16 February 2021, <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1130871>.

⁹² Bernadette D. Nicolas, "Despite robust tax take, Bayanihan 3 funds hang," *Business Mirror*, 09 September 2021, <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2021/09/09/despite-robust-tax-take-bayanihan-3-funds-hang/>.

⁹³ Economic Policy Research Institute, *The Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Households in the National Capital Regions of the Philippines*, 10 December 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/philippines/reports/impact-covid-19-crisis-households-national-capital-region-philippines>.

6.1 Health

As *Bayanihan* 1 and 2 are the primary responses to a health crisis, these two policies have a number of provisions on contact tracing and supporting health care workers on the front lines. Yet, when it comes to SRH of youth, no support was specifically mentioned. The Executive branch of the DOH has issued guidelines on the continuous provision of family planning services, including counselling for teenage mothers below the age of 18 years.⁹⁴ Additional guidelines released by DOH are on the provision of primary care service packages and individual health care packages, including care for pregnant women, prenatal and immediate postpartum care, and family planning services across life stages, including youth and adolescents.⁹⁵ Despite these efforts, the survey conducted by SWS still shows that teenage pregnancy remains the top challenge being faced by women, and a staggering 70 per cent have not used family planning methods in the past six months.⁹⁶ POPCOM noted that, in the worst-case scenario, 750,000 unplanned births are to be expected, and the crude birth rate (CBR) is 1.5.⁹⁷ The agency reiterated that teenage pregnancy is a national social emergency. As such, it mobilizes local government units to give access to family planning methods to teenagers and advocates for the enactment of a Teenage Pregnancy Prevention Bill. When enacted, this bill will provide a multitude of interventions to prevent teenage pregnancy, particularly access to contraceptives without parental consent; and will give social protection to adolescents, such as continuous provision of education.⁹⁸

During COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an increase of gender-based violence (GBV), dubbed as the 'shadow pandemic'. While *Bayanihan* 1 and 2 have no specific provision on GBV, the implementation of the *Bayanihan* 2 report of the President to the Congress contains data on the assistance provided to women, children and other vulnerable groups. In December 2020, the Philippine National Police (PNP) in partnership with the Philippine Commission on Women (PCW) reported that since the start of the implementation of the community quarantine there have been 9,302 cases of recorded violence against women and 11,015 cases of violence against children.⁹⁹ While *Bayanihan* 1 and 2 did not address GBV in the context of the pandemic, PCW and DSWD have released department issuances to continue services to survivors of GBV. The PCW partners with other agencies to address GBV and to ensure that survivors access legal and support services.¹⁰⁰ DSWD has released a COVID-19 Response and Recovery Plan 2020-2022, which outlines activities and support services to survivors of GBV.¹⁰¹

⁹⁴ Department of Health, *Department Memorandum 2020-0222 Continuous Provision of Family Planning Services during Enhanced Community Quarantine following the COVID-19 Pandemic*, 30 April 2020, <http://familyplanning2020.org/sites/default/files/COVID/Guidelines-Continuous-Provision-FP-Services-Enhanced-Community-Quarantine-COVID-19-Pandemic.pdf>.

⁹⁵ Department of Health, AO No. 2020-0040 Guidelines on the Classification of Individual-based and Population-based Primary Care Service Packages, 07 September 2020, <https://hfsrb.doh.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2020/10/AO-2020-0047.pdf>.

⁹⁶ Social Weather Stations, *Fourth Quarter 2020 Social Weather Survey Items for the Commission on Population and Development (POPCOM): Early teenage pregnancy tops the most important problems of women today*, 17 February 2021, <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artclisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20210217122106>.

⁹⁷ Interview with POPCOM, 15 February 2021, conducted via Zoom.

⁹⁸ Commission on Population and Development, *POPCOM: Number of girls 10-14 y/o who give birth continue to rise*, 06 March 2021, <https://popcom.gov.ph/?p=759>.

⁹⁹ Implementing Guidelines of Republic Act No. 11494, "An Act providing for COVID-19 response and recovery interventions and providing mechanisms to accelerate the recovery and bolster the resiliency of the Philippine Economy, providing funds therefor, and for other purposes," 03 November 2020, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2020/12dec/20210104-Report-on-the-Implementation-of-Republic-Act-No-11494-or-the-Bayanihan-to-Recover-as-One-Act.pdf>.

¹⁰⁰ Philippine Commission on Women, *MC No. 2020-03, Adjustment and/or Implementation of the FY 2020 GAD Plan and Budget in view of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 Situation*, 27 April 2020, <https://pcw.gov.ph/memorandum-circular-2020-03-adjustment-and-or-implementation-of-the-fy-2020-gad-plan-and-budget-in-view-of-the-coronavirus-disease-2019-situation/>.

¹⁰¹ Department of Social Welfare and Development, AO No. 2020-03 Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) COVID-19 Response and Recovery Plan (2020-2022), 29 April 2020, https://www.dswd.gov.ph/issuances/AOs/AO_2020-003.pdf.

The mental health of youth has also suffered during the lockdown. The results of the 2020 Longitudinal Cohort Study on the Filipino Child on the Impact of COVID-19 on young people and SDGs showed that there was increased anxiety among adolescents during the pandemic.¹⁰² The study also reported worsening health during the period. With mental healthcare remaining under-resourced and lacking formal structure, despite the enactment of the Mental Health Act, logistical challenges have to be addressed in order to respond to the anxiety caused by the lockdown.¹⁰³

6.2 Education

Bayanihan 1 and 2 did not explicitly mention a programme to address the situation of the youth in the pandemic, yet its provisions on SAP and budget suggests that there is some assistance targeted to youth. *Bayanihan* 1 provided for a budget augmentation of the DSWD Assistance to Individuals in Crisis Situations (AICS). Students-in-crisis are identified to be one of the beneficiaries. These students are defined as those who are breadwinners or working students, children orphaned or abandoned and now living with relatives, children of indigent solo parents, unemployed parents or overseas Filipino parents who are not supporting their families. Also considered as students-in-crisis are children with HIV or whose parents have HIV, and those who are victims of abuse or displacement.¹⁰⁴ Assistance to qualified students is provided for in *Bayanihan* 2. This is in the form of subsidies and allowances that should be given to students who are neither part of Listahanan (a list of the poorest of the poor families in the Philippines) or are not covered by other programmes. However, a recent study in the NCR shows that households who are part of the *Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program* (4Ps) were unaware of having received the SAP, and some even expressed frustration on how the beneficiaries were selected.¹⁰⁵

In addition to AICS and allowances and subsidies, *Bayanihan* 2 provides for budget augmentation in school-based feeding programmes, digital education and digital infrastructure, support to alternative learning modalities, and printing and delivery of learning modules under DepEd. Similarly, for youth in tertiary education, *Bayanihan* 2 also mandates the Commission on Higher Education (CHED) to invest in ICT infrastructure and to acquire learning management systems in order to implement flexible learning modalities for students. This law also provides exemption for import duties and taxes for equipment that will be used in schools. There are also allotted budget to assist state universities and colleges, subsidies and allowances to qualified students, and additional scholarship funds for technical-vocational programmes.

One of the uncertainties brought about by the pandemic is the reopening of schools and academic year. In July 2020, months into the pandemic, the Congress passed an act to lengthen the school calendar from two hundred days to 220 days. One provision of this law is in the event of a national emergency, which is the case of the COVID-19 pandemic, the President may set a different date for the opening of classes. DepEd has raised on more than one occasion the possibility of a face-to-face classes and

¹⁰² UNFPA et al., *Longitudinal Cohort Study on the Filipino Child - Impact of COVID-19 on young people and SDG: Preliminary results* (Unpublished), 11 February 2020.

¹⁰³ John Lally et al., "Mental health legislation in the Philippines: Philippine Mental health Act," *BJPsych International*, August 2019, 16(3): 65-67, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC6646847/>.

¹⁰⁴ Department of Social Welfare and Development, *Memorandum Circular No. 24, s2020 "Amendment to Memorandum Circular No. 11, series of 2019 otherwise known as "The Revised Guidelines on the Implementation of the Assistance to Individuals in Crisis Situation,"* 19 October 2020, https://www.dswd.gov.ph/issuances/MCs/MC_2020-024.pdf.

¹⁰⁵ Economic Policy Research Institute, *The Impact of the COVID-19 Crisis on Households in the National Capital Regions of the Philippines*, 10 December 2020, <https://www.unicef.org/philippines/reports/impact-covid-19-crisis-households-national-capital-region-philippines>.

reopening of schools.¹⁰⁶ But the President has given a pronouncement that no face-to-face classes shall be held until the vaccine against COVID-19 becomes widely available in the Philippines.¹⁰⁷ One year into the community quarantine and along with the loosening of the restrictions, the Senate through a Senate Resolution has recommended the immediate launch of the pilot testing of face-to-face classes in 1,065 public schools around the country. The goal of the pilot test is to gather evidence on the ground to inform a framework for the safe reopening of schools, including health protocols, and to address what is deemed as “controversial quality of blended learning”.¹⁰⁸ Along with Venezuela, the Philippines is one of the only two countries without face-to-face classes.¹⁰⁹ But this situation will change when the President, through the recommendation of the DepEd, approves the pilot testing of face-to-face classes in 120 target schools starting 15 November 2021. However, this number declined due to the increasing number of cases in the location of the schools and in apprehension of local government units.¹¹⁰ Another encouraging development is that with the recognition of the government that safe reopening of schools can be achieved through vaccinating children and youth,¹¹¹ the DOH has started vaccinating youth younger than 18 years old with co-morbidity,¹¹² albeit still largely concentrated in Metro Manila.

6.3 Labour and Employment

During the restriction imposed in the second quarter of 2020, the gross domestic product (GDP) of the Philippines fell by 16.9 per cent along with an increase in the unemployment rate.¹¹³ The *Bayanihan* 1 mandated programmes to be provided to both formal and informal workers. These are the *Tulong Panghanapbuhay sa Ating* Disadvantaged/Displaced Workers (TUPAD) for the beneficiaries from the informal sector and COVID-19 Adjustment Measures Program (CAMP) for affected formal workers and for Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). Report of the President to the Congress in January 2021 indicated that the CAMP has already reached more than 1 million beneficiaries, while TUPAD has provided assistance to more than 900,000 informal workers.¹¹⁴ While these programmes do not specifically target the youth, the working youth might have benefited from them. Unfortunately, the report of the President does not provide age-disaggregated data on the beneficiaries of the programmes. Unlike provisions pertaining to the OFWs that are explicitly written in the law, there are no explicit mentions of the programme for youth employment or to cushion the impact of the pandemic on their economic wellbeing.

Other interventions for employment that DOLE is expected to implement are wage subsidies and cash-for-work programmes to generate employment and provide public services. UNFPA noted that

¹⁰⁶ Bonz Magsambol, “DepEd says 1,114 schools ‘nominated’ to join dry run of face-to-face classes,” *Rappler*, 16 December 2020, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/dep-ed-report-number-schools-nominated-join-dry-run-in-person-classes>.

¹⁰⁷ Bonz Magsambol, “Duterte rejects face-to-face classes until vaccines available in PH,” *Rappler*, 22 February 2021, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/duterte-rejects-face-to-face-classes-again>.

¹⁰⁸ Senate of the Philippines, *Resolution Expressing the Sense of the Senate to Recommend the Immediate Launch of the Pilot Testing of Localized Limited Face-to-Face Classes*, 01 March 2021, <http://legacy.senate.gov.ph/lisdata/3458931400!.pdf>.

¹⁰⁹ Mariejo S. Ramos, “Unicef exec: PH can take ‘school reopening’ lessons from Asian neighbors,” *Inquirer.net*, 09 September 2021 <https://globalnation.inquirer.net/198997/unicef-exec-ph-can-take-school-reopening-lessons-from-asian-neighbors>.

¹¹⁰ Christian Deiparine, “Face-to-face classes to start in 30 schools on November 15 — DepEd,” *PhilStar Global*, 19 October 2021 <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2021/10/19/2135227/face-face-classes-start-30-schools-november-15-deped>.

¹¹¹ Christian Deiparine, “More hospitals administer COVID-19 jabs on minors as expanded rollout begins,” *PhilStar Global*, 22 October 2021, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2021/10/22/2135952/more-hospitals-administer-covid-19-jabs-minors-expanded-rollout-begins>.

¹¹² Cristina Eloisa Bacig, “PH vaccination drive enters new phase—children, minors,” *Inquirer.net*, 19 October 2021, <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1503883/ph-vaccination-drive-enters-new-phase-children-minors>.

¹¹³ National Economic and Development Authority, *Joint statement of the Duterte administration’s economic managers on the Philippine economic performance for the fourth quarter and full-year of 2020*, 28 January 2021, <https://www.neda.gov.ph/joint-statement-of-the-duterte-administrations-economic-managers-on-the-philippine-economic-performance-for-the-fourth-quarter-and-full-year-of-2020/>.

¹¹⁴ *Report on the Implementation of Republic Act No. 11494 or the Bayanihan to Recover as One Act*, 04 January 2021, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2020/12dec/20210104-Report-on-the-Implementation-of-Republic-Act-No-11494-or-the-Bayanihan-to-Recover-as-One-Act.pdf>.

worldwide, youth are the sector of the population that is first to be laid off.¹¹⁵ This is why it is important that DOLE, as mandated by Bayanihan 2, has provided guidelines on alternative work arrangements.¹¹⁶ While the WFH or telecommuting may have posed challenges to youth in terms of Internet connectivity, it can be considered to have provided an opportunity to show that alternative work arrangements can work. WFH also lessens the time youth spent in commuting. It is, however, important to point out that WFH is only one of the alternative work schemes prescribed in the guidelines. As an alternative to termination of employees or closure, businesses may also opt to transfer employees, re-assign employees to other positions, reduce the working hours, rotate the job among employees, or partially close the business. With the provision on the partial closure of establishment, this could mean that some section of the population, including youth, may be laid-off or retrenched.

6.4 Participation

While *Bayanihan* 1 and 2 were enacted by the Philippine Congress in the middle of a lockdown wherein public consultation is limited, youth made sure that their voices were heard in the space where they deemed themselves free – the social media. Aside from the political representation of the youth in the institutional mechanisms such as the *Sangguniang Kabataan* and Partylist system, social media became a platform for youth to launch activities and express their opinions. In an interview with a youth leader of Y-PEER Pilipinas (Youth Peer Education Network Philippines), it was noted that they utilized the power of the social media to implement *E-Bahagi*, which they described as an online telehealth information system where adolescents and young people can share their issues, concerns and challenges during the pandemic.¹¹⁷ In addition to this, they were able to engage the DOH in the creation of an advisory for the continued access to antiretroviral (ARV) drugs for people living with HIV during the lockdown, which enables the use of courier services of ARVs and use of electronic appointment system for the HIV treatment hub.¹¹⁸

In addition to the efforts mentioned above, a consultation with adolescents nationwide was conducted on the proposed Adolescent Prevention Bill. The consultation, organized by UNFPA, POPCOM, and Philippine Legislators Committee on Population and Development (PLCPD), was timely given the continuous increase in the number of births to adolescents. One of the questions on the proposed bill during the consultation was on the role of the social workers, and a concern was expressed on dissemination of factual information on adolescent SRH during the pandemic.¹¹⁹ This suggests that given a space for participation, youth can provide inputs on the development of bills concerning them.

The Anti-Terrorism Act (Republic Act 11479) was enacted in June 2020, when the National Capital Region was still in the strongest category of community quarantine from the COVID-19 pandemic. This act raised strong concerns from different sectors of the society on the possible stifling of freedom of speech enshrined in the Constitution. Several petitions were filed before the Supreme Court to strike down provisions that would put youth in danger. The 14th petition filed came from university student

¹¹⁵ Interview with UNFPA, 23 February 2021, conducted via Zoom.

¹¹⁶ Department of Labor and Employment, *Labor Advisory No. 17 s.2020 "Guidelines on employment preservation upon the resumption of business operation,"* 16 May 2020, https://www.dole.gov.ph/php_assets/uploads/2020/05/Labor-Advisory-No.-17-20.pdf.

¹¹⁷ Interview with Y-PEER Pilipinas, 09 February 2021, conducted via Zoom.

¹¹⁸ Marites B. Paneda, "DOH ensures access of ARV drugs to PLHIV during enhanced community quarantine," *Philippine Information Agency*, 21 March 2020, <https://pia.gov.ph/news/articles/1036846>.

¹¹⁹ Philippine Legislators' Committee on Population and Development, *Amplified: Young Voices for Adolescent Health*, 26 February 2021, <https://fb.watch/3UU9utxX2g/>.

organizations arguing that youth is most at risk with the vagueness of the definition of terrorism in the law.¹²⁰ Another petition, the 29th petition filed before the Supreme Court, was filed by several officials of *Sangguniang Kabataan*, which echoed the arguments of other petitions filed by other sectors and argues that the act will infringe on several rights including right to peaceful assembly, association and even due process.¹²¹

The previous sub-sections discussed the policies at the national level. The Local Glance box explains how some of these policies are actually being implemented in one local government unit and how *Bayanihan* 1 and 2 responded to people on the ground.

Local Glance

The experience of Tabaco City during the pandemic

Bayanihan 1 provided for one month of the internal revenue allotment of the City of Tabaco¹²² in Southern Luzon in Bicol Region amounting to PHP 52 million (USD 1 million). This includes a provision that allows for the realignment of appropriations; the budget coming from the Gender and Development (GAD) fund that was previously being used for the **youth hub** was realigned for a learning hub. The youth hub was situated inside a school campus where youth could approach psychologists and guidance counsellors trained by POPCOM for sexual and reproductive health, and **youth ambassadors** for peer counselling, especially for youth on the edge of depression. While there is a mental health institution in the city, it is important for the youth hub with peer-to-peer counselling to be linked to the institution if needed. In terms of pregnancies, the increase in teenage pregnancies during the COVID-19 pandemic was not observed in those who were not cohabiting, but was observed among those who were cohabiting and on their second pregnancy. The city is focusing on making sure that if adolescents are unable to delay having their first children, then services and information will be provided to **plan their second pregnancy** through proper spacing. Contraceptives are available in the city health clinic.

With the lockdown and closure of schools, the youth hub was also closed. The **learning hub** was opened as a response to the difficulty experienced by learners with the modular learning. It is in partnership with the Office of the Vice President of the Philippines, wherein 10 students in need of help from Grades 1 to 8 were recommended by school principals to be invited to the learning hub for a walkthrough of the modules guided by two teachers. Gadgets were also available and social distancing observed.

Some youth working in the National Capital Region went home to Tabaco City when the lockdown started. With the **government internship program (GIP)** under DOLE, a fund was channelled to the LGU and these unemployed youth ages 18–35 years were employed in government agencies for a six-month period with minimum wage. Youth were also mobilized as **contact tracers** during the height of the lockdown.

One of the difficulties of mobilizing the youth during the pandemic was the resignation of *Sangguniang Kabataan* officers in several barangays in the city due to anxiety or the need to focus in adjusting to the new mode of learning. But what they did continue mobilizing youth to use the budget initially allocated to other projects for school needs such as school supplies and gadgets for students in need.

A creative way to facilitate the participation of the youth as an outlet for their anxiety during the pandemic is the **virtual activities of the city's Tabak Festival**. Activities with art and music, spoken poetry, film-making, and storytelling serve as a way to release the emotions of the youth and a way to present their creativity.

¹²⁰ Kristine Joy Patag, "Groups of Filipino youth join legal fight vs anti-terrorism law," *PhilStar*, 23 July 2020, <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/07/23/2030045/groups-filipino-youth-join-legal-fight-vs-anti-terrorism-law>.

¹²¹ Joel R. San Juan, "SK officials, youth leaders file 29th petition challenging anti-terrorism law," *Business Mirror*, 20 August 2020, <https://businessmirror.com.ph/2020/08/20/sk-officials-youth-leaders-file-29th-petition-challenging-anti-terrorism-law/>.

¹²² Interview with local government of City of Tabaco, 13 March 2021, conducted via Zoom.

7. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The Philippines has reaffirmed its commitment to the goals of the ICPD and the SDGs during the Nairobi Summit. It has committed to (1) implement policies on reproductive health care, including addressing teenage pregnancy, as well as universal health care, (2) accelerate efforts to maximize the demographic dividend, (3) reduce poverty, and (4) increase investment for reproductive health care.

The COVID-19 pandemic has posed new challenges to the youth. For youth going to school or university, there is the abrupt shift to distance or remote learning; for those who are working, the need for WFH necessitated stable connectivity; and the imposed mobility restrictions have affected the spaces for participation of the youth and has increased anxiety for some. These challenges are in addition to the already existing consistently high teenage pregnancy rate, difficulty in accessing sexual and reproductive health services, mental health concerns, and youth unemployment. *Bayanihan* 1 and 2, the key legislations responding to COVID-19, and other legislations enacted while the country was in lockdown did not specifically focus on addressing the impact of the pandemic on youth. Nevertheless, some of their provisions, along with several policies issued by the Executive branch, may have cushioned the impact experienced by youth. Recommendations in this section are informed by research or assessments referred to in this policy review, for which women and girls were consulted and stakeholders interviewed.

7.1 Health

The reproductive health law remains partially implemented and while the proposed Adolescent Prevention Act is still pending in the Congress, teenage pregnancy remains high, and COVID-19 exacerbated the difficulty of adolescents in accessing SRH services. Similar to reproductive health, the mental health of young Filipinos also suffered, with the mental health law yet to be fully implemented.

The RPRH law, the landmark law providing SRH services to Filipinos, still needs to be fully implemented. While it has had some success, an assessment of its performance shows that it is confronted with limited interagency coordination, budget vulnerability to political interference, and an insufficient workforce.¹²³ While the RPRH law is in agreement with adolescents' SRH rights, it still has some restrictive provisions, particularly on access to SRH for minors, argued to be a reflection of strong influence of conservative religious beliefs in the country.¹²⁴ Despite the increase in total health expenditure of the Philippines by 7.9 per cent to PHP 906 billion (USD 18.6 million) in 2019 from PHP 840 billion (USD 17.2 million) in 2018,¹²⁵ unintended pregnancies during the pandemic are still expected to increase according to projections of UPPI. Along with the consistently high rate of teenage pregnancy, there are projections

¹²³ Valerie Gilbert T. Ulep et al., *An Assessment of National-Level Governance of the Philippines' Responsible Parenthood and Reproductive Health Law: Trends and Ways Forward*, Philippine Institute for Development Studies, February 2021, <https://pidswebs.pids.gov.ph/CDN/PUBLICATIONS/pidsdps2109.pdf>.

¹²⁴ Junice L. D. Melgar et al., Assessment of country policies affecting reproductive health for adolescents in the Philippines, *Reproductive Health*, 2018, <https://reproductive-health-journal.biomedcentral.com/articles/10.1186/s12978-018-0638-9>.

¹²⁵ Philippine Statistics Authority, *Health Spending Grew by 10.9 percent in 2019*, 15 October 2020, <https://psa.gov.ph/content/health-spending-grew-109-percent-2019>.

of limited access to SRH services, and reports received by civil society organizations from youth on actual difficulty of accessing SRH commodities. Gender-based violence and violence against children also continue, as evident in the recorded cases by the government (which may still be underreported). Provision of SRH is absent in *Bayanihan* 1 and 2. However, policies issued by Executive agencies, provisions for budget realignment in *Bayanihan* 1 and 2, the extension of the budget of *Bayanihan* 1 and 2 (Republic Act 11519), and the extension of the 2020 Appropriations (Republic Act 11520) to 31 December 2021 can make up for this and can be instrumental in ensuring continuous provision of SRH and other health services.

Mental health of young Filipinos also suffered during the pandemic. In a dialogue with the DOH, young people who participated expressed mental health issues, including fears of falling ill and dying, and losing family members due to pandemic. The Mental Health Act, as well as its Implementing Rules and Regulations, is relatively new legislation, and stakeholders are still navigating and observing how the law can be applied at a national scale. When implemented, youth should be a priority group, along with the elderly.

Recommendations

• Government

The RPRH law should be fully implemented, especially in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic when the progress gained in previous years was compromised. It is indispensable to ensure the provision of SRH information, services and commodities for everyone, including youth. Legal and support services should be continuously made available to victims of GBV and violence against children. Girls and young women have expressed the need for the government to improve COVID-19 response plan through fund allocation to improve health care.¹²⁶ In terms of programmes, provision of water, sanitation and hygiene is recommended in densely populated areas and areas where there are a high number of cases of COVID-19.¹²⁷

The national government should also strive to implement the Mental Health Act, which is the landmark law that recognizes that mental concerns are health concerns and access to mental health care is a right. It is legislation that needs interagency work, starting from the DOH, through to the local government units.¹²⁸

• Congress

The passage of the two key bills, the Adolescent Pregnancy Prevention Bill, which gives access to contraceptives to minors without parental consent and age-appropriate reproductive health information, and the bill that seeks to establish a local Population and Development Office in every local government unit helps address teenage pregnancy and ensures that SRH services reach the local government units. Similarly, to strengthen the policies that protect youth, the passage of a bill increasing the age of statutory rape from below 12 to below 16 and prohibiting child marriage is imperative.

¹²⁶ Plan International, *Through Her Lens: The Impact of COVID-19 on Filipino Girls and Young Women*, 15 October 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/philippines/through-her-lens-impact-covid-19-filipino-girls-and-young-women>.

¹²⁷ Interview with Y-PEER Pilipinas, 09 February 2021, conducted via Zoom.

¹²⁸ Interview with UNFPA, 23 February 2021, conducted via Zoom.

- **Civil society organizations (CSOs) and youth organizations**

Continuous engagement and working with the government in the implementation of existing policies is needed. CSOs and youth organizations should continue to develop innovative programmes to fill the gaps (e.g., #GetCondomPH) and provide spaces for dialogue between the youth and the government (e.g., QuaranTALK).

7.2 Education

With the abrupt change in the mode of delivery of education and the uncertainty of resumption of face-to-face classes, the subsidy and allowances in *Bayanihan 1* should be maximized and properly implemented to help students, especially those students in crisis.

The Philippine Government has been going back and forth on the resumption of face-to-face classes, but while the students are in a remote learning mode, the number of hours they have allotted to studying has decreased, and assistance in school lessons mainly comes from their mothers at home. The SAP and the assistance given to students in crisis can be seen as an effort of the Philippine Government to continue its investment in the education of children. This will not only help reap the benefits from the demographic dividend but will also break the cycle of poverty. As in the case of the WFH, a strong ICT infrastructure programme is also crucial to make remote learning an accessible experience for youth in schools. The disbursement of the allotted budget of *Bayanihan 1* and 2 to invest in ICT infrastructure and development of learning system should be prioritized.

Recommendations

- **Government**

A risk-assessment and risk mitigation plan should be in place for resuming face-to-face classes. With students in almost a year of remote and blended learning, a national assessment of the blended learning is also necessary, as blended learning might still be an option in areas with high cases of COVID-19. Monitoring of the process and guidelines for the pilot testing of face-to-face classes should be documented and assessed to inform a plan for future full reopening of schools.

- **Congress**

Parliamentarians should continue their responsiveness to changes in the mode of learning, as in the case of the Senate Resolution urging the Executive branch to gather evidence on pilot testing of face-to-face classes. Reports from the implementation of *Bayanihan 1* and 2 should be assessed to determine the necessity of enacting *Bayanihan 3* or if the budget allocated is already sufficient. It is also recommended that there is proper fund allocation to provide financial assistance to girls and young women for education.¹²⁹

¹²⁹ Plan International, *Through Her Lens: The Impact of COVID-19 on Filipino Girls and Young Women*, 15 October 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/philippines/through-her-lens-impact-covid-19-filipino-girls-and-young-women>.

- **CSOs and youth organizations**

Assist the government, as needed, in mobilizing community volunteers and in developing online materials. CSOs and youth organizations can also help build the technical capacity of teachers through training on remote teaching. As watchdogs and with a strong presence on the ground, data and stories of families and children experiencing challenges in the new mode of learning must be brought to the attention of the government to inform the improvement of the policies on education.

7.3 Labour and employment

The labour programmes targeted to unemployed Filipinos in the formal and informal sector may benefit unemployed Filipino youth, a move that can contribute to attaining the demographic dividend.

The young population of the Philippines comprises 30 per cent of the population, a demographic window of opportunity to attain the demographic dividend if the government sufficiently invests in the education and employment of youth. With the increase in the youth unemployment rate during the period of the pandemic and WFH becoming the default during lockdown, *Bayanihan* 1 and 2 mandated DOLE to craft policies on alternative work arrangements. The labour programmes in *Bayanihan* 1 and 2 are not directly targeting the unemployed youth, and no disaggregated data are available to examine whether they did benefit from this programme. As the proposed *Bayanihan* 3 (House Bill 8628) is still under deliberation, the recognition of the need to restore jobs and support local businesses and the proposed allocation of additional PHP 30 billion (USD 615 million) for displaced workers may contribute to addressing the existing unemployment of the whole population, not specifically for youth.¹³⁰

Recommendations

- **Government**

The Telecommuting Act (Republic Act 11165) was enacted even before the pandemic. Though this law was not intended for times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it has provisions on fair treatment of telecommuting workers, including pay, rest time and workload. This law, along with the guidelines issued by the DOLE, might be beneficial. The future of WFH and its potential success requires a strong ICT infrastructure for stable connectivity. Assistance to youth that have been unemployed due to the pandemic should be sustained in the form of cash assistance or through assistance in job matching, internships or apprenticeships.

- **Congress**

Adapting to the reality that WFH might become common beyond the pandemic years, and with youth becoming more accustomed to freelance work, passage of the National Digital Careers Bill and the Freelance Protection Bill should be studied and considered. The proposed National Digital Careers Bill aims to include the gig economy, including digital entrepreneurs and freelancers, to the overall labour regulatory framework of the country, and the Freelance Protection Bill seeks to simplify and automate the registration process for tax paying and accessing social protection (e.g., universal health system, pension system, etc.) for freelancers.

¹³⁰ House Bill 8628 "Bayanihan to Arise as One Act," https://www.congress.gov/ph/legisdocs/basic_18/HBO8628.pdf.

- **CSOs and youth organizations**

The voices of youth who are telecommuting or engaged in freelance work must be heard.

The experiences during this pandemic should be documented and serve as input to the proposed bills to the parliamentarians.

7.4 Participation

Non-face-to-face spaces for participation and new strategies were utilized by youth to provide assistance to fellow youth and to the larger public.

The only venue for participating with *Bayanihan* 1 and 2 is through the Congress deliberation, and that became limited, if not impossible, with the lockdown imposed in the country. Youth organizations utilized social media to volunteer and to provide services to their fellow youth, particularly on SRH, during the community quarantine. With the passage of a law that is perceived to be threatening to the freedom of speech of Filipinos, the youth sector was among those who filed petition before the Supreme Court to ensure that the right to participation of every Filipino would be protected. As some of the laws concerning youth are still under deliberations, such as the Adolescent Prevention Bill, consultations with youth are being conducted at the initiation of the parliamentarians and other stakeholders, such as youth and civil society organizations.

Recommendations

- **Government**

Addressing the concerns of youth on the perceived threats to their right to participate is imperative, particularly given the challenges to deliberations of the Anti-Terror Law during the lockdown.

The existing institutionalized mechanisms for youth participation, such as the *Sangguniang Kabataan* and parliamentarians that are representatives of the youth sector, should be utilized and maximized to hear the concerns of youth. At the local level, efforts of the LGUs to ensure youth participation in various forms, such as in the case of Tabaco City, require creativity and innovation given the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Congress**

Deliberations and public hearing on proposed bills can still be made accessible even during the pandemic despite the non-face-to-face settings. It is essential to make the public hearing more accessible through utilizing digital technology and inviting youth organizations and CSOs that represent youth to include the youth voices and evidence.

- **CSOs and youth organizations**

Continuous utilization of non-face-to-face spaces and transcending its limitations are a welcomed development, yet face-to-face means are crucial for addressing the needs of fellow youth, such as giving relief and mobilizing resources to provide sexual and reproductive health services in coordination with other stakeholders. Consultations on bills that concern youth issues should be continuously organized to bridge the gap between youth and parliamentarians.

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