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COVID-19 and aid distribution in the Philippines: a patron-clientelist explanation

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ABSTRACT

Republic Act (RA) 11469, also known as 'The Bayanihan to Heal as One Act', and RA 11494 the 'Bayanihan to Recover as One Act', or Bayanihan 2, were passed into law in the Philippines as a response to the COVID-19 pandemic. RA 11469 and RA 11494 were fundamentally flawed because they relied on data from *Listahanan*, the National Targeting System for Poverty Reduction (NHTS-PR). These data gave only partial coverage of those affected by the pandemic and was largely reliant on data gathered in 2009. To plug the gaps data beneficiary identification was devolved to Local Government Units (LGUs) and local government officials. We examine how a lack of state capacity and the technical weaknesses of RAs 11469 and 11494 were capitalised on by an underlying culture of patron-clientelism. This undermined the distribution of relief aid, or '*ayuda*' to urban poor communities in Metro Manila and adjacent provinces. We also identify instances where strategies were devised to circumnavigate such political failings, which offer hope for future good practice. We argue that robust data and enhanced state capacity are essential for the distribution of future relief aid in the Philippines as a means of promoting social equity and limiting political discretion.

Introduction

Rodrigo Roa Duterte was elected to the Philippine presidency in June 2016 and was in office during the COVID-19 pandemic. His presidential campaign promises included an end to corruption, drug use and criminality. Once in office, Duterte securitised the 'war' on drugs, a punitive, militarised strategy that he also adopted in response to COVID-19 (Bekema 2021; Hapal 2021; Thompson 2022) after initially downplaying the pandemic (Parmanand 2022). This article explains how, under Duterte's watch, patron-clientelism perpetuated inequality in urban poor communities during the COVID-19 pandemic in Metro Manila and adjacent provinces.

We examine Republic Act (RA) 11469 (Republic of the Philippines 2020), also known as 'The Bayanihan to Heal as One Act' and its successor RA 11494, the 'Bayanihan to Recover as One Act' or Bayanihan 2. We specifically focus on the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) Emergency Subsidy Programme (DSWD-ESP) implemented through

the Social Amelioration Program (SAP). RA 11469 and RA 11494 were fundamentally flawed because they relied on outdated data from *Listahanan*, the National Targeting System for Poverty Reduction (NHTS-PR). We argue that a failure of state capacity linked to *ad hoc* political devolution and technical limitations led to a COVID-19 relief program open to patron-clientelist abuse. Elected officials, from the top national post to the most basic administrative unit in the Philippines called the 'barangay' headed by its 'captain', could use discretion to funnel funds and resources to favoured citizens.

This article offers a novel in-depth case study that tests the workings of patron-clientelism during the response to COVID-19 in the Philippines. Patronage indicates the use of public resources, whilst clientelism involves the wider use of private funds. In the Philippines, financial patronage has blurred into a broader culture of clientelism that is deeply embedded in political life (Aspinall and Hicken 2020; Lande 1967) to the extent that the two terms are indistinct. We have chosen to use the term patron-clientelism in this article as we consider the two terms to be deeply connected. We show that government support failed to reach some of the neediest in society during the pandemic, and 'blame-shifting' occurred across levels of government when the COVID-19 response fell short.

We are persuaded by the work of Swamy (2016), which claims that social protection can undermine patron-clientelism if the distribution is rule-based. But where the rules are unclear or, as in this case, not supported by adequate data, resources intended for social protection can be restricted or diverted. We argue that the DSWD-ESP was fundamentally flawed as it relied on obsolete and/or partial data to identify family beneficiaries. This, plus the devolution of beneficiary identification from central to local government officials, opened up spaces for patron-clientelism to influence the distribution of aid, especially cash and food. Overall, the state lacked both the data against which the rules could be enacted and the capacity to enforce the rules.

Nevertheless, patterns of mutually supportive behaviour evolved within communities, and with other public and private organisations, to provide safety nets for the urban poor. We explore some of the alternative governmental and non-governmental social networks that were activated to direct and deliver aid, known as *ayuda* in the Philippines, to urban poor communities. We offer evidence of how aid providers and communities navigated the failings of the national government's COVID-19 relief strategy. Our discussion argues that the creative ways of working in evidence between some government and non-government actors could also be harnessed to support proactive ways of gathering better data on vulnerable families. Following Swamy's logic, if better data supported the rules of aid distribution, relief aid could be targeted more effectively, the operating space for patron-clientelist intervention could be reduced, and inequality could be better managed.

Inequality comes in many forms, e.g. gender, race, pay, income, wealth, environmental resources and inequality in rights and opportunities (UNCTAD 2021). Sustainable Development Goal 10: Reduce Inequality is dedicated to decreasing inequalities within and among countries. In this article, we explore the social norms and technical limitations that have perpetuated social inequalities and underpin the unequal distribution of aid in the Philippines. As such, we are examining the processes that limit opportunity, as opposed to a snapshot of material resource distribution. Even though aid is not earned, it is related to SDG Goal 10.1, income inequality, as during the pandemic, aid substituted for earned income for many families, especially informal workers. In 2021, 62.8% of the national wealth in the Philippines was held by the top 10% of the population, and the bottom 50% of the

population earned only 14.2% of pre-tax income (World Bank Inequality Database (2021). Despite rapid GDP growth, the situation of the bottom 10% has seen little change since 1980.

This article is structured as follows. The first section comprises a literature review investigating patron-clientelism; the second section explains our case study and methodology; the third section outlines the Listahanan and its weaknesses as a rule-based database, the fourth section explains the problems concerning RA 11469 and RA 11494, specifically in relation to the identification of family beneficiaries and the distribution of aid. The fifth section explains how various actors in urban poor communities worked to counter the failings of the SAP-ESP. This is followed by a sixth discussion section and a conclusion, including recommendations for policy improvements in relation to data gathering to better target the needy, especially during disasters. The following section offers an overview of the literature.

Patron-clientelism

Patronage applies to state resources that can be 'disbursed for particularistic benefit' (Hutchcroft 2017, 56). Whilst there is no commonly accepted definition of clientelism, dyadic relationships, hierarchy, iteration and contingency are common themes in the literature (Hicken 2011, 290). Clientelism applies when the patron is not necessarily an office holder and has no or limited control in using state resources to induce desired behaviour, typically concerning voting. Clientelism includes the use of other resources, such as private or party money. Thus clientelism is 'a much broader phenomenon than patronage, with patronage simply one specific type of clientelist exchange' (Hicken 2011, 295). The blurring of patronage and clientelism results from using both private and public funds to manipulate political outcomes. Due to this blurring patronage and clientelism have sometimes (Kitschelt and Wilkinson 2007, 7), but not always (Hutchcroft 2017), been viewed as 'synonymous and interchangeable' (Hicken 2011, 295). The distinction between patronage and clientelism matters to the extent that the use of public resources, as opposed to private money, is the key concern. If the key concern is the outcome of using such monies, then this distinction matters less.

Relationships and hierarchy

Clientelist relationships are characterised by 'iteration', with each side anticipating future interactions as they make decisions about their behaviour today' (Hicken 2011, 292). Older notions of patron-clientelism relate to personalised, often dyadic, power relations (Lande 1967; Lemarchand and Legg 1972, 151). Lemarchand and Legg argue that affectivity characterises clientelist relationships as opposed to 'ideal-type' norms of bureaucracy such as 'rationality, anonymity and universalism' (1972 151). They argue that this relationship relies on 'lop-sidedness' under which the patron offers protection, and the client offers loyalty. The relationship can endure if the status difference becomes greater but will collapse if it becomes equal, as neither party will have anything to offer the other. Clientelism can still be dyadic, but nowadays, it can also characterise formal structures and bureaucratic networks.

State resources controlled at the national level can be manipulated from the top down through a networked 'pyramid' structure (Aspinall and Hicken 2020; Hicken 2011, 295) to local brokers. Brokers can direct resources and monitor voting compliance or allegiance. They are necessary because clientelism operates based on contingency as 'there is generally

a lag between when the voter delivers his vote and when the politician delivers the promised benefit or vice versa, and thus the ability of each party to monitor the other is crucial' (Hicken 2011, 291–292). However, it is difficult to monitor the efficacy of clientelism or the costs of defection because of contingency. The former may be expensive and inefficient, while the latter may be hard to quantify (Hicken and Nathan 2020).

The rules and directives that regulate formal bureaucratic networks can coexist with a culture of clientelism. However, the personal affectivity between patrons and clients may lead to decision-making that 'operates[s] at cross purposes with, or at least independently of, the formal role relations specified in statutory rules and regulations' (Lemarchand and Legg 1972, 153). Thus clientelism may lead to seemingly 'irrational' behaviour that results in sub-optimal outcomes for bureaucratic networks. Nevertheless, clientelism is rational for the patron and the client, as the patron gets voter compliance, and the client gets resources.

Rules

Mookherjee and Nath examine the impact discretionary benefits have on voters. Citing household survey data from West Bengal, they show that household heads delivered votes in relation to 'excludable private benefits' (2023, 2) but not the provision of public non-excludable goods. This aligns with Swamy's discussion on allegiance. Swamy argues that social protection programs that safeguard basic living standards can counter clientelism if the distribution is rule-based. The client does not owe the benefactor any particular allegiance for the benefit because he is entitled to it, and disbursement is regulated. However, where the benefit is discretionary, i.e. a politician or elected barangay captain can control disbursement and claim credit for it, there is the potential for irregularity. In reality, 'virtually any programme can become a resource for clientelism if discretionary allocation is possible' (Swamy 2016, 64).

According to Sugiyama and Hunter, countries where clientelism is an issue should safeguard social protection programmes by establishing national agency control over 'entry into the program, institute a direct mechanism to direct resources to beneficiaries, provide user friendly bureaucratic channels for solving problems, and institute transparency and oversight mechanisms' (2013, 55). They argue that because these criteria were present and transparent to the public, clientelism was not an issue for Bolsa Familia family grants in Brazil. Even though local officials facilitated access to the programme, 'locals understood that the programme falls outside of their [the officials] influence' (Sugiyama and Hunter 2013, 54). Local officials were unable to act as clientelist brokers. In this article, we will show that the DSWD-ESP in the Philippines suffered from inadequate data and a lack of state capacity in relation to bureaucracy and oversight. These gaps and failings allowed for broker discretion in the allocation of benefits.

Case study and methodology

Metro Manila was chosen as a case study for this research because the densely populated National Capital Region (NCR) posed significant social and logistical challenges for the government concerning COVID-19. The Philippines has recorded more than 3.9 million cases of COVID-19 and over 66 thousand deaths (World Health Organisation (WHO) 2023). Metro Manila has recorded over 1.2 million cases and over 13.2 thousand deaths (Republic of the

Philippines 2022). Metro Manila went into lockdown or 'extended community quarantine' (ECQ) on 12 March 2020 (Santos 2020), on 16 March, this was extended to the whole of Luzon. Further lockdowns with varying degrees of strictness, e.g. Modified Community Quarantine, General Community Quarantine and 'granular' (localised) lockdowns, followed as cases emerged across the archipelago (Bueza 2021). Overall the lockdown in the Philippines was one of the longest and strictest in the world.

Metro Manila comprises 16 cities and one municipality and has a population of nearly 13.5 million (Philippine Statistics Authority 2021a). Metro Manila has a population density of 21,765 persons per square kilometre, while the City of Manila has a density of 73,920 per square kilometre (Philippine Statistics Authority 2021b). Around three million people in Metro Manila are informal settlers; they live in unplanned, unregulated settlements on land that they have no legal claim to and a further three million are considered homeless (Meribole 2020). The dense and ramshackle nature of urban poor communities provides ideal conditions for COVID-19, a 'crowd' disease, to thrive.

We expanded the geographical area of our research to the adjacent provinces when it became clear that many of our interviews worked in the provinces as well as the metro area. We were curious to investigate the extent to which RA 11469 was effective in relation to the social protection of the poor, given Duterte's avowedly militarised approach to the pandemic, exemplified by his call to shoot lockdown violators dead (Duterte 2020). RA 11469 is also known as the 'Bayanihan to Heal as One Act'. Bayanihan is a Tagalog word that refers to civic unity and cooperation within the nation or community. By tagging the COVID-19 response as an exercise in bayanihan the Philippine government framed RA 11469 as a collective social effort of self-restraint and compliance with lockdown measures.

Narrative data were gathered for this article via 38 semi-structured interviews held between September and November 2021. All of the interviews that we conducted were either with people that we already had a personal connection to or with people to whom we had been personally endorsed by a third party known and trusted by us both. When we approached strangers for an interview, we usually got no reply. Interviewees included public servants, community leaders and NGO workers with extensive experience supporting the urban poor. Our interview sample was purposeful in that all of our interviewees had been active in urban poor communities since at least the start of the pandemic. They had real 'problem-solving' experiences within those communities. Our sample was also practical, as our personal connections to the interviewees meant we enjoyed a degree of rapport with our interviewees from the outset. We sought out interviewees who had diverse experiences of working for or with local government officials, as opposed to only those that had 'bad' experiences of local government action. Our questions aimed to identify the factors that hindered the distribution of aid, some of the strategies devised to counter these problems and how well government and non-government actors worked together. We stopped conducting interviews at the point of data saturation, which we judged to be where we were still gaining comprehensive data. Still, returns were diminishing as little novel information was being added.

Our interviewees were active in urban poor communities at various locations, including the City of Manila, Quezon City, Navotas, Caloocan, Bulacan and Laguna. Almost 80% of our interviewees spoke to us on condition of anonymity. In this article, we either use the interviewees' real name, where this was expressly agreed under our ethics procedures or a first name pseudonym. Many interviewees were active in, or had responsibility for, communities affected by Extra Judicial Killings (EJKs) under Duterte's so-called 'War on Drugs'. The families

'left behind' after an EJK faced particular challenges in accessing material and social support during the pandemic, given the pariah status they sometimes faced. Thirty-three of our interviewees were either community or NGO workers. We also interviewed public health workers, personnel from the Department of Education, staff from the office of Vice President Leni Robredo and City of Manila Mayor Francisco Moreno Domagoso (Isko Moreno).

All interviews were conducted virtually due to pandemic restrictions. Interviews lasted one to two hours and were conducted in English or Tagalog, depending on the interviewee's preference. Many interviewees clarified additional questions *via* online messaging after the initial interview. We crosschecked narrative evidence from the interviews against each other and NGO and government statements, legislation and policy papers. We also consulted open-access qualitative reports and statements and statistical data from e.g. the Asian Development Bank, Social Weather Stations, the International Labour Organisation and the Philippine government.

Rules and the Listahanan

Eighteen million households, or 70% of the population, qualified for aid under the SAP-ESP, including 'the 4.4 million households enrolled in the country's flagship safety net program, the Pantawid Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps or Pantawid), together with other vulnerable populations such as informal workers' (Cho et al. 2021, 2). The 4Ps is a conditional cash transfer program, legislated under RA 11310 in 2018, for families with children (Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) 2018). It provides grants for the health, nutrition and education of children up to 18. The 4Ps is aimed at the poorest of the poor in the Philippines, but it excludes childless households. The program relies on data from the Listahanan (World Bank 2017).

The Listahanan is a government-run information management system that identifies who the poor are and where they live. It provides data to the DSWD for its various social protection programs. The DSWD lauds the Listahanan as 'a pioneer database consisting of a comprehensive organisation of poor households nationwide' (Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) 2016, v). The first round of data gathering, Listahanan I, took place in 2009 with the results published in 2011. Listahanan 2 took place in 2015, with results published in 2016, and Listahanan 3 started in 2019 but was suspended in 2020 due to the pandemic. The SAP-ESP relied on 2015 data from Listahanan 2 that identified 15 million poor families. Using population growth data from the Philippines Statistics Authority (PSA) another three million families were added to the SAP-ESP's target list (Reyes et al. 2020, 16).

The Listahanan should be updated every four years, but Listahanan 2 was delayed due to budgetary issues and the Aquino government's scepticism about the accuracy of the data-gathering process. The accuracy of the Listahanan was further complicated by the 2013 decision to increase the age of qualifying children from 14 to 18. There was also resistance from Judy Taguiwalo, who was appointed DSWD Secretary under President Duterte in 2016.[1] Taguiwalo was concerned that the data for Listahanan 2 did not make sense compared to Listahanan 1, given the increase in the child beneficiary age range, and imposed a moratorium whilst community-level checks were carried out. Drawing on government interviews and assessments from e.g. the Commission of Audit (COA) and the World Bank Dadap-Cantal et al. argue that these problems led to 'an increasingly outdated picture of who needs social protection in the Philippines' (2021, 377). The Lisahanan suffered from 'stasis' due to administrative failures in the development of the program and the failure to adequately account

for attrition between rounds of data gathering. The state lacked the capacity to oversee or update the programme accurately. Consequently, until at least 2019, enrolment in the 4Ps program was largely based on 2009 data.

Findings: problems encountered

This section explores why reliance on the Listahanan for information on 4Ps beneficiaries was problematic for RA 11469 and RA 11494. RA 11469 was passed on 24 March 2020 and granted the president emergency powers in response to COVID-19 for an initial period of three months. Social Amelioration Programmes (SAP), including DSWD-ESP, were legislated for under RA 11469. RA 11494 was signed into law by Duterte on 11 September 2020. RA 11494 extended the emergency powers granted under RA 11469, which officially expired on 5 June 2020, and provided an additional PHP165.5 billion for the pandemic response. It initially ran until 19 December 2020, was extended until 30 June 2021, and was extended again until the end of 2021. These Acts were both ratified by the Philippine Senate and the House of Representatives. They were meant to streamline the distribution of COVID-19 relief. The proposed benefits of the acts included the distribution of relief aid to low-income families, additional financial allowances, insurance and healthcare provision for frontline health workers, the timely provision of healthcare and testing for COVID-19 patients and additional educational funding to assist the transition to remote learning. The Acts also gave the government the power to crack down on those seeking to profit from the pandemic by manipulating the price of scarce or essential resources. Low-income target beneficiaries included:

'(i)   4Ps beneficiaries
(ii)   Informal economy workers (helpers, sub-contractual workers, homeworkers, drivers and public utility operators, micro-entrepreneurs, farmers, daily wage earners, stranded workers)
(iii)   Other vulnerable population consisting of (a) indigent senior citizens; (b) persons with disabilities; (c) pregnant and lactating women; (d) solo parents; (e) overseas workers in distress; (f) indigenous peoples; (g) homeless; and (h) other vulnerable population'. (Asian Development Bank 2020, 2)

The criteria above were tied to the habitual status of poverty, e.g. 4Ps beneficiaries, and also identified other vulnerable groups. The criteria account for the working poor, often those on tenuous or non-existent employment contracts based on 'no work, no pay', whose situation quickly deteriorated due to the pandemic. This included daily wage earners, such as street vendors or scavengers, whose money is earned and spent daily. The movement of people due to the pandemic also complicated this situation e.g. Overseas Foreign Workers (OFWs) returning home, city workers returning to their provinces or households amalgamating or dispersing due to destitution.

The 4Ps beneficiaries accounted for only 25% (Ramos 2020, 9) of those eligible for the SAP-ESP, meaning the government had to somehow identify the other 75% of eligible family beneficiaries. The 'churning' of the population over time and due to the pandemic meant that identifying SAP-ESP beneficiaries was extremely challenging and open to abuse. On 2 April 2020, Cabinet Secretary Karlo Nograles stated that President Duterte would not allow the COVID-19 relief efforts to become embroiled in patronage politics (Lopez 2020) and that

Local Government Unit (LGU) involvement would be limited to the distribution of cash sub-sidies. However, LGUs were, in practice, also tasked with identifying family beneficiaries. Duterte stated that he would control the allocation of COVID-19 relief, or at least not allow patronage politics to distort allocations, whilst at the same time directing desperate families to barangay captains who were 'overwhelmed by the social relief crisis and the spread of the disease, all while being left confused and uncertain by the Duterte government's policy guidelines' (Talabanong 2020). Critics have argued that Duterte's rhetoric was a deliberate effort to monopolise patronage resources, direct citizen gratitude to the palace as the ulti-mate patron, and yet deflect accountability to the local level where problems occur' (Gera 2020).

RA 11469 legislated for a minimum of PHP 5000 and a maximum of PHP 8000 to be dis-tributed twice over a period of two months. The actual amount disbursed was to be based on regional minimum wage rates and adjusted to take account of existing cash transfers and rice subsidies (Republic of the Philippines 2020, 3). It was left to LGUs to identify SAP-ESP beneficiaries and submit budget proposals to the DSWD, which was responsible for running the SAP-ESP. On 29 May 2020, the DSWD reported that 17.57 million families had received a share of PHP 99.32 billion in disbursed funds. 1,510 out of 1,634 LGUs nationwide had completed the SAP-ESP distribution, and 774 LGUs had completed the paperwork necessary to release the next tranche of funds (Nagtalon 2020).

The reliance on the Listahanan for information on Pantawid beneficiaries was problematic. The disbursement of SAP-ESP funds under RA 11494 and RA 11469 relied, at least partially, on data that was more than 10 years old. Therefore, whether or not a household received the 4Ps was not necessarily a reliable indicator of vulnerability, or lack of vulnerability, or qualification for the SAP-ESP. The relatively rapid distribution to 4Ps beneficiaries, which initially looks like a positive starting point for COVID-19 relief, is undermined as the SAP-ESP relied on obsolete data. The Listahanan database offered a partial and obsolete snapshot of poverty that could not account for either the regular 'churning' of people across the metro or the irregular effects of the pandemic. This meant that local government officials were handed more discretion in the allocation of the SAP-ESP than they might have been if robust data had been available.

By September 2020, it became evident that the SAP-ESP had run into problems. Only 13.9 families had received a second payment, and only 83.5 PHP of the available 16.86 billion PHP had been disbursed (Remito 2020). There were problems in coordination between the DSWD and LGUs. The DSWD claimed the money had not been disbursed because the LGUs had submitted only 14 million names when 18 million were expected. There were also DSWD claims that some LGUs repeatedly tried to adjust the number or type of qualifying benefi-ciaries, some LGUs refused to facilitate the distribution of the SAP-ESP, and both DSWD and LGU personnel experienced 'threats and harassment from constituents' (Reyes et al. 2020, 19).

Some families received two payments under the first tranche of the SAP-ESP. Others had received emergency subsidies from elsewhere and were therefore ineligible for a second payment. There was confusion over which areas were eligible for the second tranche of the SAP-ESP. The DSWD used Executive Order No. 122 (President of the Philippines 2020), dated 30 April 2020, to identify areas under emergency or general community quarantine lockdown regulations and declared those areas only eligible. Families in Metro Manila were eligible according to that list. Meanwhile, the LGUs 'were complaining that the funds given to them could only provide for six out of eight families during the Bayanihan one hearings' (Remito

2020). By September 2020, the DSWD had received more than 400,000 complaints about the distribution of SAP-ESP funds and hotlines were set up to deal with complainants (Luci-Atienza 2020). In October 2020, the Presidential Anti-Corruption Commission (PACC) reported that it had investigated 7,601 complaints of corruption related to the distribution of SAP-ESP funds (Mendez 2020). The Philippines lacked the capacity to centrally control entry to the SAP-ESP, enforce programme regulations or operate on the basis of reliable data. The disbursement of funds was both inefficient and inequitable. As detailed below, the allocation of funds was distorted at the local level because LGUs devolved responsibility for the compilation lists of SAP-ESP beneficiaries to barangay leaders.

Palakasan and qualification for aid and the SAP-ESP

Establishing who was eligible for government aid was a herculean task during the pandemic. The sheer number of 'informal' (in relation to employment status or housing) people coupled with discrimination on the part of at least some of those in authority meant that the government had its work cut out even to establish who was eligible for aid. City of Manila Mayor Franciso Moreno Domagoso (Isko Moreno) explained to us that the number one issue that he had in the distribution of aid was inadequate data. He thought initially thought that he had to cater for 350,000 families, but it later became clear that there were 690,000.

To receive SAP-ESP benefits, residents not identified for inclusion *via* the Listahanan had to fill in a Social Amelioration Card (SAC) form. The distribution of the form was at the discretion of locally elected barangay captains and their councillors or *kagawads*. Rita, a human rights facilitator, reported that some residents were denied the form (2021). Ruby, who works for a religious mission station in Caloocan City, stated that those who were not allies with the barangay captain were not given aid (2021). Ernest reported that the *palakasan* system was 'very apparent in the distribution of aid' (2021). *Palakasan* is a Tagalog word that means 'the assertion of personal interest *via lakas* while subtly bypassing prescribed rules and procedures in line with *delicadeza*' [2] (Lopez 2021, 92). *Palakasan* is thus the subtle, and therefore, potentially deniable, disregard of regulations in the pursuit of self-interest. Ellen, a community worker in Sampaloc, City of Manila, reported that barangay officials were sometimes embroiled in personal or political vendettas with some constituents and 'families did not receive food or cash aid because of this' (2021). She also stated that 'officials find ingenious and cunning ways to justify why these households were not eligible to receive aid' (Ellen 2021). From these examples, we can see that locally elected officials used their discretion to control access to the SAC form and fulfil their own localised clientelist objectives.

Ernest stated that he observed 'an unjust and unfair implementation of programs and aid. For example, families who are friends with local government officials can get two stubs (used to claim aid) while others only receive one stub' (2021). Also, houses containing multiple families could only claim one food-pack and 4Ps beneficiaries were denied food packs. Arthur, a child-focussed human rights worker working in Malabon and Navotas, also used the term *Palakasan*. He said that *palakasan* was 'a common complaint in the communities as 'those who were connected or related to the one who distributes aid were able to receive assistance even if there are others more in need'. (Arthur 2021). Victor, a human rights worker active across Metro Manila, reported the same issue. He also added that while there were no reports of Extra Judicial Killings (EJK) families being discriminated against over the allocation of aid, these families 'had apprehensions in seeking LGU help because of their identity as an EJK

connected family' (Victor 2021). Some EJK families did not even try to get on the list because they did not want to draw any attention from the authorities.

Victor, an administrator for a human rights organisation, also told us that 'we received reports that some families that were related to the LGU officials, received aid even if there were others who were more in need' (2021). He also told us that 'our partner families indicated that there were issues of corruption within LGUs. Some families had to sign a waiver saying that upon receiving the cash donation worth 1000 pesos, they lose their right to ask for more donations' (Victor 2021). This effectively meant that they were signing away their right to the second tranche of the SAP-ESP. Delia reported that she was aware of needy families who received no government aid, but their names were not listed because they were not close to the barangay captain. Her evidence for this came from regular monthly meetings with local families over the course of the pandemic. She stated that to get on the list, you had to be close to the barangay captain or barangay councillor and clarified this by saying 'of course you know that in the Philippines, if you're not in the same party or in the same group, they don't receive the same' (Delia 2021). Thus indicating that the misallocation of resources was not a localised or one-off mistake but an iterative practice.

Informal sector and settlers and the homeless

Informal workers and residency was a problem for SAP-ESP allocation. Delia, who works with a community organisation active in Quezon City called Solidarity with Orphans and Widows, told us that to qualify for government aid, you had to be able to prove that your place of employment was shut and you could no longer go to work. For informal workers or scavengers, this was impossible. She said that 'if you cannot prove that you lost work, for instance, scavenging, then you don't qualify, you're not on the list, and so you are not going to receive anything' (Delia 2021). This technicality directly undermines RA 11469, which specifically mentions the transfer of cash or goods to 'households working in the informal economy (not already in receipt of the 4Ps) […] of an amount adequate to restore capacity to purchase basic food and other essential items during the duration of the quarantine' (Republic of the Philippines 2020, 11).

Many interviewees told us that renters or the homeless did not qualify for the SAP-ESP. Multiple families living in one house also muddied the numbers. Ernest, who works for a human rights organisation, reported that in San Jose Del Monte, Bulacan, the distribution of food packs was 'covered with controversies' (2021). Those not registered as legal residents of the barangay and those that only rented houses were excluded. Rachel, who is the director of a Children's Rights Centre in Quezon City, told us that 'LGUs were very selective in providing relief assistance to families who were not legally registered in their place. Most of our clients live in informal settlements with no legal claim on their land or legal recognition from their LGU' (Rachel 2021). Mae, who works for a human rights organisation, reported that the selection of beneficiaries for the SAP-ESP was controversial and chaotic. Residents reported 'long queues in accessing the SAP assistance. Some residents were ineligible to receive it despite relocating and living there for a long time' (Mae 2021). Meanwhile, Djoanalyn Janier, of the advocacy group Unity of Women for Freedom, reported that the allocation of assistance was organised based on a master list from the DSWD. She said that 'old and dead or missing people were still on it [the list]. Renters were not included or students' (Janier 2021). A densely populated city such as Metro Manila will inevitably be home to many itinerant

families, however many of those living in informal housing stay in the same location for years. The need to prove house ownership was a barrier to the SAP for the three million people living in informal housing in Metro Manila.

Plugging the gaps

Despite the issues listed above, different stakeholders found innovative ways to counter the SAP-ESP failings and identify and assist the urban poor during the pandemic. We found that the common theme in these strategies was the ability to bypass bureaucratic structures to improve the transparent distribution of aid. We outline some of these strategies below.

Issues with data

Mayor Isko Moreno Domagoso told us that he used Facebook live as a vehicle for those in need so that 'people can complain and people can demand, and I will know directly. We empower the people to participate. So we know who is abusing' (Domagoso 2021). The use of regular use of Facebook Live was a way to virtually link with his network of constituents, who grew to trust him to respond. Other interviewees independently confirmed the effectiveness of this strategy. Virtual links facilitated checks on the SAP-ESP and helped develop trust between City Hall and constituents. Facebook disrupted the subtleties of *palakasan* by allowing people to publically question the distribution of aid. The Mayor noted that he relied on public servants to collate beneficiary details because they were accountable. He did not work with non-governmental actors to identify beneficiaries as he viewed them as unaccountable. Therefore non-governmental interventions in the patron--client relationship were limited.

The Mayor also told us that he wanted to give the people at least the impression that his team were working 24/7 to address the community's needs and monitor public servants such as the police and barangay captains. He reported that out of 896 barangays he had a problem with only 20 officials whom he invited to City Hall whereupon, he tried to be '"reasonable" on a personal level, here in my office' (Domagoso 2021). The Mayor stressed that he grew up in Tondo, Manila, and the community trusted him. He commented that 'I have been working in the City Hall for 20 years, and I have been living with them. So I know their attitude, as long as your words are valuable, they will listen to you' (Domagoso 2021). By wanting to be seen 24/7, he wanted to police the city effectively and for his constituents to believe that their experiences of the crisis were fully understood.

The role of the vice president

Joseph, an interviewee from the Office of Vice President Leni Robredo who was involved in the distribution of relief packs, told us that their mission was denied access to areas that were not politically aligned with Robredo. He stated that 'we could not access the communities, and we had to assess the political alignment before we went there' (Joseph 2021). In other words, local politicians feared alienating President Duterte, their patron, by working with his political rival, Robredo.[3] Duterte and Robredo have been at odds throughout the pandemic (Ranada 2021). Robredo has accused the Duterte administration of a lack of leadership, of using lockdowns as 'band aid solutions' (Cepeda 2021) and the misuse and underuse

of funds. Critics (Thompson 2022, 12) argued that Duterte 'bullied Local Government Units (LGUs) into compliance with militarised lockdown measures by threatening them with disciplinary action. At the same time, Duterte's personal rhetoric managed to generate '*utang na loob* or debt gratitude amongst recipients' (Deinla et al. 2022, 155). Robredo and Duterte both accused the other of politicising the pandemic. The Office of the President accused Robredo of 'incessant and non-stop' (Gita-Carlos 2021) political nit picking, and Robredo accused Duterte of 'being more focussed on politics than managing the government's pandemic response' (Varcas 2021).

The day-to-day management of the government response was left to local politicians who had to deal with the piecemeal distribution of COVID-19 relief and a desperate population. Their political loyalties further complicated this situation. Nevertheless, Robredo's team were able to circumnavigate Duterte supporting officials by bypassing them entirely and working with community groups instead. In other locations, it was easier to work with local groups. One of these groups was the United Women's Blessed Association, which operates in Baesa, Quezon City. An interviewee from that group, Irene, told us that 'Leni helped and gave vegetables for 400 families' (2021). She also reported that grocery packs had been received from Quezon City Mayor Joy Belmonte and that, in her experience, barangay officials helped with the relief effort. Belmonte endorsed Robredo for the Vice Presidency in 2016 and they also joined forces to promote a vaccine drive for public transport workers (Fernandez 2021).

These examples show that it was possible for government officials and local communities to work together in ways that circumnavigated Duterte's militarised response to the pandemic and the failings of the SAP-ESP.

Resisting political epal

Harry, who worked with a relief foundation associated with the Vincentian Missionaries, told us that his organisation preferred to work with priests and lay workers, not political actors. This was because they wanted their relief packs to be 'distributed to those who are really in need and not on the basis of how they would vote in an election' (Harry 2021). Audrey, a businesswoman who self-started her own relief agency and campaigned for donations from friends, family and private companies, also stated that she avoided working with politicians. She was advised by 'various agencies' that she should put the name of her agency 'on all food packs or the government would try and put their name on the packs. Or repack the goods in packs with their political logos' (Audrey 2021). To gain credit as patrons, politicians don't have to provide goods; they only have to make it look like they have. Decanting relief goods into packages with political colours is common practice in the Philippines during disasters. In Tagalog the word *epal* is used in relation to this practice, meaning 'butting in where not needed' (Zdanowicz and Hunt 2013).

The examples listed above serve as examples of how gaps in the distribution of the SAP-ESP were countered. They show that government and non-government actors have worked together with varying degrees of success. Between some actors, there are low levels of trust and actors have worked around, rather than with, each other. Others have worked together in practical ways to support the well-being of some of the most vulnerable sectors of society during the pandemic. Government and non-government actors can work in creative ways to remedy administrative failings in the distribution of aid during crises. Ideally, this reactive

creativity could also be harnessed to proactively support a 'rolling' Listahanan program as outlined below.

Discussion

We found evidence that where qualification for the SAP-ESP was clear – or rule-based – e.g. if beneficiaries were already in receipt of the 4Ps then SAP-ESP disbursement was mostly regularised. However, in cases where the status of the beneficiary was less obvious, problems arose. We found that this was also the case with LGU-organised food packs. This follows Swamy's argument that when distribution rules are clear, opportunities for patron–clientelism are reduced.

The 'rules' were undermined because (a) the operation of the rules was devolved and the state lacked the capacity to oversee this process or make it bureaucratically 'friendly' and (b) the Listahanan suffered from 'stasis', which meant that the rule-based identification of family beneficiaries was flawed. The devolution of the identification of family beneficiaries down to the barangay level allowed patron-clientelism to flourish. This behaviour was 'rational', in relation to those that sought to benefit materially and politically from the skewed distribution of the SAP-ESP, but bureaucratically 'irrational' in relation to the stated aims and objectives of RAs 11469 and 11494.

The wealth of evidence that we gathered from the communities was very important for this project as we were able to identify how 'lopsided' patron–client relations were sometimes locally abused to divert *ayuda* away from those that needed it most. This local 'lopsidedness' is nested within the wider institutional relationship between national and local government in the Philippines. Under RA 11469, the national government directed LGUs to provide lists of eligible beneficiaries who would then receive aid under the SAP-ESP. The LGUs subsequently relied on barangay officials to provide details of eligible beneficiaries from their area. In due course, because of obsolete, conflicting or distorted local data, the government did not deliver the promised resources. The state also failed to recognise the 'informal' status of workers or residents, which created problems in registering for government help. The militarisation of the pandemic also meant that some communities, especially those that had suffered from EJKs, were fearful of the police, and the militarisation of lockdowns led to heightened anxiety. This fear and anxiety meant that some families were hard to document, as their preference may have been to stay invisible. Ironically, these were often the people most in need.

The devolved nature of governance in the Philippines means that local politicians may use their discretion to allocate goods and services in ways that serve their own interests. The devolution of political power is not necessarily a corrective to clientelism. However, local patrons may also be clients as they are just cogs in the wider scheme of material and political power. The pandemic created the opportunity for different levels of government to capitalise on the opportunities that the SAP-ESP offered in terms of patronage. This situation also meant that political officials at different levels could blame each other for failures in allocating aid.

Financial shortfall and logistical difficulty explain some of the problems concerning the SAP-ESP, but some of the inequality in distribution was deliberate. There is evidence from our interviews that barangay captains operated as patrons to both secure future allegiance and punish rogue clients for the real or perceived failure to deliver political support in the past. Where the patron and client lived in close proximity in the barangay, the distribution

of *ayuda* was not a one-off transaction. Rather it was part of an ongoing relationship that potentially involved the cultivation of 'patrons on everyday matters and a hedge against future needs' (Swamy 2016, 65). There is also evidence that local patrons would not allow national-level political opponents to distribute *ayuda* on their turf for fear of alienating their national-level patron, the president. Thus the distribution of goods was skewed away from those who were not networked with power-holding patrons whose primary objective was to consolidate their own self-interest.

Culturally embedded practices such as *palakasan* are hard to shift and hard to quantify or police. Sanctions such as disbarment from political office or criminal proceedings are possible but could stall due to legal inertia or the ability of patrons to circumnavigate such processes. One future policy option could be for the Philippines to adopt a Listahanan system that gathers data on a rolling basis rather than rely on data that only offers a snapshot of a particular time. The list could be continuously updated and contribute more effectively towards a rule-based distribution of state aid. Attrition could be monitored more effectively money could be saved, and needs could be met in a more timely and efficient manner. The existing Listahanan project cycle tasks and quality checks (Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) 2021) could act as a starting point for that process. Beneficiaries could self-report to the list in order for official checks to be undertaken. It could be possible to develop a consolidated proactive online version of self-reporting. This self-reporting could be endorsed by e.g. a government official, or a community worker, social worker, medic or priest. At the moment the Listahanan offers only a snapshot in time, like a census, the data that it offers is quickly obsolete.

Conclusion

Palakasan is detrimental because it reinforces inequality and undermines the rule-based distribution of aid. This practice is culturally entrenched and perpetuates injustice in the Philippines. Patron-clientelism can be dyadic, but is also embedded in complex bureaucratic networks. The devolution of responsibility for the organisation and distribution of the SAP-ESP opened the COVID-19 relief efforts up to patron-clientelism. SAP-ESP reporting mechanisms were not bureaucratically friendly, and the state lacked the capacity to oversee this process. This allowed for blame-shifting between various levels of government when things went wrong. This situation was made worse because the rules, or rather the data that informed the rules, were inadequate.

This discussion is important because patron-clientelism undermines social safety net policies. Without other interventions to counter this injustice the deprivation caused by SAP-ESP failures has the potential to perpetuate future inequality. Parents found it difficult to adequately feed their children (Eadie 2021) or provide them with the expensive gadgets necessary for remote learning. Both of these issues compromise potential future earnings for the family. Desperate workers were forced on to the streets in the pursuit of income even though they knew that this put them in breach of lockdown regulations and put them at risk of catching COVID-19.

It was often community and church-based groups that stepped into the breach to help the urban poor during COVID-19. It is reasonable to assume that such actors, with detailed knowledge of their local communities, could help boost state capacity and support a rolling Listahanan program. More robust data could improve the rule-based distribution of aid and

reduce inequality. Such a proactive response would also potentially help identify and meet the needs of the most vulnerable during future disasters. This is not to say that a rolling Listahanan programme would completely solve the problems we found in the distribution of the SAP-ESP or similar schemes. We also cannot assume that new joined-up ways of working between government and non-government actors would be completely free from patron-clientelism, produce perfect data or be technically trouble-free. But inadequate data contributed to weaknesses in the organisation and implementation of the SAP-ESP. Unless ways are found to improve the utility of the Listahanan as a means of countering *palakasan* then aid will continue to be a resource to be distributed based on politically mediated largesse.

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Disclosure statement

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Notes

1. Despite serving as Secretary for a year the Commission on Appointments in Congress failed to approve her appointment and Taguiwalo was removed from office in August 2017. This was allegedly because of her connections with the leaders of the exiled Communist Party of the Philippines.
2. *Lakas* means strength or power and *delicadeza* means a refusal to be vulgar or crass in the exercise of power.
3. In the Philippines the president and the vice president do not have to be from the same political party. Tensions can arise if the incumbents are not politically aligned.

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