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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# THROUGH THE EYES OF NON-MEDICAL FRONTLINERS: SOCIAL, POLITICAL, AND ECONOMIC CHALLENGES OF COVID-19

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### ABSTRACT

The emergence of the Coronavirus Disease or COVID-19 across the globe yielded significant and critical impact to the lives of millions of people. In the Philippines, the national and various local governments have implemented the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) and lockdowns in April 2020 to minimize the spread of the virus among Filipinos. To help the government enforce the regulations prescribed by the Inter-agency Task Force (IATF), medical and non-medical frontliners were deployed in various areas within a community. However, few studies have been conducted to examine the lived experiences of non-medical frontliners, particularly the challenges that they encountered in the discharge of their duties. This qualitative study examined the experiences of six non-medical frontliners in Bontoc, Mountain Province during the implementation of the ECQ and the lockdown period. Findings of the study disclosed that the challenges encountered by non-medical frontliners in the performance of their duties during the ECQ were classified as social, political, and economic challenges. The benefits that they gained in the discharge of their functions were categorized into (a) professional enhancement and (b) personal satisfaction.

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## INTRODUCTION

Over the last two weeks of the month of March, 2020, media all over the world were flooded with countless updates and endless news about the rising number of Covid-19 confirmed cases and Covid-19 related deaths. Countries around the world like Italy, China, Iran, and even the United States recorded alarming statistics on Covid-19 cases and deaths while their national governments continually expressed fears over the unstoppable rise of such cases and deaths (CNN, 2020). The Philippine government responded to this health crisis and it started to closely monitor the Covid-19 situation in early January 2020, and by the end of the month, the country recorded its first confirmed case which was attributed to international travels. On March 7, 2020, the first local transmission was documented in Metro Manila (Reyes, Co, Medina, Law, Layug, & Wong, 2020). The IATF in Emerging Infectious Diseases was convened in January 2020 and it implemented a mix of containment and mitigation measure that were mostly centered in Metro Manila.

These included border control, testing, contact tracing, class suspension and enhanced community quarantine (Reyes et al., 2020). In particular, the ECQ was adopted and enforced as it was deemed necessary in slowing down the transmission and spread of the virus across the country. Despite these measures, the health crisis persisted and the number of confirmed and positive cases has exponentially increased from March to July 2020 (de Guzman, 2020). One of the most vulnerable groups who has a large extent of exposure to the corona virus is the medical and non-medical frontliners. However, most recent studies have featured medical frontliners because of their constant and daily exposure to patients who are suspected to have been infected by the virus. Their stories have flooded various social media platforms while the reading public has expressed its sympathy toward this group. Researchers found that medical frontline health workers in any part of world were much more likely to report depression, anxiety, and insomnia than other frontliners (Thompson, 2020). Yet, the stories of non-medical frontliners, particularly the government and non-government personnel assigned to monitor the public streets and highways have been published to a limited extent.

These non-medical frontliners include the Philippine National Police (PNP) and Bureau of Fire Protection (BFP) personnel, government workers in the various local government units (LGUs), and volunteers. In the locality of Bontoc, Mountain Province, the health crisis has affected the lives of many people, including those who have been used to living the normal life engrossed by a mix of contemporary and traditional means. For instance, the presence of uniformed personnel acting as frontliners who enforce the prescribed laws is not a day-to-day sight in the cultural town of Bontoc. For most people, this sight influences the way they negotiate their daily lives. As a matter of fact, many people in the locality observed how IATF regulations and their implementation in the community run counter to some daily, cultural norms that used to define the activities of local people that are socially, culturally, and economically beneficial to them. Because of the social conflicts, even non-medical frontliners encounter challenges in the discharge of their functions and responsibilities, trying to bridge the gap between the law and the social and cultural norms. Based on these presuppositions, the researchers intended to uncover these challenges and suggest ways by which these dilemmas could be appropriately addressed, particularly through local policies that are responsive both to the demands of the national and the local governments and their constituents.

**Research Problem:** The results of social observation conducted by the researchers provided the main gap that this study addressed. The researchers observed that since the implementation of the Enhanced Community Quarantine in Luzon and the subsequent lockdown order from various LGUs, much attention were given to the role that front liners have in the crisis. Information posted in social media sites like the Facebook and Twitter by people across the country and evidence from actual observations in the Bontoc community were initially analyzed. For instance, the suspension of public transportation in major cities across the country aggravated the situation of front liners who reside outside Metro Manila. Additionally, some front liners who were interviewed before the conduct of the study articulated their frustrations over citizens who do not strictly comply to directives that they implement. Moreover, Thompson (2020) wrote in the Health Day Reported dated March 23, 2020 that nurses in New York City are already facing severe stress over Corona virus. The critical analysis of these evidence fueled the researchers' thinking to examine the experiences of front liners in the performance of their expected functions, particularly their pains – the challenges that they encounter in the discharge of their expected functions and their gains – the personal benefits that they perceive they will obtain from doing their work. The main goal of this study was to examine the experiences – pains and gains – of non-medical front liners in the municipality of Bontoc during the Covid-19 crisis that resulted in the ECQ and lockdown. Specifically, the study aimed to look at the challenges that frontliners encounter in the implementation of the ECQ and the lockdown orders in the municipality of Bontoc, Mountain Province, and determine the benefits they could gain in discharging their functions during such period, sought answers to the following research questions:

This study is framed by the theoretical assumption that non-medical frontliners of the Covid-19 health crisis are mediators of national and local laws and regulations provided by the government to combat the hasty spread of the virus across the country.

As mediators, non-medical frontliners have to sustain balance between the requirements of the IATF on the prescribed minimum health protocols and the compliance of the community people towards these regulations. While the national regulations could empower non-medical frontliners in terms of enforcing the laws, the researchers also assume that these personnel encounter challenges inherent to their duties and functions. On the other hand, non-medical frontliners may also gain some benefits in the discharge of their functions in the midst of a health crisis that has threatened both the social, economic, cultural, and political security of the nation and its people. Laws and regulations remain as written discourses until they are enacted in sociocultural contexts. In other words, the participants in the study who translate these written discourses into practices may possibly encounter challenges that have serious implications in the ways that they implement the laws, particularly in a culturally- and politically-charged context.

The conceptual paradigm is provided in Figure 1.

## METHODOLOGY

**Research Method:** This is a qualitative study that examined the experiences of non-medical front liners in the municipality of Bontoc, Mountain Province. The decision to use a qualitative research method lies on the nature of the research problems which require qualitative, in-depth data to describe the participants' experiences. Specifically, the study utilized the phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2013) to explore the lived experiences of non-medical frontliners who are the implementors of national and local laws and regulations related to the Covid-19 health crisis. As the study is theoretically framed by the notion that non-medical frontliners are co-constructors and mediators of local and national IATF and government regulations on Covid-19, the use of qualitative research provides an opportunity for the participants to describe how they mediate between the laws and the community members. The philosophical view that the meaning of an individual's experience (Moustakas, 1994) also provides the foundation for this study. While the researchers assume that each study participant has a subjective experience towards the phenomenon under study, they also presume that the participants have objective experiences that they share in common, considering that they also share an ultimate goal of helping alleviate the spread of the virus through the implementation of regulations.

The participants in the study were selected through convenience sampling, which means that non-medical frontliners whom the researchers are familiar with were chosen as participants of the study. However, the researchers used a criterion to select the respondents considered as non-medical frontliners. These criteria include the following: (a) personnel who implement the ECQ and lockdown orders and regulations, (b) personnel who facilitate the provision of public services like food assistance, public safety and security; and, (c) personnel who were willing to be interviewed and observed as they discharge their duties. A total of six (6) non-medical frontliners who met the aforementioned criteria comprised the study's respondents. One (1) respondent, Jona (pseudonym) is an officer of the local government of Bontoc; another one, Edgar (pseudonym), is an employee in one of the barangay halls in central Bontoc; the four other respondents are from the

Philippine National Police (PNP) – John, Nathan, Glen, and Dominic (pseudonyms).

**Data Gathering Tools and Collection:** The primary mode of data collection was a series of in-depth, semi-structured phenomenological interviews following Seidman (2006). Phenomenological interviews were consistent with the framework and suitable for the purposes of this study because of their focus on the meanings of the participants' experiences as non-medical frontliners vis-à-vis the national and local regulations (Kvale, 1996; van Manen, 2014). The researchers used an interview protocol which they formulated based on the needed data to respond to the research problems.

The secondary mode of data collection was through observations conducted in the field. The primary author conducted a total of 9 observations which lasted between 40 to 45 minutes.

**Data Analysis:** The researchers analyzed data for the study using thematic analysis. For the initial step of data analysis, the researchers read the data for first reading, and in this process, the researcher simply read through the synthesized data without making any notations. In the next step, researchers re-read the data for open or initial coding. To do this, the researchers highlighted important words and phrases that stood out for them. The researchers also adopted an inductive approach in reading, which means that they took note of interesting emergent ideas without utilizing a priori codes. They read the data without being influenced by their existing presumptions on the phenomenon under study. After this process, the researchers obtained open codes. In the next phase, the researchers employed theoretical coding. As they were reading the data for the third time, they combined the initial codes into themes that synthesized the open codes through the process of thematic coding. They employed constant comparative method, which means that as they read the data and synthesized the open codes into thematic codes, the researchers compared these outputs vis-à-vis the data. Lastly, the thematic codes were further analyzed to obtain overarching themes that would capture all the data obtained from the study.

**Trustworthiness:** To ascertain the study's credibility, the researchers employed two strategies within data collection to build a level of trust within the research which were data triangulation and observation in the areas of data collection. Credibility was built into the research through the use of more than one method to collect data. In terms of data analysis, the researchers employed member checking and peer review and debriefing to establish trustworthiness in the research process. Member-check or respondent validation is employed by researchers to enable the study participants to confirm and validate their experiences through the researchers' interpretation of these accounts (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In addition, two other members of the research team coded and analyzed the raw data. After this, the three researchers who analyzed the data met and discussed their findings and reconciled critical differences in their interpretations.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

**Challenges Encountered by Non-Medical Frontliners:** Overall, the challenges encountered by the Covid-19 non-

medical frontliners of Bontoc, Mountain Province are encapsulated in three overarching themes: (a) social challenges; (b) political challenges; (c) economic challenges. These themes are discussed in the succeeding sections.

### Theme #1: Social Challenges

*The attitudes of the community people: hard-headedness, non-compliance to rules, orders, and authorities, and tendency to abuse the home quarantine pass.* Non-medical frontliners articulated that community people's attitudes perceived as "negative" influenced the ways that they enforced the laws and regulations. The primary source of this challenge emanated from people non-compliance to prescribed regulations and health protocols during the pandemic. John articulated, "the first challenge is dealing with non-compliant community people and those who resist following the regulations of the ECQ and the lockdown, and insist on what they want to do despite the intensive dissemination of information everyday, every hour" (Interview #2, 3/20/2020). He further added that people also refuse to wear masks because they claim that they are not infected with the virus at all. More strikingly, the non-medical frontliners also cited cultural conflicts as one source of the challenges they encountered. Joan expressed her view on this, "The implementation of the ECQ is a complicated challenge in itself especially for an indigenous community like ours. There are provisions and protocols that immediately compromise our culture and our way of life. Thus, striking the balance between the IATF-MEID protocols and our indigenous/cultural practices is crucial and hard for us who are involved in both policy-making and compliance monitoring" (Interview # 1, 3/18/2020). This articulation corroborates with the statement of Nathan, a PNP frontliner. He said, "we are also challenged in dealing with the Bontoc culture, for example, deaths, wakes, and funerals. These practices affect our work because we have to exercise discretion on our end because we are dealing with culture" (Interview # 4, 4/2/2020).

*Insufficient awareness among the community people about the nature of the ECQ and lockdown, the precautionary measures to avoid the transmission of the virus, and the role of the PNP and the LGUs.*

The respondents perceived that the lack of awareness towards prescribed regulations and consciousness towards their role as community people was another source of their challenge. In fact, the frontliners even questioned whether the people are just pretending to lack awareness to excuse them from not complying with regulations or they really lack sufficient orientation. One PNP frontliner contended, "The first challenge is the community's lack of awareness towards the important precautions they need to observe because so far, there are no confirmed cases of Covid-19 in Mountain Province yet. They are still stubborn and they do not still take Covid-19 seriously. Despite our reminders about things that are prohibited, they still insist on going out and do not comply to 'stay at home' orders" (Interview # 2, 3/26/2020).

*Community people's negative perceptions towards barangay officials and workers on the discharge of their functions during the crisis*

During the ECQ, the researchers conducted field studies in the barangay halls which were the site of the distribution of relief goods.

One striking observation is related to the behavior that community people displayed in dealing with barangay officials. Because of the pressure and the persistent implementation of the lockdowns, the community people developed negative perceptions towards frontliners in the barangay halls. Edgar stressed, “in the discharge of our functions, we request the community people to comply to regulations, however, we also hear unpleasant comments from our constituents in the barangay. These things happen also during the distribution of relief goods provided by the LGU. Some people whose names are not listed in the beneficiaries often utter unpleasant directed towards us. Our constituents also bash us in social media for our shortcomings. Yet, we still work with our best and so we ask for their prayers that we will not acquire the virus in the process of doing our functions” (Interview # 1, 4/16/2020).

*The absence of relief goods to unlisted members of the community, e.g., stranded college and senior high school students who are not considered “vulnerable” citizens during health crisis*

This challenge is related to the aspect on the distribution of relief goods and the various processes involved. Based on the observations of the researchers, the local and the barangay governments relied on the list of official residents which were not updated. According to some barangay officials, the un-updated list was attributed to the fact that the unexpected emergence of the health crisis caught them unprepared. In addition, they elaborated that stranded senior high school and college students were not officially considered as permanent residents, and so their names are not included in the list.

## **Theme #2: Political Challenges**

*The implementation of the ECQ and the community lockdown was difficult because of the following reasons:*

Lack of clear and sustained directives from the national government to help LGUs deal with ECQ concerns; (2) clash between legal orders and the community culture and people’s personal beliefs about processes to be observed, and (3) inconsistencies of orders from authorities, e.g., the grant of travel pass to vehicles entering Bontoc and uncoordinated and absence of implementing rules and regulations (on all directives. These politically charged circumstances had important implications to the implementation of regulations by the non-medical frontliners. At certain points, they encountered anxiety because of the lack of consistency in the order being provided to them from higher authorities. Joan explained during the interview that since this pandemic came unexpected, it seems that policies and regulations are implemented thru a dry-run until the government could perfect the system.

*The LGU is left on its own to manage the crisis and look for resources to use which further reflects the limited capacity of the national and local government to respond to such nature and scale of health emergency.* Joan said, “we are not prepared for this kind of disaster. We had been preparing for typhoons and other kinds of disaster but there were no preparations for a pandemic” (Interview # 4, 4/15/2020). *Lack of relevant preparedness of the government and the community people to deal with the Covid-19 health phenomenon.*

This situation leads to (1) trial and error in implementing protocols not meant for a pandemic; (2) reliance of front liners on advisories that keep on changing; and (3) confusion among the community people on which orders and regulations to follow due to incongruity of available information to the public (social media, TV, statuses).

*Personal frustrations among front liners regarding the timeliness of release of test results and even the lack of testing kits among local and regional medical centers.*

Based on the researchers’ observation, the duration on the release of medical tests on patients had also a serious impact on the work of the frontliners. According to them, they undergo confusion on who are really infected or not.

## **Theme #3: Economic challenges**

*Lack of clear guidelines from the national government on the use of funds.*

Both the local and barangay governments were grappling with their respective fiscal situations. The use of funds like the calamity fund and the barangay development fund had no clear guidelines in terms of their utilization. Edgar emphasized, “we think that in this case, the calamity fund could be used. In fact, President Duterte signed last Friday an order that barangays can use their Barangay Development Fund to augment their funds in case the calamity fund is not sufficient. We are very willing to utilize these funds but again, we are not provided the proper guidelines to utilize them and we are restricted from using them” (Interview # 6, 4/25/2020).

*The use of personal money by barangay officials and workers to finance their daily activities; non-payment of barangay tanods and health workers who report on weekends.*

The respondents reported that even during weekends, they are required to report. During these periods, barangay officials are forced to spend their own money. One of them reported, “most of the time, the expenses we incur come from our own pockets such as the food we eat during weekends and the snack we give to the barangay health workers. The operation centers sometimes also do not provide us anything so we need to pitch in for our food”.

*Mobility of resources within the barangay and municipal levels which is necessary for survival; resources include manpower, goods, services, and finances.*

During the ECQ and lockdown period, the prices of goods increased exponentially. This was attributed to the fact that travels were limited and restricted. However, this had also an implication on the entry and exit of trucks delivering food. According to the frontliners which was verified through the researchers’ observation, the movement of resources had an important implication to the ways that PNP frontliners enforced the regulations. Nathan explained, “We also have concerns about vehicles like the food trucks which come from other provinces to deliver food to Bontoc, We think that if possible, the drivers of these trucks from other places should undergo self-quarantine when they stay in Bontoc. Their privilege of staying outside would defeat the purpose of the quarantine ... we are not even sure if their health certificates would suffice in ensuring that they are Covid-free. The

*mobility which is necessary for survival is challenging to deal with” (Interview # 8, 4/25/2020).*

### **Benefits Gained in the Performance of Frontliners’ Duties**

Besides the challenges that they need to deal with, the respondents of the study also articulated significant benefits that they gained in the discharge of their duties and responsibilities during the ECQ and the lockdown period. Two overarching themes were obtained from the analysis of data: (a) enrichment of professional experience and (b) personal sense of satisfaction.

#### **Theme #1: Enrichment of Professional Experience**

Overall, the respondents perceived that working as non-medical frontliners provided them opportunities to develop themselves professionally. While they were challenged by various factors and circumstances, they also considered these as learning experiences that enrich them as professionals. The sense of accomplishment that the respondents obtained from their work emanated from their assumption that they were instrumental in minimizing the spread of the virus. Because of their work, they also felt that the community people will soon develop self-discipline and subsequently become cooperative with them. Glen, a PNP frontliner said, “...when everyone is spared from the virus – that is the ultimate benefit for me. Knowing that I am contributing to the solution is consolation enough for me. Providing basic services to the community is inherent to our job” (Interview # 5, 4/10/2020). The frontliners also added that being given the opportunity to serve and perform their jobs despite the negative reactions from the people and their uncompliant behavior support their professionally enhancement. They are also made to feel that their work is important during the health pandemic. Again, while they perceive their duties as challenging, there are also inherent professional benefits to them.

#### **Theme #2: Personal Sense of Satisfaction**

The second theme that captures that benefits that the respondents perceive in the discharge of their duties relates to personal sense of satisfaction. Some argue that despite the lack of monetary benefit, the personal satisfaction that they obtain, especially when the virus has minimal spread is more important. However one of the PNP frontliners argued otherwise. He shared, “...but in terms of personal benefits that we gain, I just cannot think of anything because we do not actually expect to have these things because I feel that we are just following orders and it is an inherent part of our job to do these things.

### **CONCLUSION**

The health crisis caused by the Covid-19 virus is considered as an unprecedented pandemic that scattered across the globe. It has affected the lives of millions of people in various countries, including those in the Philippines. The pandemic has also brought serious implications to the work of non-medical frontliners who are at the fore of implementing and enforcing national and local regulations to alleviate the spread of the virus. In view of the study’s findings, this study puts forward the conclusion that the challenges encountered by the respondents, which range from social, political, to economic challenges imply the necessity for the national and local governments to address such dilemmas in their continuing

endeavors to at least minimize the spread of the virus. Furthermore, the finding also imply that the community people of Bontoc have their own roles to embrace, particularly in demonstrating cooperation and responsive collaboration with the authorities because they have common goals and objectives. The pandemic is not exclusive to the government and the frontliners to address, rather, it requires functional cooperation among all groups and individuals within the community. On the part of the national and local governments, the need to enhance the communication system, particularly in terms of internet connectivity is critical. No one knows when the pandemic will end, but certainly, the crisis has ushered in a new normal which requires efficient internet connectivity because almost all processes and operations have turned into virtual, digital, and technological endeavors that require speedy internet connection.

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors have no conflict of interest in this study.

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#### **GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS**

BFP – Bureau of Fire Protection  
 ECQ – Enhanced Community Quarantine  
 IATF – Inter-agency Task Force  
 LGU – Local Government Unit  
 PNP – Philippine National Police

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