



Coping with Covid-19: Kumustahan with Champion Mayors in the Philippines

A State of Public Health Emergency due to the Covid-19 pandemic was declared in the Philippines on March 8, and community quarantine was put in place in many parts of the country about a week later. More than three months later, how are coastal communities coping with the drastic changes brought about by the pandemic while dealing with the challenges of managing fishery resources?

To answer these concerns, Rare Philippines gathered the chief executives and municipal agriculture and environment officers of local government units (LGU) in the two-part virtual meeting “Kumustahan with Champion Mayors.” The Visayas edition on June 23, 2020 gathered participants from 19 LGUs while an additional 20 sites in Luzon and Mindanao joined the meeting on July 1, 2020.

From the novelty of wearing masks and handwashing with alcohol, to the difficulty of observing physical distancing while performing government duties, local

government personnel shared the changes in their work routine due to the pandemic. Other consequences of compliance with the new regulations were more pleasant, such as having more time for family life and domestic activities like cooking, gardening, and even restoring shine to bamboo floors using *lampaso* or coconut husk.

Rare Philippines Vice President Rocky Sanchez Tirona said the pandemic and lockdowns may have caught everyone off-guard and yet, local governments had stepped up. “Sixteen weeks later, we are seeing so many solutions. It is really inspiring how small coastal LGUs — LGUs without a lot of resources — are finding ways to meet the challenge (of COVID) on their own terms.

“*Hindi natin alam kung gaano katagal ang krisis na ito at hindi natin alam kung pabalik-balik ito — if it’s really something we’re going to have to live with for a long time. Yung mga resources natin na puwedeng sandalan — our fish, our biodiversity, and the resources in our community — kailangan natin talagang pangalagaan at kailangan nating i-prioritize,*” she said.

Supply Chain and Food Security

Quarantine measures, particularly restrictions on travel to minimize infections, forced many local governments to restructure traditional market arrangements.

In the Municipality of Gubat in Sorsogon province, Mayor Sharon Rose Escoto said they ensured adequate food supply by importing fish from other areas. They also intensified tilapia distribution, required each barangay to have a wet market, and encouraged vegetable gardening in every household.

The town of Caramoan in Camarines Sur province went the other way. "We limited the transport of fish to other areas until such time that we determined local supplies will support our needs," said Mayor Marilyn Co. However, to serve the relatives of Caramoan residents living in other municipalities, the LGU **exempted some traders from transport controls** as long as the total weight was below five kilograms. The LGU also adopted a modified version of the Department of Agriculture's Kadiwa ni Ani at Kita direct marketing program: they bought fish and vegetables at farmgate prices, and sold the products within the municipal government's compound to the townsfolk.

In municipalities where fishing activities were unhampered, the main concerns were low selling prices for the abundant fish catch and bringing seafood products to consumers.

Mayor Mike Orayani of Lubang, Occidental Mindoro said the municipal government bought all the fish that could not be taken to the principal market in Calatagan, Batangas. The **fish catch was distributed to residents for free, taking the place of canned goods in relief packs**. Mayor Orayani said they were able to do four rounds of fish distribution.

In the neighboring town of Looc, also in Lubang island, Mayor Benjamin Tria said many fishers were apprehensive about close contact with buyers during the pandemic, making it difficult for them to sell their fish catch. The municipal government's solution was to **assign a coordinator at the Calatagan port** in Batangas who would manage the unloading of the fish catch and take care of the needs of the fishers.

In the municipality of Libertad in Antique, Mayor Mary Jean Te said fishers did not have problems with their

Price ceiling and centralized fish trading

IN THE MUNICIPALITY OF CULASI in Antique, Municipal Environment and Natural Resources Officer Alma Lisay-Sandig said fishers faced the problem of getting their fish catch to buyers in the community and traders outside the municipality due to limitations on market operating hours. The municipal government's solution was to **centralize trading activities in the community fish landing center**, where freezers were available for the use of both fishers and buyers. **Price ceilings for fish products** and agricultural commodities were implemented, in consultation with the fishers and traders. The LGU also assisted fishers by buying their fish catch, which was then sold to municipal employees or given to the kitchens of Covid-19 isolation facilities.

Based on the guidelines of the Department of Agriculture's Memorandum Circular issued on March 20, 2020, which the LGU publicized on their Facebook page, Culasi issued **certification cards to fishers**. "With the certification card, *naging madali sa fisherfolks namin ang maglako ng catch nila*," Alma said.

Culasi LGU also passed an ordinance setting up a *talipapa* in all barangays where fishers and farmers can sell their produce. Alma said that as a result, "Consumers were happy that they were able to buy fish at a lower price amidst the crisis, when the income of other sectors is really low if not lost."

catch during the lockdown. In fact, they had so much tuna that selling prices were reduced to unprofitable levels.

"*Ang problema, wala kaming masuplayan, kaya sobrang nagmura ang isda*," she said. Tuna went for as low as P110 per kilo, while squid only fetched P30 per kilo. Mayor Te said the LGU resorted to **buying the catch and giving it away to residents and government frontliners**.

Law Enforcement

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ith government-mandated restrictions in place, LGUs faced challenges in enforcing fisheries laws and conserving marine resources during the

lockdown. Local governments reported the proliferation of unregistered and unlicensed fishers inside municipal waters, intrusion inside marine protected areas which are supposed to be no-take zones, and fishing with the use of poisonous substances.

Mayor Susano Ruperto Jr. of Tayasan in Negros Oriental said they observed fishers from other municipalities intruding into their area, competing with the town's fishers and their boats that are duly registered. To deal with this problem, they **increased the regular seaborne patrols** of their Bantay Dagat teams, whose 40 members are spread out in seven coastal barangays.

In the town of Mercedes in Camarines Norte, Mayor Dante Morales said commercial fishers that are fishing inside the MPA is a big problem, so the local government intensified law enforcement. Two teams of Bantay Dagat worked on a rotating schedule to establish daily presence in the MPA. However, the task is challenging as their coastal barangays are located in remote areas — the farthest being a three-hour trip away — so that by the time the Bantay Dagat arrives, the trawlers have long sailed away. To deal with this challenge, the Sangguniang Bayan of Mercedes passed an ordinance **deputizing fish wardens in island barangays** and trained 50 volunteers to guard their fish sanctuaries.

In the municipality of Ipil in Zamboanga Sibugay, the local government **joined forces with other law enforcers to curb sea piracy**. Felix Badon, MENRO of Ipil, said they observed increased incidence of extortion activities when their fishers ventured outside municipal waters. He said the pandemic had overstretched law enforcers on the mainland, leaving the seas largely unguarded. "We tried to engage the support of law enforcers, military, and police para mabigyan ng back-up support ang mga Bantay Dagat," said Felix. The joint effort resulted in the arrest of violators, among them commercial fishers.

Ipil also had to deal with the problem of upland dwellers coming down to coastal areas to look for food in the MPA. "Dahil sa Covid, sa food availability nahirapan ang mga upland folk namin kaya may mga nag-gleaning," he said. This new challenge made the LGU of Ipil realize that they **need to include upland residents in their information campaigns**. "Sila ang target audience natin, 'di lang coastal communities. Kung mag-utilize

Tougher stance for Bantay Dagat patrols

MAYOR LIZA RESURRECCION of Pilar Surigao del Norte favors stricter measures in dealing with intruders in the two marine sanctuaries that they have protected for the last five years. *"Meron din talagang mga tao dito sa Siargao na walang mga puso... na nakikita na nila ang paghihirap ng LGU para lang maprotektahan ang sanctuaries and they still have the temerity na pasukin 'yon, magboboso. Minsan, yung catch nila tinitinda pa nila sa market ng bayan ko,"* she said.

In response, she **reactivated the municipality's Bantay Dagat patrols** and requested the police to disable the intruders' fishing boats so these can no longer be used for illegal fishing. "It's about time we send a signal to all these people na we will be willing to do kung ano ang kelangan to protect the sanctuaries and preserve the efforts of the fisherfolk," Mayor Resurreccion stressed

din pala sila ng resources natin, dapat maintindihan din nila yung balance — yung sustainable utilization of these resources," Felix added.

In Culasi, Alma said cases of intrusion inside municipal waters increased because commercial fishers took advantage of the situation, knowing that law enforcers were focused on monitoring quarantine checkpoints. Other fishers justified their intrusion inside the MPA by saying they had to find an "easier way of food extraction" amid the COVID crisis. Alma recalled a meeting of their Crisis Management Team where some officials wanted to suspend the implementation of the closed season out of compassion, following the appeal from violators. "I had to speak out na **mas kailangan mag- conserve to ensure a sustainable supply of food** to cover the unknown duration of the crisis," noted Alma.

In Caramoan, the local government **exempted MPA protection funds from realignment in favor of COVID** responses, in order to ensure that marine resources are conserved.

In LGUs where fishing with noxious substances was observed, information campaigns were the favored solution. The government of San Carlos City went a step further, **sending the Bantay Dagat and the Maritime Police to the homes** of suspected cyanide fishers. *"Kinakausap sila na tumigil sa ganoong pamamaraan dahil kulang talaga ang aabutin nila,"* according to Melvin Maglayon from LGU San Carlos.

Community Participation

With physical distancing and other quarantine restrictions such as the 25-person limit for face-to-face meetings still in place, LGUs are grappling with the challenge of sustaining interest from coastal communities when they cannot be together in one location. Through various channels, old-school and new, they are using various tools to maintain a sense of community, even just virtually.

The Municipality of Bais relies on the internet, **using email and social media** to proceed with activities already lined up by the people's organization managing their MPA, the United Fishermen's Association of Kapinyahan. Online tutorials that had been scheduled were continued per committee. Although not all the organization's members have computers or laptops, tutorials proceeded via emailed materials that were printed and distributed to the learners. Computers were shared among members.

In Caramoan, the local government is utilizing both legacy and new media to keep residents informed and to provide proper education for students. While **developing an E-learning system** for the Caramoan Community College, the government is also **utilizing community radio** for the use of both civil servants and schools.

In Pilar, Mayor Liza Resurreccion said Covid-19 protocols prevented them from holding regular quarterly meetings so she **visits the communities** instead,



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"especially sa coastal barangays kasi ayoko maputol ang interaction and dialogue between the LGU and fisherfolks. I told them that while we are trying to combat this pandemic, we should continue to protect our marine resources, our sanctuaries, dahil ito ang primary source ng kabuhayan ng almost 60-70 percent ng mga kababayan ko dito sa Pilar."

Other LGUs maintained **community engagement through Fish Forever Savings Clubs**. In small towns like Looc, which counts 37 Savings Clubs, as well as Libertad, membership proved to be beneficial when their pooled funds were shared out, as many people had lost their livelihood due to the lockdown.

Barangay Wi-Fi and E-Hatod

SOCIAL MEDIA IS A BOON to community engagement in the Municipality of Tinambac, which uses innovative techniques like online discussions and games with relief goods as prizes to reach the public. "The LGU **Facebook page became very relevant** to the community in the pandemic," said Vice Mayor Belle Prades, noting that Kapihan sa Tinambac now has 20,000 followers.

To make it easier for the public to connect to the Internet, the LGU **set up Barangay Wi-Fi centers** and pushed telecommunication companies to set up more cellular sites. "*Hindi mo na kailangang*

ipatawag ang mga kapitan. Ka-GC (group chat) mo na," Prades added.

Improved connectivity also helped fishers market their products online, with the Sangguniang Bayan lending its vehicle to help bring the produce to buyers. The government also set up a "**door-to-door motorcycle delivery service** to enable online sellers to deliver products to other municipalities.

Vice Mayor Alfredo Coro II of Del Carmen said the initiative was similar to their **E-Hatod Public Logistics Service**, which also helps residents bring products to consumers.