

Joe-Mar S. Perez

Department of Environment and Natural Resources, Philippines.
(email: joemar.s.perez@gmail.com)

Submitted: 25 February 2025, Revised: 13 April 2025, Accepted: 17 April 2025

Joe-Mar S. Perez, is a Director at the Department of Environment and Natural Resources. He also worked as the Head of the Operations Center at the Office of Civil Defense. He has extensive experiences in public governance and disaster management for more than 13 years. He finished two post-graduate degrees: Master of Public Administration and Master in Disaster Risk and Resilience. He contributed to several publications and paper presentations in the field of disaster risk reduction, both locally and abroad.

Battling COVID-19 and Disasters:

Task Force Bureaucracy during Emergencies in the Philippines

Abstract

Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) caused significant adjustments in the landscape of public governance in the Philippines. While the world was focused on the pandemic, the Philippines had to simultaneously address the impacts of disasters such as volcanic eruption and strong typhoons. In response, the government resorted to the use of “Task Force”, a military concept wherein a unit is designed to work on a single activity. This paper aims to answer the research question: how does the Philippine government operationalize task forces during emergencies such as COVID-19 and other disasters? Using secondary research as methodology, it examines the reconfigurations in the national government in terms of leadership, structure, human capital, policies and practices for disaster management. It analyzes the strengths and challenges of drastic reinventions in public administration and governance while in the middle of a crisis situation wherein all sectors are affected and their implications for the post-pandemic period.

Keywords:

Philippines; task force; COVID-19; disasters

Introduction

It is a known fact that Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) has left a significant mark in the history of the world. Although people generally have moved on from the pandemic, COVID-19 made a lasting impact not only for the health system but across all sectors. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), around 776 million cumulative COVID-19 cases

have been recorded globally, with around seven (7) million deaths in total (WHO, 2024). The overwhelming experience especially at the height of the pandemic forced authorities to undertake drastic adjustments in policies and systems, which remain prevalent up to the present time.

In the case of the Philippines, the pandemic resulted to around four (4) million confirmed cases,

with around 66 thousand deaths (WHO, 2024). In terms of losses, the country suffered an estimated total loss of 2.9 trillion pesos in 2020 and 3.2 trillion pesos in 2021 (Del Castillo, Fujimi, & Tatano, 2024). Given these impacts, the Philippines was considered as among the heavily impacted countries in Southeast Asia (Chu, 2022).

While the Philippines was battling COVID-19, the country also has to contend with the simultaneous occurrences of disasters. This is attributed to the country's location along the highly seismic Pacific Ring of Fire and the Typhoon Belt, which explain the occurrence of calamities such as typhoons, earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions (National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Plan, 2012). In fact, the website of the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) records around three (3) major volcanic eruptions, four (4) major earthquakes, and more than 30 tropical cyclones that hit the country from 2020 to 2022 (NDRRMC, 2024), the period that can be considered as the height of the pandemic.

Responding to disasters while facing a deadly virus was a major challenge for the Philippine government. The compromised health system, limited mobility, depleted resources, and restricted interaction severely hampered the actions for disaster response. As with the rest of the world, the Philippine government had to redirect most of its time, effort and resources to the pandemic response.

Among the emergency measures implemented was the operationalization of "task force", a military concept wherein a unit is designed to work on solely on a single activity. Specifically, the Philippine government activated the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases to provide policy guidance for the pandemic response. Meantime, the NDRRMC, the highest organized body of the Philippines for disaster management, served as the National Task Force (NTF) for COVID-19 to

manage the pandemic operations based on the guidance of the IATF.

This paper aims to answer the research question: how does the Philippine government operationalize task forces during emergencies such as COVID-19 and other disasters? Using secondary research as methodology, it examines the reconfigurations in the government in terms of leadership, structure, human capital, policies and practices while responding to the pandemic. It analyzes the strengths and challenges of drastic reinventions in public administration and governance in the middle of a crisis situation and their implications for the post-pandemic period.

Method

The paper utilizes secondary research as methodology. Secondary research involves the synthesis of literatures that have been organized and published by others (Bouchrika, 2025). For this paper, the literatures examined are journal articles, government publications, reports and issuances, news articles, and various online-based sources.

Results and Discussion

Origin of The "Task Force" Concept

Upon examination of literatures, there are not much available materials that describe task force as a government machinery. However, it is acknowledged that the term is commonly used in the military discipline. Task force is defined as *"a temporary grouping under one leader for the purpose of accomplishing a definite objective"* (Merriam-Webster, n.d.). Originally introduced by the United States (U.S.) Navy, task force is now accepted for general usage outside the uniformed field (Robinson, 2020).

For a brief history, Admiral Ernest J. King, the Commander in Chief of the U.S. Fleet, is commonly cited as the one who popularized the term task force. Admiral King directed for the creation of Task Force 1, with the mission of escorting

convoys to Iceland that had been occupied by the U.S. Marines. The convoys were typically American, but ships of other nationalities were free to join (Morison, 1957). During the World War II in the 1940s, aircraft carriers and naval vessels were assembled together in groups described as task forces by the U.S. Navy (Chant, 2013). This approach provided flexibility in terms of military planning and operations.

There is no concrete documentation detailing the evolution of task force. It was just known that the non-military sectors such as businesses and governments eventually adopted the task forces. Nowadays, task forces are evidently applied in various sectors such as health, transportation, law and order, environment, and disaster management. They are commonly associated with special committees, teams, boards and inter-agency organizations from various disciplines to cater to specific needs. For example, to address and combat human trafficking in the U.S., an Interagency Task Force composed of 20 agencies across the federal government was created (U.S. Department of State, n.d.). Task forces can also be setup between and across countries and organizations. One example is the Ad Hoc Joint Task Force among Indonesia, Malaysia, and the European Union on European Union Deforestation Regulation (European Union, 2023). Clearly, task forces can be created at various levels, depending on the needs of the situation.

Task forces in The Philippines

The same concept of task force applies in the Philippines. However, literatures on the emergence of task forces in the country are not widely available. Nonetheless, Philippine task forces are usually specialized groups or inter-agency committees coming from authorized offices and organizations to address specific issues. They operate on a specific duration, although some eventually become permanent in the government. Through issuances such as laws,

executive orders, resolutions, and ordinances, a task force is established with a designated head along with its members; and a detailed set of responsibilities.

Due to the limited references, the exact number of task forces in the Philippines cannot be readily determined. Nonetheless, they are generally categorized as follows:

Law Enforcement Task Forces: These task forces are formed to address criminal operations such as drug trafficking, terrorism, and organized crime. Examples are the following:

Task Force Davao: This task force focuses on counter-terrorism operations and maintaining peace in Davao City. It was created way back in 2003 following the terrorist attacks at the Sasa Airport and Sasa Wharf (City Government of Davao, 2023). To date, Task Force Davao remains in operation.

National Task Force to End Local Communist Armed Conflict: This task force was organized to respond to and raise awareness about ongoing communist armed conflicts. Specifically, it was mandated to provide an efficient mechanism structure for the implementation of a "whole-of-nation" approach and was likewise institutionalized as a government policy for inclusive and sustainable peace (Gita, 2018). To date, it is still currently operational.

Disaster Management Task Forces: These task forces are created to respond to and recovery from the impacts of disasters. Examples are the following:

Inter-Agency Task Force Yolanda: Established after the devastation of Typhoon Yolanda (international name: "Haiyan") in 2013, the task force was mandated to oversee recovery and rehabilitation in all affected areas. Given the needs for long-term typhoon rehabilitation and recovery, the task force has been extended until 2022 to oversee the completion of rehabilitation and recovery projects (Parrocha, Duterte extends term of task force overseeing Yolanda rehab, 2020).

Task Force Bangon Marawi: Following the armed conflict between the Philippine government security forces and militants in Marawi City in 2017, the task force was created to facilitate recovery, reconstruction and rehabilitation of Marawi City and other affected areas (Placido, 2017). The task force was eventually abolished on 22 December 2023 (Corrales, 2023).

Task Force Build Back Better: This task force was formed to facilitate and expedite the rehabilitation of areas affected by calamities, particularly typhoons, by focusing on sustainable and resilient infrastructures. It was described as a high-level institutional platform in charge of streamlining and expediting post-disaster efforts in an integrated and sustained manner (Quinones, 2020). Presently, there are no updates on the status of the task force.

Health Task Forces: These task forces are created to handle public health crises or safety issues. Examples are the following:

Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases: This task force was organized in 2014 as the government's instrument to assess, monitor, contain, control and prevent the spread of any potential epidemic in the country (Pocalla, 2014). When COVID-19 hit the Philippines, the Inter-Agency Task Force was activated and given the mandate to strategically lead the overall pandemic response.

National Task Force for Monkeypox: This task force was created to prevent the spread of monkeypox, popularly known as “mpox”, in the country. It is composed of experts in communicable diseases, especially the infectious disease experts that helped during the COVID-19 pandemic (Villanueva R., 2024). To date, there are not much available information on the operations of the task force.

Environmental Task Forces: These task forces are organized to address wide range of environmental concerns and issues such as

deforestation, pollution and illegal logging. Examples are the following:

Task Force Tayo ang Kalikasan: This task force was created to strengthen collaborative efforts among governments, communities and stakeholders in protecting the natural resources and maintaining the ecological balance for the future generation. It spearheaded various campaigns and advocacies to encourage Filipinos to participate and contribute to preserving the country's environment (Villanueva A., 2020). Presently, the task force is no longer in operation.

Boracay Inter-Agency Task Force: This task force was established in 2018 to reverse the degradation of Boracay Island, one of the known tourist spots in the Philippines, and address the underlying issues that caused its deterioration. Among the operations of the task force included recovering the beach areas and cleaning its waters, regaining the wetlands, restoring ecosystems, and paving the roads intended for public transport (DENR, 2021). The task force continued to operate until 30 June 2022 (DENR, 2021).

Overall, task forces form part of Philippine government's interventions to effectively and efficiently address specific challenges by bringing together expertise and resources from different sectors. Based on the examples provided, task forces in the Philippines commonly have the following features:

- **Task forces operate on set of specific objectives.** A task force is generally assigned deliverables to address a particular problem or prevent the occurrence of similar situation. For example, the terrorist attack in Davao City in 2003 led to the creation of the Task Force Davao to prevent and combat future related incidents. Further, the occurrence of Typhoon Yolanda in 2013 prompted the creation of Inter-Agency Task Force Yolanda to expedite rehabilitation.
- **Task forces are situation driven.** It is generally known that task forces are ad hoc or temporary organizations. Once the problem

is resolved, the task force can be abolished. While this is the general assumption, the life-span of task forces in the Philippines depend on the needs of the situation. Some task forces are provided with an expiration date. For example, the Boracay Inter-Agency Task Force that was created in 2018 was deemed dissolved on 30 June 2022. Yet, there are also other task forces with functions that can persist for a longer period. For example, Task Force Davao, created way back in 2003, remains active in order to prevent terrorist attacks up to the present time.

- **Task forces are multi-sectoral.** A task force is typically organized by pooling expertise from various sectors, fields or disciplines. One example is the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the task force mobilized not only the experts from the health sector but also from the economic sector, among others. Another is Task Force ang Kalikasan, which implemented environmental campaigns requiring community and stakeholder engagement.

In summary, the term "task force" is widely used across military and government sectors. It describes a temporary group that formed to address a particular problem or achieve a specific goal. It started with the U.S. Navy's use of task forces to organize fleet of ships and air assets for military operations. Carrying on this practice, governments generally utilize task forces for various interests and purposes.

Operations of The Philippine Task Forces for Covid-19 Response

As mentioned, among the task forces created in the Philippines is the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases, which was colloquially known as "IATF." Created way back in 2014, the Philippine

government deemed it imperative to have an inter-sectoral collaboration to establish preparedness and ensure efficient response in order to assess, monitor, contain, control and prevent the spread of any potential epidemic in the country (The Philippine Star, 2014). This led to the creation of the IATF.

For a brief chronology of events, it was on 30 January 2020 when the Department of Health (DOH) reported the first case of COVID-19 in the Philippines coming from a Chinese national. Months after, on 07 March 2020, the DOH confirmed the existence of local transmission of COVID-19 in the country (WHO, n.d.). While the IATF was already existing as an inter-agency mechanism for the disease outbreak, the NDRRMC also played an important role especially at the early stages of the pandemic. The NDRRMC is the organized and authorized group of national government agencies, civil society organizations (CSOs), and private sector groups in charge of disaster management. Empowered with policy-making, coordination, integration, supervision, monitoring, and evaluation functions, the NDRRMC is the overall in-charge of preventing, preparing for, responding to, and recovering from the impacts and consequences of disasters. At the time, the local transmission of COVID-19 was considered as a disaster emerging from a health-related hazard, thereby prompting the NDRRMC to respond.

Organizationally, the NDRRMC is headed by the Secretary of the Department of National Defense (DND) as the Chairperson, with the Office of Civil Defense (OCD) Administrator as the Council's Executive Director. The organizational structure of the NDRRMC is as follows (Republic Act 10121, 2010):

Included in the overall disaster response strategy of the NDRRMC is health response. This is evident in the Response Clusters as the organized arrangement of disaster response activities and priorities. The Response Clusters of the NDRRMC are tasked to lead, harmonize, and facilitate multi-sectoral and multi-disciplinary participation of

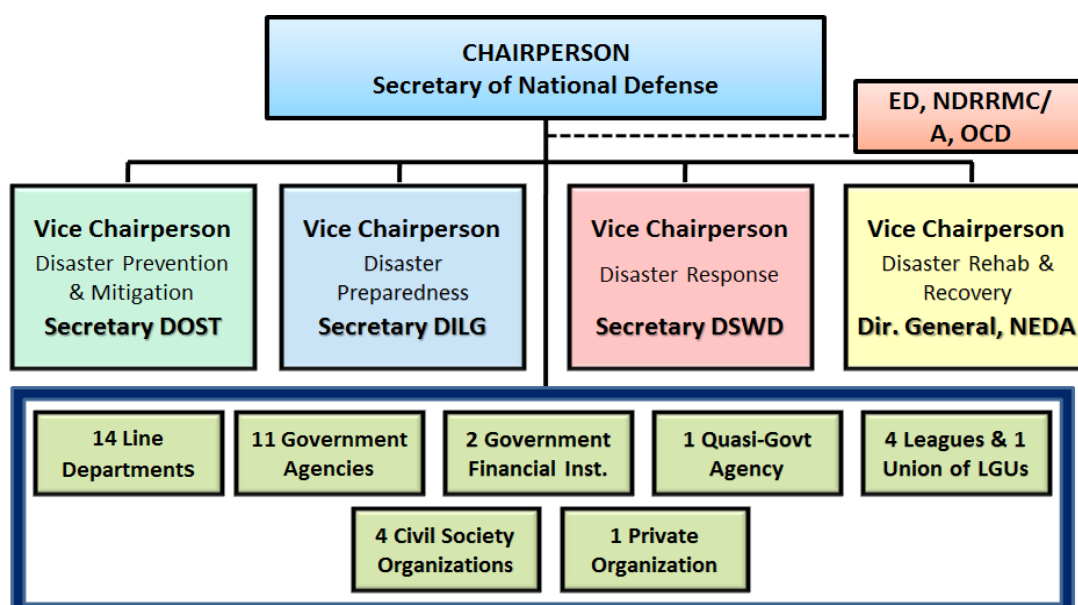


Figure 1. Organizational Structure of the NDRRMC

Source: Processed by Author

Table 1.
Response Clusters of the NDRRMC and the Lead Government Agencies

Response Cluster	Lead Government Agency
Food and Non-food items	Department of Social Welfare and Development
Protection	Department of Social Welfare and Development
Camp Coordination and Management	Department of Social Welfare and Development
Wash, Health, Nutrition and Psychological Services	Department of Health
Logistics	Office of Civil Defense
Emergency Telecommunication	Department of Information and Communication Technology
Education	Department of Education
Search, Rescue and Retrieval	Armed Forces of the Philippines
Management of the Dead and the Missing	Department of the Interior and Local Government
Law and Order	Philippine National Police
International Humanitarian Assistance	Department of Foreign Affairs

Source: Processed by Author

disaster responders coming from various agencies and organizations. Each Response Cluster is headed by a government agency with the mandate relevant to the type of service. Below is the list of response clusters and their corresponding lead government agencies (National Disaster Response Plan, 2014):

As seen in the above table, included in the composition of the Response Clusters is the Health Cluster under the leadership of the DOH. The main purpose of the Health Cluster is the delivery of appropriate and timely public health and medical interventions in order to save lives and decrease

preventable mortalities, morbidities, injuries and disabilities (National Disaster Response Plan, 2014).

With the onset of COVID-19, the Philippine government initially directed for a multi-sectoral response through the IATF under the leadership of the DOH. However, recognizing that COVID-19 is not merely a health-related concern but already a disaster in its own way, there was a realization to align the IATF with the NDRRMC's Response Clusters through the Health Cluster, also under the leadership of the DOH. For this purpose, on 14 February 2020, NDRRMC Memorandum Circular

No. 1 was issued, which directed the NDRRMC's Response Clusters to undertake a unified response with the IATF to identify, track, control and prevent the increase of COVID-19, then referred to as 2019 Novel Coronavirus (NDRRMC Memorandum Circular No. 1, 2020).

Specifically, the IATF organized its Task Groups to work seamlessly with the NDRRMC's Response Clusters. In terms of concept of operations, the Task Groups of the IATF focused on port quarantine, contact tracing, treatment and containment, and risk communication while the Response Clusters of the NDRRMC through the Health Cluster focused on the rest of supporting activities for the pandemic response (NDRRMC Memorandum Circular No. 1, 2020)..

Preparations for large-scale pandemic response seemed in place. However, several days later, the direction for response underwent drastic changes. Announced on 26 March 2020, the Secretary of the Office of Presidential Adviser

for Peace Process (OPAPP) was designated as the Chief Implementer of the Philippine government's policy against COVID-19 (Gotinga, 2020). Given this designation, the Chief Implementer directed for the development and implementing of the National Action Plan (NAP) on COVID-19, which primarily aimed to contain the spread of COVID-19 and mitigate its socioeconomic impacts (NTF, 2021).

Under the guidance of the Chief Implementer, the NAP provided for the establishment of another task force called the National Task Force, also popularly known as the NTF. As provided for in IATF Resolution No. 15 series of 2020, the NTF was created in order to lessen the burden on the IATF and to streamline and decentralize the operations in addressing COVID-19 pandemic. In terms of delineation of mandates, the IATF served as the policy-making body while the NTF provided the operational command. The NTF was placed under the leadership of the DND. Meanwhile,





TASK GROUP	EO NO. 168 Detailed Functions	DOH EREID Manual			NDRRMC NDRP	
		Lead	Bureaus	Supporting Agencies	Lead	Supporting Response Clusters
 Port Quarantine	Quarantine and immediate Containment of EID within ports of entry	DOH	BOQ	DFA DOJ-BI DOTR DA-BAI DA-BPI	HEALTH	PHIL. INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE LAW AND ORDER LOGISTICS
 Contact Tracing	Epidemiological Investigation and Contact Tracing		EB RESU	DFA DILG PNP BFP AFP DOLE OWAA POEA DEPED DA DSWD		CAMP COORDINATION AND CAMP MANAGEMENT EDUCATION LAW AND ORDER LOGISTICS SEARCH, RESCUE AND RETRIEVAL
 Treatment and Containment	Treatment of infected cases and containment of affected areas		DPCB BHEB HEMB RTM	DENR DILG LGUS DA DEWD DTI PNP BFP AFP PHIC		CAMP COORDINATION AND CAMP MANAGEMENT EDUCATION WASH EMERGENCY TELECOMMUNICATIONS FOOD AND NON-FOOD ITEMS LAW AND ORDER LOGISTICS MANAGEMENT OF THE DEAD AND THE MISSING PROTECTION
 Risk Communication	Formulation of a risk communication plan and EID materials for the general public		HRCS	DOLE OWAA POEA DEPED DILG PIA DND OCD		CAMP COORDINATION AND CAMP MANAGEMENT EDUCATION EMERGENCY TELECOMMUNICATIONS LOGISTICS PHIL. INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN ASSISTANCE

Figure 2. Complementation of the IATF and NDRRMC

Source: Processed by Author

the NDRRMC, which is also chaired by the DND, was directed by the IATF to provide support for the NTF in terms of mobilizing and organizing agencies (IATF-EID Resolution No. 15 s. 2020, 2020).

At this point, two (2) task forces were already in place: the IATF and the NTF. The NTF coordinated and implemented all requirements for COVID-19 response based on the direction set by the IATF, which is the primary policy-making body for managing the pandemic. Given the magnitude and overwhelming impacts of the pandemic, there was a need to organize groups in charge of tactical activities. For this purpose, the Regional Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Councils (RDRRMCs) and the Local Disaster Reduction and Management Councils (LDRRMCs) were organized as the Regional Task Forces (RTFs) and Local Task Forces (LTFs), respectively (NDRRMC Memorandum No. 32, 2020). The establishment of these ground task

forces completed the network of task forces for COVID-19, comprising the IATF, NTF, RTFs, and LTFs. Central to the operations of the task forces was the orchestration of the Chief Implementer. In terms of human capital, all government agency personnel from the NDRRMC, RDRRMCs and LDRRMCs were also the same operators of the NTF, RTFs, and LTFs, respectively.

Under the direction of the Chief Implementer, the NAP underwent several phases of implementation, which dictated the changes within the organizational structure, composition and priorities of the task forces. These phases are as follows (NTF, 2021):

Phase 1: March to June 2020

During Phase 1, focus was on prevention, containment and eventual elimination of COVID-19 transmission. This was the time wherein strict lockdowns were imposed considering that there was no vaccination developed yet. In terms of

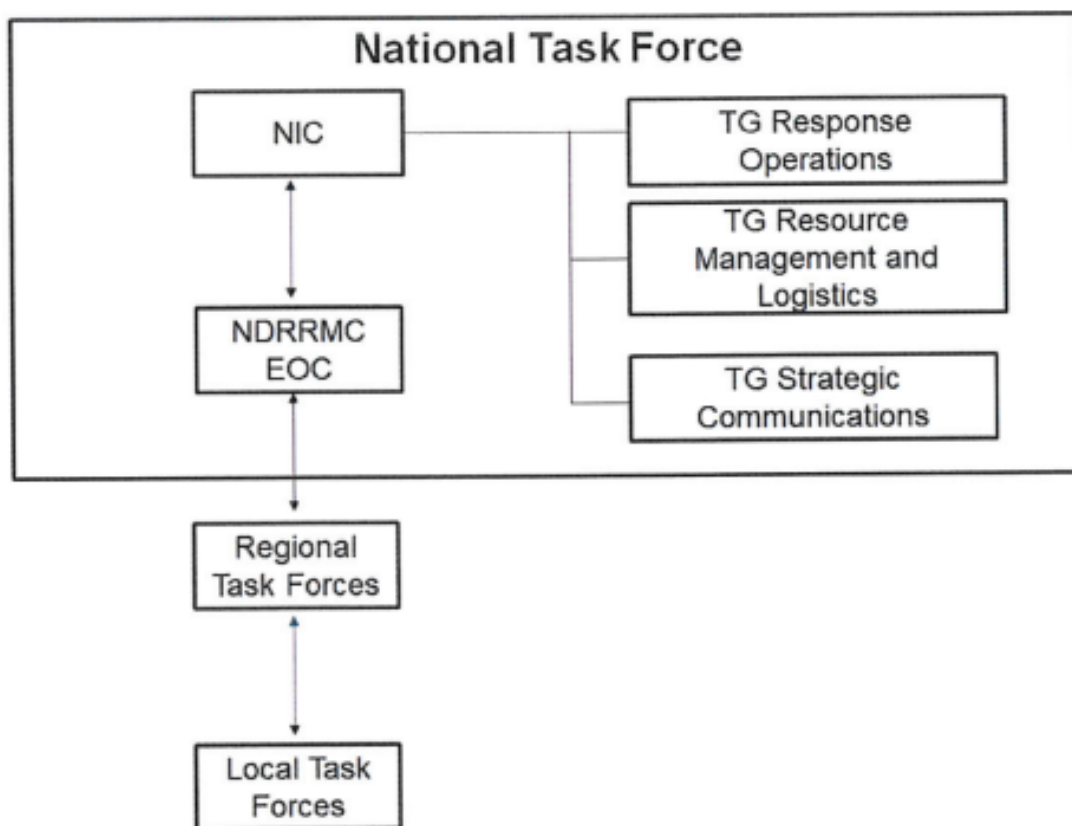


Figure 3. Reporting Structure of the NTF, RTFs and LTFs

Source: Processed by Author

Figure 57. Phasing of the NAP Against COVID-19

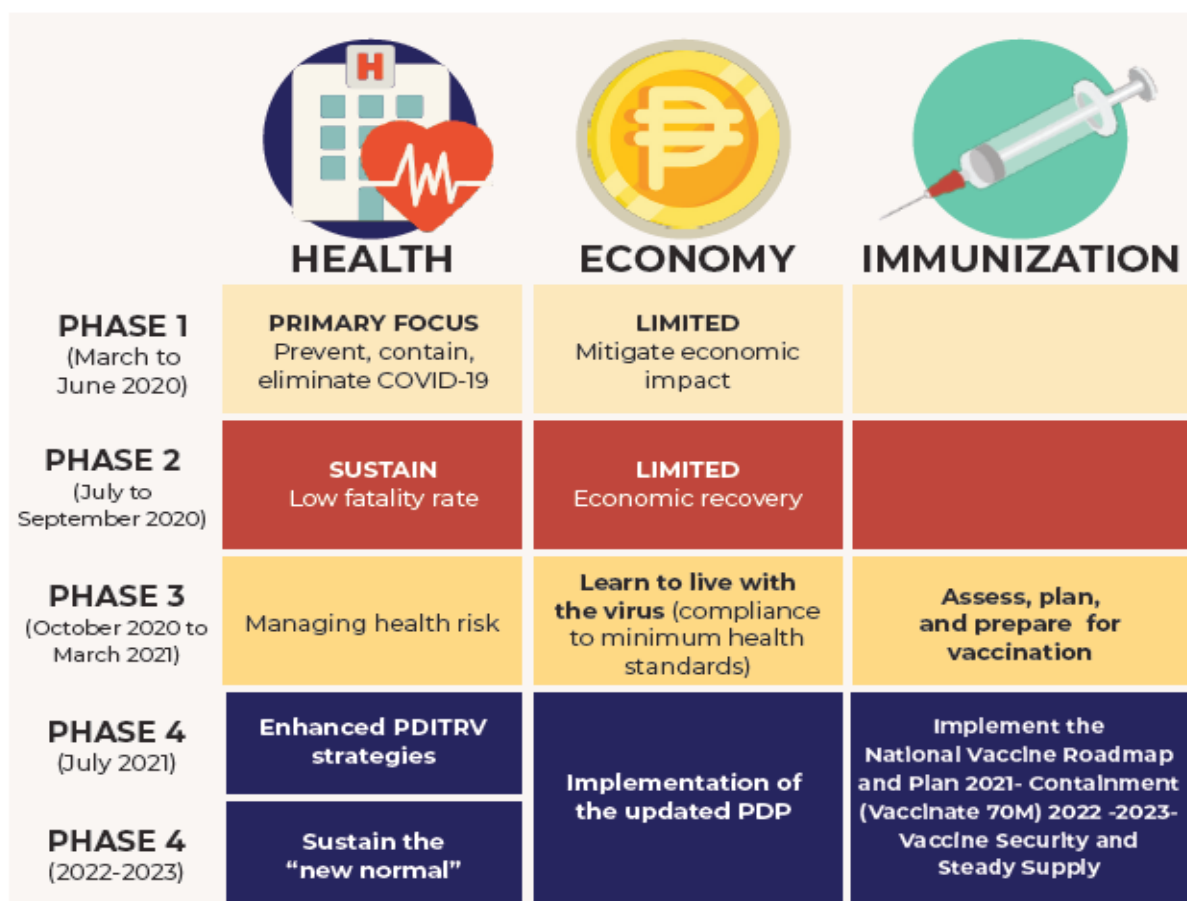


Figure 4. Phases of National Action Plan for COVID-19

Source: Processed by Author

organizational structure, the IATF remained on top while the NTF created its Task Groups (TG). Each TG was led by a particular agency, with several Task Units and corresponding agencies assigned.

- TG Response Operations: in charge of health-related responses, including testing, treatment, and isolation.
- TG Resource Management and Logistics: in charge of procurement and distribution of medical supplies and personal protective equipment (PPE) as well as the establishment of response facilities.
- TG Strategic Communications: in charge of public information and crisis communication.
- TG Food Security: in charge of providing food and financial assistance to families affected by lockdowns.

The implementing units of the operations of the NTF and its TGs were the RTFs and the LTFs assigned at the local levels.

Phase 2: July to September 2020

Phase 2 sustained the response priorities of Phase 1, with emphasis on ensuring that mortality rates are low and manageable. It was during this time that businesses suffered greatly, hence, the need to also prioritize economic recovery. Likewise, Filipinos were getting anxious about the exposures of their family members abroad and demanded for their safe return in the middle of the pandemic. With this, additional TGs were established:

- TG Recovery: in charge of recovery of businesses.

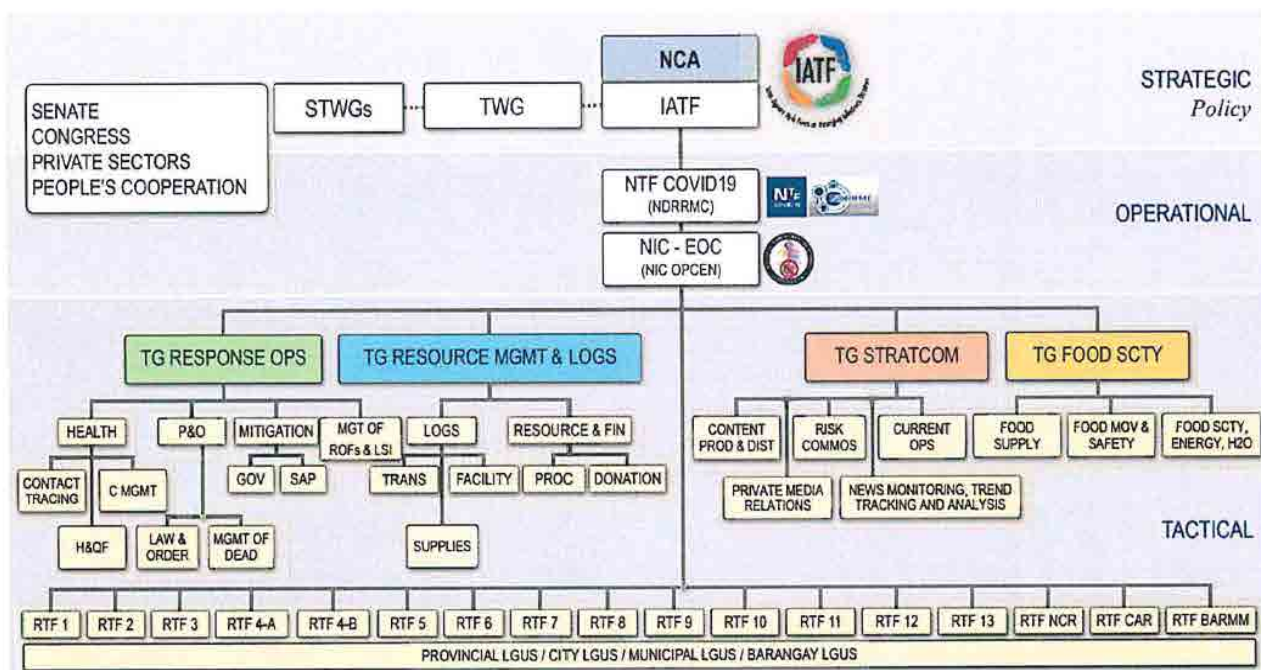


Figure 5. NAP Phase 1 Organizational Structure

Source: Processed by Author

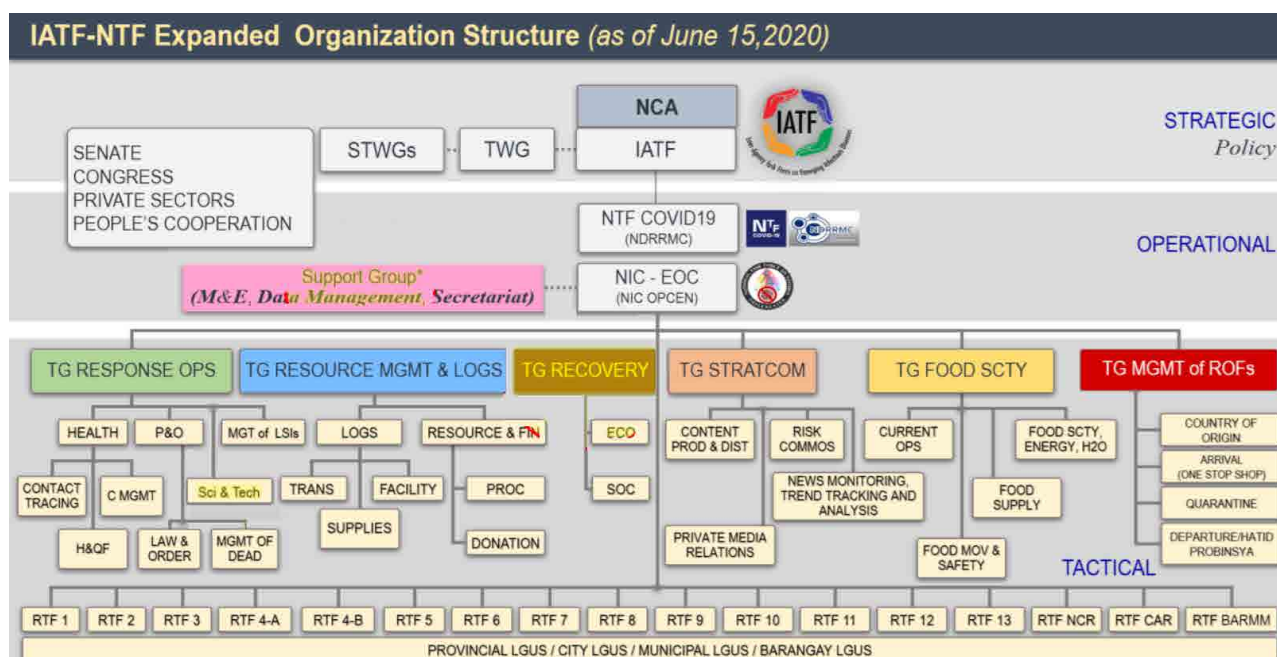


Figure 6. NAP Phase 2 Organizational Structure

Source: Processed by Author

- TG Management of Returning Overseas Filipinos: in charge of facilitating the transfer of Filipinos abroad back to their homes in the country.

As with Phase 1, the operations of the RTFs and LTFs remained in Phase 2 for the

implementation of tactical activities and priorities set by the NTF and the IATF.

Phase 3: October 2020 to March 2021

For Phase 3, the Philippine government managed to establish a structure for managing the overall health risk and living with the virus.

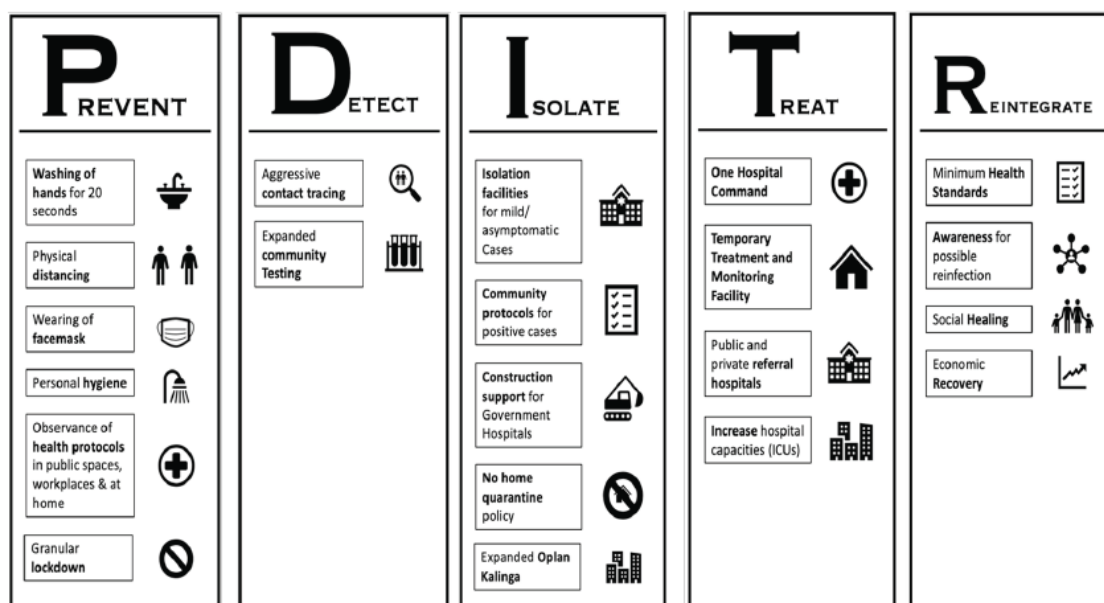


Figure 7. P-D-I-T-R Strategy of the NTF

Source: Processed by Author

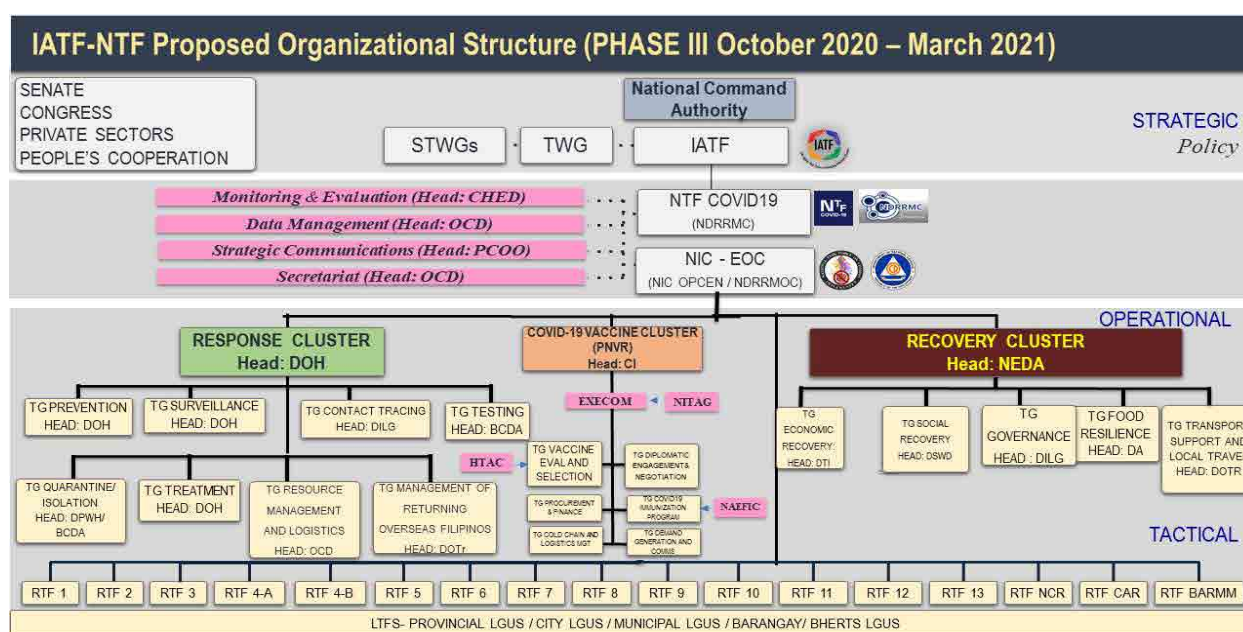


Figure 8. NAP Phase 3 Organizational Structure

Source: Processed by Author

Hence, the P-D-I-T-R or Prevent-Detect-Isolate-Treat-Reintegrate became the standard sequence of response activities of the NTF.

During this period, there were already plans about the development of vaccine. With this, the Philippine government prepared its mechanisms to gain access to vaccination supplies and eventually implement a large-scale immunization

program. At this point, NDRRMC's concept of Clusters gained significant attention, thereby prompting the NTF to reorganize the TGs into Response Cluster and Recovery Cluster, with the addition of Vaccination Cluster.

- **Response Cluster:** in charge of health-related responses, including testing, treatment, and isolation.

- Recovery Cluster: in charge of large-scale economic recovery.
- Vaccination Cluster: in charge of planning, procurement, distribution, and administration of COVID-19 vaccines.

Phase 4: July 2021 onwards, 2022 to 2023

Phase 4 was the last phase, which basically sustained the priorities for Phase 3 but with streamlining in terms of organization and functions. The Philippine government and the communities eventually learned to live with and adapt to the existence of COVID-19, which popularized the term “new normal.” Vaccines eventually became accessible globally, and the Philippines implemented its own National Vaccine Roadmap and Plan. Further, the government prepared to update its long-term Philippine Development Plan by incorporating all the lessons,

experiences and challenges for COVID-19.

Organizationally, the Response, Recovery and Vaccination Clusters retained as well as the RTF and LTFs.

Throughout the four (4) phases of NAP implementation under the orchestration of the Chief Implementer, the Philippine government’s response to COVID-19 can be best summarized as follows (NTF, 2021):

- **Lockdown Management:** Based on the recommendations of the IATF, the NTF implemented and enforced community quarantine, also known as lockdowns, across the country based on the severity of COVID-19 cases in different regions and localities.
- **Testing and Contact Tracing:** The NTF strengthened the country’s testing capacities and improved its contact tracing efforts to monitor and contain the spread of the virus

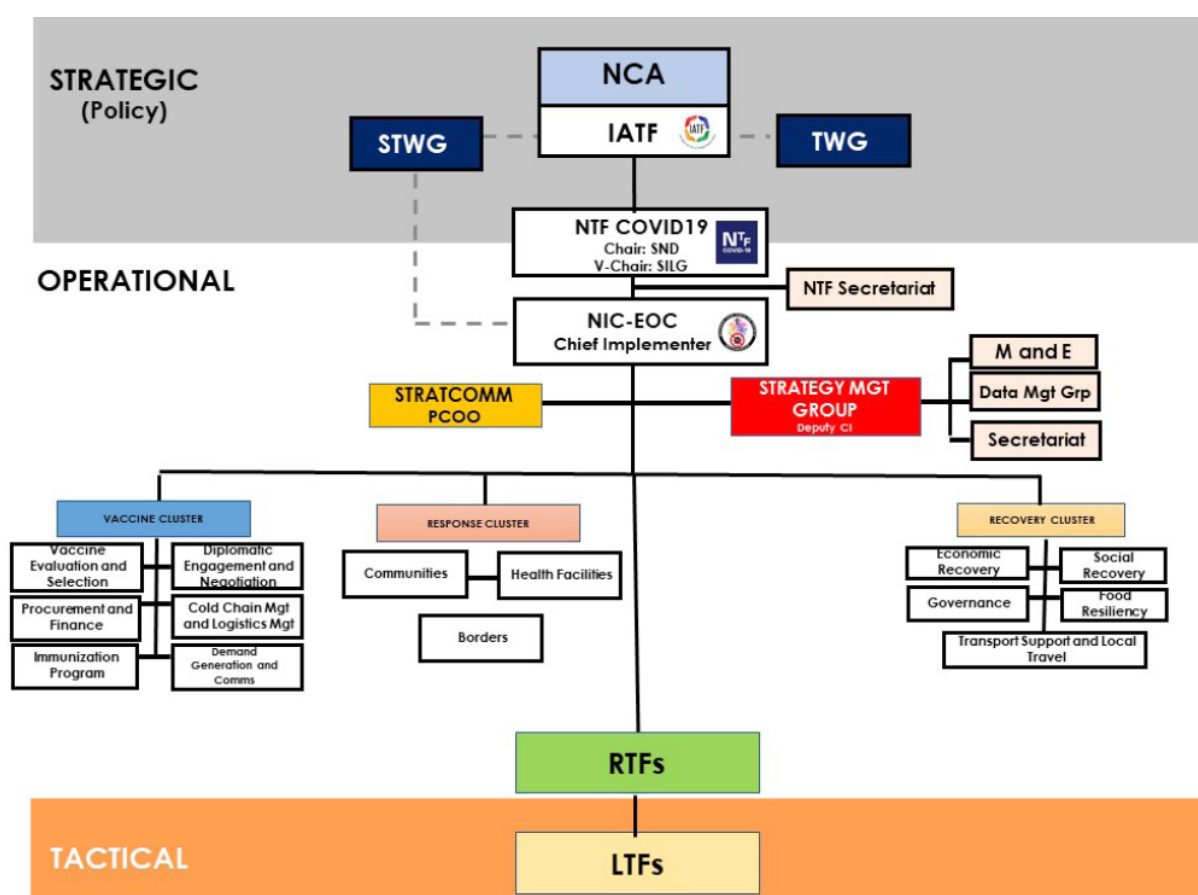


Figure 9. Nap Phase 4 Organization Structure

Source: Processed by Author

through the operationalization of the RTFs and LTFs.

- **Vaccination:** Upon availability of vaccines, the NTF spearheaded the procurement, distribution, and administration of COVID-19 vaccines to achieve herd immunity.
- **Public Information:** The NTF, through its TG Strategic Communication, implemented massive information campaigns to educate the public about COVID-19, promoting health protocols and countering misinformation.
- **“New Normal” Adjustments:** Through the recommendations of the NTF, the IATF authorized policy adjustments in view of the “new normal” such as flexible work arrangements for employees to work from home and permission for distant learning for educational institutions.
- **Coordination with localities:** As with any disaster, the local government units are always at the frontline of emergencies. Through the

RTFs and LTFs, the national government was able to work closely with the localities to ensure that policies are effectively carried out, especially in terms of lockdowns, health protocol enforcement, and vaccination.

In summary, the Philippine government underwent several reorganizations and restructuring in the operations of task forces comprising the IATF, NTF, RTFs and LTFs. Such also involved the shifting of priorities of the NDRRMC to support the NTF and the IATF. Overall, these network of task forces were critical in coordinating the government’s response and managing all available resources across all levels.

Disaster Response in The Middle of Public Health Emergency

It has been established that COVID-19 was not the only problem of the Philippines as it faced numerous disasters even at the height

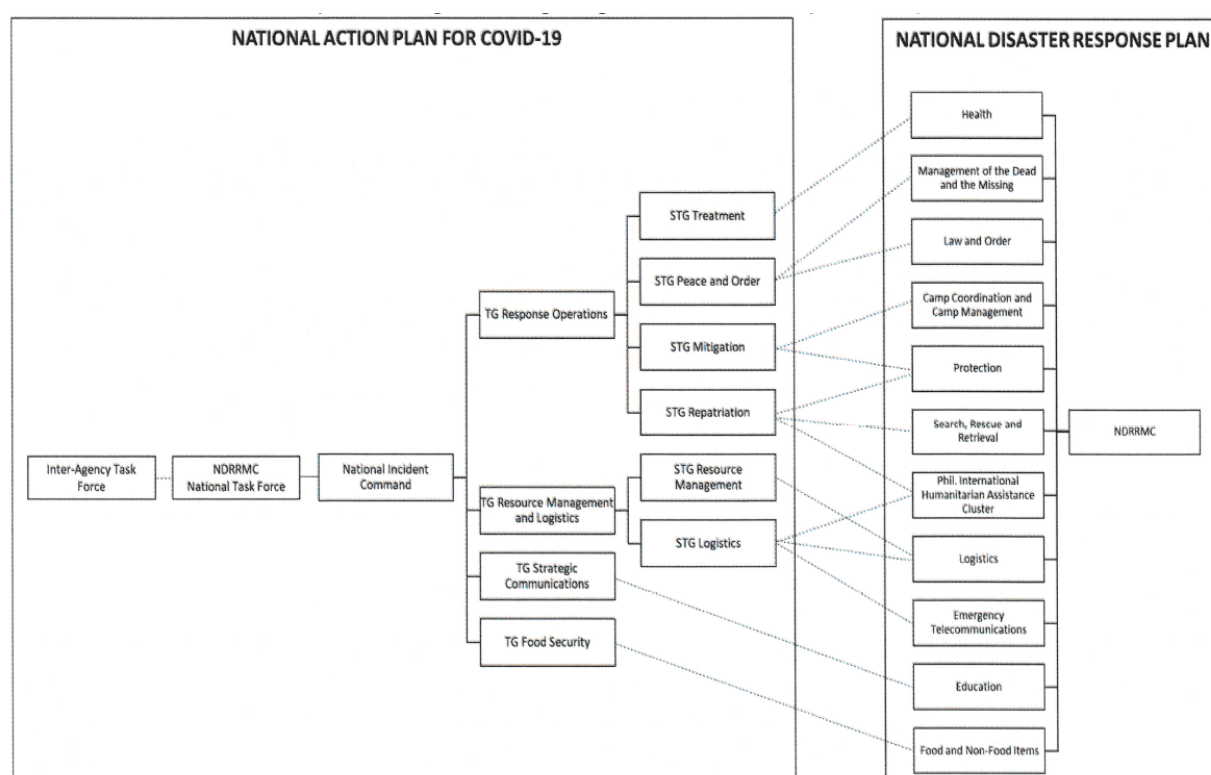


Figure 10. Alignment of NTF's National Action Plan for COVID-19 with NDRRMC's National Disaster Response Plan

Source: Processed by Author

of the pandemic. During this time, the NDRRMC was already operating as NTF, with most of its personnel and resources already dedicated for COVID-19 response. Thus, in anticipation for disasters that may strike at any time, the NDRRMC initiated alignment of the NAP COVID-19 with the Council's National Disaster Response Plan (NDRRMC Memorandum No. 46, 2020).

The above initiative was an attempt to address the confusion arising from the overlapping roles performed by Philippine government agencies that are mandated to respond to COVID-19 and other disasters at the same time. Through this initiative for alignment, it was made clear that the COVID-19 management was under the purview of the NTF while disaster management remained under the leadership of the NDRRMC (NDRRMC Memorandum No. 46, 2020). Even if the NTF and NDRRMC had the same operating agencies, the setup can be described as just a matter of switching roles based on the situation.

To further clarify the delineation of the NTF and the NDRRMC, the Philippine government issued the interim guidelines on disaster response operations simultaneous with COVID-19 response operations. (NDRRMC Memorandum No. 111, 2020). It comprehensively laid out the adjustments in the administration and governance of the NDRRMC in view of the pandemic. Among the highlights of the guidelines was the addition of functions to the existing Response Clusters of the

NDRRMC, thereby making them appropriate for COVID-19 response.

Even the management of the NDRRMC's 24/7 Operations Center underwent drastic adjustments. Unlike in the past wherein multiple agency representatives had to be physically operate in the Operations Center especially during emergencies, the entire facility had to be managed by the OCD. The rest of the government agencies and stakeholders were restricted in rendering duty at the Operations Center in adherence to the minimum health protocols (NDRRMC Memorandum No. 93, 2020).

With the occurrence of three (3) major volcanic eruptions, four (4) major earthquakes, and more than 30 tropical cyclones from 2020 to 2022 (NDRRMC, 2024), along with many other localized incidents that occurred throughout the country, the Philippine government's readiness for both COVID-19 and other disasters were put to the test. This was demonstrated during the onslaught of Typhoon Odette (international name: "Rai") on December 2021.

Typhoon Odette is the 15th tropical cyclone that hit the Philippines in 2021 (Typhoon Odette Final Report, 2022, p. 1). Its wind threat reached as strong as Tropical Wind Signal No. 4, characterized by severe damage especially to makeshift or old, dilapidated structures, and other structures made of light materials (DOST-PAGASA, n.d.). Typhoon Odette made a total of nine (9) landfalls

Table 2.
Additional COVID-19-related Functions for NDRRMC's Response Clusters

Response Cluster	Additional Functions
Health Cluster	Sustain the PDITR strategy while providing essential emergency health service
Management of the Dead and Missing	Ensure that precautions are followed when handling human remains to avoid further spread of diseases
Food and Non-food Items	Sustain provision of family food packs for families affected by disasters and COVID-19
Law and Order	Maintain quarantine Control points and enforce zoning containment strategy during disasters
Logistics	Provide support requirements for COVID-19 and others disaster operation
International Humanitarian Assistance	Facilitate acceptance of donations and others forms of assistance intended for COVID-19 and other disasters

Source: Processed by Author

and affected 11 regions, 38 provinces, 536 cities and municipalities and 6,575 barangays in total (Typhoon Odette Final Report, 2022, pp. 1-2). It claimed lives totaling to 405 deaths and affected around seven (7) million individuals. Further, the estimated cost of damage to infrastructure was around 29 billion pesos (Typhoon Odette Final Report, 2022, p. 2).

During the emergency period for Typhoon Odette, there was still the surge of COVID-19 cases. It can be recalled that on period of January 2022, the emergence of Omicron variant led to high exposures among Filipinos (Reuters, 2022), the same period for typhoon response and recovery. Rescuers, emergency managers, medical teams, and relief workers were not exempted from COVID-19 exposure. In the NDRRMC's Final Report for Typhoon Odette, the following was documented: *"The threat of COVID-19 remains in the country. Hence, mobility has been restricted due to unwanted exposure. There have been several reports about teams deployed on the ground who caught COVID-19 and had to undergo mandatory isolation before resuming response and recovery operations."* (Typhoon Odette Final Report, 2022, p. 13).

Responding to both COVID-19 and disasters was definitely a daunting task for the NDRRMC. Despite the challenges and limitations brought about by COVID-19, the NDRRMC managed to perform its mandate in disaster management.

The setup prevailed until it was publicly announced on 20 July 2022 that the NTF is abolished and its functions has been transferred back to NDRRMC. The abolishment was to streamline the government's pandemic response, wherein the NDRRMC shall cater to all NTF concerns while the DOH shall address queries on vaccination programs (Nepomuceno, 2022). After the deactivation of the NTF, there was no mention of succeeding IATF operations in connection with COVID-19. Nonetheless, the existence of the IATF remains considering that Executive Order No. 168 series of 2014 does not mention anything about the task force's duration of effectivity or abolishment.

Analysis of the Philippine task forces: The hammer and dance theory

During the devastation of COVID-19, the "Hammer and Dance" theory became popular among decision makers and managers all over the world. Popularized by author and writer

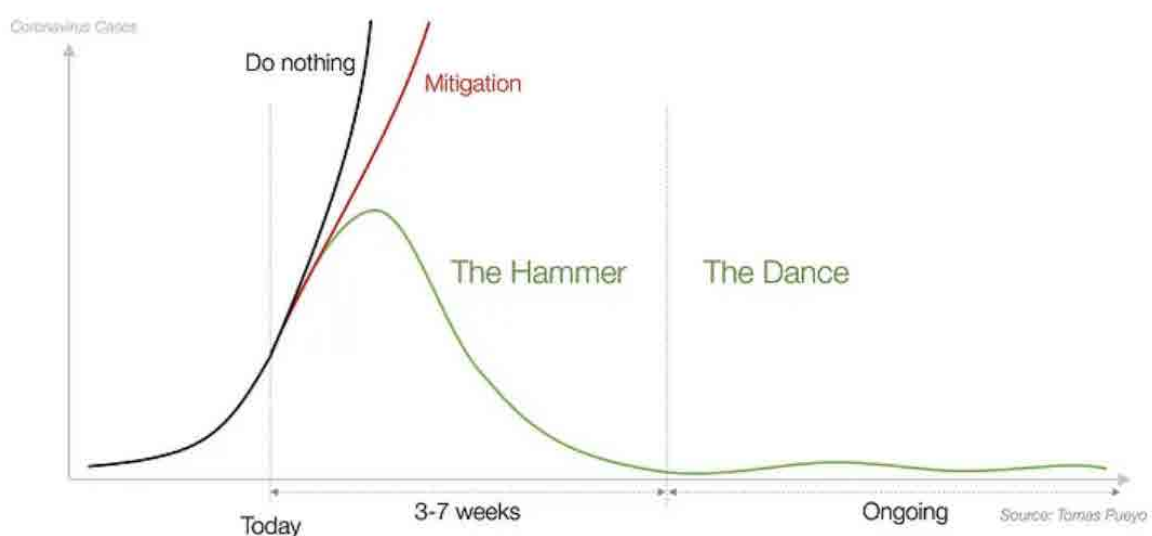


Figure 11. Graphical Presentation of the Hammer and Dance Theory

Source: Processed by Author

Tomas Pueyo, the Hammer and Dance Theory is a framework used to describe general strategies for managing the pandemic.

Based on the theory, the concepts of “hammering” and “dancing” are applied. Hammer is used to describe aggressive and quick action to suppress COVID-19 as soon as possible (Pueyo, 2020, p. 23). This is the phase where strict and aggressive measures are applied such as lockdowns, social distancing, widespread testing and quarantine. Dance, on the other hand, is about containing the virus after implementing drastic measures, then sustaining the efforts until there’s a vaccine (Pueyo, 2020, p. 29). This is the phase where economic and social activities gradually resume, and people learn to live with the virus.

The Hammer and Dance Theory emphasizes the flexibility of interventions based on the situation: the “hammer” is short-term and drastic intervention while the “dance” is a long-term and sustainable adaptation strategy. Using this theory as the framework for analysis, it is important to examine the strengths and dangers of task forces as the government’s primary response intervention during COVID-19.

In terms of strengths, flexibility was evidently demonstrated by the task forces. Priorities were constantly shifting based on the requirements of the COVID-19 situation. “Hammering” was demonstrated as a quick solution by enforcing hard measures such as lockdowns to contain the infection and prevent its further spread. Through time, people managed to live with the virus and the peak of the cases have been controlled. With this, the task forces “danced” by eventually relaxing the controls and sustaining the gains until vaccination was made available.

The flexibility was also demonstrated in the organizational structure of the NTF. As new priorities emerge, TGs and Clusters were added in the national structure and were translated at the local level. Everything started with a very complex structure but was eventually streamlined.

The multiple expertise within the task forces as well as the varying levels of coordination were also advantageous. The overwhelming situation brought about by COVID-19 cannot be resolved by a single entity alone. “Hammering” the response does not only pertain to the health intervention. Clearly, there was a need to involve other factors such as public information, security, resource management, and economic recovery. All of these were evident in the organizational dynamics within the task forces, from the IATF and NTF down to the RTFs and LTFs.

However, there are also challenges regarding the operationalization of task forces. Foremost, there is the question on the leadership of the Chief Implementer coming from the Secretary of the OPAPP. Now referred to as Office of the Presidential Adviser on Peace, Reconciliation and Unity (OPAPRU), the office is in charge of managing, directing, integrating, and supervising all aspects of the comprehensive peace process, including initiatives that promote and reinforce national reconciliation and unity (Parrocha, 2021). In terms of mandate, capacity and competency, OPAPRU does not have jurisdiction on the management of operations for infectious disease. In general, management of infectious diseases does not fall within the mandate and purview of OPAPRU. Yet, OPAPRU was designated as the lead implementer of the government’s overall policy against COVID-19.

Further, the NDRRMC had initial plan for managing COVID-19 even before the onset of its local transmission in the Philippines through the complementation with the IATF pursuant to Memorandum Circular No. 1 issued on 14 February 2020. However, the plan did not materialize when the Chief Implementer took over and assumed responsibility one month after the issuance of the Memorandum Circular. However, the plan did not materialize when the NTF was activated one month after the issuance of the NDRRMC Memorandum Circular. This is an

indication of drastic reinvention of existing plans and mechanisms, which were not put to use.

It is also important to point that the NDRRMC member agencies are exactly the same organizations that comprise the NTF, with some expansions later on. With this, it can be assumed that the NTF is a rebranding of the existing NDRRMC but under a different command. At the time, there must be confusion and lack of direction on the part of implementing agencies due to shifts in leadership.

The Hammer and Dance Theory emphasizes the flexibility of interventions for COVID-19, which also depicts the flexible nature of the task forces. Even after the pandemic, the theory remains relevant in providing a framework for the operations of task forces. The following are key recommendations for the establishment of succeeding task forces in the Philippines:

- **Task forces should fill-in the gaps in existing mechanisms.** As the saying goes, *“if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.”* Given that task forces are typically created to address specific problems, authorities must ensure that the particular task force does not necessarily reinvent or rebrand established mechanisms offering the same solutions. Instead, task forces should fill-in the gaps that current structures can no longer cater to, necessitating the need for another temporary organization. Otherwise, “hammering” and “dancing” interventions will just lead to unnecessary duplication and redundancies in the performance of functions as well as wastage of time and resources.
- **Task forces require careful and flexible planning.** Task forces generally are planned for in order to prevent escalation of problems or issues. At this point, “hammering” is applied as it addresses the matter as soon as possible. In the process, there should also be some form of “dancing” along the way in order to see the effectivity of the interventions.

Revisiting the COVID-19 experience, the NTF was immediately established despite the existence of the NDRRMC’s initial plans for pandemic response. It took two (2) years before the NTF was abolished, with the realization that the response is under the purview of the NDRRMC. Such exemplifies how a task force can duplicate existing structures and disregard established plans. Applying the above recommendations, the setup could have been improved if the government carefully examined the prevailing structure before deciding on the need for a new task force.

In summary, the Hammer and Dance Theory, made popular during COVID-19, remains relevant as framework to govern the operations of task forces. Whenever issues arise, task forces can “hammer” the situation immediately, then “dance” for flexibility and sustainment.

Conclusion

From its origins in the U.S. Navy during the World War II era, the concept of task forces has been proven useful in military, business and government activities. During the height of COVID-19, the Philippine government resorted to using the network of task forces composed of the IATF, NTF, RTFs and LTFs in order to manage the pandemic’s impacts. While the task forces observed flexibility in terms of response activities, the overlapping functions, redundancies and duplications are among the observed challenges in the bureaucracy.

The Philippines’ utilization of task forces during COVID-19 provided important insights. Moving forward after the pandemic, the government must learn to set the direction right when it comes to establishing task forces for whatever purpose they may serve. While task forces are generally flexible, there must be careful assessment as to how the task forces will resolve the root cause of problems that existing mechanisms cannot address. With no clear

guidelines about task forces as of the moment, the framework brought about by the Hammer and Dance Theory can serve as a starting point.

References

- Bouchrika, I. (2025). Primary Research vs Secondary Research for 2025: Definitions, Differences, and Examples. Retrieved from <https://research.com/research/primary-research-vs-secondary-research#secondary>
- Cervantes, F. M. (2023). New disaster task force to have FEMA-like functions: Palace. Retrieved from <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1201120>
- Chant, C. (2013). *The Encyclopedia of Codenames of World War II (Routledge Revivals)*. New York: Routledge.
- Chu, D.-T. e. (2022). COVID-19 in Southeast Asia: Current Status and Perspectives. *Bioengineered*, 2, 3797–3809. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21655979.2022.2031417>
- City Government of Davao. (2023). *TF Davao turns 20*. Retrieved from <https://www.davaocity.gov.ph/peace-and-order/tf-davao-turns-20/>
- Corrales, N. (2023). Task Force Bangon Marawi abolished. Retrieved from <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1881652/task-force-bangon-marawi-abolished>
- Del Castillo, M. F., Fujimi, T., & Tatano, H. (2024). Estimating sectoral COVID-19 economic losses in the Philippines using nighttime light and electricity consumption data. *Front Public Health*. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpubh.2024.1308301>
- DENR. (2021). DENR-led task force on schedule to complete Boracay rehab project by 2022. Retrieved from <https://denr.gov.ph/news-events/denr-led-task-force-on-schedule-to-complete-boracay-rehab-project-by-2022/>
- DENR. (2021). DENR-led task force on schedule to complete Boracay rehab project by 2022. Retrieved from <https://denr.gov.ph/news-events/denr-led-task-force-on-schedule-to-complete-boracay-rehab-project-by-2022/>
- DOST-PAGASA. (n.d.). Tropical Cyclone Wind Signal #4. Retrieved from <https://www.pagasa.dost.gov.ph/learning-tools/tropical-cyclone-wind-signal#:~:text=Tropical%20Cyclone%20Wind%20Signal%20%234&text=Severe%20damage%20will%20occur%20to,few%20may%20suffer%20severe%20damage>.
- European Union. (2023). Kick-off Meeting of the Ad Hoc Joint Task Force between Indonesia, Malaysia and the EU. Retrieved from https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/indonesia/kick-meeting-ad-hoc-joint-task-force-between-indonesia-malaysia-and-eu_en?s=168
- Gita, R. A. (2018). Duterte creates task force to end local communist armed conflict. Retrieved from <https://www.sunstar.com.ph/manila/local-news/duterte-creates-task-force-to-end-local-communist-armed-conflict>
- Gotinga, J. (2020). Peace process chief Galvez is 'chief implementer' of gov't policy vs coronavirus. Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20200609070748/https://www.rappler.com/nation/256028-carlito-galvez-chief-implementer-policy-coronavirus>
- IATF EID. (2020). IATF-EID Resolution No. 15 s. 2020.
- IATF-EID. (2020). IATF-EID Resolution No. 1 s. 2020.
- IATF-EID Resolution No. 15 s. 2020. (2020). *Resolutions relative to the Management of the Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) Situation*.
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). task force. Retrieved from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/task%20force>
- Morison, S. E. (1957). The Battle of the Atlantic,

- September 1939 – May 1943. In *History of United States Naval Operations in World War II* (p. 434). Boston: Little, Brown.
- National Disaster Response Plan. (2014). Retrieved from https://ndrrmc.gov.ph/attachments/article/1334/NDRP_Hydro_Meteorological_Hazards_as_of_2014.pdf
- National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Plan. (2012). Retrieved from https://ndrrmc.gov.ph/attachments/article/41/NDRRM_Plan_2011-2028.pdf
- NDRRMC. (2024). Retrieved from NDRRMC Monitoring Dashboard: <https://monitoring-dashboard.ndrrmc.gov.ph/page/situations/archive>
- NDRRMC Memorandum Circular No. 1. (2020). *Enjoining all Member Agencies to support the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases on the 2019 Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCov)*.
- NDRRMC Memorandum No. 111. (2020). *Interim Guidelines on the Implementation of NDRRMC Disaster Response Operations Simultaneous with COVID-19 Response Operations*.
- NDRRMC Memorandum No. 32. (2020). *NDRRMC Emergency Operations Center (EOC) Reporting Process Flow in connection with the National Task Force (NTF) for Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19)*.
- NDRRMC Memorandum No. 46. (2020). *Alignment of the National Disaster Response Plan and the National Action Plan for COVID-19*.
- NDRRMC Memorandum No. 93. (2020). *Interim Guidelines on the Management of the NDRRMC Emergency Operations Center during COVID-19 Pandemic*.
- NEDA. (2021). NEDA Updates on NAP Phase IV, IATF-Approved Scorecard. Retrieved from <https://neda.gov.ph/neda-updates-on-nap-phase-iv-iatf-approved-scorecard/>
- NEDA. (2023). NEDA underscores need to rebuild a resilient, post-pandemic health sector. Retrieved from <https://neda.gov.ph/neda-underscores-need-to-rebuild-a-resilient-post-pandemic-health-sector/>
- Nepomuceno, P. (2022). *NTF Covid-19 transfers functions to NDRRMC*. Retrieved from <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1179393>
- Nepomuceno, P. (2023). Task force created on Oriental Mindoro oil spill. Retrieved from <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1196565>
- NTF. (2021). National Action Plan against COVID-19 Phase IV.
- Parrocha, A. (2020). Duterte extends term of task force overseeing Yolanda rehab. Retrieved from <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1116785>
- Parrocha, A. (2021). Duterte signs EO renaming OPAPP to OPAPRU. Retrieved from <https://web.archive.org/web/20211229103737/https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1164046>
- Placido, D. (2017). Duterte orders creation of 'Task Force Bangon Marawi'. Retrieved from <https://news.abs-cbn.com/news/07/03/17/duterte-orders-creation-of-task-force-bangon-marawi>
- Pocalla, D. (2014). Task force on emerging infectious diseases formed. Retrieved from <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2014/06/03/1330458/task-force-emerging-infectious-diseases-formed>
- Pueyo, T. (2020). Coronavirus: The Hammer and the Dance: What the Next 18 Months Can Look Like, if Leaders Buy Us Time. Retrieved from <https://www.exemplars.health/-/media/files/egh/narrative-pdfs/sri-lanka/challenges/61-coronavirus-the-hammer-and-the-dance--by-tomas-pueyo--medium.pdf>
- Quinones, M. T. (2020). PRRD signs EO creating the "Build Back Better Task Force". Retrieved from <https://reliefweb.int/report/philippines/prrd-signs-eo-creating-build-back-better-task-force>
- Republic Act 10121. (2010).

- Reuters. (2022). Philippines confirms community transmission of Omicron, cases hit record. Retrieved from <https://www.reuters.com/business/healthcare-pharmaceuticals/philippines-confirms-community-transmission-omicron-cases-hit-record-2022-01-15/>
- Robinson, C. D. (2020). The U.S. Navy's task forces: 1–199. *Defence and Security Analysis*, 36(1), 109–110. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14751798.2020.1712028>
- Rocamora, J. A. (2024). PBBM creates task force for Bataan oil spill. Retrieved from <https://www.pna.gov.ph/articles/1229919>
- The LawPhil Project. (2014). Retrieved from https://lawphil.net/executive/execord/eo2014/eo_168_2014.html
- The Philippine Star. (2014). *Task force on emerging infectious diseases formed*. Retrieved from <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2014/06/03/1330458/task-force-emerging-infectious-diseases-formed>
- Tupas, E., & Cabrera, R. (2024). PNP creates task force vs illegal POGOs. Retrieved from <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2024/07/21/2371774/pnp-creates-task-force-vs-illegal-pogos>
- Typhoon Odette Final Report. (2022).
- U.S. Department of State. (n.d.). The President's Interagency Task Force. Retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/the-presidents-interagency-task-force/>
- Villanueva, A. (2020). DENR leads 'Tayo Ang Kalikasan' campaign. Retrieved from <https://manilastandard.net/?p=318347>
- Villanueva, R. (2024). DOH task force vs communicable diseases created. Retrieved from <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2024/08/25/2380370/doh-task-force-vs-communicable-diseases-created>
- WHO. (2024). Retrieved from <https://data.who.int/dashboards/covid19/cases>
- WHO. (2024). *COVID-19 in the Philippines*. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/philippines/emergencies/covid-19-response-in-the-philippines>
- WHO. (n.d.). *COVID-19 in the Philippines*. Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/philippines/emergencies/covid-19-response-in-the-philippines>
- World Health Organization. (2020). Retrieved from <https://www.who.int/philippines/news/feature-stories/detail/100-days-of-covid-19-in-the-philippines-how-who-supported-the-philippine-response>