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Calling attention to mental health issues in a developing country: Views and recommendations from the Philippines post-elections

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Dear Editor,

The recently held Philippine elections diverted Filipinos' attention from pressing concerns. A crucial problem that remains to be addressed in the country is the huge mental health impact of COVID-19 that was exacerbated by the occurrence of other disasters. The Philippines was badly hit by a super typhoon in late December 2021, at around the same time that the Omicron variant rapidly spread in the country. I was part of a team that went to Siargao island to conduct training and psychosocial processing with inhabitants of the coastal area. The initiative materialized in coordination with a local official who saw the need for collaborative efforts in helping the community recover. We listened to their stories of how unprepared they were for the typhoon as dealing with COVID-19 was difficult in itself. What added salt to the wound was the fact that they have not fully recovered yet from the devastating effects of previous typhoons many years back. This demonstrates that for poor, climate vulnerable countries, pandemic recovery is even more challenging.

Finding solutions for public health issues is a balancing act. We know that government-imposed lockdowns were necessary to prevent the spread of infection and to keep people safe. However, it has been reported that more restrictive COVID-19 policies result in higher psychological distress and lower life satisfaction (Fancourt et al., 2021; Aknin et al., 2022). Once borders re-opened, people were noticeably happier, and businesses started to thrive again. Thus, striking a balance between implementing stringent policies and helping communities recover economically by allowing tourists to come in is crucial. In the province we visited, 90% of the residents' livelihood came from the coconut plantation which was gravely damaged by the typhoon. Having to deal with this and the pandemic added to the distress experienced by community dwellers pressured to support their families. They had no choice but to rely on income that came in from tourism. This demonstrates the need to put measures in place that would safeguard both the physical and mental health of the population.

The above problems come to mind as we usher in a new set of government officials. At the time of writing, the Philippines has just recently held its elections. I hope that the newly-elected officials make it a

priority to push for policies that prepare the country's healthcare system to weather future health crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Unfortunately, while the Universal Healthcare System was signed into law in 2019, we have yet to see its full rollout and implementation in the country, especially in the area of mental health. While we can always adopt the mental health service model of more developed countries such as China (Xu et al., 2022), the inequality in the geographic distribution of mental health services appears to be a global occurrence. One recommendation is to align mental health service delivery with mainstream healthcare services and to push for making mental health a public health priority (Latoo et al., 2022).

Low-and middle-income countries (LMICs) such as the Philippines remain at a grave disadvantage, with limited resources to bounce back from the pandemic's deleterious effects. Cultural and socio-economic factors affecting mental health must be considered in LMICs, such as stigma, accessibility of services and the demand for culturally sensitive interventions (Javed et al., 2021). Professionals who can speak the local dialect in rural and underserved communities are needed. I see huge potential in trained community health workers as key to meeting this demand, and thus recommend conduct of more training for these people at the grassroots level.

As an educator and a mental health professional, I also worry about the education crisis that the country is experiencing. The Philippines is one of the countries that had the longest school closures as a consequence of the pandemic (Magsambol, 2021). This negatively impacted students' academic progress as well as their mental health (Alibudbud, 2021; Simon, 2022). The global health crisis caused a global learning crisis (McKinsey and Company, 2022) that translates into a loss of human capital. Teachers who had to deal with heavily affected students also became vulnerable to mental health issues (Aruta et al., 2021). As we ease our way back to face-to-face classes, there is a need to retrain teachers who lost their confidence in delivering lessons in-person. Preparing for the next normal should include continuous and effective training for teachers to conduct hybrid learning. The Philippines continues to lag in international assessments such as the Program for International Student Assessment (Republic of the Philippines Department

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of Education, 2019). Increased absenteeism and dropouts are issues that exacerbate pre-existing problems in our educational system, and rising mental health concerns can be assumed to be linked to these issues. All of these suggest that although we can see some light at the end of the tunnel, the widespread impact of the COVID-19 pandemic will linger on for many years to come. Thus, creative and innovative solutions are needed now more than ever.

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