

Challenges in Preventing the Spread of COVID-19

Observations in the Philippines and Japan

1. Introduction

In addition to restricting entries at legal borders, governments generally recommend, and to great extent enforce, four common actions to prevent the spread of COVID-19: *staying home*, *social distancing*, *wearing mask*, and *washing hands*. Table 1 shows an observation (based on news reports and actual experiences) between the Philippines and Japan.

Table 1 Policy Difference in COVID-19 Preventive Actions
Between the Philippines and Japan

Preventive Action	The Philippines	Japan
<i>Staying Home</i>	- Mandatory Imposition of lockdowns (<i>military, police, and related enforcement agencies are engaged</i>)	- Non-Mandatory No imposition of lockdowns (<i>drawing on individual responsibility and cooperation</i>)
<i>Social/Physical Distancing</i>	- Cancellation of group events (e.g., church worship, beach parties, and cockfights)	- Avoidance of 3Cs: crowds, closed spaces, closed contacts; Also cancellation of group events (e.g., marathons)
<i>Wearing Mask</i>	- Legislated at local governments (<i>penalty for violation of ordinance</i>)	- Encouraged but not legislated - National Government announced giving out masks
<i>Washing Hands</i>	- Encouraged (on your own)	- Encouraged (with wide establishments' support)

Policies and actions taken by governments differ for many reasons, including: 1) preparedness of the health systems, 2) demographics, e.g., percentage of elderly and poor, 3) population density, 4) testing capacity, and 5) cultural, social, and political dynamics.

2. 'Community Quarantine' in the Philippines

Relief goods from the local government are a common sight of daily life during the quarantine.

Families, especially those living 'below poverty line' and 'daily wage earners', receive relief goods to alleviate hunger. Goods usually include 3-5 kilos of rice, 5 canned sardines, and 3-5 packs of instant noodles. In Cagayan de Oro (a city in Mindanao, Southern Philippines), where my relatives live, *daily wage earners* include: 'tricycle drivers', 'jeepney drivers', 'sidewalk vendors', 'hairdressers', and 'street cleaners'. Other daily wage earners earn by selling freshly harvested fruits and vegetables or freshly caught fish. They have so much anxiety during quarantine, particularly how long relief goods can sustain. Essentially, this situation is happening not just in Cagayan de Oro but also in all parts of the Philippines. When did it start?



Photo 1. Relief Goods (Inquirer 2020)

On 16 March (with 142 reported confirmed COVID-19 cases)¹, the Government of the Philippines imposed ‘Enhanced Community Quarantine’ (ECQ) for the entire Luzon.² Immediately after that, other provinces followed (e.g., Misamis Oriental and Davao). The ECQ is a lockdown.³

- **It restricts people’s movement:** mass gathering is prohibited (e.g., church fellowship, beach parties, movies, and sports events), public transportation is stopped, and schools at all levels are suspended. Front-liners (i.e., doctors, nurses, army, police, and relevant personnel) are exempted. Private companies are ordered to implement “telework” arrangements. Only one person in the household is allowed to go outside to buy basic needs (e.g., food and medicine). In restricting people’s movement, military-police checkpoints (Photo 2) and ‘quarantine pass’ (Photo 3) are essential requirements.



Photo 2 Police Checkpoint (CNN Philippines 2020)

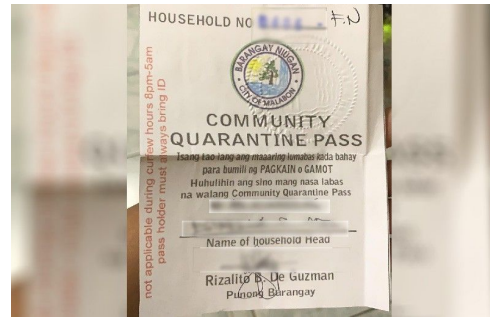


Photo 3 Quarantine Pass (Philippines Star 2020)

- **It imposes closure of establishments:** Hotels, casinos, cockpits, and related businesses are not allowed to operate. Exempted establishments are financial institutions such as banks and money transfer services. Violators will be penalized (See Memorandum from the Executive Secretary dated 16 March 2020).⁴
- **It restricts travel:** Issuance of visas and entry of foreigners into the Philippines are suspended. Travel outside the Philippines is also restricted with exemptions to those who travel with medical supplies related to COVID-19. Cargo forwarders, farmers, and other food producers are exempted. Violators will be penalized (See Memorandum of 16 March 2020).

2.1 Entire Philippines under ‘State of Calamity’

On the first day of the lockdown, President Duterte declared the entire Philippines under a *State of Calamity* for a period of six months.⁵ This declaration allows all local governments to use their respective emergency funds, usually by providing relief goods to their constituents through the local disaster risk management office (LDRRMO). Some local governments invest on buying for personal protective equipment (PPE) for medical personnel (e.g., Pasig City).⁶ Others offer financial assistance as well doing disinfection-related activities.⁷ Note that, the President also

¹ COVID-19 Tracker Philippines, <https://www.doh.gov.ph/covid19tracker>

² CNN Philippines, ECQ, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/3/16/luzon-enhanced-community-quarantine-covid-19.html>

³ ECQ Memorandum, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2020/03mar/20200316-MEMORANDUM-FROM-ES-RRD.pdf>

⁴ Memo 16 March 2020, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2020/03mar/20200316-MEMORANDUM-FROM-ES-RRD.pdf>

⁵ PH under State of Calamity due to COVID-19, <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/3/17/ph-state-of-calamity-coronavirus.html>

⁶ ABS-CBN, <https://news.abs-cbn.com/ancx/culture/spotlight/03/20/20/heres-everything-that-mayor-vico-sotto-has-done-so-far-in-response-to-covid-19>

⁷ Financial assistance, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/257106-manila-financial-assistance-families-under-coronavirus-lockdown>

issued a memorandum that ordered the freezing of price of basic goods, emergency medicines, and medical supplies.⁸

2.2 Special Powers to the President

On 24 March, Duterte signed a law known as ‘Bayanihan to Heal as One’ that authorizes the President to execute necessary powers for handling the COVID-19 national emergency.⁹ The law specified **thirty special powers** that will last for three months unless modified by Congress. One of these powers is providing an emergency subsidy amounting to five thousand pesos (₱5,000.00) to eight thousand pesos (₱8,000.00) to low income households based on prevailing regional minimum wage rates. Duterte assigned the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) to distribute the subsidy to the beneficiaries.¹⁰ One issue is how to release this subsidy without causing people to crowd at banks or designated money transfer centers while ensuring that these beneficiaries maintain physical distance.

2.3 Challenges

Although many activities are implemented to restrict people’s movement, there is no ‘mass testing’ for COVID-19 in the Philippines. The rich and powerful, especially the politicians are prioritizing themselves for testing.¹¹ Additionally, these challenges are also noted:

- COVID-19 tracker shows that the percentage of those who died is higher than the percentage of those who recovered (<https://www.doh.gov.ph/covid19tracker>)
- As of 10 April, 21 medical doctors died of COVID-19. Moreover, 152 doctors, and 63 nurses are tested positive¹²
- There are anecdotal reports of stigma and discrimination by middle class among poor people – branding them as lazy and plain beneficiaries of government subsidies

Originally, the lockdown was set for the period 15 March to 14 April. However, with less indication of flattening the curve, the President accepted the recommendation from the Inter-Agency Task Force (IATF) on COVID-19 to extend the lockdown until 30 April.¹³

3. Drawing on ‘Individual Responsibility’ in Japan

Unlike the Philippines, where much of Government control is imposed on the people, Japan appears lenient. Under existing Japanese law, lockdowns cannot be enforced. So, it amended the *Special Measures Act for Pandemic Influenza and New Infectious Diseases Preparedness and Response* so that the Government of Japan (GoJ) can declare health emergency that would restrict people’s freedom by requesting and ‘ordering’ them stay home to prevent the spread of novel corona virus. However, there is no penalty if people refused. As there will be closures to many stores, restaurants, amusement facilities, and factories in order to prevent people from going out their homes unnecessarily, the government will implement a financial aid package for those businesses, which includes providing 2 million yen to small and medium-sized corporations as well as those relatively larger corporations to sustain their businesses. It will also provide 1 million yen to individual owners.¹⁴ On these bases, Prime Minister Abe, on 7th April 2020, declared a month-long *State of Emergency* for Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama, Chiba, Osaka,

⁸ Rappler, Freezing of prices, <https://www.rappler.com/nation/254915-duterte-orders-price-freeze-coronavirus-lockdown>

⁹ ‘Bayanihan Heal as One Act’, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2020/03mar/20200401-IRR-RA-11469-RRD.pdf>

¹⁰ DSWD to distribute cash aid, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/4/2/dswd-lgu-cash-aid-distribution.html>

¹¹ VIP testing in the Philippines, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/covid-19-testing-for-vips-sparks-outrage-in-philippines/87517>

¹² CNN Philippines, <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/4/8/doctors-nurses-with-coronavirus.html>

¹³ Extension Memo, <https://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/2020/04/07/memorandum-from-the-executive-secretary-on-extension-of-the-enhanced-community-quarantine-over-the-entire-luzon-until-30-april-2020/>

¹⁴ Amendment to Special Measures Act (Article 32), https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/202004/_00001.html

Hyogo, and Fukuoka prefectures (until 6th May).¹⁵ This declaration allows the governors to introduce restrictions to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Note that the government’s countermeasures on COVID-19 is evolving, and on 16 April 2020, the Prime Minister announced to provide a cash handout of 100,000-yen (approximately US\$930) to every resident in Japan as economic measure to counter the effects of the new coronavirus outbreak.¹⁶

3.1 Covering 7 Prefectures Only¹⁷

Out of 47 prefectures, only 7 are covered in the State of Emergency (please note that the government policy is evolving. On 16 April 2020, the State of Emergency has been expanded to entire Japan). In essence, the state of emergency is more of an authority of the governors to request and order. Among these are *asking* residents to refrain from non-essential movements and *requesting* schools to close and place limits on the use of nursery schools, elderly daycare centers, and other welfare facilities. The governors have no legal authority to order private companies to close. So, unlike the Philippines, there are no excessive use of military and police in Japan. In some sense, Japan’s *State of Emergency* contrasts that of the Philippines.

- **It does not forcefully restrict people’s movement:** Residents can still go outside their houses without a pass. Some people can still walk under the cherry blossoms (Photo 4)¹⁸ and can still do groceries in orderly manner at supermarkets (Photo 5).¹⁹



Photo 4 People under Cherry Blossoms (Kyodo News 2020)



Photo 5 Special time for elderly in Kobe (Mainichi 2020)

- **It does not impose mandatory closure of establishments:** Private companies are only encouraged to arranging telework, but are not mandated to close.
- **It does not restrict travel:** Public transportation still operates. Railway and bus companies essentially maintain normal schedules. Additionally, there are no restrictions on taxi drivers.

3.2 Powers of the Governors

Under a *State of Emergency*, governors have authority to close theaters, event venues, hotels, gyms and pools, museums, libraries, and nightclubs. The real power of the governors is more on facilitating the health system, which is core in easing the impact of this pandemic. Governors can order the seizure of essential goods, including medicine – subjecting penalties to those who refuse to comply. Governors can compel companies to transport

¹⁵ NHK World, https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/20200407_43/

¹⁶ Y100,000 cash handout, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/asia/japan-offers-covid-19-stimulus-payment-to-all-residents-12653052>

¹⁷ Expansion of State of Emergency to entire Japan, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2020/04/da404143318b-urgent-japan-looks-to-expand-areas-covered-by-virus-emergency-declaration.html>

¹⁸ Cherry blossoms, <https://english.kyodonews.net/news/2020/03/14fb6e803d74-feature-japan-struggling-to-get-a-grip-on-social-distancing.html>

¹⁹ Special time for elderly, <https://mainichi.jp/english/articles/20200408/p2a/00m/0na/015000c>

medical goods and equipment as well as use private property as temporary medical facilities without the owner's consent.²⁰

3.3 Challenges

Perhaps, peoples' anxiety in Japan is whether the democratic approach to flattening the curve will be effective. Also, whether the limited coverage of the State of Emergency is enough since other prefectures also have COVID-19 cases (<https://covid19japan.com/>). In fact, some prefectures (e.g. Kyoto and Aichi), which are not covered in the State of Emergency, are implementing their own versions of state of emergency.²¹ Another challenge is on 'perception'. There is anecdotal observation that most Japanese still prefer to go to work physically at office, as they perceive working at home is less productive. Additionally, the support of higher management is essential. If the higher management supports telework, then employees will be inclined to work at home. Furthermore, 'culture' is also a factor. There are reports that the traditional 'seal system' hampers telework.²²

4. Insights

- Both the Philippines and Japan have systems in place to handle disasters, and these systems (activated through the Declaration of State of Emergency) were used in efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19. The Government of the Philippines utilized the NDRRMC structure, wherein the chair now leads the Interagency Task Force (IATF) on COVID-19.²³ PDRRMOs and MDRRMOs at the local government levels (chaired by governors and mayors) are subsequently utilized, particularly in the distributions of relief goods. In Japan, it's usually the local governments (especially the governors) who are leading and directing the efforts of the addressing the crisis. So, the same procedure is applied in this pandemic.
- The Philippines adopted a more 'authoritarian' approach in containing COVID-19, including giving extra powers to the President and excessive use of force with the mobilization of military and police. This appears essential to keep people at home, as the Philippines doesn't have strong health system (i.e., limited hospital beds, ventilators, PPEs, and even health care insurance).
- Japan's approach is more democratic. Japan maintains the separation of powers between the national government and prefectural governments amidst corona virus. Most importantly, Japan did not impose mandatory restrictions. Instead, the Government calls on people to support and recognize their 'individual responsibility'. The Government of Japan can afford this kind of decision since the country has stronger health system, better welfare support, and cooperative citizens.

²⁰ Statement of Prime Minister Abe, https://japan.kantei.go.jp/98_abe/statement/202004/_00001.html

²¹ NHK World, <https://www3.nhk.or.jp/nhkworld/en/news/backstories/1025/>

²² Japan Times, <https://www.japantimes.co.jp/news/2020/04/13/business/corporate-business/traditional-japanese-seal-system-hampers-telework/#.XpT8xIMzb-Y>

²³ NDRRMC COVID-19, http://www.ndrrmc.gov.ph/attachments/article/4031/update_re_situational_report_no3_coronavirus_disease_2019_issued_17_march_2020_12nn.pdf