

# COVID19, palakasan and the culture of clientelism in the Philippines

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**In October 2021 discrepancies in distribution and funding of the Philippines government's Social Amelioration Program (SAP) were queried by Senator Panfilo (Ping) Lacson during a Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) budget hearing. The DSWD claimed to have disbursed [94% of SAP aid](#) when its financial records indicated the disbursement of only 80% of funds. In response the DSWD cited delays in updating the lists due to altered quarantine status and out-dated beneficiary data. Clearly something is wrong with the SAP.**

These COVID-19 relief funds are legislated for under Republic Act [\(RA\)11469](#), the “Bayanihan to Heal as One Act”. Eligible families on the SAP list have been able to claim funds during a number of disbursement rounds during the pandemic. However, getting on the list and receiving aid has been problematic. The problems with the SAP have not just been technical but also social.

RA 11469 was passed on 25 March 2020 and granted President Duterte emergency powers in response to the COVID-19 pandemic for an initial period of three months. RA 11469 legislated for a minimum of 5000 (98 USD) and a maximum of 8000 (156 USD) PHP to be distributed to around 18 million low-income families twice over a period of two months. A subsequent act, [RA 11494](#) the “Bayanihan to Recover as One Act” or Bayanihan 2, was signed into law by the president on 11 September 2020. Bayanihan 2 extended the emergency powers granted under Bayanihan 1, which officially expired on 5 June 2020, and provided an additional 165.5 billion PHP (32.4 billion USD) for the pandemic response. Bayanihan 2 initially ran until 19 December 2020, was extended until 30 June 2021 and then extended again until the end of 2021. It was left to Local Government Units ([LGUs](#)) to identify SAP beneficiaries and submit budget proposals to the DSWD.

We conducted interviews with over 35 community leaders, aid workers and public servants working with the urban poor in Metro Manila between September and November 2021. The evidence from these interviews indicates that the SAP has suffered from *palakasan*. [Palakasan](#) is a Tagalog word that means “the assertion of personal interest via *lakas* while subtly bypassing prescribed rules and procedures in line with *delicadeza*”. *Lakas* means power or strength and *delicadeza* means a refusal to be vulgar or crass in the exercise of power. *Palakasan* is the subtle, and therefore deniable, disregard of regulations in the pursuit of self-interest. *Palakasan* underpins clientelism.

[Political clientelism](#) relies on its “lopsidedness” under which the patron offers protection and the client offers loyalty. Social protection initiatives can undermine clientelism if distribution is rule-based. This is because the client does not owe the benefactor any particular allegiance for the benefit, because they are entitled to it and disbursement is regulated. However, where the benefit is discretionary, i.e. a politician or barangay leader can control disbursement and claim credit for it, there is the potential for irregularities. In reality “[“virtually any programme can become a resource for clientelism if discretionary allocation is possible”](#)”. Clientelism can be dyadic but it can also

characterise social networks.

On 29 May 2020 the (DSWD) [reported](#) that 17.57 million families had received a share of 99.32 PHP billion (1.94 billion USD) in disbursed funds. 1,510 out of 1,634 LGUs nationwide had completed the SAP distribution and 774 LGUs had completed the paperwork necessary for the release of the next tranche of funds. However, by September 2020 it became evident that the SAP had [run into problems](#). Only 13.9 families had received a second payment and only 83.5 billion PHP (1.63 billion USD) of an available 16.86 billion PHP (3.3 billion USD) had been disbursed.

The DSWD claimed that the money had not been disbursed because the LGUs had submitted only 14 million names when 18 million were expected. It was also claimed that some families had received two payments under the first tranche of the SAP and that others had received emergency subsidies from elsewhere and were therefore ineligible for a second payment. There was also confusion over which areas were eligible for the second tranche of the SAP. The DSWD used [Executive Order No. 122](#), dated 30 April 2020, to identify areas under emergency or general community quarantine lockdown regulations and declared only those areas eligible. By September 2020 the DSWD had received more than 400,000 complaints about the distribution of SAP funds and hotlines hotlines were set up to deal with complainants. In October 2020 the Presidential Anti-Corruption Commission (PACC) reported that it had investigated 7,601 [complaints of corruption](#) related to the distributed of SAP funds.

The allocation of SAP funds was distorted at the local level because LGUs devolved responsibility for the compilation of lists of SAP beneficiaries to [barangay](#) leaders. Where qualification for the SAP was clear or rule based—e.g. if beneficiaries were already in receipt of the [4Ps](#)—an existing cash grant programme for poor families, then SAP disbursement was mostly regularised. But in cases where the status of the beneficiary was less clear problems arose. Our interviewees reported the following problems (all names are false to protect anonymity).

Ellen a community worker in Sampoloc, City of Manila told us that barangay officials were sometimes embroiled in personal or political vendettas with some constituents and “families did not receive food or cash aid because of this” She also stated that “officials find ingenious and cunning ways to justify why these households were not eligible to receive aid”.

Ernest stated that he observed “an unjust and unfair implementation of programs and aid. For example, families who are friends with local government officials or local community leaders can get two stubs (used to claim government food packs) while others only receive one stub”. Arthur, a child focussed human rights worker working in Malabon and Navotas, used the term *Palakasan* directly. He said that *palakasan* was a common complaint in the communities as “those who were connected or related to the one who distributes aid were able to receive assistance even if there are others more in need”. Victor, a human rights worker active across Metro Manila, also referenced *palakasan* directly. He told us that “we received reports that some families that were related to the LGU officials, received aid even if there were others who were more in need”. He also told us that “our partner families indicated that there were issues of corruption within LGUs. Some families had to sign a waiver saying that upon receiving the cash donation worth 1000 pesos (USD19.6), they lose their right to ask for more donations”. This effectively meant that they were signing away their right to the second tranche of the SAP. Delia, a community worker, reported that she was aware of needy families who received no government aid, because they were not close to the barangay captain their names were not listed. Her evidence for this came from regular monthly meetings with local families over the course of the pandemic. She stated that to get on the list you had to be close to the barangay captain or barangay councillor and clarified this by saying “of course you know that in the Philippines if you’re not in the same party or in the same group you don’t receive your allocation,” thus indicating that the misallocation of resources was not a localised or one off mistake but an

embedded practice—the practice of *palakasan*.

Meanwhile Jacob, a field manager for the distribution of aid from the office of Vice President Leni Robredo, told us that local politicians in areas not politically aligned to the Vice President would not allow his team to distribute relief goods. That is because those politicians did not want their *lakas* challenged or their loyalty to their patron (Duterte) questioned.

Whilst some of those distributing aid had it refused others were wary of having it hi-jacked. Harry, who worked with a relief foundation associated with the Vincentian Missionaries, told us that his organisation preferred to work with priests and lay workers, not political actors. This was because they wanted their relief packs to be “distributed to those who are really in need and not on the basis of how they would vote in an election”. Audrey, a businesswoman who initiated her own relief agency and campaigned for donations from friends, family and private companies, also stated that she avoided working with politicians. She was advised by “various agencies” that she should put the name of her agency “on all food-packs or the government would try and put their name on the packs. Or repack the goods in packs with their political logos”. In Tagalog the word *epal* is used in relation to this practice, meaning “butting in where not needed”.

*Palakasan* is a “negative” social practice that distorted the allocation of the SAP and other aid which local politicians had control over. This is because members of bonded social networks in local communities trusted each other to sanction this practice for their own self-interest. The *delicadeza* that allowed rules to be bypassed by patrons (those in control of the lists) also applied to the subtle acceptance of what was happening by the clients (those who benefitted from the distortion of the lists). Those not bonded to the patron missed out. The SAP was in effect a resource for clientelism.

The COVID-19 pandemic is far from over and many poor families across the Philippines, especially un- or under-employed and informal workers continue to suffer hardship. Problems with the allocation of aid under the Bayanihan Acts need to be urgently addressed, especially as *palakasan* is likely to be heightened as we move into the 2022 election period.

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