

Poverty in a Time of Pandemic: A Critique of Philippine Democracy and Some Imperatives Moving Forward

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Abstract

There is no need to belabor that most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic are the poor. Despite the overused statement “the virus is our real enemy”, it cannot be denied that the pandemic is, in many ways, a political and economic issue. The goal of this paper is to present the face of poverty in a time of pandemic. Using the views of Amartya Sen (capability approach) and Robert Chambers (multidimensionality of poverty) this work endeavors to argue that people's multifaceted difficulties and vulnerabilities during the COVID-19 pandemic ultimately indicate the deficiencies of Philippine democracy that are concretely felt in the experiences of certain segments of the populace especially when the Enhanced Community Quarantine (ECQ) was imposed in many parts of the country. Building on the foregoing, this work, though not offering any concrete suggestion or blueprint for action, proposes key areas for further critique on the deficiencies of Philippine democracy.

Keywords: poverty, capability approach, multidimensional poverty, unfreedoms, pandemic, social and economic rights

Introduction

In general, this paper is about poverty as it was experienced in a time of pandemic. And because there are many definitions of poverty as there are interpretations of it, this paper uses the notion of Amartya Sen on poverty as the lack or absence of capabilities and thus the experience of unfreedoms. For the purpose of this paper, the author, additionally, uses Robert Chambers' notion of poverty as a multidimensional reality. Thus, the theoretic frame of this paper can be read as one that uses Sen's conceptualization of poverty (as the lack of capabilities and thus unfreedoms) enhanced by Chambers' perspective on poverty as a multidimensional experience of vulnerabilities. The latter's view is also used as basis in framing the flow of the discussion.

In light of the foregoing, the paper's first objective is to present the difficulties and vulnerabilities experienced by the poor during the pandemic. In specific terms, this refers to the poor's limitations and thus vulnerabilities due to their livelihood, physical location, and powerlessness among others.¹

The second objective of this endeavor is to present a critique of Philippine democracy. This aim is not a digression or a totally unconnected topic in relation to the first. The arguments for this are as follows: (1) based on Sen there is a connection between poverty and freedom, or if one would put it positively, between wellbeing or wealth and freedom, and (2) from a real-practical point of view, the context of the experiences that the paper discusses is a political system that constitutionally defines itself as a democracy. Interrogatively put, how then are we to explain that the poor who are supposed to be beneficiaries of democracy experience suffering in a system that is supposed to help them uplift their lives?

¹ Just a remark on the methodology of data collection: it is "ideal" to collect first-hand data, however, at the time of the paper's writing, it was impossible for such to be carried out. Thus, available data from news sources were used as examples in order to come up with the desired picture of poverty as experienced in a time of pandemic.

I. Analytic Lenses: Why Sen? Why Chambers?

The choice for Amartya Sen and Robert Chambers is justifiable to the extent that they provide the theoretical blend that is needed in this paper; thus three general points can be mentioned to explain their selection: (1) both have written about poverty not limiting the term's definition to income, (2) both have argued that poverty has many dimension, although Chambers is more explicit on this, and (3) Sen provides a more substantive theoretical explanation on poverty as the lack of capabilities or the presence of unfreedoms; Chambers supplements this by saying that for us to know what poverty truly is, it is not enough to limit ourselves to what the experts say about poverty, that is we have to allow the poor to speak to us about their own poverty.²

(a) Sen on Poverty

In *Development as Freedom*, Sen elaborates in chapter four the idea of poverty as capability deprivation.³ Accordingly, it is not enough to define poverty merely as lack of income or

² This author has made studies using the same combined theoretical frames of Amartya Sen and Robert Chambers. Said studies focused on the political face of poverty as it is "lived" and "experienced" in situations and problems related to human rights in Pasil, Cebu City. See Rhoderick John S. Abellanosa, "Poverty's Political Face in a Slum: Focus on Human Rights" in *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society* 39 [2011]: 149 – 162. Also see R.J.S. Abellanosa, "The Political Face of Poverty: Cases of Human Rights Violations in Pasil, Cebu City" in *Journal of Asia Pacific Studies* 2(2) [2011]: 132-148.

³ Poverty as deprivation is already pointed out in an earlier work *Poverty and Famines*. Sen ends chapter 2 of the said work with a remark: "Poverty is, of course, a matter of deprivation." The statement is said within the context of his critique of another view of poverty as critique of the notion that poverty is "relative deprivation" which according to him "is essentially incomplete as an approach to poverty." See Amartya Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation* (New York: Oxford, 1981), 22. Chapter 3 of the said book provides a lengthier discussion on poverty, pp. 23-38.

low income.⁴ It is not just a condition where there is lack of money⁵; it is also not having the capability to realize one's full potential as a human being.⁶ Although there is no denial, according to Sen, that low income is one of the major causes of poverty, however it is wrong to limit the understanding of poverty merely to low or lack of income. For generations, social scientists and economists in particular have measured poverty based on the so-called income approach. Apparently, the most clear cut and convenient way to classify who is poor and otherwise, the method however is limited and reductionist.⁷ It fails to include the unfreedoms and deprivations that are co-existent with poverty, which are the causes that disable people from achieving certain "crucially important functions up to certain minimally adequate levels."⁸ Sen identifies age, gender, social role, location and epidemiological atmosphere as factors that affect the relationship between income and capability.⁹

This kind of perspective on poverty is what precisely this paper needs for a theoretical frame, that is, an economic and philosophical view of poverty that is not stuck in the issue of income and other said to be objective thresholds that serve as the measure of destitution. Sen's view allows us to widen our reading that economic and statistical data on poverty no matter

⁴ Amartya Sen, *Development as Freedom* (New York: Oxford, 1999), 19-20, 87-92. Also see by the same author *The Idea of Justice* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 254-257. A similar treatment on the topic related to income and wellbeing is found in A. Sen, *Inequality Reexamined* (New York: Russell Sage/Harvard, 1995), 28-30.

⁵ Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 87.

⁶ Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo. *Poor Economics: A Radical Rethinking of the Way to Fight Global Poverty* (New York: Public Affairs, 2011), 6. Joseph Stiglitz, A. Sen and J-P Fitoussi. *Mis-measuring our Lives: Why GDP Doesn't Add Up* (New York: the New Press, 2010), 64-65.

⁷ Precisely why even in the macroeconomic level, Sen (together with Joseph Stiglitz and Jean-Paul Fitoussi) would argue that conventional economic measures such as Gross Domestic Product does not and cannot capture the quality of life or subjective well-being. See Joseph Stiglitz, A. Sen and J-P Fitoussi, *Mis-measuring our Lives*, 62.

⁸ A. Sen as cited by Darius Hayati et al, "Combing Qualitative and Quantitative Methods in the Measurement of Rural Poverty: the Case of Iran" in *Social Indicators Research* 75(3) [2006]: 361-394.

⁹ Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 88. Also see p. 109.

how apparently objective are not sufficient to come up with a fuller description of the actual and real condition as experienced by the poor themselves. For example, the Philippine Statistics Authority says that a family of five (5) needs 7,528 for their monthly food consumption. However, the kind or quality of food is not specified. It is simply assumed therefore, that such budgeting is at least based on the primacy of survival (human need) rather than aesthetic or personal preference (human want). Such an estimate therefore rules out the possibility of an ordinary family surviving on the bare minimum amount – of not having the chance to frequently eat branded fast foods or the so-called "good food" that is commonly shown on TV.

But there is more with Sen's notion of poverty other than the abovementioned. He relates poverty and democracy. There is a connection between the absence of wellbeing and the limitations of freedom, or put conversely, wealth and freedom. He argues not just for the advancement of people's wellbeing or freedom from poverty. He believes that any attempt to allow people to increase wealth cannot be divorced from their freedom. The drive to earn money is connected to higher values and that is to live a good life, understood in Sen's terms as capabilities. "Expanding the freedoms that we have reason to value not only makes our lives richer and more unfettered, but also allows us to be fuller social persons, exercising our own volitions and interacting with – influencing – the world in which we live."¹⁰ Sen believes that many people's experience of poverty is not just a matter of lack of income or money; rather, it involves institutional conditions that do not facilitate the acquisition not only of income but wellbeing. The very institution and system to which the people belong have built-in constraints that already prevent them from moving out of their fettered economic condition. His earlier work *Poverty and Famines* gives us a concrete case in support of his contention, which is better represented by this statement: "[a] person starves either because he does not have the ability to command

¹⁰ Ibid., 14-15

enough food, or because he does not use this ability to avoid starvation.” The sixth chapter of *Development as Freedom* is devoted to discussing the relation between wellbeing and democracy, and the other way around between poverty and the lack of freedom. Democracy is instrumental in allowing people to achieve those things that they find reason to value.¹¹

(b) Chambers on Poverty

This paper also uses Robert Chambers’ notion of poverty as a multidimensional experience in order to create a wider reading of poverty as a reality. As can be read in the discussions below, the situation of the poor in a time of pandemic must be known through the various experiences that they went through over and above the common report that they lack work and income due to the lockdown.

Chambers is not an economist but a development practitioner but like Sen, he believes that poverty cannot be understood merely as lowness in income. Accordingly, it is better understood by paying attention to the qualitative realities of the poor.¹² For him poverty is local, complex, diverse and dynamic, one will arrive at a more vivid take on poverty not just as the lack or absence of earnings or income but the lack of capabilities and how unfreedoms subject the poor to multidimensional or multi-layered vulnerabilities vis-à-vis the networks of power in a political system. Again, like Sen, Chambers believes that although income-poverty is important in any approach to poverty studies, however it is basically only one aspect of deprivation.

Chambers warns not only the limitations but also the traps in most if not all approaches to poverty especially by those

¹¹ Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 152-153, 157. Again he repeats famines as an example, saying that famines happened and have happened under authoritarian regimes but not in the context of political systems where people can make demands, *Development as Freedom*, 152.

¹² Robert Chambers, “Poverty and Livelihood: Whose Reality Counts?” in *Environment and Urbanization* 7(1): 175. Also, R. Chambers, “What is Poverty? Who Asks? Who Answers?” in *Poverty in Focus*, Dec 2006: 3-4.

who consider themselves experts. According to him: “Error is inherent in the enterprise. There must always be doubts. But if the reality of poor people is to count more, we have to dare to try to know it better.”¹³ Precisely why any effort to understand the poor requires a continual appraisal of the many dimensions and criteria of the disadvantages they experience: ill-being (as opposed to well-being) and the more specific conditions other than merely not having income: social inferiority, isolation, physical weakness, vulnerability, seasonal deprivation, powerlessness and humiliation.

As a development practitioner, Chambers believes in the importance of participation in the continual attempt to understand and address poverty. Thus, this is where he and Sen are also similar, and that is on the value of democracy in the uplifting of people’s lives. This is clear in his assertion: “whose reality counts?” In fact, he believes that for the poor to address their own poverty, they should not just accept the realities created for them by the professionals. Thus, it is not for the government to merely say, on the basis of income, who is poor and who is not. The poor must be the one to say something about their poverty, and they must be allowed to describe their poverty in their own terms.¹⁴

II. The Face of Poverty in a Time of Pandemic: What it Means to be Poor in a Time of Crisis

1. Poverty in the Philippines: Beyond the Figures

Although classified as a developing country, poverty remains to be a problem in the Philippines. Poverty incidence among the total Philippine population is at 16.6%, meaning to

¹³ R. Chambers, *Poverty and Livelihood*, 185.

¹⁴ Chambers, *Poverty and Livelihoods*, 175. Also see what he says in p. 179: “We are all part of a world system which perpetuates poverty and deprivation. Those who are poor and deprived do not wish to be poor and deprived. We who are well off and who have power say that poverty and deprivation are bad and should be reduced or eliminated. Yet, whatever else does not last, poverty and deprivation prove robustly sustainable.”

say 17.6 million Filipinos are poor.¹⁵ According to the Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA] a family of five (5) needs around 10, 727 PhP to meet their minimum basic food and non-food needs. With the same family size 7, 528 PhP per month is needed to meet food needs.

In its survey on self-rated poverty, the Social Weather Stations says that as of December 2019, 54% of families consider themselves as *Mahirap* or Poor. The estimated numbers of Self-Rated Poor families are 13.1 million for December and 10.3 million for September. The latest Self-Rated Poverty rate is the highest since the 55% in September 2014. In terms of the capacity to purchase food, SWS in its December 2019 survey found that 35% of families rate their food as *Mahirap* or Poor, termed by SWS as Food-Poor. This is 6 points above the 29% in September 2019. The estimated numbers of Food-Poor families are 8.6 million in December and 7.1 million in September.¹⁶

Poverty, though, is not just about numbers or statistical figures. It is not merely living below the threshold of income. “Real poverty” based on how much “capability deprivation” there is in the lives of the poor is “more intense” than just living below the poverty threshold.¹⁷ In its most experiential sense it is a “bad condition of life”¹⁸ and to understand what this means requires much attention to the details of the multidimensional experiences of being vulnerable. This is an important premise to keep in mind because of the following: (1) in the Philippine context it is possible that there are those (families and

¹⁵ Philippine Statistics Authority, “Proportion of Poor Filipinos Estimated at 16.6 percent in 2018” [available online]: <https://psa.gov.ph/poverty-press-releases/nid/144752>

¹⁶ Social Weather Stations, “Fourth Quarter 2019 Social Weather Survey: Self-Rated Poverty rises by 12 points to 5-year-high 54%” [available online]: <https://www.sws.org.ph/swsmain/artcldisppage/?artcsyscode=ART-20200123140450>

¹⁷ A. Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 88.

¹⁸ Robert Chambers, “Participation, Pluralism and Perceptions in Poverty” in *Proceedings of the International Conference: The Many Dimensions of Poverty* [2005]. Brasilia: UNDP, International Poverty Centre, Department of International Development, BID and IPEA.

individuals) whose income is above the poverty threshold but whose condition is poor because they are caught in a web of unfreedoms, incapability and deprivation, and (2) the negative effects of poverty are felt more intensely in a time of crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, thus the succeeding presentation.

2. Vulnerability, Livelihoods and Locations

Vulnerability is exposure to threats and defenselessness. It has two sides: the external side of exposure to shocks, stress and risk; and the internal side of defenselessness, meaning a lack of means to cope without damaging loss.¹⁹ A major issue in relation to this was the perceived non-compliance of some Filipinos of the ECQ despite COVID-19. This was a common observation with those who live in slums or urban poor communities. The bias against the poor was so strong especially in highly urbanized cities like Metro Manila and Metro Cebu.²⁰

But what many among those who are non-poor have difficulty understanding is the fact that poverty involves the limitations of various aspects in life specifically transportation and housing. The location and arrangement of the houses of the poor do not follow the same formalities and luxuries in spacing, symmetry and of course the quality of materials with those who belong to the middle class or high-income brackets. In his participatory studies and engagements with poor peoples in various places in the globe, Chambers notes that there is one thing in common when we speak of the poor's physical location: the poor people live and suffer combinations of isolation, lack of infrastructure, lack of services, (there is) crime, pollution, and vulnerability to disasters like drought, floods and landslips.²¹

¹⁹ R. Chambers, *Poverty and Livelihood*, 175.

²⁰ Take the case of Sitio Zapatera, Barrio Luz in Cebu City. See Marit Stinus-Cabugon, "135 Covid-19 cases in Cebu City neighborhood" [available online]: <https://www.manilatimes.net/2020/04/20/opinion/columnists/135-covid-19-cases-in-cebu-city-neighborhood/716241/>

²¹ Robert Chambers, "Participation, Pluralism and Perceptions of Poverty: a Conference Paper" in *Paper for the International Conference on Multidimensional Poverty*: Brasilia August 29-31 2005, p. 14.

Precisely why the strict observance of the ECQ was relatively not difficult to observe by the middle class and the rich. Some postings in social media have emphasized that people living in small villages or slums are hardheaded, and instead people should cooperate with the government in order to hasten the end of the quarantine. Comments of this kind are not sensitized by the structural and material conditions of the poor. Already in 1994, economist Arsenio Balisacan emphasized the correlation between housing and health, which according to him (and this was a decade ago) are growing concerns of the poor rapidly urbanizing areas. Logically, there is an inverse relationship between the quality of housing and the chances of vulnerability to health hazards.²²

People's responses to the government's policies varied depending on their social and economic location. Physical distancing was not hard to comply by those who have enough space but not for a family of six or more renting a thirty square meter room. It is easy for some to stay at home but not for those whose consumption depends on whatever daily earning there is. Lack of savings is a reason why wholesale shopping of groceries is not a practice among households in slums or urban poor villages.

Thus, on the part of the poor: (1) being exposed to a greater probability or chance of infection, and (2) experiencing stressful experiences due to the impositions of the government such as but not limited to monetary fines and imprisonment for probable violations cannot be considered as plainly intentional. People choose based on what they think or believe is rational and what is rational is based on how the balance between economic necessities and other priorities is weighed. Survival may overpower the fear of getting sick (after all, death is a consequence of both hunger and disease). This has been concrete in how the elderly (senior citizens) had to risk lining up

²² Arsenio Balisacan, *Poverty, Urbanization and Development Policy* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1994), 96.

in barangay centers just to get their subsidies and vendors who have to sell their goods every day because sadly “[f]or poor people there are often trade-offs between income and security. Income-poverty thinking can neglect vulnerability in seeking to raise incomes.”²³

3. Socio-economic Insecurity and Powerlessness (Exploitation)

In a trickle-down economy, any crisis that would hit the main economic drivers would automatically sacrifice the poor who are low income, daily wage, or seasonal earners. The ECQ due to COVID-19 has hit hardest vendors, tricycle and *habal-habal* drivers, and small-time mechanics. In effect their powerlessness has been highlighted – concrete in the face of income-less citizens who would be dependent on government subsidies and always in potential danger of political manipulation.

In its March 19, 2020 impact assessment, the National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) forecasted that given the “simultaneous adverse effects on the supply and the demand side of the economy” the Philippines should expect “a cumulative loss of PHP428.7 to PHP 1,355.6 billion in gross value added (in current prices).” This is “equivalent to 2.1 to 6.6 percent of nominal GDP in 2020.” NEDA further added that “without mitigating measures, this would imply a reduction in the Philippine’s real GDP growth to -0.6 to 4.3 percent in 2020.”

Based on the Department of Labor and Employment’s (DOLE) Job Displacement Monitoring Report of the total number, 108,620 workers from 2,317 establishments were affected due to the implementation of Flexible Work Arrangements (FWAs) and Temporary Closure (TC). This means that either the workers are earning less due to the adjustment of the work scheme or schedule or are not earning at all. Around 889 establishments with 41,311 workers have implemented FWAs while 368 companies engaged in reduction of workdays,

²³ R. Chambers, *Poverty and Livelihood*, 190.

affecting 15,556 workers. Other companies also imposed forced leave. Around 9,941 workers were without work from around 225 companies while 58 other companies with 3,655 employees were also affected by the anti-virus measures.

Against the backdrop of the foregoing, it should be understandable why it has appeared that those who live in sitios or informal settlements are not cooperative with the government. It is easy to cooperate if there is trust. But trust is difficult in the face of uncertainty. Uncertainty of government aid has been an issue among low-income families. Displaced workers who had to continue feeding their family cannot but partly if not largely rely on the assistance of the government. When the ECQ, for example, was implemented on March 28, some people in Cebu City, without hesitation, went to their barangay hall in order to inquire about the ECQ pass and the subsidies or allowances. Senior citizens also went to their barangay hall to ask about their monthly one thousand pesos (1,000) allowance from the city government.

News spread about certain barangay officials who took advantage of the situation. There were reports that some barangays would require a voter's identification (ID) card as requirement for government assistance. This is an example of the poor being used as warm bodies to further political advantage. Chambers is apt in his description of the poor: "dispersed and anxious as they are about access to resources, work and in- come, it is difficult for them [the poor] to organize or bargain. Often physically weak and economically vulnerable, they lack influence. Subject to the power of others, they are easy to ignore or exploit. Powerlessness is also, for the powerful, the least acceptable point of intervention to improve the lot of the poor."²⁴

It was easy for some Filipinos to just say that a total lockdown or even a martial law should be implemented in order to save everyone. But this is according to those who live with

²⁴ R. Chambers, *Poverty and Livelihood*, 190.

safety nets that come in the form of socio-economic security (savings, continual income, investments and networks and connections). These people need not contend with the complexities in life that are caused by the ineffective and inefficient bureaucracy of the state no less. Without resources it follows that the poor are powerless. The notion of power in this sense need not be complicated theoretically. We are basically speaking about the very reality of the poor being subjected to so many forms of political abuses.

4. Powerlessness: Humiliation and Human Rights Violations

The material conditions of the poor make them more prone to the predatory tendency of the officers of the law.²⁵ This is because, as Sen explains, “destitution can produce provocation for defying established laws and rules.”²⁶ In relation to the foregoing is the issue of humiliation in various forms such as marginalization and even, eventually, human rights violations. The lack or even absence of any capability and capacity to push their agenda make the poor subject to the various layers and dimensions of power relations. The law may be imposed on everyone but the apparent difference lies in the fact that those who have economic influence have a higher bargaining capacity.²⁷

Al Jazeera correspondent Anna Santos narrates what we can use as an apt case that highlights the poor’s vulnerability to human rights violation:

On the day her husband was arrested, Bernadeth Caboboy had 200 Philippine pesos (about \$4) in her pocket and her fidgety three-year-old daughter in her arms. The toddler needed milk and they needed food, but had no money to buy either. It had been

²⁵ R.J.S. Abellanosa, *Poverty’s Political Face in a Slum*, 160.

²⁶ Amartya Sen, *Identity and Violence* (New York: Norton, 2006), 142-143.

²⁷ According to Sen, “poverty and inequality closely relate to each other” in *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, 23.

three weeks since the lockdown to curb the spread of COVID-19 was declared, and 21 long days since operations at the construction site where her husband worked had stopped.

Their neighbourhood of San Roque in Quezon City, the country's largest metropolis, got neither food nor aid from the government. Caboboy's husband, Jek-Jek, decided to meet his foreman to see if he could get his salary.

When Jek-Jek went out, he was swept up in a throng of people who were waiting for the rumoured distribution of relief goods. "Someone shouted that a charity was going to give away a half-sack of rice," Jek-Jek recalled. "People started lining up on the side of the road. The next thing I knew, the police came, telling us to get on the ground."

Jek-Jek and 20 other residents of San Roque were arrested on April 1 and charged with violating quarantine protocol, disobedience and illegal assembly.²⁸

The poor are at the center of politicians' focus during elections. But outside of said season they have difficulty asserting themselves or even negotiating. They are very easy to be subjected to humiliation and insults. They are more prone to abuse due to lack of information or low level of literacy, joblessness, and [even] poor health. Their lack of self-esteem would already be a form of disability for them to assert their rights.²⁹

²⁸ Ana Santos, "Poverty Punished as Philippines gets Tough in Virus Pandemic" [available online]: <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/poverty-punished-philippines-tough-virus-pandemic-200413063921536.html>

²⁹ See R.J.S. Abellanos, *Poverty's Political Face in a Slum*, 154-160.

The state of emergency that gave the government a wide latitude of power also posed a threat to the poor who would for one reason or another have a higher chance of experiencing abuses. In a developing country like the Philippines, where democracy remains to some extent nominal rather than functional, the Bill of Rights is more of an ambivalent legal formality that may be availed by those who have the capacity to hire a lawyer.

Before proceeding to the next segment, it is important to highlight that the face of poverty, that is the poor's concrete experiences of vulnerability, subjection to humiliation and human rights violation, and all other forms of socio-political exploitation are largely caused by a low regard for their social and economic rights. This assertion is further grounded in Amartya Sen's position: (1) a holistic approach to rights (political and civil participation should translate to more enhanced social and economic rights (enhanced capabilities), and in this light (2) election is not only a formal ritual of democracy; it is also an opportunity to be informed as to what options there are for citizens to avail (political participation as a means towards enhancing and building individual capabilities).³⁰ Capabilities should be enhanced in order to overcome limitations, incapacities, or unfreedoms as these are the causes of paralysis among the poor.³¹

III. A Critique of the Deficiencies of Philippine Democracy

5. Democracy and the Expansion of Capabilities

Faced with complex challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, democratic institutions, and in this case Philippine democracy, cannot but be subject to a critique. This means putting into question the extent to which it has facilitated the

³⁰ A. Sen, *Development as Freedom*, 148-149 and 153.

³¹ Relevant references for this are A. Sen, *Poverty and Famines: An Essay on Entitlement and Deprivation*, and A. Sen, "Hunger in the Contemporary World" in *Discussion Paper DEDPS/8* (November 1997): 2-24.

enhancement of people's capabilities and thus allow them to achieve their goals. It is not enough therefore to just speak of the success of democracy in terms of having the most perfect *institutional structures* – the examination must go as far as including “actual behavior patterns” as well as the “working of political and social interactions.”³²

Part of the critique is to push public discourses to the limit especially those that condition people's minds to settle for a minimalist view of democracy. More crucially, anti-democratic discourses should be fought more purposively as it diverts the direction from development as freedom to development without freedom. The choice or preference for democracy is not just a matter of preferring a system that is more effective and efficient than another. If this is what the value of democracy is all about then we might as well consider other systems of governance that are apparently also effective in providing wealth to its subjects or citizens.

At the end of his book, *The Idea of Justice*, Sen highlights the intricate connection between justice and being human. Using Thomas Nagel's paper *What is it Like to be a Bat?* Sen argues that the question or any theory about justice has something to do with a similar question “what is it like to be a human being?”³³ It is argued that the consciousness of the question cannot just be reduced to bodily operations. To be a human being relates to the “feelings, concerns, and mental abilities that we share as human beings.”³⁴ Apparently, the focus of this entire endeavor is not justice. However, using how Sen explains the connection between justice and humanity, here it is argued that in essentially the same way, our consciousness about democracy, why we feel and think that democracy is important cannot be reduced to the advantages that democracy as a system yields or provides to our bodily needs. Democracy's

³² A. Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 354.

³³ Amartya Sen, *The Idea of Justice* (New York: Penguin, 2010), 414. See Thomas Nagel, “What is it Like to be a Bat?” in *Philosophical Review* 34(4) [1974]: 435-450.

³⁴ A. Sen, *The Idea of Justice*, 414.

meaning to us is more than just the pragmatic satisfaction that it gives us. This is not to deny the importance of the pragmatic value of democracy. On the contrary, we appreciate democracy because it gives more meaning to the "feeling, concerns, and mental abilities that we share as human beings."³⁵

A number of studies on Philippine democracy have been written and made by scholars and academics in the social and political sciences. However, such studies cannot be the end all and be all in our treatment of democracy if the goal is to have a fuller and continual understanding of democracy's relevance in our lives. Democracy is not just an institution for sociological observation because it has to connect to humanity and its collective goals. Thus, a critical reading of democracy as it practiced in the Philippines, with all its deficiencies, necessarily involves not just the analysis of the compartments of a political system but more importantly its connection to good life, i.e. the desired freedom which each and every person values.

Coming from Sen, it is argued that democracy is not just a system or approach of governance but above all an expression of people's collective values. In other words, we choose the said system because we believe in the values behind the system. Freedom has a value and that is why we find democracy valuable. Where freedom is involved, each and every person especially those who are in authority have the duty not only to provide and promote the various opportunities for the expression of such but also to promote and defend the same.

That countries should thrive politically in a democratic spirit, that is in the spirit of liberty and freedom is not an option that may or may not be taken but rather an ethical imperative. In the words of Sen: "[t]hroughout the nineteenth century, theorists of democracy found it quite natural to discuss whether

³⁵ A. Sen, *The Idea of Justice*. Sen explains that there is a caveat though from our theorists and that is not to fall into the temptation of going back to the question or issue of human nature. His solution to the need to ground justice in the humanity of man is the conviction that we share "common presumptions about what it is like to be human being" (414). Thus, the "general pursuit of justice might be hard to eradicate in human society even though we can go about the pursuit in different ways" (415).

one country or another was "fit for democracy." This thinking changed only in the twentieth century, with the recognition that the question itself was wrong: A country does not have to be deemed fit *for* democracy; rather, it has to become fit *through* democracy."³⁶

The pandemic has magnified how Philippine democracy, more concretely in the aspect of social and economic rights, is not only flawed but a failure in some aspects particularly in terms of the basic services needed by the people. This is not to say that efforts were not made in order to help people move forward and survive amidst a serious threat. Indeed it is fair to say that there were efforts and to some extent such did help people cross the threshold of difficulty in the current situation. However, the experiences of people presented above using the gestalt of the political face of poverty show that the government's efforts even to the point of getting assistance, both financial and non-financial, from private individuals are reflective and indicative of the so many areas that are yet to be improved in the country's democratic system.

The exploitative conditions that have been sustained through the years, stretching back to several administrations, have been clearly highlighted by the people's poverty and their vulnerability to a system that is supposed to defend them in times of great distress. They have become objects of humiliation and (human rights) violations, and although they were given assistance but such was also not without any color of political opportunism. It is unthinkable how a country that professes, through its constitution, to "promote a humane society and establish a government that embodies people's aspirations to promote the common good under the rule of law and the regime of truth and freedom" among other values – continues to live in a great divide between those who have and those who don't have.

³⁶ A. Sen, "Democracy as a Universal Value" in *Journal of Democracy* 10(3): 4.

6. Democracy should be more than Just Elections

Sen emphasizes democracy as a universal value more than just being a system of governance. As such it has three inseparable virtues through which the lives of citizens are enriched: first, the *intrinsic* importance of political participation and freedom in human life; second, the *instrumental* importance of political incentives in keeping governments responsible and accountable; and third, the *constructive* role of democracy in the formation of values and in the understanding of needs, rights, and duties. In light of this diagnosis, we may now address the motivating question of this essay, namely the case for seeing democracy as a universal value.³⁷

Elections and the whole idea and practice of representation are just aspects of democracy, among others. In Sen's words: "even elections can be deeply defective if they occur without the different sides getting an adequate opportunity to present their respective cases, or without the electorate enjoying the freedom to obtain news and to consider the views of the competing protagonists. Democracy is a demanding system, and not just a mechanical condition (like majority rule) taken in isolation."³⁸ It should ultimately translate to the achievement of citizens' desired outcomes in their lives: access to housing, transportation, healthcare particularly hospitalization, food and water security, education, and stable employment.

After decades of elections, the concept and practice of representation have been proven to be a failure in facilitating people's movement out from their unfreedoms. The failure of representation as a feature in a democracy is concrete in leaders who are popular but who have not optimized the powers and opportunities of representation in order to maximize the country's political resources and thereby create tangible benefits to people: basic services in the form of healthcare,

³⁷ Amartya Sen, "Democracy as a Universal Value" in *Journal of Democracy* 10(3): 11.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

housing, public transportation and food. Representation has been used to further perpetuate the same set of representatives. And as the system continues in all its outdated fashion Filipinos continue to wallow in poverty deprived of so many capabilities and opportunities. They have remained low in financial literacy, lacking in networks and support systems. Precisely why in a time of pandemic they cannot but panic due to a perceived difficulty in life that would practically push them to greater vulnerabilities and thus bury them in a more serious state of poverty that would even reach a point of irreversibility.

During the pandemic efforts from both the public and private sectors were made as gestures of charity (such as donation of a government official's monthly salary in part or in whole); this would not have been needed if only a system is well in place and functional. Unless the electoral process would not translate to the desired social and economic freedoms desired by people, such a process cannot be an effective instrument towards lessening poverty. At the very least it must be said candidly that it is part of the problem and not a solution.

In the absence of indicators that would show the optimization of democratic processes in the Philippines, specifically in the field of social and economic rights, the whole political system in the country as well as its institutions can be aptly described as one that fails to achieve its end of enhancing people's capabilities towards the achievement of the freedoms that they desire and thus lead the kind of life that they would like to live.

7. Democracy and the Imperative of Enhancing Capabilities

Sadly, elections in the Philippines have not been without problems. The electoral processes have remained a legitimating mechanism of the systemic injustices in the country or the sources of said systems.³⁹ Poverty is a word commonly used and

³⁹ For an assessment of elections and the role of political parties in the electoral process see E. Co et al, *Philippine Democracy Assessment: Free and Fair Elections and the Democratic Role of Political Parties* (Quezon City: NCPAG and F.E.

discussed during campaigns and debates prior to elections but largely capitalized by politicians in order to gain support from the masses. People's access to decent housing, transportation, healthcare particularly hospitalization, food and water security, education, and stable employment remain largely and extensively unmet. After elections, officials of both national and local governments would be busy with day-to-day politics. Often, the national government especially the executive and legislative would be embroiled in partisan controversies and issues.

The advancement of people's economic and social welfare is not on top of the country's priority. Take the case of housing as an example. Since the late 1990s the government has estimated some 700,000 units for Metro Manila, and approximately three (3) million in the entire Philippines. Sadly, it has been an unsolved problem that has been passed from one administration to another. Despite the promises of presidents (e.g. President Estrada who was most popular in his pro-poor campaign advocacy) many Filipinos have remained without decent homes or places of dwelling. The poor population management strategy of previous administrations (not to mention that delayed legislation of the Reproductive Health law) has exacerbated the problem of housing. The National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) reported an estimated backlog of over 900,000 units between 2005 and 2010.⁴⁰ Side by side with this are other enduring realities in the Philippine electoral and democratic landscape. Politicians especially in the provinces continue to represent the oligarchies that have thrived on land-based politics. New politicians have entered the

Stifting, 2005). Also see Clarita Carlos et al, *Democratic Deficits in the Philippines: What is to be Done?* (Quezon City: Center for Political and Democratic Reform, 2010). On the influence of patronage and elite-based politics see Francisco A. Magno, "State, Patronage, and Local Elites" in M.E. Atienza, ed. *Introduction to Philippine Politics* (Quezon City: UP Press, 2013), 1-18. In the same book is the chapter of John Sidel, "Beyond Patron-Client Relations: Warlordism and Local Politics in the Philippines," pp. 19-40.

⁴⁰ E. Co et al, *Philippine Democracy Assessment: Economic and Social Rights*, 47.

scene but are either not strong enough to push for reforms or are but additional recruits to an old system.

A tentative conclusion is important to close this segment of the discussion and thus bridge to the next. The following premises are noteworthy:

1. Poverty that is concrete in the web or multi-dimensionalities of vulnerability, humiliation, distance, sickness or ill-being, hunger, isolation, powerlessness, and insecurity among others correlate to the extent social and economic rights are advanced and protected in a democratic society.
2. The fulfillment of a democratic system is measured not only in terms of the electoral process, its regularity and the extent of people's participation but in how such a process translates to the achievement of people's economic and social rights.
3. In the context of this discussion, the political face of poverty among some Filipinos has been highlighted when the government imposed the ECQ because of the COVID-19 pandemic specifically such experiences as vulnerability, lack of income, powerlessness, humiliation and human rights violations. The multidimensional experiences of vulnerability and poverty among some Filipinos in the face of a crisis further highlight the deficiencies of Philippine democracy specifically in the areas of social and economic rights.

Apparently, this paper cannot offer an exhaustive approach to the issue. At the very least, this serves the purpose of opening up a discussion that has become relevant in the wake of a pandemic that has magnified the political face of poverty among Filipinos and the multidimensional vulnerabilities, disadvantages and unfreedoms that go with it. It can only be said as an expression of hope that the COVID-19 experience will hopefully push the Philippines to change its democratic agenda.

Such an agenda need to include the following as imperatives in the list of the nation's basic necessities:

1. Improved healthcare system in the country primarily through the creation of hospitals,
2. Increased budget for assistance of people with physical and mental disabilities and the ageing,
3. Improved mass public transport system not just in the capital region but also in the other major or developing urban centers in the country,
4. Increased investments in agriculture and enhanced capacity to access food,
5. Proactively engaged urban poor on the problem of squatting or informal settlements. Urban planning must be considered an essential agenda of local governments
6. Enhanced reproductive health policy, and
7. In the spirit of the principle of subsidiarity, greater spaces for participation and decision making on how to lead their lives according to their regional contexts and respectful of their desired freedoms as a people

A post-COVID-19 Philippine politics cannot claim to be democratic if it would refuse to address whether directly or indirectly the very problems that brought the country downwards during the pandemic.

Conclusion

Poverty has a political face that is concretely seen in how people struggle amidst the limited social and economic capabilities in the most difficult situations of their lives. We continue seeing this in situations of various limitations in a time of pandemic. All talks about democracy are difficult to comprehend and appreciate if they are disconnected to the long-standing need to alleviate people from practically all forms of conditions which

Amartya Sen would call unfreedoms, and as Robert Chambers would articulate – multidimensional vulnerabilities.

If politics ought to radicalize our ethical persuasions, then what are the ethical imperatives for the Philippine government in relation to the needs of the poor specifically in the areas of healthcare, public services such as transportation, housing, food security, and even population management? The ethical imperative to fight poverty means clarifying what ought to be done with the so many forms of capability deprivations and multi-dimensional vulnerabilities that continue to prevail in society.

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