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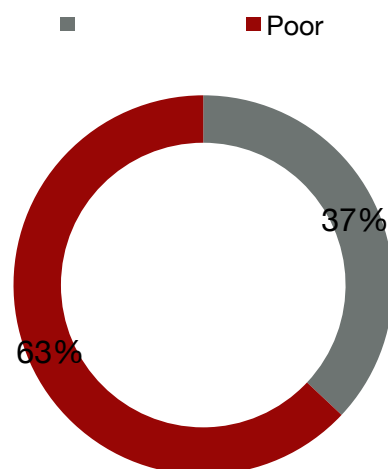
## **Overcoming Uncertainty**

### **COVID-19 in BARMM: Introduction of Local Communities' Situation and Challenges**

The Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM)<sup>1</sup> in the Philippines, a new political entity created from its predecessor, the Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (ARMM), came to official existence only March 29, 2019 last year, after 40 years of struggle by the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) and successful peace negotiation with the Philippine government.

BARMM, unlike ARMM, has more territory and authority to govern itself—its own people and resources— exercising full autonomy, except for the armed forces, which still fall under the wings of the Philippine government.

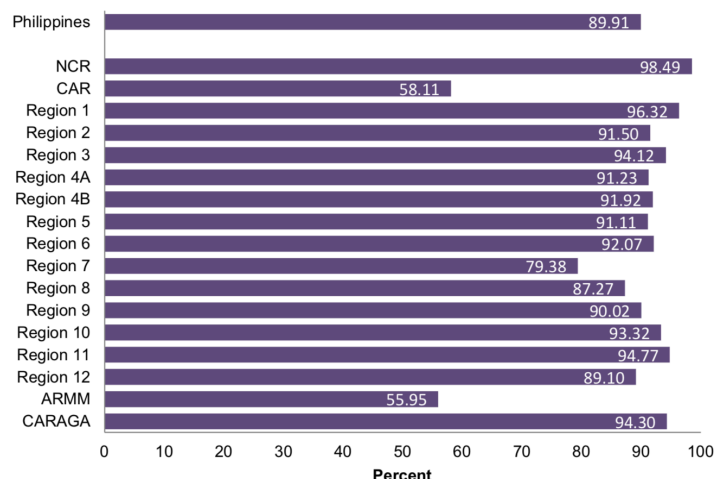
On March 29 BARMM will be one year but celebration is being set aside to focus on the fight against the COVID-19 pandemic.



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<sup>1</sup> ARMM covered 5 provinces and 2 cities while the new BARMM covers the same and additional city and 63 barangays. The data referred to were from ARMM's time and so covers only 5 provinces and 2 cities.

**Figure 2C .1 - Percentage Distribution of Households with Access to Improved Safe Water Supply by Region Philippines, 2018**



The Bangsamoro Transition Authority (BTA), where I serve as a legislator, is tasked to ensure that BARMM becomes fully operational— with its own foundational laws and structures in place—and well on its way to peace and development by the

year 2022.

When we in the BTA took our posts, we already knew the challenges that will be facing us. We already knew that among our more or less four (4) million constituents, 63 percent (Philippine Statistics Authority, 2018) of them or roughly 2.52 million belong to the poor.



MaksimYremenko/Getty Images

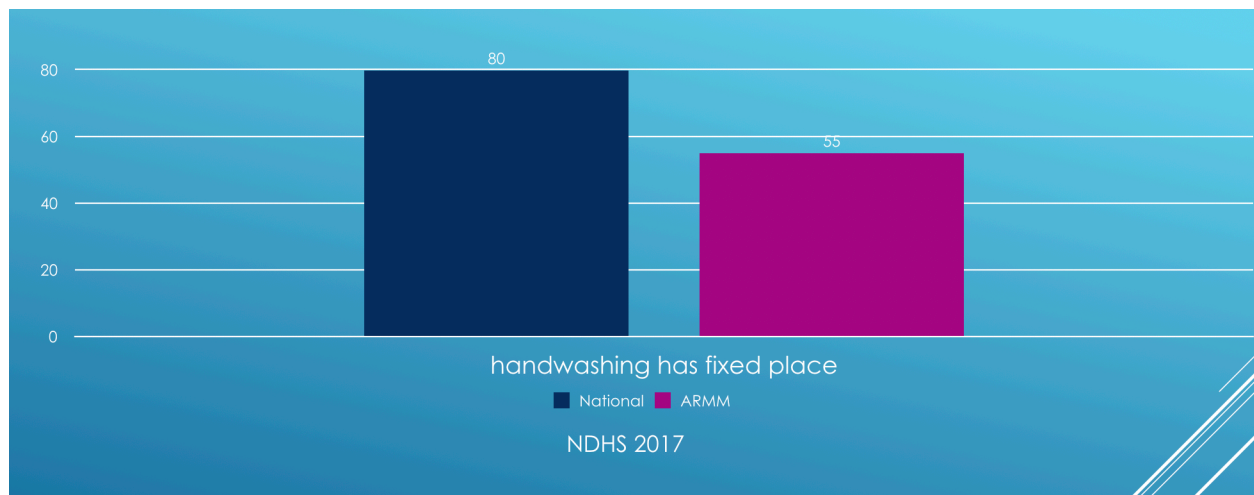
<https://www.billboard.com/articles/columns/pop/9327753/coronavirus-hand-washing-playlist-coronavirus>

In health and sanitation, the 2018 Field Health Service Information System (FHSIS) revealed that households with improved water supply are at 55.95 percent only, which means 1.76 Million (44 percent) living on conditions of limited or scarcity in clean water supply. In addition, around 33.84 percent only have sanitary toilet facility.

The 2017 National Demographic Health Survey (NDHS) revealed that 22 percent in the region have no toilet at all, 13 percent of households do not have the capacity to have their own soap or cleaning detergent, and 45 percent do not have a fixed place in their homes for hand washing. We also know that up to 90 percent of our people in geographically isolated and depressed areas do have easy access or the capacity to travel to health facilities to avail of services.

In terms of access to information, the 2017 NDHS estimated that only more than 50 percent have access to media and a fewer 22 percent can get information from social media such as Facebook. Politically, the region is yet to strengthen governance and accountability as the new leadership continue to promote moral governance in preparation for the 2022 elections.

Why do these matter with the COVID-19 pandemic?

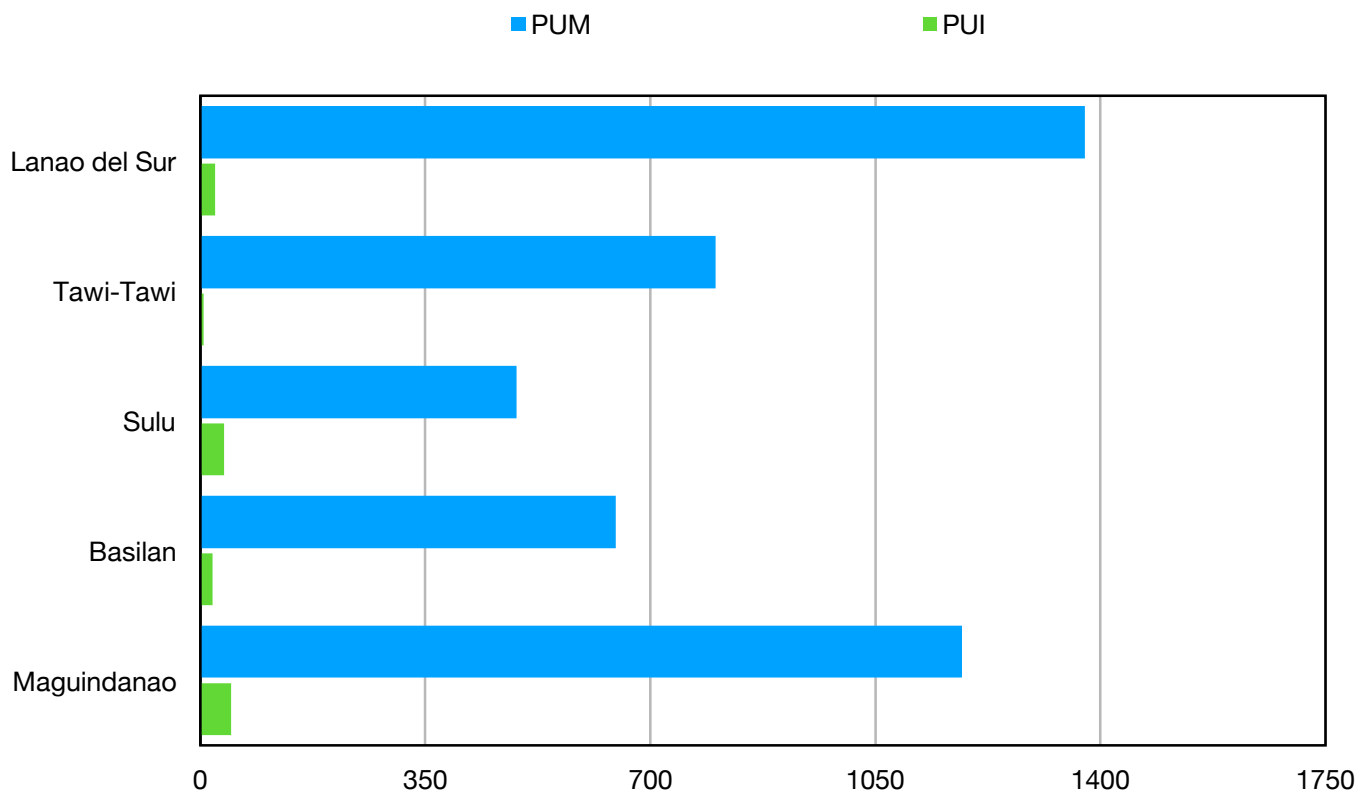


Preventive measures as simple as hand washing with soap, disinfecting with alcohol other ingredients, accessing updated information and seeking health services do not come as easy for most of our constituents. Staying home might not be possible also for people who have to relieve themselves in an open area or some unsanitary nook away from the house. As most rely on farming, trading their products and daily labor, staying home will could literally mean absolutely no income and eventual starvation for the family.

For the past many years, BARMM had already been trailing behind in human development indicators compared to other regions in the country. With the COVID-19, which we cannot see with our eyes, we also rely on the availability of clean water, purchasing capacity for soaps and disinfectants, access to critical information and health services, and adequate health structures in place. BTA and the Bangsamoro people

are faced with far greater challenges—we are like an unprepared people, poorly armoured and facing an unseen, dangerous, highly mobile and fast enemy.

As of March 20, 2020, the Ministry of Health (MoH) of BARMM and the Bangsamoro Inter-Agency Task Force (BIATF) on COVID-19 reported that there are 4,501 persons under monitoring (PUM), 132 persons under investigation (PUI). Lanao del Sur, has 1,376 PUMs and 23 PUIs. Tawi-Tawi has 802 PUMs and five (5) PUIs. Sulu has 492 PUMs and 37 PUIs. Basilan has 646 PUMs and 19 PUIs. Maguindanao has 1,185 PUMs and 48 PUIs. There were already three (3) fatalities.



The first COVID-19 patient died at the Northern Mindanao Medical Center in Cagayan de Oro City last March 3. The patient came from Pasig City and returned to Lanao del Sur before Metro Manila implemented a lockdown. Another patient died at Amai Pakpak Mindanao Medical Center while undergoing treatment for pneumonia and acute respiratory system.

Striving to respond to this crisis, the MoH have already directed hospitals in BARMM to prepare dedicated wards for COVID-19 patients. The MILG and the Ministry for Social Services (MSS) have been preparing food packs for distribution. My office, even with our limited resources, has also distributed rice and canned goods to some communities in Lanao del Sur. Other officials like myself are also doing their part in easing the burdens that COVID-19 and the lockdowns have been causing on our poorer communities.

Given our deficiencies, our region is facing catastrophe unless we halt the trans-



*Burying the PUI from Marawi. Photo courtesy of Jane usudan/DOH-BARMM*

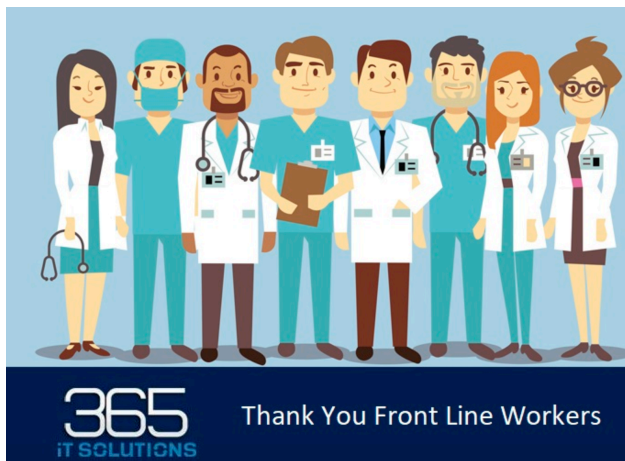
missions, give effective treatment to patients, protect our frontline workers and, at the same time, assist poorer families and communities to survive the lockdowns through sufficient and culturally-sensitive food and non-food relief.

While a vaccine to combat the disease, even just some of the challenges I see in our context are overwhelming. Some of these challenges could be similar to other communities in the Philippines or any part of the world.

1. Informing and getting the cooperation of communities to break the transmission
2. Breaking the secrecy and moving toward effective contact tracing and prompt testing
3. Ensuring culturally-sensitive quarantine and treatment for patients
4. Efficiently protecting health workers and supplementing personnel everywhere
5. Sustaining services and sufficient supplies especially in populous areas or where there are high



<http://www.ndsc.org/communityprotection/>



<https://365itsolutions.com/thank-you-front-line-healthcare-workers-from-365-it-solutions/>

number of infections

6. Mobilizing local leaders to ensure consistent LGU support and cooperation with health personnel and facilities
7. Attending to the special and additional needs of the vulnerable Internally Displaced Populations (IDPs) who lack most of the resources such as food, water, cleaning agent, and space for social dis-

tancing

8. Ensuring delivery of holistic support to geographically isolated and conflict-affected areas
9. Ensuring the survival of the poorer sectors and families or those who rely on daily wages/earnings outside of the home by providing alternative sources of income
10. Dealing with security problems associated with quarantines or lockdowns such as rise in crimes
11. Planning to bounce back from the social effects of the pandemic and economic setbacks
12. Learning from the pandemic to build a disease-resistant region
13. Using all kinds of helpful technology in all aspects of the fight and resilience-building against the or any pandemic



<https://play.google.com/about/families/>

As a closing note, when I came to office as a legislator in the BTA, I was aware of the problems I will be facing and contributing solutions to. I knew that I will be dealing with poverty, isolation, health issues, economic insufficiency, peace and order problems, incapacities. However, when COVID-19 came to all our lives, I, perhaps like other public officials, suddenly felt uncertain if we can hurdle all the problems that are now made worse by the pandemic. However, for now, first things first. Let me speak for myself and the Bangsamoro, that together, working with this global alliance, we in the Bangsamoro will not stop until we overcome this pandemic.