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Food and *Ayuda* Narratives during the Pandemic in Remote and Small Island Communities in Northern Iloilo, Philippines

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Abstract

Food insecurity and access to *ayuda*, or government-initiated social protection programs, were essential concerns during the COVID-19 pandemic in the Philippines. While the needs in urban city centers were fairly attended to by government instrumentalities, the question of how food and survival issues in small and remote island communities are addressed warrants equal attention. In this paper, the people's narratives in remote and small island communities are investigated to assess how individuals survived and could be subjectively well during the pandemic. Through focus group discussions, three activities were conducted: community map making, Lamesa activity, and *ayuda*/basket activity participated by representatives from the seven barangays in remote island communities in Northern Iloilo in May 2023. As a result of the FGDs, this paper concluded the following insights: (1) Rice is a key resource as it indicates a household's food security and subjective well-being at the time of the pandemic, (2) Cash or money in the *Ayuda* program of the local government is important as it allows households to access food and improve its stock of food supplies, (3) Having alternative financial resources is important as the island communities are mainly dependent on fishing as its core economic activity, and (4) Volunteer work for the community forms part of the people's subjective well-being despite the limitations experienced with regards to food and financial resources.

Keywords: food insecurity, *ayuda*, subjective well-being, pandemic, small and remote Islands, the Philippines

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The COVID-19 pandemic made food security issues more complex and problematic in the Philippines. Angeles-Agdepa et al. (2022) noted that having no money to buy food was the top concern of families dealing with food insecurity. This deficiency in financial resources could be attributed to livelihood difficulties and interruptions brought about by the pandemic. In a survey done by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)—Philippines (2020) in 10 cities in Metro Manila and four cities in Cebu, for instance, 83% of households experienced a reduction in income, about 34% lost their source of income, and about 33% reported having to skip a meal in a week. Del Castillo (2022) added that the quarantine measures for COVID-19 in the Philippines caused a labor market crisis, resulting in almost 7.6 million Filipinos losing jobs.

With the disruptions in food systems, physical and economic access to food was also severely affected. Even before the pandemic, there was already an increasing number of households experiencing food insecurity in the Philippines (Angeles-Agdepa et al., 2022). More specifically, statistics from the Household Food Insecurity Access Scale (HFIAS, 2019) reported that from 33.9% in 2015, food insecurity in households increased to 56.0% from 2018 to 2019. With such an increase, the pandemic even made the situation worse. In addition, Angeles-Agdepa et al. (2022) noted that “There was a high increase in the percentage of moderate to severe food insecurity among households in low- and medium-risk areas of COVID-19 infection than in high-risk areas. The poorest households were 1.7 times more likely to become moderate to severe food insecure during the pandemic than middle-income households. The ultra-poor who did not have phones were not reached and excluded, thus, may have experienced worse during the pandemic”.

To help mitigate the effects of the pandemic, the government created social protection programs, including food and cash assistance. Food assistance refers to the distribution of food packs, usually rice, canned goods, and other foods distributed by the local government units. Cash assistance or Social Amelioration Program (SAP) stands for the provision of financial subsidies to low-income households to help families cope with the crisis brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic (Republic Act No. 1169).

With food insecurity and the social protection programs of the government and the studies of these phenomena mostly done in urban city centers, the present paper endeavors to investigate the status and meaning of food insecurity and the experience of the *ayuda* program in remote and small island communities. Specifically, this paper aims to accomplish the following: (1) describe the food served on the table of households pre-pandemic, at the time of the pandemic, and in the new normal; (2) identify the kinds of assistance received from the local government unit; and (3) analyze the meanings of experiences related to food and the *ayuda* program through the lens of McGregor’s (2006) subjective well-being which has its focus on how people think and feel about what they have and can do.

Review of Related Literature

This section presents the key published articles on well-being studies as a framework and subjective well-being studies during the pandemic. Another key discussion in this section is on food security as a concept and framework and the status of food security in the country. Here is a summary of these important concepts:

The social well-being framework of Coulthard et al. (2011) defines *well-being* as “a state that humans experience but focuses on the conditions that must be in place for people to achieve well-being” (p. 457). This definition entails three interrelated dimensions, namely, material dimension, relational dimension, and subjective dimension. The material dimension answers the question, “What does a person have?”; a relational dimension seeks to address, “What can they do with what they

have?”; and the subjective dimension aims to interrogate the query, “How do they think and feel about what they have and can do?”.

When taken together, the three dimensions provide a multi-perspective description of social well-being. While the three dimensions are encouraged to be taken together, subjective well-being, when underscored and given focus, allows the unfolding of individual narratives on their judgment about their well-being beyond the material conditions. This means that individuals’ judgments are given primacy in assessing personal well-being (Piosang & Grimes, 2022). White (2009) also considers this the most crucial vantage point since the meanings attached to relational and material well-being largely depend on people’s values and interpretations.

Available literature focuses on subjective well-being specific to the pandemic, such as those of Aldar et al. (2021) and Long (2021). An exploration of subjective well-being at the time of the pandemic by Aldar et al. (2021) presents an assessment of the subjective well-being of households in Timor-Leste. A similar quantitative approach to the study of well-being was conducted by Long (2021), who presents financial and non-financial effects as key considerations when discussing individual subjective well-being. Financial concerns are represented by one’s employment and income change. At the same time, non-monetary effects refer to mental health issues and the capacity to enjoy positive benefits as COVID-19 measures were implemented.

As both studies used quantitative correlation on subjective well-being, nuances from the ground or micro-narratives remain lacking, with contexts and particularities barely considered. This is where the present study on small island communities may present its contribution to subjective well-being studies in privileging the specific accounts of food and *ayuda* or forms of assistance received from the government.

Another approach to subjective well-being is presented by SEIA 2.0, where subjective well-being is construed in terms of life satisfaction and effect (Aldar et al., 2021). Life evaluation is discussed in terms of life as a whole or overall satisfaction, which covers these domains: health satisfaction, financial satisfaction, living environment satisfaction, employment satisfaction, and satisfaction with belonging in the community. Meanwhile, affect pertains to emotional states (Kahneman & Krueger, 2006, in Aldar et al., 2021) in reference to how people actually experience life in contrast to how such experiences are remembered.

Given these varying notions of subjective well-being, this study privileges McGregor’s (2008) perspective of subjective well-being through the query: “How do they think and feel about what they have and can do?” This question encompasses what people regard as important in the thinking and feeling levels and what they could contribute or share with others in the community within the context of the challenges brought about by the pandemic. This means that the paper also does not aim to describe the sense of overall life satisfaction and the specific emotional states that people have as difficulties experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic.

With regard to food security as a concept, Galang (2022) identifies at least four key perspectives in history, namely, food security as (1) Food Availability, (2) Food Accessibility, (3) Food Utilization, Nutrition, and Stability, and (4) Food Security, contributing to the attainment of Nutrition Security. For the first notion, food availability was espoused in the 1970s, when food security was framed according to food availability and price. With the second notion, the perspective changed with food accessibility in the 1980s, wherein access to food was stressed and based on people’s ability in terms of economic conditions, livelihood and employment, and ownership of assets. This perspective of food security is also analyzed at more disaggregated levels from the individual, household, regional, national, and international levels. For the third notion of food security, food utilization, nutrition,

and stability were the privileged elements framed through the World Food Summit in 1996. This upheld a multidimensional lens to include accessibility, availability, food use, and stability while incorporating vulnerability and risk management concepts. Nutrition was also a factor in food use or utilization, and this notion of food security upheld the rights-based approach by privileging the Right to Adequate Food. Lastly, the fourth notion is that food security is construed to be a contributor to nutrition security. This perspective in the 2000s aimed to broaden the scope of food security to include both food intake and health issues. By underscoring nutrition, food security also aimed at health interventions to address markers of malnutrition (Galang, 2022). These changing perspectives of food security historically locate what is now considered the four dimensions of food security—food availability, food accessibility, food utilization, and stability. In the Philippines, these dimensions of food security still have issues as the country was ranked 64 out of 113 countries in the Economist's 2021 in terms of the Global Food Security Index (GFSI) (Philippine Institute for Development Studies, 2022). In view of food security in the present paper, the discussions revolve around the basic notions of food availability and food accessibility. The notion of food utilization, such as nutrition and stability, is peripheral in the discussion owing to the more fundamental needs of households in small and remote island communities during the pandemic.

During the 2020 pandemic, Galang (2022) also cited a rapid nutrition assessment survey conducted by the Food and Nutrition Research Institute (FNRI) in the country. This survey indicated that more than half of the households had difficulties with food accessibility due to the following reasons: (1) No money to buy food (22.1%); (2) No/limited public transportation (21.6%); (3) No money due to loss of job (19.5%); (4) Limited food stores in the area (10.8%); and (5) Elderly (no other members to buy food) (5.1%). To address these issues, households and families purchased food on credit (72%) and borrowed food from other families, neighbors, and friends (66%). Some of these reasons for food insecurity are reiterated in the narratives and accounts of people living in small and remote island communities.

Materials and Methods

The University of the Philippines' Emerging Interdisciplinary Research (UP-EIDR) on the well-being of remote, small islands at the time of the COVID-19 pandemic conducted a series of focus group discussions (FGDs) in May 2023 in four municipalities of Northern Iloilo, Philippines, which was participated in by representatives from the island barangays. The research team also visited these island barangays for household interviews, which began in October 2022. Moreover, the selected municipalities were Ajuy, Concepcion, Estancia, and Carles. The representatives from the selected barangays per municipality were requested to be part of the activity held in the municipality/town proper. An average of 18 respondents from each island barangay comprised individuals representing the economic, health, education, and youth sectors. Representatives from the religious sectors were also requested to participate in the subjective well-being study.

The activities conducted for each FGD include (1) Community Map Making, (2) Lamesa Activity, and (3) *Ayuda*/Basket Activity. For the Community Map Making, participants were asked to draw and present the island's landscapes and features, facilities, resources, and other important places, including local place names at the time of the pandemic. For the Lamesa activity, each community was requested to identify the food served in a household before and during the pandemic and the new normal. Some barangays described the ideal 'table' that they consider to be sufficient for every household's needs. For the basket/*ayuda* activity, participants identified the assistance they received during the pandemic and their prioritization of such forms of assistance.

During FGDs, the Barangay Officials, Barangay Health Workers, Mentors, Faith Leaders, and other Key Officials represented the two island barangays from each municipality. Six of them

participated in the Subjective Well-being (SWB) activities, wherein they were divided into three pairs; each pair worked on different activities for SWB. The participants were given writing and drawing tools for all the activities; an hour was allotted to finish the tasks, and another was used to present the work to the whole group. Moreover, an open forum was done simultaneously during the presentations to encourage the exchange of opinions and comments from all the participants and the EIDR team.

The FGD was selected as a method to help bring together key informants from various sectors and respective communities and allow space for discussion about their barangays, given the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic. The activities were crafted and selected to facilitate a more nuanced description and discussion on the status of food security in the area and how communities fared given the various assistance programs of the local government.

Figure 1

Study sites (Map adapted with permission from Bagsit, 2020)



Due to the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, the investigation focused on the province of Iloilo, particularly in rural coastal municipalities along Northern Iloilo that border the Visayan Sea. These include the municipalities of Ajuy, Concepcion, Estancia, and Carles (See Figure 1). Remote small island barangays under the jurisdiction of these four local government units were further selected as study sites based on pre-determined criteria. Selection of the study sites was guided by the Philippine Department of Health's strategy for Geographically Isolated and Disadvantaged Areas (GIDA), which are defined as "far-flung areas and marginalized populations including islands, mountainous areas, conflict-affected areas, internally displaced persons and indigenous people" (DOH-NCIP-DILG Joint Memorandum Circular No. 2013-01). These are places with marginalized communities— physically and in socio-economic terms— from the mainstream society. The physical factors considered for GIDA include those areas isolated due to distance, weather conditions, and difficulties with transportation. For the socio-economic factors, inclusion in GIDA means there is a high incidence of poverty in the community, the area has vulnerable sectors, or the community is still recovering from a social crisis or armed conflict (dswd.gov.ph). The selected research sites experienced the devastating impacts of Typhoon Haiyan in 2008, reinforcing their vulnerability as GIDA.

As part of the ethical conduct of the project, an ethical clearance was sought and approved by the Research Ethics Board of the University of the Philippines Visayas. The highlights of the ethical context of the project include the anonymity of the respondents, the translation of the informed consent form into the local language, and upholding the integrity of the data gathered through a data management protocol. The safety of the participants and the research team was also ensured by observing the minimum COVID-19 protocols in the concerned barangays.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the output of the FGD for the Lamesa activity per barangay wherein the barangay representatives identified the kinds of food they served on the table in their households before, during, and after the pandemic. In addition to the Lamesa activity, this section also presents the FGD output for the *ayuda*/basket activity, wherein the barangay representatives identify the kind of assistance they received from the government during the pandemic. Here are the key points from the two FGD activities:

Lamesa Activity

This section presents the output of four barangays selected for their nuance. A summary of the list of foods served on the table is presented, covering or including the output of the remaining three other barangays. An analysis of this table will subsequently follow.

Figure 2

Lamesa Activity of Barangay A



Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants from Barangay A remarked that food on the table seemed enough, “*Bulu-bastante gawa*”. Food usually prepared on the table includes *tayong* (sea urchin), *takrab-takrab* (conch snails/spider conch), rice, chicken, fish, crab, squid, octopus, and vegetables such as *tanglad*, tomatoes, pepper, paired with coffee and coke. The items served on the table were mainly fishery resources— “*Ang mga dunang-mangad dira kita nagaka-buhi kay ara kita sa higad dagat. Ang tanan nga ara sa kadagatan, yara sa isla*” [We live on the resources provided by the sea since we reside by the seashore. All of the sea’s resources are available to us on the island.]

On the other hand, during the pandemic, the participants noted that only a few kilos of rice were available. Households usually prepare rice porridge or *lugaw* so it can last for at least two days. Usually, a .20 kg or one *gantang* equals a day’s consumption. They also described their coffee, noodles,

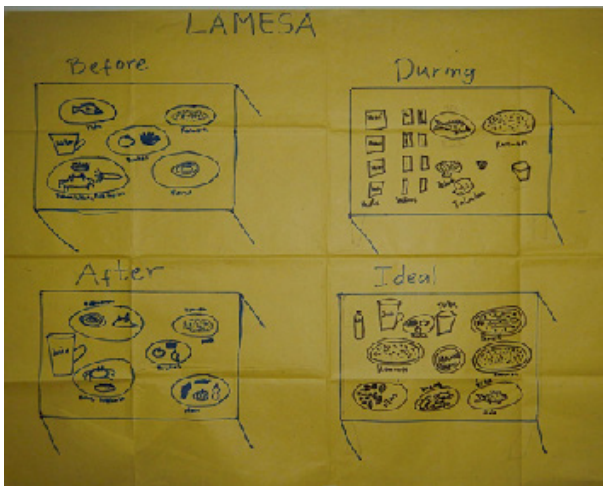
sardines, and rice as *lapsaw*, indicating that extra water is poured or used to make more coffee, rice porridge, noodle soup, and sardines. Also, a participant remarked, “*Ang amon manok kay talagsa na lang man mag-itlog kay ato naman sa yahong*” [They rarely get eggs from their chickens since they already cooked most of their chickens].

Furthermore, during the new normal, a participant remarked, “*Abunansya na ang tawo kay ligwa na ang lakat sa lawod*” [People had a sense of abundance because they were allowed to go back fishing]. This implies fewer restrictions and buyers returning to buy their catch. In the post-pandemic new normal, food on the table includes rice, fish and crabs, eggs, coffee and milk, noodles, bananas, vegetables, and coke. While this contrasted with what was available on their tables during the pandemic, the respondents underscored that part of the income from fishing was always used to pay for debts.

With the pandemic, many residents also resorted to borrowing money from private lending corporations such as Cardbank, Landbank, Dungganon, and Lifebank. At times, their fishing boats were used as collaterals. A participant noted about lending institutions, “*Damo na di. Way importante kun sa ano ngalan. Importante maka-utang*” [There are a lot of lending institutions. It does not matter by what name, as long as one can apply for a loan]. Despite the difficulties, the participants explained that in the barangay, there were no instances of hunger during the pandemic because everyone united and helped each other; some shared food, rice, and water.

Figure 3

Lamesa Activity of Barangay B



Before the COVID-19 pandemic, participants from Barangay B observed, “*ang sulod sang amon lamesa, daw medyo okay pa*” (Our tables had sufficient items). This includes fish, crab, fruits, and rice.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, food includes *panginason* or gleaned shells, rice, Homi (noodles), sardines, corned beef, and meat loaves. One participant added, “*masum-udan ka man kaon sardinas*” (You will eventually feel a sense of aversion to eating canned sardines). The reliance on processed or canned food is partly due to mobility restrictions in the area, wherein residents were only allowed to go once a week to the mainland to buy their needs. In each household, only one member

was allowed to go to the mainland to buy from the market. Hence, people take stock of canned goods.

Meanwhile, they have sardines, rice, fruits, and viand, such as lechon manok (roasted chicken), during the new normal. At this point, they were still receiving relief assistance; the people were allowed to fish anytime. Restrictions like going to the mainland market were also lifted. As a participant noted, “*Ang mga tawo naka luwag-luwag na*” [People can already move around].

For the ideal table for every household, respondents remarked, “*Kada pamilya ga-tinguha para amo ni tani sulod sang ila lamesa*” [Each family perseveres and strives hard in order for these things to be served at their tables]. These food items include rice, meat and fish, and fruits. They also affirmed that drinking water is sufficient on the island. The participants cited that the most important ‘food’ on their tables is rice, “*Bisan wala sud-an, gapanginhas, basta may kan-on lang*” [Even if there is no main dish, we can glean shellfish; as long as the rice is available, the family can still eat].

Figure 4

Lamesa Activity of Barangay C



Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants from Barangay C noted that their food usually consisted of rice, fish, vegetables, chicken, banana and mango, water, and coke. They explained that before the pandemic, fishing was still good, and they could still sell their fish at regular to higher prices; thus, they could afford the meals they put on the table.

During the COVID-19 Pandemic, the participants remarked that their usual food included rice, mostly cooked as *lugaw* or porridge, adobong *takway* (vinegar braised taro shoot stem), root crops and banana, and dried fish. There was no coke, and they also frequently prepared *malunggay* (moringa leaves) soup with dried fish instead of fresh fish. The participants clarified that the scarcity of rice during the pandemic forced them to cook it as *lugaw* or rice porridge so it would last longer. They added that they could not easily source rice because of the pandemic restrictions and also lack of money, given that their livelihood was affected by the health protocols. The participants also shared that in a day, they only ate at most twice a day— brunch and dinner. There were even instances when the barangay leaders cooked food and distributed it to the community.

During the new normal, the participants highlighted some changes in the kinds of food served on their table, which now include rice, adobong manok, vegetables, fish, pork, and coke. They explained that one can already buy what one wishes because there is no movement restriction, and the livelihoods, especially fishers, are thriving again.

Figure 5

Lamesa Activity of Barangay D



Before COVID-19 pandemic, the participants from Barangay D remarked, “Sang wala pa pandemic makita ta nga maayo pa ang aton lamesa” [Before the pandemic, our tables were sufficient]. They specified that their food usually consists of rice, fish, crabs, fruits such as banana and mango, milk, and vegetable soup.

During COVID-19 pandemic, the participants shared that the people were mostly sad: “Gapangasubo ang mga tawo sa lamesa kay dyutay na lang ang ila pagkaon kay tungod nga limitado man ang pag-pangita kag ang balaklon sadto limitado man” [People were mostly sad since they have scant food due to the limitations on their livelihood and limited availability of sold goods]. The food they frequently ate included rice, noodles, and canned goods, mostly from relief goods given to them. Breakfast usually consisted of coffee only. Rice was their biggest challenge in the island community, “Mahingagaw kita to sa Concepcion (mainland) kay basi mag sirado na waay kita bugas” [We have to rush to the Concepcion mainland to buy rice before the stores close]. Since there are no rice fields in their island barangay, some residents planted root crops and bananas but only for their consumption. Also, vegetable vendors often visited the island to sell their produce before the pandemic. However, during the pandemic, they could not do so; thus, the residents had no choice but to go to the mainland to buy them. The barangay captain also noted that “Imbis bala tani mag damo ang ulutanon, didto sila ya nag-focus sa bulak” [Rather than having vegetable gardens, many people were hooked into ornamental plant gardening]. The participants further clarified that rice would be enough for the household if there was rice.

During the new normal, the participants expressed, “Masadya na sila kay maluwag na paghulag ta, indi na kita mabudlayan” [People are happy since there are less restrictions, and people can already move around]. For this period, the food on the table already included rice, fish, fruits, seashells, and water. Meanwhile, for their ideal table for every household, the participants shared that they hoped for a complete set of meals, including fish, fruits, vegetables, and rice. They also noted that drinking water was sufficient on the island. For them, the most essential food on their tables was rice, fruits, and fish.

In summary, the food that people usually consumed from all seven barangays before, during, and after the pandemic include the following:

Table 1

Summary of Food on the Table

Before Pandemic	Count	During Pandemic	Count	After Pandemic	Count
Sea urchin	1	Rice as Porridge	7	Rice	7
Conch/Snails	1	Coffee	2	Fish	6
Rice	7	Noodles	4	Crabs	1
Manok	5	Sardines	6	Fruits	6
Fish	5	Eggs	2	Coffee	2
Crab/Kasag	4	Corned Beef	3	Eggs	1
Octopus	1	Meatloaves	3	Noodles	1
Vegetables	6	Shells	1	Vegetables	6
Coke	4	Small Fish	2	Coke	4
Coffee	2	<i>Takway</i>	1	Sardines	1
Fruits	7	Root Crops	1	Lechon Manok	1
Milk	2	Dried Fish	1	Adobong Manok	1
<i>Lokus</i> (Squid)	1	Vegetables	1	Pork	3
				Bread	1

In Table 1, one can take note of the consistent presence of rice, fish, fruits, and vegetables before and after the pandemic. In both periods, fish and fishing played crucial roles, which speaks of the communities' dependence on and relation to the fishery resources in the area (White, 2015). Inhabitants also have a special attachment to the island community, given their dependence on fishery resources for consumption before, during, and after the pandemic.

Among the resources needed, the participants said that rice, fruits, and vegetables are brought from the mainland, which was difficult to access during the pandemic. As previously mentioned, vegetable vendors from the mainland visited the island barangay to sell vegetables pre-pandemic, but this was no longer the case during the pandemic. It is also important to note that in contrast to pre-pandemic and post-pandemic set-up, the communities' food changed during the pandemic period, with people having to settle with rice porridge, canned goods, and noodles from the government's *ayuda* or food assistance program. The presence of processed food also outnumbered the smaller count of the fishery resources, which can be attributed to the mobility concerns of fishers during the pandemic period and the reliance on resources that can be accessed along the coast, like shells and small fish.

The reliance on fishery resources and the description of the island community as a fishing village can also be gleaned from the community map made by the representatives from the seven barangays. Examples are presented in the community map of Barangay B.

Figure 6

Community Map of Barangay B



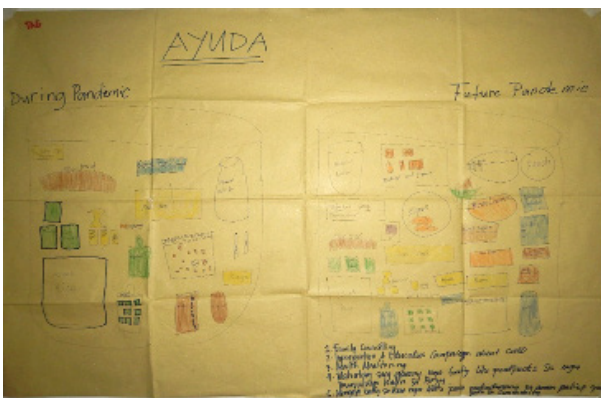
Based on this map, the barangay is abundant in fishery resources as the sea surrounds it, and the number of fishing boats in the area signals the relevance of fishing as a livelihood activity. The place also has coconut trees for *copra* (dried coconut meat) and coconut oil. The participants noted that the barangay, however, has no farmland due to a lack of space for farming.

Ayuda/Basket Activity

In this section, the outputs of three barangays are discussed in detail. A summary of the *ayuda* or assistance from the local government unit for the seven barangays will also be presented.

Figure 7

Ayuda Activity of Barangay E



Barangay E shared that the kinds of assistance they received during the pandemic include the following: (1) cash assistance from the Social Amelioration Program (SAP), (2) baskets containing rice, bread, canned goods, noodles, (3) hygiene kits with soap, (4) medicines, (5) water, and (6)

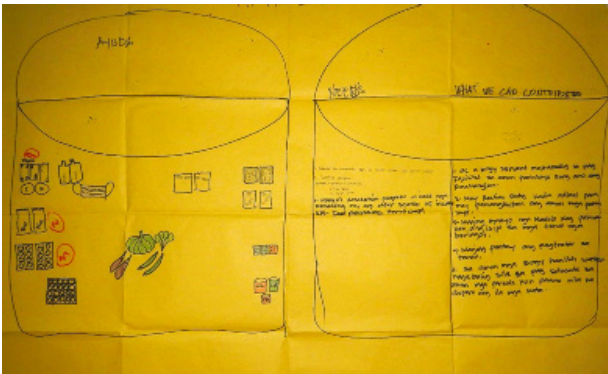
COVID kit inclusive of face masks, and alcohol. The participants, however, noted that all of these forms of assistance were insufficient for their daily needs. In their own words, “*Kung tulukon naton, kulang ini siya sa pang adlaw-adlaw naton nga pag ginawi*” [When we look at it, these were not enough for our everyday needs.]

If given a chance to suggest what they hope to receive in times of crisis such as the pandemic, they hope to be assisted with (1) more food supplies—“*dugang-dugangan kay daw bitin gid*” [The food items given were very limited.]; (2) clothes, mattresses, and slippers; (3) more rice; (4) vitamins; (5) vegetable supplies; and (6) school supplies since it was a burden for parents to buy the children’s school supplies when they could not even provide food for their families.

When the participants were asked what they could contribute to the community, the Barangay Officials in the group suggested these steps: (1) During the pandemic, the community was in a state of depression, and as Violence Against Women and Children (VAWC) officers, they needed to do counseling for their residents, (2) Information and education campaign regarding the COVID crisis in order for the community to be aware of what was currently happening in the society and how to combat it, (3) The Barangay Health Workers (BHW) and the health center should monitor the status and wellness of all its constituents especially the vulnerable ones like the elderly, kids, and pregnant women, (4) The barangay can also give food packs from its own budget with the help and assistance of private individuals who would like to share what they have and their excess to those in dire need, and (5) They can also tap and ask for assistance from other NGOs to increase their budget allotted for food supplies that will be distributed to all the residents of the barangay.

Figure 8

Ayuda Activity of Barangay F



The participants of Barangay F recounted that the government and private sectors gave them food supplies, hygiene kits, and medicines during the pandemic. If they were to rank the most assistance they needed, they said it would include money first, rice second, and medicine. The participants explained that rice was sourced from the neighboring town of Estancia, Iloilo, at Php 2,000.00 per sack because their community does not have farming lands to plant their own rice. However, the community has alternatives to rice, including root crops such as cassava, *banayan* (lesser yam), *kayos* (wild yam), and some also have banana plants.

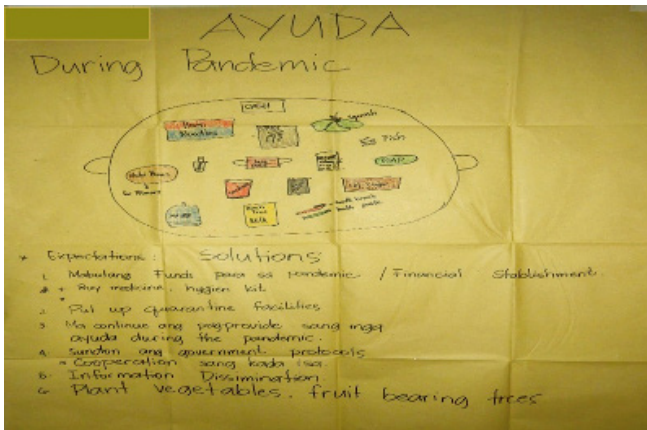
In terms of other assistance, the community members hope to receive training on diversifying their livelihood using the cash assistance given to them. Based on their experience, they need ideas

on how to make productive use of capital assistance. The participants also hope they will receive livelihood assistance for the residents, including livestock, gardening, and processing of fishery resources. Lastly, they also aspire to train in crafts-making, especially for women. The identified needs of the participants from this barangay include (1) training on how to handle income and save, (2) a livelihood program, especially on backyard gardening, livestock, and dried fish, and (3) food processing and handicrafts for women's association.

In view of what the participants can contribute to others in a time of the pandemic, they made these remarks: (1) The barangay needs to be aware of the needs of its constituents, (2) Volunteers can do the daily routine of roving around the barangay from whom people can ask information, (3) Individuals in the community especially local officials should serve as models, especially to those who do not conform to rules, (4) Barangay health workers should find time to teach parents how to take care of their kids.

Figure 9

Ayuda Activity of Barangay F



For Barangay G, the assistance they received during the pandemic included (1) cash Assistance, (2) food supplies such as noodles, rice, vegetables, canned goods, coffee, eggs, milk, and brown sugar, (3) Gurayan [Anchovy/Dilis]— “*Tood nga isla kami, damo kami tabagak, gin padal-an naman kami sang gurayan*” [As an island, we have a lot of *tabagak* (sardines), but we were still sent with Gurayan (anchovy).], (4) alcohol, face masks, soap, toothbrush, and toothpaste, (5) vitamins, (6) Nutribuns for students, and (7) small bottles of Wilkins mineral water. As a community, they also gave “*tabagak/ sardines*” to the LGU as a form of relief assistance to other barangays during the pandemic, specifically to other areas in Ajuy and Manapla, Negros Occidental, as this municipality was already near (facing) Ajuy though a part of the Negros Island usually requiring a 1–2-hour boat ride. When asked about the order of priority of items they received, the participants discussed that money was first, followed by rice and canned goods.

In times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the participants remarked that they would most probably experience severe poverty as they have low income due to difficulties in human interaction or “*mabudlay nga pag-sinalayo*”. Pereira and Oliveira (2020) also underscored similar challenging life conditions during the pandemic due to unemployment and little capacity to purchase goods. In the small islands, it is important to note that poverty can also be due to expensive

transportation fares during the pandemic, and almost all commodities prices soared. There were no available opportunities for jobless individuals as well.

When asked what the barangay can contribute to help others during a pandemic, the participants shared that as a response to the difficulties that a crisis brings to people, the barangay should always have a medicine supply on hand in case of emergencies. There should also be a proper facility to be used as a quarantine area because, for their barangay, they just utilized the elementary school, daycare, and health center as quarantine facilities during COVID. Residents should also follow all health protocols, work in unity, and relay proper information to others. Families should also plant vegetables and fruit-bearing trees so that these resources can alleviate hunger, or “maka piyan-piyan” when a crisis happens.

As a summary of the *ayuda*/basket activity, the following forms of assistance/items were received, prioritized, and as possible contributions of all FGD participants in a pandemic context:

Table 2

Summary of Ayuda Received, Priorities, and Potential Contributions

<i>Ayuda</i>	Count	Priorities	Count	Contributions	Count
Cash assistance	6	More food supplies	7	Counselling	1
Rice	7	Mattress, Clothes	1	Information dissemination	7
Eggs	3	Rice	7	Monitoring of BHW	6
Canned goods	6	Money	6	Food packs	1
Noodles	6	Medicine	4	Tap NGO	1
Hygiene Kits	4			Volunteers	6
Medicines	5			As role models	2
COVID Kit	5			Medicines	2
Water	3				

Table 2 shows that the top *ayuda* or assistance received for the seven barangays include rice, cash assistance, canned goods, and noodles. The results from the Lamesa activity validate the importance of rice. Moreover, the list of prioritized *ayuda* of the participants includes rice, more food supplies, and money, which again underscores the importance of rice to a household. This priority list allows us to note that the government made appropriate choices for the *ayuda* program— that the people should receive rice during the pandemic.

In the spirit of a give-and-take relationship, participants also expressed their willingness to contribute something to the community. This includes particularly their involvement in information dissemination, volunteering in the barangay for local programs, and regularly monitoring the BHW or barangay health worker in the community. This capacity to volunteer despite the limitations can refer to Kabear’s (2020) notion of agency as citizenship, wherein people choose to act and do for the well-being of the locale, and what Broch (2022) considers as a possible case of resilience given the potential to handle natural and social changes.

On Subjective Well-being

Given the respondents' presentation of food placed on the table and the *ayuda*/basket of goods or assistance received from the local government, the question now is how residents of small and remote islands made sense of their subjective well-being concerning food and assistance of the local government, considering the realities conditioned by the pandemic. When talking about the participant's account of their food, a crucial concern is the household's encounter with its limitations in terms of its resources during the pandemic. This limitation pertains to the food stock of the family. Emphasis is given to rice and the dwindling financial capacity of the household due to the interruptions to their livelihood, which Long (2021) considers part of the financial effects or changes in employment and income during the pandemic.

In the participants' stories, all barangays emphasized the vital role of rice for their well-being in terms of food security. The extra premium placed on rice can also be taken as a suggestion to the government to add more rice to its food assistance program. As participants noted, rice became porridge during the pandemic to ensure it would last another day or two. Thus, providing more rice will help ensure a sense of food security and assure that community members can still live well (McGregor et al., 2009), thereby influencing the subjective well-being of households in remote island communities in the context of the pandemic. Dependence on rice also raises a concern that residents could explore possible rice alternatives, such as root crops, as figured in the narrative of some barangays. This serves as a recommendation to communities in island communities as another resource to possibly cultivate and develop should access to rice become problematic in future pandemics.

The livelihood difficulty experienced by all participants also means less money coming into households. Thus, when families receive money from the local government, it creates a sense of relief when it is part of the *ayuda* or assistance programs. With the additional money, families can buy food especially rice, medicines, and canned goods for consumption. The limitation in financial resources in every household is due to the interruptions in economic exchanges in the island community. With no buyers in sight, fishing is done more for subsistence than income. Interestingly, the kinds of food served during the pandemic focused more on canned or processed food, which may be due to the strict implementation of health protocols in the island community that consequently made access to fresh produce on the mainland more difficult. Given the lack of financial resources during the pandemic, the local government unit may brainstorm on cash-for-work assistance, especially for impoverished households.

Another essential part of subjective well-being rests on the kind of contributions that people can still give despite the limitations caused by the pandemic. This is where people find fulfillment in assisting others despite their food and money limitations. In this case, people still find it meaningful and rewarding to help the local community, specifically regarding information dissemination, and volunteer in local programs or activities. White (2018) considers this an example of subjective and relational dimensions of well-being as it allows a person to fulfill valued goals such as self-actualization through relationships with other members of the community.

By highlighting the capacity for volunteerism, the people in the barangay underscore the importance of social solidarity, which, from Kabeer's (2020) perspective, stands for agency as citizenship. In a few barangays, this form of social solidarity is seen in community kitchens where local leaders prepare and distribute meals, especially for households severely affected by the pandemic. To incentivize volunteerism, the local community may consider giving awards like simple tokens to certain individuals to boost their self-esteem and serve as models for the other community members. These acts of solidarity can be further interpreted as expressions of freedom and choice (Sen, 1999), which underscores some control over what happens and the capacity to achieve something from what a person values (Abunge et al., 2013).

Conclusion

Food insecurity in small and remote island communities is characterized by issues concerning food availability and food accessibility. In relation to food availability, households in these communities needed to contend with limited rice supplies. This conversely means that rice is a key resource, indicating a household's food security and subjective well-being during the pandemic. This also explains why families resort to rice porridge, and some barangays shared that households eat only twice a day to extend their rice supplies. With rice as a commodity imported from the mainland, these small and remote islands expose their vulnerability to rice shortage, especially at the height of the pandemic. Hence, households value the *ayuda* program of the government, which, at the minimum includes rice. As a commodity that is not readily available to remote and small islands, this opens up the discussion of whether the community can consider food security in terms of cultivating alternative food for rice, such as root crops (e.g., sweet potatoes or *camote*, cassava) which may come in handy during crises situations such as pandemics. While there may be some cultural barriers to adopting these alternatives, as these may be associated with poverty or impoverished conditions, the nutritional value of these root crops may be highlighted and underscored by the local barangay. Thus, creating community plots for root crops during the new normal is something that local barangays may want to plan or consider bolstering food security in terms of availability and food stability of locally grown food in the area.

Food insecurity, in terms of food inaccessibility for households living on small and remote islands, can be attributed to a family's dwindling financial resources during the pandemic. Galang (2022) claimed this was the number one factor affecting food accessibility during the pandemic in the country. The economic and livelihood interruptions brought about by the pandemic conversely showed people's dependence on one primary source of income, specifically from fishing. Thus, cash or money in the *Ayuda* program of the local government is important as it allows households to access food such as rice and improves their stock of food supplies. Moreover, alternative financial resources are important because island communities mainly depend on fishing as their core economic activity. This exposed families' lack of capacity to purchase food and improve the household's food stock. Hence, the pandemic revealed what people do not have— an alternative income resource or diversification of livelihood, given the interruptions to fishing due to COVID-19 protocols. The relevant role of livelihood diversification is a concern also shared during the household interviews. Should another pandemic unfold, how should communities address food inaccessibility due to lack of income? This question is something that communities need to deal with to ensure food security by considering the relationship between income and food accessibility.

Despite the limitations caused by the pandemic, barangay members suggest that they could still serve the community through volunteer work. More specifically, the participants of the FGDs expressed willingness to extend themselves to local programs created by the barangay. This makes volunteer work for the community part of the people's subjective well-being despite the limitations experienced concerning food and financial resources. This sense of volunteerism that facilitates community solidarity is something that local communities can encourage as these acts afford a sense of fulfillment or subjective well-being to community members. This form of agency as citizenship (Kabeer, 2020) can be positively interpreted as valuing the locale in terms of place attachment (White, 2015) and reclaiming the uncertainties in a place during a crisis such as the pandemic.

As a general recommendation, a key aspect in making sense of uncertainties during a crisis is the importance of knowing people's subjective notions of food security. This knowledge can benefit government institutions by designing programs that are more aligned with people's articulations of their needs and may, in turn, contribute to better food preparedness to reduce food insecurity during pandemics (Koyratty et al., 2023).

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