

**MESSAGE OF
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Salig Bangsamoro Kapihan
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Assalamu alaikum warahmatullahi wabarakatuh.

Good morning. First of all, thank you to Internews, the USAID, the Coalition of Moro Youth Movement, the Initiatives for Dialogue and Empowerment through Alternative Legal Services, and everyone who took part in organizing our dialogue today.

To all the participants from humanitarian and civil society organizations, the community leaders and representatives, religious leaders, local government officials, and media representatives present here today, welcome to Salig Bangsamoro Kapihan. Thank you for giving your time to take part in this dialogue on the COVID-19 pandemic, the infodemic that came with it, and our next steps moving forward.

I know many of you are working hard to address this already in your own ways, and in your own communities. But I think what's important in our dialogue today is that we will get a chance to talk about our own experiences, the needs of our communities, the best practices we've proven, and the gaps and problems we've seen, especially in terms of what information is needed on the ground. That way, we can chart a better and more strategic path forward.

Conversations like this are much-needed, especially today. Alam nating lahat, very timely ito. We've reached 93 million global cases already. Almost 2 million people have already died.¹ Here in the Philippines, we have close to 500,000 total cases already; sa BARMM, halos 3,000 na tayo.²

Kaya minsan, nakakalungkot din makita, it's so unfortunate that some people still aren't taking the pandemic seriously. I'm sure some of you have encountered this in your work. Maybe you've seen it more in the news coming in from other countries. There are people who don't think the pandemic is real, or that it's not serious. Even here, in our rounds to deliver aid to communities during the BARMM's relief operations, we sometimes hear similar sentiments—that this is not that dangerous, that this will all soon be over, that we can act like nothing has changed. But we know otherwise—we've seen otherwise. We see the numbers. I myself, I'm a COVID survivor. Alhamdulillah, I made it through; but not everyone is that fortunate.

But what this shows is that we have a deficit in terms of good risk and crisis communication. There's something wrong with how information is reaching the ground—sabi nga natin, we're also dealing with an infodemic. So that's really one of the biggest gaps we've seen. Maybe it's because no one was prepared for the scale and the speed of COVID; the whole world was really caught off-guard. But going around our communities, what I realized is that we really have to understand the context and situation to understand where people are coming from. We have to empathize with their fears and concerns. We have to listen first to what they are saying instead of just telling them what to do. That's what will show us the best way to address the problem. This is one of the areas that we continue to work on and improve.

¹ 01/15/21 data from Johns Hopkins COVID-19 Dashboard. <https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>

² 01/15/21 data from DOH COVID Tracker. <https://doh.gov.ph/2019-nCoV?page=1>

That's why I'm looking forward to hearing your insights and experiences today, especially regarding the information needs of our communities. I am sure that the sharing and the panel discussion will go a long way in helping the Bangsamoro improve its response to the pandemic. We all know that in terms of political and institutional age, compared to everyone else, BARMM is still very young—and it's unfortunate that one of the very first challenges it had to face as a political entity is a global pandemic that's been so difficult to deal with even for the most established and most developed countries. But even so, with the help of people and organizations like you, it's been doing the best it can to slow the spread and deliver the relief its constituents need. But still, our belief is that there is always a better way to serve, there is always a more strategic path to follow, there is always a better way forward. That's why I believe this dialogue will be very beneficial for everyone. I hope you give your all in this activity—because what you do here could help save more lives.

We still have a long way to go before we end this pandemic for good, so I wish you all strength and courage in the days and months ahead, because we all depend on you. The survival of the BARMM will depend on you. But don't worry; we at the BYC—and I'm sure I can speak for the rest of the BTA and the BARMM—will always be here to provide whatever support you need. Together I know we can build the homeland we have dreamt of, and fought for, for so long—a safer, more peaceful, and more prosperous Bangsamoro.

Again, good morning, and welcome to Salig Bangsamoro Kapihan. Thank you.