

PRESIDENTIAL COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE
News and Information Bureau

2023 POST-SONA DISCUSSIONS: POVERTY REDUCTION
Hilton Manila, Pasay City
JULY 26, 2023

MS. DAPHNE OSEÑA-PAEZ: After a successful State of the Nation Address by President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr., let us continue to dive deeper into his message as we tackle specific issues in our cluster panel discussions. Ngayong umaga ay tatalakayin natin ang Poverty Reduction; kasama sa usaping iyan ang edukasyon, kalusugan, trabaho, pagpababa ng presyo ng bilingin, mga ayuda at marami pang ibang bagay na umaalalay sa ating mga kababayan.

With us this morning is Secretary Teodoro Herbosa of the Department of Health; Usec. Michael Wesley Poa, Department of Education; Secretary Rex Gatchalian, Department of Social Welfare and Development; Secretary Bienvenido Laguesma, Department of Labor and Employment; Undersecretary Maria Anthonette Velasco-Allones, Department of Migrant Workers; Deputy Director General Rosanna Urdaneta, Technical Education and Skills Development Authority or TESDA; Chairperson Prospero de Vera III, Commission on Higher Education; Undersecretary Marlo Iringan, Department of Interior and Local Government and; Secretary Arsenio Balisacan, National Economic Development Authority.

Okay, let's begin. We'll begin with the Department of Health. The President stated in his SONA, "We are working towards a more direct and efficient delivery of services through integrated primary care providers and networks in partnership with the LGUs and private sector." Secretary Herbosa, please tell us more about the projects of the Department of Health that bring healthcare services closer to the people. What are the government's programs to improve healthcare access such as facilities and mental health services, especially in remote areas? What is the status of the President's commitment to build specialty centers in all regions?

DOH SEC. HERBOSA: Thank you very much, Daphne, and good afternoon to everyone. For the aspect on access to healthcare, the President has already verbalized that to me on the day he actually appointed me and asked me to make sure that access to healthcare of our poor, disenfranchised, the underprivileged happen. So I put on an 8-point agenda for the department, and the first point of that agenda is that bawat Pilipino, ramdam ang kalusugan.

And with this idea, we actually embody what has been emboldened in the Universal Health Care Act. In the UHC Act passed in 2019, we were able to implement huge framework change for the health system. And the idea here is that the strength of the implementation of the Universal Health Care is really access to primary health care. So, very important that people in remote areas end up being attached to a specific position or specific health center, so they will have access, ready access to a doctor and health services, medicines and laboratory test.

So, this is the main focus of the government and this can be done in partnership with the local government units, local chief executives that actually run the primary care services. So, that's very important and—together with this actually, there's a very big project of the first lady, called "The Lab for All" Project. We tried to do all of these things in one—in most remote areas and the people with depressed economies wherein we bring hospital personnel outside the hospital and bring them to the community to provide services to the people.

So, this is the type of difference, Daphne, that we want to implement: Services that are brought to the people, instead of the people going to our health care services. So, that's going to be done through strengthening the primary healthcare system all over the country. And we need the help of the local of the chief executives that actually run what we call the local health systems. So, that's the big plan, it's a big partnership; luckily the private sector is also a gung-ho about helping out in the health sector. And as you very well know, I think in the SONA sinabi din ng Presidente, ang mamamayan ang army, and we need to keep them healthy to be able to help development in our country.

MS. DAPHNE OSEÑA-PAEZ: Secretary Ted, what about the status of the specialty centers, how far have we gone?

DOH SEC. HERBOSA: As reported by the President, we have incorporated specialty centers in many of the retained hospitals of the Department of Health. The huge one, we have counted about 60 that have been completed – heart operations, cancer operations are now being done in several regions of the Philippines, whereas, before it will all done here at heart center. So, we completed many of those in the first year of the President, and we continue to have multi-specialty centers planned by the President.

The first one is the site he visited in Clark, so this is going to be the first multi-specialty center site that is going to be built through the help of private sector donations, PAGCOR money and DOH money. And hopefully, by one or two years, we'll be seeing the first general hospital built in Clark, followed by a children's hospital, followed by the heart center and then the cancer center. And this will be multiplied to 17 other regions. And in fact, yesterday, when we accompanied the President, he had a final instruction outside the SONA to me that PCSO also wanted to fund the cancer centers. So, I had a commitment from the PCSO now to actually fund three cancer centers every year for the next several years. So, that's going to be an addition to the already planned and we are going to do the complete staff for that so that can be accomplished.

MS. DAPHNE OSEÑA-PAEZ: That's wonderful, let's move on to Education Undersecretary Poa: In the SONA the President said, taking to heart the lesson of the pandemic, alternative delivery modes and blended learning methodologies have been adopted to ensure unhampered learning, additional social safety nets such as school based feeding program are also being implemented. Learners will be made more resilient, our public school facilities are being increased and fortified.

Please tell us more about the Department of Education's active and dynamic approach in advancing education, per as the President introduced "Ang Bagong Pilipinas."

DEPED USEC. POA: Thank you very much, Ma'am Daphne. Magandang hapon po, unang-una, sa lahat na nga nandito, sa lahat ng nanunood sa atin. Basically, tayo po 'no, under the Marcos Administration, we all understand na napakadami ng challenges ng basic education and we need to address sooner rather than later. So under the Marcos Administration and of course, under stewardship of our Vice President Sarah Duterte, we will be tackling these issues using a two-track approach. Ano pong ibig sabihin ng two-track approach 'no? We do have the traditional solutions, alam naman natin mayroon tayong mga shortages in term of classrooms, shortages in terms of teacher. So we will continue hiring more teachers, building more classrooms. Of course with DPWH as a partner, we will be building disaster resilient classrooms.

But aside from that, kaya nga sila perennial problems kasi ang hirap mag-catch up, so that's why there is a second track that we are looking to explore, in fact we are starting now and that is

tapping into technology. As the President mentioned, there were lessons learned during the pandemic; dati hindi naman natin alam na puwede pala iyong blended learning, puwede pala iyong online learning, puwede pala iyong distance learning.

So now, we need to use those lessons learned from the pandemic to address the issues of basic education. We started this year because, number 1, dati po kapag ganitong may bagyo, wala na kaagad pasok; kapag may lindol or any kahit po mga manmade na disasters ay wala na tayong pasok. Pero sa ngayon, to maximize learning continuity, since we are on learning recovery mode, hindi na po tayo magsususpende ng pasok. Ang sinususpende lang natin ay iyong in-person classes. Pero tuluy-tuloy po iyong pag-aaral ng ating mga learners sa kani-kanilang mga bahay using what we call alternative delivery mode, whether it be modules, blended learning or online learning – iyan po ay nagagawa na natin sa ngayon.

Aside from that, we want to tap into technology to really help decongestion in our school. We believed that by institutionalizing blended learning, ito iyong mas effective way to quickly decongest our schools, hindi lang iyong shifting schedules tayo. So, right now the department is really moving towards that direction, providing connectivity to all of our schools. We want our learners to be equipped with 21st century skills, binibigyan natin sila ng e-learning cards or computers para nang sa ganoon—it really is, in a globalized society, importante itong 21st century skills sa kanila, nang sa ganoon we have learners that after basic education will not only be ready in terms of employment in the Philippines' setting but ready for the world really. So, iyon po iyong direction natin sa Department of Education.

MS. DAPHNE OSEÑA-PAEZ: That's great. We'll get back to you shortly also. Let's move on to Social Welfare and Development Secretary Rex: The President mentioned the Food Stamp Program that has been launched recently. Please tell us more about this program, also how does the government ensure that beneficiaries of the Social Welfare and Development program are the deserving poor and the disadvantaged given that there are some misconceptions of people that beneficiaries are those whom the local leaders know of?

DSWD SEC. GATCHALIAN: Thank you, Daphne. Yes, that's true. The President did mention the Food Stamp Program. The Food Stamp Program is envisioned to fulfill a promise of the President to end involuntary hunger and at the same time, to make the country more inclusive.

Right now, the Philippine Statistics Authority has rated around one million Filipino families as food poor – that means there are families who don't make beyond eight thousand pesos. So dahil hindi sila kumikita ng eight thousand pesos, they can't provide for their family or can't buy the basic food requirement for the family.

So in this program, we will give these families electronic benefit cards wherein we load them up with food credits rather than cash and we will accredit retailers – Kadiwa ng Pangulo, community markets, agri coops – so that the beneficiaries can go into these retailers, accredited retailers and use their electronic benefit cards that have been loaded with food credits.

Now, the food credits are designed by the FNRI of the DOST, the Food and Nutrition Research Institute that prescribes 50% of those credits goes to carbohydrates, 30% to protein and 20% to healthy fats. So meaning, puwede silang pumili from that food group – it gives them back the power of choice. It empowers our food-poor Filipino families to decide for their own, what their families need. So, that's the first dimension of it – ending hunger, involuntary hunger.

But the President also expanded the notion or the concept that we have to include pregnant and lactating women because we know that stunting, wasting these are very big issues in our country. And for the past 20 or 30 years, we've been trying to combat stunting in particular pero it's still prevalent. With the Food Stamp Program, the President wants to include pregnant and lactating women so that we can watch over their caloric intake or their food or nutrition-specific interventions for the first 1,000 days. So that by the time children get to the daycare centers, they won't be stunted.

So the program's goal is to, one, end involuntary hunger; two, to combat stunting; and three, to change the behaviors of our Filipino families to make sure that they understand that puwede naman ang pagkain mura, masustansiya and masarap. We want to do a behavioral change so that they start consuming right, they start eating right.

Now, on the second question – it's always been a misconception that the selection of beneficiaries goes through the political leaders, quite the contrary. All our programs including 4Ps and now the Food Stamp Program, ang anchor niyan is the Listahanan database that the department runs. The Listahanan database is a database based on saturation drive or a survey drive that's done by the department. The local leaders have no control over that.

And then, we use the Listahanan as a basis for different intervention programs such as 4Ps or in this case, the Food Stamp Program. In the Food Stamp Program for instance, because we are looking for the families that don't make beyond eight thousand pesos, we will choose the one million families with the lowest per capita income, so it's data driven, it's database driven and it's really isolated or insulated from our political leaders on the ground.

So, I guess that's a misconception that has to be clarified again and again so that we put the right beneficiaries into the right programs.

MS. OSEÑA-PAEZ: Thank you, Secretary Rex.

Now, we move on to Labor and Employment Secretary Laguesma. The President reported in his SONA: *"As of May this year, our employment rate rose to 95.7% - clear proof of the improvement from the severe unemployment that we experienced during the height of the pandemic. Employment then was at a low of 82.4%. But even with our current high rate of employment, we must do more. We will generate additional jobs for the remaining 4.3% of our workforce as well as for the 11.7% underemployed Filipinos seeking better employment opportunities."*

As the President said, there is more to do. Secretary Laguesma, please tell us more about the DOLE's programs and initiatives in advancing employment and creating opportunities for the workforce.

DOLE SEC. LAGUESMA: Maraming salamat, Daphne. Isang maganda at mapagpalang hapon po sa ating lahat.

Una, nais kong banggitin na iyong nabanggit na employment improvements or employment gains ay bunga o resulta po ng kolaborasyon, active partnership at involvement po, una, ng atin pong tinatawag na social partners – ang mga manggagawa, ang kanilang kinatawan at ang mga namumuhunan.

Ikalawa po, nakatulong po iyong active partnership at convergence ng iba-ibang mga departamento kagaya po ng aming 'ika nga'y pinasimulan ng DOTr, to mention also DENR at

DSWD kasama po namin; kasama po namin din ang Department of Health at siyempre po kasama namin ang local government units. Dito po ay nagkaroon ng sama-samang pagkilos at hindi po ito aakuin lamang ng Department of Labor and Employment na amin pong accomplishment o wins as far as the Department of Labor and Employment, napakahalaga po ng tulong, kolaborasyon, convergence of different departments upang makamit po natin iyong ganiyang klaseng employment rate.

At siyempre po, hind po dapat makalimutan na nabanggit ng ating Pangulo – mapalad po tayo na mayroon tayong tinatawag and to quote the President, “*An enormous pool of highly competent, dedicated...*” and I will add, dependable workers po, kasama po nating naglilingkod. Kasama po natin sila ngayon, siguro po marapat na palakpakan po natin ang ating sarili sapagkat bahagi po tayo ng improvement, ito pong employment gains ‘no.

At kasama po namin diyan ang atin pong TESDA na doon po sa mga detalye, bahala na pong magpaliwanag si Deputy Director General Urdaneta. Nais ko lamang magpasalamat sapagkat ang ating Pangulo po, sa simula po ng paglilingkuran, ibinalik po ang TESDA sa Department of Labor and Employment – isang mahalagang hakbang sapagkat nariyan po iyong linkage ng training sa employment, hindi po puwedeng maghiwalay.

Kaya pinasasalamat ko po ang ating mga reunited na kasamahan sa TESDA na dati po ay pinangungunahan ng TESDA Director General na si Atty. Danilo Cruz noon pong nakaraang taon at ito po’y tuluy-tuloy sapagkat nakikita po natin na dapat po nating i-sustain at bahagi po dito, and aligned with the 8-point socioeconomic agenda of the President and the Philippine Development Plan for 2023-2028, nagbalangkas din po ang Department of Labor and Employment sa tulong ng social partners – labor representatives at ang employees representative ng isa pong tinatawag na Labor and Employment Plan.

Dito po nakapaloob iyong mga programa na kung saan tutukuyin o bibigyan po ng pagsusulong [ang] may kinalaman po sa youth employability, iyon pong tinatawag natin na pagpapatuloy po ng kapayapaang pang-industriya at iyon po, sinasabi po natin na building an inclusive and sustainable social protection sa lahat po ng mga sektor – kababaihan, katandaan kagaya ko elderly, iyon pong active force, nasa active force at siyempre po ang kabataan.

So, itong mga programa na ito ay nakapaloob po doon sa tinatawag natin na Labor and Employment Plan na naendorso po noon pong tripartite sector at ito po ay aming ibabahagi sa ating Gabinete nang sa ganoon po magkaroon ng konsiderasyon at magkatulong-tulong, magkaroon po ng convergence upang matamo po natin iyong sinasabi ng ating Pangulo na inclusive growth, poverty reduction by single digit at ang pinakamahalaga po sa Department of Labor and Employment ay iyon pong pagkakaroon ng de-kalidad, remunerative, sustainable na employment opportunities.

MS. OSEÑA-PAEZ: Thank you, Secretary Laguesma. You mentioned the inclusive growth and the importance of the labor force and TESDA’s role in it so let me jump to TESDA Deputy General Urdaneta. The President said, “*We will not let a student’s financial constraints be a hindrance to education. We have activated social safety nets such as skills development training and youth employment programs.*” This is what he said at his SONA.

So sa bahagi po ng TESDA, what key trainings and programs are in store for the Filipino learner? How are these accessible to our kababayans?

TESDA DDG URDANETA: Thank you, Daphne. Let me tell you, it's not just about accessibility but inclusivity also. We are very much engaged with our partners, particularly the local government units.

When the President appointed our new secretary, Secretary Suharto Mangudadatu, dalawa lang po ang ipinagbilin sa kaniya – harmonized the TVL (Technical, Vocational Livelihood) Track with DepEd; and number two, try to reach out to as many Filipinos and let them be skilled, re-skilled and upskilled. So, these are the things that we are doing right now.

When it comes to accessibility, we have also made it a point that the scholarship has been allocated to all the private TVIs as well as the TESDA institutions so as we are able to reach 300,000 graduates or trainees or enrollees. With that, we are also trying to populate our TESDA online program – we have 150 programs already which are also being used by our OFWs when they have their rest time so that they would be able to have these particular programs also and they will be certified later and assessed.

Mayroon din po kaming tinatawag ngayon na micro credentialing – ito po iyong mga bite-size or micro programs na usually ang industry po ang nagpa-participate na mag-register ng program sa amin; these are the five to ten-day programs such that for a Filipino to be re-skilled or upskilled, ito po iyong mga kinukuha nilang mga programa. So, at this point we have already a number of micro credential programs that have been registered to TESDA.

There are so many things that we wanted to do at this point. Primarily, we wanted to really engage the industry in the business of training and development. Katulad po ng sinabi kanina ng DOLE secretary, kami po ay nakikipag-ugnayan sa lahat ng mga industry partners, we are activating our industry boards such that we wanted them to really do the curriculum themselves because ito iyong mga kailangan nila. So, para ho talagang maging responsive ang mga programs ng TESDA, we sit down with them, we develop our training regulations with them and we also provide them with the opportunity na sila din po ang mag-implement ng mga programs because they know better than us. So, these are the things that we are doing.

And then apart from these, we would like also to make sure in terms of accessibility mayroon ho kaming guiding principle ngayon under our new Secretary Mangudadatu is saying na “Sa TESDA, Lingap ay Maaasahan.” So we have this TESDA sa barangay program – we will reach all the barangays, the 42,000 barangays for us to be able to train them and skill them kasi po naniniwala po kami na kapag trineyn (train) mo ang isang tao, limang tao pa ang matutulungan mo. For a person to be trained, to be employed you will be able to at least help the five members of the family in a household. So, these are the things that we wanted to do in TESDA, and these are the things that we wanted to really implement for us to respond to the directives of the President.

MS. OSEÑA-PAEZ: Okay. Thank you. Let's move on to Migrant Workers Undersecretary Allones. I'll read the President's SONA: “We are engaging with our partners in the international community to ensure a safe working environment for our countrymen. As we do so, we are also putting in place responsive mechanisms for the social welfare, repatriation and reintegration of our returning OFWs into the Philippine economy.”

Usec, ano po ang mga proyekto ng DMW sa ilalim ng administrasyong Marcos Jr. upang lalong maprotektahan ang ating mga overseas Filipino workers? Anu-ano rin po ang mga nag-aabang na programa para sa mga nagbabalik na OFWs?

DMW USEC. ALLONES: Maraming salamat, Madam Daphne. Bago ko sagutin, nais ko kayong bigyan ng konteksto ng departamento dahil kami yata iyong pinakabata sa magkakapatid dito sa stage.

Ang Department of Migrant Workers po ay fully constituted lang noong Enero ngayong taon. Kami ay bago pero luma dahil pinagsama-sama ang limang ahensiya ng pamahalaan kasama na ang social welfare office ng DSWD, ang NRCO national reintegration program na dati ay nasa pamamahala ng OWWA, kasama rin po ang International Labor Affairs Bureau ng Department of Labor and Employment, ang National Maritime Polytechnic at iyong pinakabuod po, pinakamalaking bahagi ng DMW ay ang dating POEA.

Having said that, ang vision po ng DMW ay maging tahanan ng OFW sa gobyerno at diyan po sa vision na iyan nakabatay din iyong buod ng pinakamaraming reintegration programs na inilatag ng department at alinsunod din po iyan sa suporta namin sa ating AmBisyon 2040: Panatag, matatag at maginhawa ang pamumuhay kung sa umpisa pa lang ay buo ang pamilya.

Iyong trabaho po ng reintegrasyon ay nag-uumpisa bago pa umalis ang OFW so, ang mga programa pong nakalatag ay sumusuporta sa ating adhikain, iyong aspirasyon na sinasabi natin na ang pangangailangan para magtrabaho ay choice at hindi dala ng pangangailangan. Kaya fully supportive kami kay Secretary Benny sa DOLE na ma-achieve ang full employment dahil ang ibig sabihin po noon ay maraming pagkakataon ang ating mga kababayan na hindi na mangibambansa at dito pumili na magtrabaho.

Iyong mga program po sa reintegration para madaling tandaan, mayroong tatlong focus so siguro eh ating—KKK, Ma'am Daphne: Iyong unang K – kabuhayan. So, kasama po rito iyong mga livelihood development assistance, ang pagbibigay po ng mga pa-training, pa-seminar at nakiki-partner din po kami sa Department of Trade and Industry para mabuksan ang kanilang mga kaisipan at maihanda rin sila sa pagbalik dito na may mga nais silang gawing negosyo ay handa sila in terms of capital and in terms of kakahayan – iyong capacity para gawin iyon.

Kasama rin po iyong pangalawang K – ang Kasanayan, Kaalaman at Kahusayan. So, ang partner po namin dito ay TESDA dahil marami po sa ating mga OFWs ay kailangang ma-reskill, kailangang ma-upskill para matugunan ang demand ng ating labor market dito at makapili sila at maging handa sa pagbabalik na puwede na sila dito sa mga ganitong patungkol, na ibang specific na mga jobs na naghihintay sa kanila rito.

Alam ninyo mabanggit ko lang, ang private sector po at social partners ay napaka-supportive sa mga programang ito. Isang success story po ay iyong mga partnership sa mga review centers natin. Marami tayong nurses, teachers at iba pang mga professionals abroad, na hindi passers ng board. So, Sec. Ted, inuumpisahan namin this year, nag-conduct kami ng mga online review – alam ninyo iyong mga OFW sa Middle East, sila iyong nag-top ng mga Nursing exams ng PRC. So, nagpasalamat din po kami sa PRC dahil iyong mga special programs for licensure exams ito po ay pinagpupunyagian naming magawa. Nag-o-online review kami sa mga OFWs at nakaka-impress po na sa kanilang break time iyan po ay ginagawa nating available ang mga online review para po tuluy-tuloy, Sec. Ted. Kung magdesisyon silang umuwi sila ay pasado na sa board.

Kasama rin po dito ang programang tinatawag na SPIMS – “Sa Pinas Ikaw ang Ma'am at Sir.” Marami tayong teachers na non-passers sa LET. So, tinutulungan din po sila para ang DepEd naman, partner namin, may alokasyon sila taun-taon ng mga posisyon sa DepEd na teaching positions na talagang nakalaan sa OFW.

Ngayong taon po ay 1,200 ang mga allocated na positions. So iyong mga bumabalik pong teachers, iyan po ay tinutulungan ng DMW kasama ang DepEd para talaga pong maging teacher sila at ma-practice nila iyong kanilang profession.

Ang pangatlong K ay Kalusugan. Hindi ho lahat ng kuwento ay maganda – may mga umuwi na disturbed, distressed, depressed dahil alam natin gaano kahirap ang mawalay sa pamilya. Nagpapasalamat kami sa DOH, ang atin pong mental health programs sampu ng ating social partners; marami pong mga volunteers – psychologists, mga psychosocial associations and services – sila po iyong partner namin para buo pa rin po, naihahanda talaga na ma-reintegrate sa ating pamayanan ang mga bumabalik na OFW. Sakali man pong mayroon silang problema sa kaisipan, sa pisikal na kalusugan mayroon po tayong OFW Hospital na tuluy-tuloy naman po ang suportang ating Kongreso. Thank you, Ma'am Daphne.

MS. OSEÑA-PAEZ: Thank you so much Undersecretary Allones. Ang daming magagandang programa! Let's move on to CHED now, again in education, higher education. Applauded and well-received, the President assured us that tertiary education in state universities and colleges will remain free for all qualified students, a testament that tertiary education remains a priority of the PPBM administration. Post-pandemic, how is CHED advancing the government's agenda in education? What other programs await the Filipino tertiary learner?

CHED CHAIRPERSON DE VERA III: Thank you, Daphne. The mandate of the Commission on Higher Education under the Marcos administration is to ensure access and equity to quality higher education. So, the first is access. As the President said, we assure everyone that free public higher education will continue so that the close to two million students studying in more than 200 public universities will continue not to pay tuition and miscellaneous fees and we have increased the participation rate in higher education to 41% already, that means 41% of university-aged students are in university. We want to maintain that and even increase that by creating pathways for those who have fallen out of university education to come back.

Equity. We have seen the phenomenon of what we call first-generation graduates, ito po iyong mga estudyante na una sa pamilya nilang nakatuntong sa kolehiyo at nakapagtapos. And that is the reason why we want to focus on equity: To push public universities in particular to consciously increase the number of students coming from public schools, poverty-stricken areas, the children of indigenous communities because we have to bring and target more of them to our universities.

Now, quality education, that's the third component. We want to ensure that all public and private universities maintain quality education standards by ensuring that their curriculum is okay, their teachers are qualified and their programs are implemented correctly. And therefore, by ensuring quality education we want to make our teachers get their advance scholarships so they can finish their masters and PhDs, we want to make sure that the facilities of schools are adequate, we want to make sure that we increase the research output of our faculty members. And the net result of these is when we have this, we have universities that internationalize.

The President mentioned and recognized 52 public and private universities that are now included in international ranking. These are universities that consciously benchmarked with other universities abroad, improved their quality of education and create partnerships with other universities. By doing all of these, the net result is we will continue to produce world class professionals. We have complied with the requirements of EMSA and the EU, so that our seafarers continue to be recognized internationally, all 400,000 of them in ships all over the world. Together with Marina, we will make sure that the quality of maritime education continues to be world-class.

Together with the DOH, we are addressing the nursing problem so that we will continue to produce world-class nurses who will serve in the Philippines or practice their profession all over the world. We want to continue producing world-class doctors, particularly those that will serve in underserved communities in the Philippines by expanding medical education in public universities. We now have 18 state universities and colleges with medical programs. Six of them were approved under this administration so that the scholars there when they graduate and become doctors, serve in underserved areas.

And the last one is we have identified niche programs where we can produce world-class professionals, especially in science, technology, engineering, mathematics, in aircraft maintenance and we have seen opportunities in animation and game development. So we are consciously linking Philippine universities with foreign universities so that their graduates will have both Philippine and international credentials. So, we continue to be world-class.

That's the overall strategy in higher education. And the President has recognized this maritime education, nursing education, world-class universities, and of course, the free higher education. Thank you.

MS. DAPHNE OSEÑA-PAEZ: Thank you, Chairperson De Vera. Let's move on to DILG. This is of course a key department in the local implementation of national government programs. Sa usaping poverty reduction, paano tumutulong ang DILG sa labang ito at paano ninyo ito paiigtingin? What is the general directive of the President to the department when it comes to poverty, Undersecretary Iringan?

DILG USEC. IRINGAN: Thank you very much, Daphne. Magandang hapon po sa ating lahat. Of course, taking our cue from the President and under the leadership of Secretary Benjamin C. Abalos Jr., the DILG continues to provide support to our local government units so that they will be in a better position to provide for the needs of the marginalized and vulnerable sectors in the areas of responsibility.

Please take note that at the department, we do not have projects that directly impact on poverty reduction, we work through local government units by way of the policies and the technical assistance and the capacity development intervention that we provide. Take for example in the infrastructure sector, our department helps facilitate the completion of development projects and we also monitor the proper implementation of all these development projects funded from the Local Government Support Fund (LGSF) which is provided in the General Appropriations Act, yearly.

The LGSF covers the growth equity fund, the financial assistance to local government units, Conditional Matching Grant for provinces for provincial roads. We also have the support of the Barangay Development Program for those barangays which have been previously affected by communist terrorist groups.

So, all in all, DILG provides technical assistance on project development and management particularly on planning, designing, procurement, implementation, and maintenance of all these development projects. These projects would include farm-to-market roads, school buildings, health centers, electrification, livelihood projects, and more importantly water supply and sanitation systems.

So, if you look at it, for example, the roads that are built by local government units would make it easier for the people in the community in the far-flung areas to bring their produce to the market at a lower cost. Therefore, it could also contribute to the lower prices of basic commodities. It will make it easier for students to go to school and more importantly, they will be more inspired to study. I do believe that the solution to poverty is for our children to be properly educated. It will be easier for the people in the community to bring their sick to the hospitals and clinics. So, those are the impacts that the infrastructure sector, which we are helping out with, brings to our respective communities.

So overall, we also help our local government units to implement the community-based management system. This is a total enumeration of old households in the communities, profiling their conditions and situations so that our local government units will have better evidence. It will have an evidence-based planning so that the limited resources that they have will be geared towards the most important programs and projects of the local government unit.

Aside from that, of course, the effort of our Philippine National Police in the maintenance of peace and order, our effort in making sure that our local government unit adheres faithfully to the provisions of the Anti-Red Tape Act and the Ease-of-Doing Business Act would contribute to producing or creating a community or a locality that will be conducive for businesses and industries to thrive and flourish. More businesses and more industries would mean more employment opportunities and more livelihoods for our people. So those are some of the things that our department is doing in order to contribute to poverty reduction. Thank you.

MS. DAPHNE OSEÑA-PAEZ: Thank you and now to weave in all these departments under poverty reduction under the Marcos administration, let's talk to NEDA Secretary Balisacan. Based on recent economic developments, do you think that we are on track toward attaining the targets laid down in the Philippine Development Plan, especially on poverty reduction? What are the necessary changes needed to ensure the country will achieve a 9% poverty rate by 2028?

NEDA SEC. BALISACAN: Thank you, Daphne, and good morning to everyone. First, what's the socioeconomic development agenda? Primarily, it's all about creating jobs, not just more jobs but better-quality jobs so that we could achieve poverty—to reduce poverty to a single-digit level that is at nine percent from 18.7% in 2021 – the latest data available.

Okay, so the question is: Are we on track? I think given the recent developments, economic data that we have seen, we are definitely on track. As you have heard already many times by now, the economy grew at 7.6% last year; in the first quarter of this year, it grew at 6.4% -- that's one among the highest growth rates we can see among the emerging economies in the world and, the envy of our region.

Now, if you look at the jobs' data, we also are reaching—unemployment data continued to decline; the numbers have reached 4.3% by May of this year. That 4.3% is very low actually. It is a kind of unemployment data you see in most developed countries, and that's where the challenges come in because it's not so much—well, the number of jobs, one thing, but the quality of those jobs is another thing. And that's where most of my colleagues here are so much engrossed, are into improving the quality of jobs available; improving the employability of our workers; enhancing the human capital of our people so that they can ... so that the labor market can work effectively, efficiently, where workers are able to match the kind of jobs that are needed by emerging sectors like the internet, the AI and the green economy and so on.

So that's the primary reason why we are so much into going around the world, talking to the business community, to all investors, to get investment coming to the country because without investment, there is no way you can improve the quality of jobs. You need to get those ...to build factories, you need to build plants, equipment, roads, bridges and so on, to be able to employ more people in areas where people can earn decent incomes.

So that's the challenge, Daphne, that—and we are in a hurry because as we keep on saying, many of our neighbors have left us long ago. But now we have the opportunity; as we keep saying, the stars are aligned. And if you miss this time, I don't know where we are going. But I am definitely sure that given this alignment, the governance that we have right now, the popularity of our President, the clarity of our development blueprint, and the kind of, you know, this collaboration that we have between government and the private sector and the academe, I think when we get all our acts together and we are calling whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach, there is no reason that we can fail this time.

MS. DAPHNE OSEÑA-PAEZ: Wow, the stars are aligned! I liked what you said, and we could see that in all the agencies. We've been talking since yesterday with all the different department agencies, and we can really see the multiagency approach, the whole-of-government, whole-of-society approach. And like you mentioned, we have to catch up. And in fact, right now, the President is in Malaysia, doing exactly what all of you have been mentioning here.

Okay. So let's bring it back now again to the Department of Health. The President said in his SONA, we are now re-focusing our health priorities, applying the lessons learned from the pandemic and addressing the weaknesses that it has exposed. Secretary Herbosa, I know you're very, very involved in pandemic issues a few years ago, could you please expound on the statement of the President: What important pillars of the healthcare system are we strengthening and prioritizing?

DOH SEC. HERBOSA: Yes, Daphne, we did learn a lot from the pandemic. It exposed the gaps in our healthcare infrastructure and our healthcare system. And we learned to cope but we need to actually strengthen the health system, and this is the reason I put forth in the agenda for the reform in the Department of Health and the whole health system, our 8-point priority agenda.

We talked about *Bawat Pilipino, Ramdam ang Kalusugan*, which is really primary healthcare and universal healthcare. But we also want to talk about being able to use technology. We also want to talk about making sure that we are addressing any crisis. The Philippines is so disaster-prone; we just have typhoon-hit areas just now, and these people flooded and we need to be able to respond very fast in terms of health needs for these areas that are affected.

We also need to actually talk about disease prevention through *pag-iwas sa sakit*. At this point, the Department of Health now has like the third highest budget among the different agencies. Yet if we focus it all on cure, curative measures, we might be wasting some of this money. We need to talk about health literacy – the people being able to know how to keep themselves healthy which we learned during the pandemic; how to prevent illness; how to eat well, exercise, etc. So *pag-iwas sa sakit* is a very important part.

When we talk about use of technology, not only do we use digital health but I want an agency that would be more efficient in the way it is managed. We're talking about things like asset management systems in the Department of Health because as we get more budget, we have more work and we have to deliver; we have to absorb the money and spend it more efficiently.

So, these are the things we are looking at to improve the healthcare system and strengthen it.

The other thing is very important – and I noticed people love it – is the focus on mental health. I put number six in my priority on mental health and wellness, and the youth of today need our help. It's all about being able to make accessible. It doesn't mean we will have more psychiatrists or more psychologists; what it means by focusing on *ginhawa sa pag-iisip at damdamin* is to be able to help other measures like sports, hobbies, other recreational activities, entertainment and social networks that actually support different age levels or age groups. Whether you are senior citizen, an adolescent or in early life, you will have all this technical support, and I'm sure the other Cabinet secretaries will support me on that.

What's very important also in the pillars is the focus that the President mentioned on our healthcare workers. I think it's very important that now we understand that a good health system is really dependent on how good we take care of our healthcare workers. He even mentioned that we hope that one day, our healthcare workers will not leave the country and serve the Filipinos themselves. They're the best nurses in the world, the best doctors, and if they actually stay and we take care of them, we will be able to provide a better health system for everyone. And he promised also that the health emergency allowances shall be given and it's in the budget; we're just ironing out the efficiency in how to deliver them to each and every health care worker that served in the COVID ward during the past three years.

And lastly, of course, what we've learned is what to do in the next pandemic. We've actually learned how to prepare ourselves from the shock—what happened? We were not ready during this pandemic; it caused a great economic shock – my seatmate here is nodding – and our measures were overcome by fear because we were unprepared. So, I think, the most important thing next is really preparing ourselves – the whole society. And the best thing we learned, Daphne, was with solidarity we're able to get out of government – the whole of society and whole of nation approach really worked – we got 74 million people vaccinated.

The President signed just before the SONA, on the weekend, the lifting of the public health emergency, and that created a new normal for all of us. And I do hope that we can focus on economics, education, social services for the next generation.

Thank you, Daph.

MS. DAPHNE OSEÑA-PAEZ: Thank you, Secretary Herbosa.

Okay, let's move to education again. The MATATAG agenda for basic education has been launched recently. Please tell us more about this program and; how is it beneficial to the welfare of both learners and teachers.

DEPED USEC. POA: Thank you, Ma'am Daphne. The MATATAG agenda is actually the roadmap of the Department of Education for the next five years. So iba siya; hindi siya iyong framework lang. Iyong MATATAG agenda, these are concrete steps; these are commitments, in fact, around 45 commitments that the department wishes to deliver in its vision of really improving the quality of basic education in the country.

So itong MATATAG agenda po na ito, it's actually a mnemonic 'no. The first MA is *Making the curriculum responsive and*; then the TA, is *Taking steps to accelerate basic education facilities*; the second TA would be *Taking good care of our learners*; and the G is *Giving support to our teachers*.

So as you can see, apat na facets ito ng education that we believe have to go hand-in hand to improve the quality of education in the country. That's curriculum; that's basic education facilities; that's taking care, of course, of learners; and of course, most importantly our teachers.

So dito sa curriculum, we have started, in fact, we are about to launch the recalibrated K-10 curriculum 'no, in a few weeks' time, probably around mid-August. So K-10 'no, we need to clarify this, nagkakaroon kasi ng mga haka-haka na wala na iyong K-12. Actually, nandiyan pa iyong K-12, nauna lang pong ma-review iyong K-10 at iyon ang una nating natapos. But the review of the senior high school curriculum, mainly Grades 11 and 12, are underway. We already have a national task force doing that. We hope to complete that within a year's time. So iyan po iyong ating curriculum.

And, of course, we are on learning recovery so we needed to decongest our curriculum, focus more on the foundational or fundamental learning areas like Math, Science, Reading, in fact, sa reading program, mayroon din tayong iro-rollout na mga national reading program at mayroon din tayong ginagawang proyekto ngayon with Sec. Rex of DSWD sa reading.

Now, with the second, the basic education facilities, nabanggit ko nga kanina at nabanggit din ni Sec. Ted that we have to exercise fiscal responsibility. So, of course, in an ideal world, we need to catch up to the shortage in terms of classrooms, but we don't have an infinite amount of budget to do that. So in exercising fiscal responsibility, we need to spread out our resources kaya nga we are also tapping into technology. We will also be launching iyong National Education Portal – also that's a working title – it's going to be an offline-online portal that will be available to teachers, learners and parents where they can already access learning resources.

Pagdating naman po sa larangan ng ating mga learners, Sec. Ted also mentioned the importance of mental health. And that is why we already established a 'Learner Rights and Protection Office' which will look into the mental health issues of our learners and also abuses in our schools. In fact, we already launched our TeleSafe hotline para mayroon na pong direct line iyong ating learners and parents para makapag-complain or makapagbigay sa ating ng mga insidente, and to give us awareness kung ano talaga iyong nangyayari sa ating mga learners sa field.

Further, what's important with learners is also nutrition – parati kasing nakakalimutan iyan. Pero napakahirap mag-aral kapag wala ka sa tamang nutrisyon sa katawan. And that's why we have the school-based feeding program. We are looking—kasi sa ngayon, nasa 120 days for the school year ang ating school-based feeding program, we are looking to expand this, to try and see if we could have it for the entire school year. And that's very important 'no because it hits two birds with one stone, ika nga because aside from giving proper nutrition to our learners, it also encourages our learners to stay in school. So nababawasan din po iyong dropout rates kasi kapag gutom ka, bakit ka papasok, 'di ba, wala ka ring matututunan. So that's a very important program for us.

But lastly, of course, for our teachers, two things 'no: It's really quality and welfare. Pagdating sa quality, we have training programs now. We are working also with different universities to provide training programs and professional development programs for our teachers. Pagdating naman sa welfare, of course, ang isang napakaimportante is iyong benepisyo ng ating mga teachers. So, sa atin, we have, in fact, issued guidelines on the special hazard allowance. Binabaan natin iyong index 'no ng mga schools kung saan nako-consider sila as part of being in hazardous locations. That means that mayroong additional 25% doon sa suweldo ng mga teachers na nagtuturo sa mga schools na ito. By lowering the index, we also increased the number of schools and teachers that will be recipients of what we call the special hazard allowance.

And then ang isa pang malaking reklamo ng ating mga teachers, is iyong napakaraming admin task ng ating mga teachers. That's why in a few weeks' time, we will be issuing iyong ating interim guidelines on reducing kaagaran iyong admin task ng ating mga teachers; ibibigay na natin siya sa mga non-teaching personnel. That's we are also very aggressive in hiring non-teaching personnel in the DepEd.

And lastly, siyempre po 'no, kinakausap din natin ang DOH sa ngayon pagdating sa mga health programs na puwede nating ilatag for free sa ating mga teachers. And we are also talking to GSIS for their benefits, as well as the IBP or the Integrated Bar of the Philippines so that we can provide the proper legal aid sa ating mga teachers, particularly on iyong mga loan obligations po nila.

So basically, the MATATAG agenda is our comprehensive approach towards resolving and addressing the problems of basic education. But as we've all said here, we are all inter-related and it's not DepEd alone who can accomplish all these things. It has to be a whole nation approach that's why our call to action is Bansang Makabata, Batang Makabansa.

Thank you.

MS. DAPHNE OSEÑA-PAEZ: Thank you so much. Wow, MATATAG agenda for basic education, very nice. Thank you.

Okay, let's move on to DMW again, Migrant Workers, Undersecretary Allones. The DMW app has been recently launched. What are the services and benefits of this new app? And what are the safeguards put in place to ensure that information and data are protected?

DMW USEC. ALLONES: Thank you again, Daphne.

At the outset, this effort we embark on, in response to the call of the President in last year's SONA, and last Monday, he reiterated it – if I may paraphrase him – he said that digitalization is our imperative today, not tomorrow or in the next few days but it's really today. And that's why six days ago, what we launched actually is the OFW Pass. This is equivalent to the Overseas Employment Certificate which used to be a paper form; so, this is the digitalized version. And this allows the outgoing Overseas Filipino Worker to be able to not anymore lineup physically but just go online and fill in the requirements and he or she gets a digital version on the mobile phone for that.

I said, this is just part and parcel of the soon-to-be more comprehensive DMW app. Sabi ni Secretary Toots Ople, kung ang gusali namin sa Ortigas ay tahanan ng OFW, iyong DMW app ay online tahanan ng mga OFWs. And when we embark on the enhancement of the app and the completion of the more comprehensive app for DMW, that seeks to provide additional services like iyong mga gateway to online payments pati iyong pagpapadala ng pera sa mga pamilya rito, kasama na rin iyong mga magulang ng OFW, nagtyu-tutor sa mga anak. Buti nga mayroon nang ganiyan ngayon eh, noong [unang] panahon talagang wala, noong umpisa ng overseas employment! So ngayon, Sec. Ted, kahit nandoon sila sa abroad, nagtyu-tutor. So mayroon din tayong ia-upload na mga materials doon in partnership with many other agencies.

So that's the strategic direction of the app for now, it's the OFW Pass. And I mentioned, Ms. Daphne, that day six ngayon ng pilot testing. It's being rolled out in ten countries that have the most number of OFWs around the world and, of course, here in the Philippines. Our team is gathering and consolidating all the feedback in terms of the user-friendliness.

On the second question of security, we are thankful to the Department of ICT, and we have pala an organization called the Philippine Cybersecurity Response Team (CRT). So, they have supported us in ensuring that the hardware, software and including our people are prepared to protect data because we want to make sure that the features and the use of the app would be compliant with our data privacy law and that safeguards are equally in place to assure our users that their information will not be compromised.

Thank you.

MS. DAPHNE OSEÑA-PAEZ: Thank you so much. Maraming salamat sa ating mga panelist. Malawak ang usapin ng kahirapan, at ang buong puwersang pagtutulungan ng ating mga ahensiya sa poverty reduction cluster ang susi sa pagpapatupad ng mga direktiba ni Pangulong Ferdinand Marcos Jr. para s Bagong Pilipinas.

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