

Food Transfers and Social Distancing: Evidence from the Bayan Bayanihan Program in the Philippines¹

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¹This paper was prepared with the support the Asian Development Bank's (ADB) Technical Assistance (TA) 6926: Key Indicators for Asia and the Pacific 2021-2023 Subproject 3. It serves as a follow-up study to the concluded ADB TA 9356, which focused on the use of innovative data analytics, particularly machine learning algorithms, for population and poverty data disaggregation. We thank Kirill Borusyak, Manny Jimenez, Aiko Kikkawa, and Kazushi Takahashi for their helpful comments and for Charlene Camarillo Belgira for superb research assistance. We gratefully acknowledge financial support from the Asian Development Bank and the Japan Society of Promotion of Sciences (Grant No. 22K21341). The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views and policies of ADB or its Board of Governors or the governments they represent.

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Abstract

This paper examines whether and how a well-targeted in-kind food transfer program implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic helped households comply with social distancing by enabling them to stay at home. While cash transfers are often viewed as the benchmark because they maximize household choice, policymakers frequently rely on in-kind assistance when they prioritize “merit goods” (e.g., nutrition), face concerns about household decision-making, or seek implicit price insurance and self-targeting. We study the Philippine government’s Bayan Bayanihan food relief program during the early phase of COVID-19 pandemic, which used satellite-based poverty maps to target delivery during the pandemic. We link administrative targeting information to barangay-level daily origin–destination mobile phone data from a major telecommunications operator, measuring outward, inward, and within-community mobility across 2,162 communities over 274 days surrounding the outbreak. Because mobility mechanically scales with population size and may do so nonlinearly, we work with log and per-capita mobility measures so that estimated effects can be interpreted as proportional changes and are comparable across differently sized communities. Using staggered difference-in-differences designs, we find that greater program coverage among poor households is associated with lower mobility, consistent with the program relaxing short-run constraints and helping families remain at home. Overall, the results highlight an unknown benefit of in-kind transfers in crises: beyond consumption smoothing, they can facilitate public-health compliance by reducing the need for outside movement.

Keywords: Social protection; COVID-19; social distancing; mobility; big data

JEL: D04, I10, O12