


# *Pakikipagkapwa-tao* as a mode of inter-religious dialogue in the contemporary Philippines during the COVID-19 pandemic

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The study brought to the fore the issue of acute hunger and food insecurity in Philippine society during the COVID-19 pandemic. It utilised Filipino culture and the Catholic Church's *fidei depositum* as a framework to unravel the forms of inter-religious dialogue in the country. The study was qualitative research that used a case study as it analysed inter-religious dialogue, particularly the dialogue of life and action among Filipinos during the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic. In the Philippine context, dialogue takes the form of a shared life and common action. Also, the Filipino ideal of *pakikipagkapwa-tao* [having positive and sincere relations with one's brethren] promotes positive inter-religious relations and social cohesion. The author argued that although religion compelled many believers to help the needy, it is *pakikipagkapwa-tao* that undergirds the care and concern of many Filipinos to those who are suffering. *Pakikipagkapwa-tao* enabled cordial cooperation between religious institutions and individuals, which promoted the physical well-being of the poor.

**Contribution:** This study contributed to a deeper understanding of interfaith dialogue and relations in the contemporary Philippines.

**Keywords:** Fellowship; COVID-19 pandemic; solidarity; neighbours; food insecurity.

## Introduction

Religion is a strong influence on the members of faith communities. It moves the people to practise their faith and contribute to meaning making. In order to have peaceful co-existence among the members of different religions, dialogue is necessary. Tran (2018:210) pointed out that the prevalence of religious diversity indicates that a homogeneous understanding of faith or even God is untenable. In the Roman Catholic perspective, Jesus is hidden in other religious traditions, and Catholics are encouraged to engage in dialogue and collaborate with other faiths (Catholic Church 1994:1). The intentional encounter and interaction among different religions constitute inter-religious dialogue. Through interfaith dialogue, each faith group can make its unique contribution to peaceful co-existence that fosters social solidarity (United States Institute of Peace 2004:2). A broad range of inter-religious dialogue practices and initiatives exists. However, the Pontifical Council for Inter-religious Dialogue (1991:42) suggests four models of inter-religious dialogue in the encyclical *Dialogue and Proclamation*. These models are the following:

- 'The *dialogue of life*, where people strive to live in an open and neighborly spirit, sharing their joys and sorrows, human problems, and preoccupations'.
- 'The *dialogue of action*, in which Christians and others collaborate for people's integral development and liberation'.
- 'The *dialogue of theological exchange*, where specialists seek to deepen their understanding of their respective religious heritages and to appreciate each other's spiritual values'.
- 'The *dialogue of religious experience*, where persons, rooted in their religious traditions, share their spiritual riches, such as prayer and contemplation, faith, and ways of searching for God or the Absolute'.

The Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) has embraced inter-religious dialogue as one of the pillars of Christian mission in the region, along with dialogue with the poor and dialogue with Asia's cultures (Tran 2018:213). The inter-religious encounter (Phan 2018) requires:

Sincere openness of mind and heart, generous hospitality toward the other, and a genuine willingness to adapt and change. Moreover, the dialogue must speak truth to power and maintain the integrity of creation. (p. xviii)

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The foremost goal of inter-religious dialogue is to build. However, unity cannot exist if people are hungry. Conflicts and miscommunication can occur if food insecurity affects the members of the community.

In the Philippines, physical and economic access to food has disrupted the food system, especially during the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic. According to Angeles-Agdeppa et al. (2022:213), community quarantines and social distancing have affected two-thirds of Filipino households, while the poorest were 1.7 times more likely to experience severe food insecurity. Although various factors are responsible for food insecurity, this article examines the impact of an intrusive and drastic COVID-19 mitigation measure on peoples' acute hunger. It utilises the Filipino culture of *pakikipagkapwa-tao* which promotes positive inter-religious relations and social cohesion. This study contends that during a protracted trial of human existence, the dialogue of life and action and positive inter-religious relations can help save human lives.

This article specifically answers the following questions:

- How do different religious groups in the Philippines address the issue of hunger?
- How did the enhanced community quarantine (ECQ) worsen food insecurity among Filipinos?
- How did religious institutions and individuals engage in the 'dialogue of life' and 'dialogue of action' to relieve the poor of acute hunger?
- How can '*pakikipagkapwa-tao*' be a mode of inter-religious dialogue in the Philippines?

## Methods and objectives

This article is a qualitative study. It utilises a case study which analysed inter-religious dialogue, particularly the dialogue of life and action among Filipinos during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data were collected through observation and written accounts of Filipinos who dealt with acute hunger and food insecurity through shared life and common action. Content analysis was used in evaluating the data by examining the personal observations and written experiences of the people. Moreover, this article privileges the Filipino construct *pakikipagkapwa-tao* [having good and sincere relations with one's brethren] as a mode of inter-religious dialogue. Specifically, the author highlights the food insecurity among Filipinos during the ECQ and elucidates the subsequent response of religious and secular actors. Using the Christian perspective, the researcher utilises culture and the Roman Catholic Church's *fidei depositum* [sacred deposit of faith] (Catholic Church 1994:1) as an eye lens to unravel the Filipino notion of *pakikipagkapwa-tao* as a mode of inter-religious dialogue. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of interfaith dialogue and relations in the contemporary Philippines.

Accordingly, the article will proceed as follows. Firstly, the author will elucidate the religious diversity, the salience of religion and the role of religious institutions in combating

hunger in Philippine society. Secondly, the author will report on the impact of ECQ on food security among Filipinos. Thirdly, the author will explicate the dialogue of life and action between institutions and individuals in response to acute hunger during the COVID-19 pandemic. Fourthly, the author will offer *pakikipagkapwa* as a mode of inter-religious dialogue that fosters a 'neighbourly spirit' and advances people's integral development.

## Results and discussion

### Religious diversity, the salience of religion and the role of religious institutions in combating hunger in Philippine society

The existence of different religions in the Philippines, the prominence of faith for many Filipinos, and the freedom to practise their faith indicate a religious and faith-diverse society. Around 81% of 110 million Filipinos identify as Roman Catholic (World Population Review 2022). Other Christian organisations in the country are:

Seventh-day Adventists, United Church of Christ, United Methodists, Episcopal Church in the Philippines, Bible Baptist Church, other Protestant churches, Jehovah's Witnesses, and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, *Iglesia ni Cristo* (Church of Christ), Philippine Independent Church (Aglipayan), Members Church of God International, the Kingdom of Jesus Christ, and the Name Above Every Name. (United States Department of State 2019:2)

Also, approximately 6% of Filipinos are Muslims. Furthermore, Chinese Buddhism and Hinduism are active in the religious sphere (Miller 2022:1). The Beit Yaacov Synagogue and the Khalsa Diwan Sikh Temple are also present in the capital of the country. Currently, there are also religious denominations established and headed by members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer (LGBTQ) community, namely the Metropolitan Community Church, the Order of St Aelred and *Ekklesia Tou Theou* (Church of God) (USAID, UNDP 2014:28). Moreover, there are around 14–17m indigenous peoples (IPs) who practise autochthonous religions that belong to 110 ethnolinguistic groups. The IPs include, but are not limited to, the Cordilleran people, Lumad, Alangan and Hanunoo-Mangyan. They are mainly concentrated in Northern Luzon and Mindanao, with some groups in the Visayas area (United Nations Development Programme 2010:1).

Empirical studies reveal that religion is integral in the life of many Filipinos. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many Filipino Catholics believed that faith is crucial in the fight against virulent disease (Cacho & Del Castillo 2022:1). Another study on the salience of religion reveals that many Filipino Catholic youths:

[S]trongly identify with the [Roman] Catholic Church, agree with the central tenets of Catholicism, regularly participate in the communal rituals and perform private religious activities, and strongly feel the presence of God. (Catholic Bishops Conference of the Philippines-Episcopal Commission on Youth [CBCP-ECY] & Catholic Educational Association of the Philippines [CEAP] 2014:133)

The results of the CBCP-ECY and CEAP (2014) study are in parallel with the findings of Del Castillo et al. (2020:5). The researchers assert that religion is highly relevant in the lives of many Filipino Catholic youths. In another study involving youths professing non-Christian religions, Del Castillo et al. (2021:6) found that many of the informants are 'highly religious'. They lead a deeply religious life, and their faith likely plays a significant role in their daily lives.

In Mindanao, Macapagal, Montiel and Canuday (2018:9) investigated the salience of religion among the Moro people (native Muslim inhabitants of the Philippines). The study revealed that Islam is the essence of a Mindanao Muslim's identity. For this reason, 'the salience of their religious identity may be a unifying factor in a conflict-ridden context in Mindanao'.

Religion also provides the impetus for Filipinos to perform charitable acts. It can also serve as a coping resource in times of crisis. Del Castillo and Alino (2020) investigated the religious coping of select Filipino Catholic youths. The researchers found out that during trials of human existence, many Filipino Catholic youths often look for ways in which God can strengthen them, seek God's love and care and develop a deeper relationship with God. In brief, religious beliefs influence many Filipinos' subjective experiences and behaviours.

Various religions view feeding the hungry as a moral obligation, an act of love towards neighbours. For instance, Christians believe that humans must work together to 'eradicate hunger, promote adequate nutrition, and strive toward just and sustainable food systems' (Tveit 2016:5). By exercising goodwill, all human persons can have sustainable food, proper nutrition and food security (Turkson 2016:3). From the Islamic perspective, those who provide for the needy will enter paradise (Bin & Shaykh 2016:4). From the Jewish standpoint, humanity constitutes one body. As such, 'the saving of one human life is the saving of the whole world and that the destruction of one human being is the destruction of the whole world' (Soetendorp 2016:9). From a Buddhist perspective, 'human beings must come together in solidarity and work towards reforming our institutions toward a more just, equitable, global economic system' (Sivaraksa 2016:10). Lastly, from a Hindu point of view, all creation of the transcendent is one universal family. Hence, 'it is our sacred responsibility to ensure that no one sleeps hungry' (Saraswati 2016:12). On the whole, religions differ on many issues; yet, they are on the same side of the fence when fighting hunger.

Many religious and nonreligious people demonstrate the prosocial behaviour of feeding the hungry. While doctrine grounds a religious person's prosociality, compassion drives less-religious individuals to help others. Compassion – the sensitivity to suffering that comes with a desire or commitment to alleviate it (Mantzios, Rentzelas & Egan 2015:2) – is made palpable by emergency food programmes. For instance, the food pantries, soup kitchens and some

organisations like the Little Free Pantry Movement and Foodbank address food insecurity (Espartinez 2021:2). By and large, the emergency food programmes embody some core values and facilitate access to a basic need. Compassion can have powerful benefits on social relationships. Individuals who acknowledge that their sufferings are shared with other humans show empathic concern and improved outgroup attitudes. Compassion can strengthen relationships and solidarity among community members. In a religiously diverse society, compassion can foster the breakdown of religious boundaries.

In the Philippines, many religious institutions and organisations show compassion to the needy. For instance, Caritas Manila is the leading social action and community service organisation of the Catholic Church in this predominantly Christian country. One of its programmes, Caritas Damayan (compassion for others), provides mental health care services, rehabilitation, intervention programmes, emergency responses and disaster management to needy Filipinos (Caritas Manila 2022). An important ministry of Caritas Damayan is the integrated nutrition programme Hapag-Asa or Table of Hope, which feeds numerous hungry and malnourished children throughout the country (Patinio 2019).

Other religious groups also perform benevolent acts to the poor and hungry. These include, but are not limited to, the indigenous Christian church Iglesia ni Cristo [Church of Christ], whose outreach programme called Lingap sa Mamamayan [Aid to Humanity] contributes to the welfare of those in need, irrespective of their religious affiliations. Also, Islamic Relief Worldwide works closely in Mindanao to empower the poor and provide food packs to the region's most vulnerable communities (Islamic Relief World 2016). Moreover, the Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation has provided food relief for people in impoverished areas in the country (Buddhist Tzu Chi Foundation 2015). Furthermore, the Khalsa Diwan Sikh Temple's *langar* [community kitchen] provides free meals to people regardless of gender, religion or race. Several other religious organisations engage in emergency relief and ongoing sustainability efforts to disaster-stricken provinces in the country.

### Impact of enhanced community quarantine on food security among Filipinos

Acute hunger and severe food insecurity are global problems. Regrettably, the economic consequences of the pandemic and quarantine protocols that affected the food supply chain made it even more difficult for millions of people to access food. Extreme hunger has harmful physiological and psychological effects on human beings. Specifically, unfulfilled hunger contributes to poor health outcomes, impaired psychosocial functioning and low enthusiasm for learning. Hence, satisfying one's homeostasis needs is essential to survival, development and self-actualisation (Maslow 1943). On the whole, chronic food deprivation interferes with integral human development because it negatively affects entire populations' health, education, economic development and social advancement.

On 22 January 2020, the first COVID-19 case was detected in the Philippines (Edrada et al. 2020:1). To assist the people during the strict community quarantines, the Senate and House of Representatives of the Philippines enacted *Republic Act (RA) 11469 (Bayanihan to Heal As One Act)*. The Filipino term *bayanihan* refers to 'help that comes from the community and the strength of collective action' (Bankoff 2020:468). The RA 11469 enforces national policies that aim to curb the transmission of the virulent disease and prevent the long-term negative impacts of the pandemic on Filipinos' health, safety and security (Official Gazette of the Republic of the Philippines 2020). Subsequently, President Rodrigo Duterte signed Executive Order No. 112 on 30 April 2020, allowing for the implementation of ECQ and general community quarantine (GCQ) in the country (Gita-Carlos 2020). Accordingly, the Inter-Agency Task Force for the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (2020) closed nonessential shops and businesses, suspended mass transportation systems and restricted the land, air and sea travel during the ECQ and GCQ.

The loss of jobs and mobility restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated hunger and food insecurity. According to a survey by Social Weather Stations (2020), approximately 30.7% of 109m Filipinos experienced involuntary hunger in September 2020. Another study conducted by the Department of Science and Technology (2020) reported that around 62.1% of Filipino families have suffered from moderate to severe food insecurity from 03 November 2020 to 03 December 2020. Notably, food insecurity is highest in families with children and pregnant women, compared to households without such members. The respondents attributed their food insecurity to the lack of money, limited public transportation, loss of employment and limited access to food stores. Hunger and poor nutrition, especially among Filipino children, can present a disastrous future for the country because it can hinder the wholistic development of the people, especially the young in the society.

The national government made efforts to ease vulnerable populations' living conditions by providing financial assistance and food aid. However, many complained that the *ayuda* [monetary support] amounting to 1000 pesos (approximately 19 US dollars) per person during the ECQ was not enough (Lalu 2021:1). Also, the commonly distributed items inside food packs have insufficient nutrients to support and maintain health. Consequently, many Filipinos perceived that the government's social amelioration programme was ineffective (Espartinez 2021:2).

### Dialogue of life and action between institutions and individuals in response to the issue of acute hunger

Distressingly, the prohibition of mass gatherings and implementation of social distancing measures during the ECQ halted the care programmes of some religious groups. Furthermore, the opportunity for charitable organisations to

feed the hungry became limited when Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte warned that lockdown violators would be shot dead (CBS News 2020). The spectre of starvation haunted many Filipinos. Most strikingly, the Catholic priest Pilario (2021) narrates a congregant telling him:

They can imprison me if they want. I am not afraid. Neither of the police nor COVID. What I am afraid of is when my small children die of hunger! (n.p.)

In solidarity with the poor, Ana Patricia Non (a 26-year-old Filipino entrepreneur) filled a small bamboo cart with food staples, vegetables and canned goods and placed it at Maginhawa Street, Quezon City (Espartinez 2021:2). The street community pantry intends to relieve the needy from the anguish of hunger, harness the *bayanihan* spirit in the community, and serve as an impetus for *pakikipagkapwatao*. The pantry is guided by the tenet *Magbigay ayon sa kakayahan; kumuha batay sa pangangailangan* [Give what you can; take what you need] (Del Castillo 2021:1). Describing the ethos of the community pantry, (CNN Philippines 2021) said:

*Lagi kong naiisip, matagal na itong nasa puso natin. Matagal na natin itong kailangan. Kailangan lang ng isang parang mitsa para magtuloy tuloy siya. Aware naman lahat kung gaano kahirap yung pandemic. Kailangan lang nating magtulungan – yung pakikipagkapwatao. [I have always believed that helping those in need is very significant to us Filipinos. The poor and hungry have needed the community pantry for quite some time now. We just need a single spark to start the movement. We are all suffering from this pandemic. We need to help one another and have sincere relations with our fellowmen]. (pp. 7:31–7:50, [author's own translation])*

Soon afterwards, around 350 community pantries emerged in other regions of the country (Cabato 2021). The CBCP described the grassroots-initiated emergency food programme as one way of spreading generosity and practising *bayanihan*. In addition to Caritas Manila's (2022) 'Kindness Stations', the CBCP encouraged all Catholic parishes to set up their community pantries. Various churches belonging to the United Methodist Church also put up community pantries to show compassion and solidarity. The LGBTQ organisation *Bahaghari* [rainbow] also launched a community pantry in Tatalon, Quezon City (Severo 2021). In Mindanao, students and youth organisations from the University of the Philippines also established a community pantry to provide food for people living near the campus (Doctor 2021). In Cagayan de Oro, restaurateur Norkhalila Mae Mambuay-Campong founded a *halal* [permissible food according to Islamic law] community pantry. However, she (Gomez 2021) clarified:

The *halal* community pantry is for everyone in need, Muslims and non-Muslims. There's an emphasis on *halal* so that Muslims can freely get supplies without fear of getting *haram* (forbidden) food. (n.p.)

The community pantries initiatives by various religious organisations play a vital role in public health during the COVID-19 pandemic. These activities sustain the community members, especially the poor from different religious backgrounds. Both institutions and individuals work

together for the common good which strengthens, supports and mobilises collaboration to address the gaps during the health crisis (Del Castillo & Maravilla 2021).

### **Pakikipagkapwa as a mode of inter-religious dialogue that fosters a 'neighbourly spirit' and advances people's integral development**

Undoubtedly, religion has driven many Filipinos to address the issue of hunger during the ECQ. However, the generosity of many secular individuals and organisations indicates that charity surpasses religious boundaries. Contemporary culture – 'the practices and resources mediated and used in everyday life to make sense of being and living in this world' (Ross & Bevans 2015:149) – significantly influences how people interact with others and the society at large.

Various interfaith dialogue activities have been noted as a religious response to care for the people, especially during the pandemic. Different religious groups discussed in a forum the role of faith-inspired organisations to respond to the global health crisis. The participants shared their thoughts on the crucial role of interfaith partners to provide relief for communities who are suffering. Likewise, the World Council of Churches (2020:1–20) published a document offering a Christian basis for inter-religious unity that serves the fragile world that is wounded in different aspects.

A recent study on *pakikipagkapwa* [fellowship] shows that select Filipino Christians practised neighbourly spirit towards the religious others (Canete & Del Castillo 2022). At the onset of the pandemic, various dialogues of theological exchange have been engaged in by different faith groups such as Christians, Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Jews, Jains, agnostics and atheists. This had been manifested in the Day of Prayer for Humanity (Vatican News 2020). As brothers and sisters from different faith traditions, people joined together in prayer to the divine. Believers of different traditions prayed, fasted and performed works of charity together in order to implore God for protection and divine intervention. In some countries, as in the Philippines, religious organisations invited people of all religions to join the 'Walk for Life' (Gomes 2020). It demonstrated the solidarity of different people in upholding the dignity of life. Moreover, it also fostered harmonious relationships among members of different faith communities and traditions. The value of *pakikipagkapwa tao* has become the vessel of peaceful co-existence among people of different faiths and beliefs (Canete & Del Castillo 2022).

An essential part of Filipino culture is the notion of *kapwa*. The Filipino term *kapwa* is translated into English as 'neighbour'. However, in Filipino indigenous psychology, *kapwa* is conceptualised as the 'recognition of shared identity, an inner self shared with others' (Enriquez 2004:5). It is *kapwa* that 'bridges the deepest recess of a person with anyone outside him or herself – even total strangers' (De Guia 2013:180). As such, *kapwa* 'reflects a perspective

that links (includes) people rather than separates (excludes) them from each other' (Macaraan 2019:108). Throughout the Philippines, *kapwa* permeates every ethnolinguistic and religious group. A community that is so connected and committed to one another that they function as one strongly manifests the value of *kapwa* (Desai 2016:36). '*Kapwa* – the basis of Filipino sense of interpersonalism – is expressed in *pakikipagkapwa-tao*' (Aguas 2022:18).

The Filipino proverb *Ang sakit ng kalingkingan, damdam ng buong katawan* ['The entire body feels the pain of the little finger'] also points to *pakikipagkapwa-tao*. The concern for the welfare of the Other encompasses *pagtutunguhan* [interaction]. *Pakikipagkapwa-tao* and *pagtutunguhan* are evinced by Filipinos who sensed the hunger of the poor and generously supported the community pantries. Indeed, if the plight of the poor is not alleviated, the social fabric will fray and weaken over time. From the perspective of *pakikipagkapwa-tao* and *pagtutunguhan*, the community pantries reveal that every Filipino is:

- Expected to regard other members of the community with respect
- Involved in the problems faced by the community and is part of the solution
- Expected to show concern for others.

*Pakikipagkapwa-tao* resonates deeply with Filipino Christians. The Christian scriptures teach that whatever one does to others – one's *kapwa* – they also do to Jesus (cf. Mt 25):

[F]or I was hungry, and you gave me food, I was thirsty, and you gave me something to drink, Truly, I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me. (vv. 34–36, 40)

Consequently, *pakikipagkapwa-tao* requires that persons respect and value the dignity of the Other and build meaningful relationships with them. In relating with religious Others, John Paul II (1998) said:

The attitude of the Church and individual Christians towards other religions is marked by sincere respect, profound sympathy, and, when possible and appropriate, cordial collaboration. 'By dialogue, we let God be present in our midst; for as we open ourselves in dialogue to one another, we also open ourselves to God.' (p. 3)

In the same vein, Francis (2015) mentioned:

The dialogue [*must*] be open and respectful and thus prove fruitful. Mutual respect is the condition and, at the same time, the aim of interreligious dialogue: respecting others' right to life, to physical integrity, to fundamental freedoms, namely freedom of conscience, of thought, of expression, and religion. (p. 5)

From a Christian perspective, the dialogue of life and action between secular and religious actors during the COVID-19 pandemic disclosed God's loving-kindness to many suffering Filipinos. When a person experiences the suffering of the 'Other', they recognise that God, although hidden in

the world, can be found in the face of the victim (Boeve 2022:9). *Pakikipagkapwa-tao* can also be conceptualised as 'love of neighbour' – central to many religious traditions. Among Christians, a good neighbour shows compassion and helps those in need (Lk 10:25–37). Giving food to the hungry is a corporal work of mercy (Catholic Church 1994:2447). *Pakikipagkapwa-tao* is the embodying spirit that compelled grassroots Filipinos, different religious institutions and nonreligious actors to provide for the needy during the ECQ.

## Conclusion

Many Filipinos consider their brethren to be a part of themselves, as evinced by the emergency food programmes during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the Philippine society, it is *pakikipagkapwa-tao* that undergirds positive interpersonal relations that is critical to social cohesion. Moreover, *pakikipagkapwa-tao* can be a mode of inter-religious dialogue, particularly in the discourse of life and action. *Pakikipagkapwa-tao* enabled cordial cooperation between religious institutions and individuals (whether believers or not), which promoted the physical well-being of the poor. More importantly, by participating in the dialogue of life and action, the different religious traditions have demonstrated that all strive toward integral human development. This is putting one's faith in action by serving the poor and the marginalised. Hence, *pakikipagkapwa-tao* can facilitate harmonious inter-religious relationships towards flourishing human life.

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The author has declared that no competing interest exists.

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F.d.C. is the sole author of this article.

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### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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