



UNVEILING THE UNTOLD STORIES OF THE BANANA LOCAL FARMERS AMID THE TIME OF PANDEMIC: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

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Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.36713/epra15878>

DOI No: 10.36713/epra15878

ABSTRACT-----

The purpose of this qualitative study in a phenomenological approach was to unveil the untold stories of the diverse banana local farmers amid COVID-19 pandemic in Kapalong, Davao del Norte. It aimed to find out the reason why they got involved in that situation, the challenges they had experienced, how they coped with these challenges and their insights regarding their immense situations. The participants of the study were the fourteen (14) banana local farmers in Kapalong, Davao del Norte, Philippines. The data collection methods used and employed in the study were in-depth interview and focus group discussion. By which, after collecting data, it was gathered and found that the participants have experienced difficulties in banana farming during pandemic time such as dealing with agricultural input prices, dealing with travel restrictions, problems on banana packing due to curfew hours and dealing with problems on Fusarium wilt. The findings also revealed that banana local farmers amidst COVID-19 pandemic were maintaining optimism, drawing strength from one's family and starting early the banana packing process. Finally, the different insights of banana local farmers amidst COVID-19 pandemic were revealed such as lack of government support to farmers, staying disciplined at work, importance of financial literacy during this time and importance of hard work in these trying times.

KEYWORDS: *Banana local farmers, COVID-19 pandemic, qualitative study, phenomenology, Philippines.*

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global health emergency that is already wreaking havoc on the global economy, both directly and indirectly, because of the spread of the disease. The food and agriculture industries are also feeling the effects. While food supplies have held up well so far, the precautions put in place to restrict the virus' spread are beginning to affect the delivery of agro-food items to markets and consumers, both within and across borders, in many nations. Farmers are accustomed to responding to changing conditions, whether they're droughts, floods, or pest infestations. Overcoming unforeseeable obstacles is part of the work, but the pandemic is posing a new set of challenges for those who farm the food that people rely on. Many countries, particularly those with periods of peak seasonal labor demand or labor-intensive industries, are experiencing labor shortages due to restrictions on people's migration across borders and lockdowns (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2020).

In Argentina, farmers suffer supply chain disruptions that have a greater impact on markets where products are perishable, such as fruit and vegetables. Lacking the ability to quickly transport food from the field to customers can result in large amounts of food loss and wastage, putting many farmers at risk. Farmers and farm laborers have mental health issues as well. Long periods of isolation in distant places are normal in farming, but the uncertainty about when travel restrictions will be lifted presents a new set of challenges for isolated workforces (Bayer, 2021).



In the Philippines, Filipino farm workers, particularly in the Cagayan Valley, are struggling after a year of lockdowns and catastrophes that decimated crops and revenue. The weight of their hardship is being borne by consumers in the form of rising food prices and hunger. Farmers were not contacted to discuss their needs. As a result of mobility restrictions or labor shortages, many produce farmers were unable to tend to their crops and were forced to abandon them in the fields (Aspinwall, 2021).

It is undeniable that the emergence of COVID-19 affects all people in the world including farmers. It is clearly stated in the above citations that the pandemic is an emergent and observable issue at present. With that, it is now in this premise that there is an urgent need to conduct this study to investigate the problem and build worthwhile solution and valuable information that is beneficial to the different entities. This is because COVID-19 is also a problem for the local farmers in the province of Davao del Norte. The majority of which are cultivated by small producers. Many corporate farms such as TADECO, SUMIFRU, and DOLE are trying hard to maintain their crops free of the threat of pandemic by building and providing quarantine stations at all points of entry and exit.

Also, the researchers have not found a study that specifically discusses the qualitative investigation into the untold stories of local farmers on their quest amidst the pandemic. Moreover, this study will provide relevant concepts that are possibly useful in the academe, particularly in the field of agriculture. The study will examine the experiences of local farmers in producing crops, especially during this time of pandemic. In addition, the study has an immense social impact as the findings and results of the study are a good source of information among many entities including the Department of Agriculture, local farmers, producers, and corporate agricultural companies. They may use the findings in crafting and developing guidelines and protocols to combat the emergence of COVID-19 and its effect in the agriculture sector. Also, this may be used as springboard in helping the different farmers especially in budget allocation as additional source for their crop maintenance.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS/OBJECTIVES

This study determined the untold stories of the Banana Local Farmers amidst COVID-19 Pandemic. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the experiences of the banana local farmers in the time of pandemic?
2. What are the coping mechanism of the banana local farmers amidst the Pandemic?
3. What are the insight of the banana local farmers to co farmers and with others in general?

METHODOLOGY

This study is a qualitative study in a phenomenological approach. As defined, qualitative research entails gathering and evaluating non-numerical data, such as interviews, to understand and explain concepts and experiences. It guides and supports the formulation of hypotheses by conducting in-depth research on small groups of people (Government Design Service Manual, 2016). The study is qualitative as it includes the lived accounts and experiences of the local banana farmers in the emergence of COVID-19 making it under the concept of a phenomenological study.

In addition, in this study, the participants came from the locality of Kapalong. To be more specific, the participants were the banana local farmers from Kapalong, Davao del Norte. The local farmers who participated were certified farmers who have been residents of Kapalong for years and are producing crops, specifically bananas. In the selection of the participants, there were representations of local banana farmers aged 30 and up, both male and female, who have cultivated at least 1 hectare of farmland in the previous two years. A purposive sampling was used in the selection of the research participants by which, in total, 14 farmers were interviewed for the study. Seven for in-depth interviews, and the remaining seven for focus group discussions.

In the data analysis, the researchers used thematic analysis to identify the emerging themes that emerged from the study which was coming from the responses of the participants. It was done by clustering responses which shared the same thought and idea then was categorized based on the shared emerging theme with an assigned code and assigned theme. To check the credibility of the theme, the assigned themes from the thematic analysis was checked and further validated by experts.



RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Research Question No.1: Lived experiences of Banana local farmers in the time of pandemic.

To answer this research question, in-depth interviews and focus group discussion were conducted with the informants and participants. Several sub-questions are asked to elicit their concept regarding their experiences as banana local farmers in Kapalong amidst the pandemic. The major themes and core of ideas for research question number 1 were presented in Table 1. Participants had their responses to their own experiences. From the answers of the participants, four major themes emerged: (1) dealing with rising agricultural input prices; (2) dealing with travel restrictions; (3) problems on banana packing due to curfew hours; and (4) dealing with problems on Fusarium wilt.

Table 1
Themes and Core Ideas on the Experiences of Banana Local Farmers in the time of Pandemic

EMERGING THEMES	SAMPLE STATEMENTS
<p>Dealing with rising agricultural input prices</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “The price of fertilizer is still rising because of this pandemic. On the other hand, overpricing of chemicals and materials makes the bananas’ pricing unstable.” (IDI-01) ✓ “Agricultural inputs are so expensive, and all are affected. At that time, our boss is suffering from bankruptcy.” (IDI-05) ✓ “The problem is that the fertilizer increases its price almost three times from its original price.” (FGD-05) ✓ “It was way better before the pandemic because the expenses from our banana farm were not that expensive, but now we limit our fertilizer purchases because of the threefold price increase.” (FGD-07)
<p>Dealing with travel restrictions</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “The negative effect of this pandemic is the lockdown. It is hard for us to travel due to lack of documents like QR codes and other stuff.” (IDI-04) ✓ “This pandemic has had a tremendous impact on farmers who were trying hard to recover their areas, especially during lockdown. You were not able to go along the highway if you didn’t have a travel pass or food pass.” (IDI-05) ✓ “The only problem that I encountered was when they required a travel pass for the tractor and for ourselves as well.” (IDI-06) ✓ “It was so tiring because QR codes and quarantine pass are always required.” (FGD-03)
<p>Problems on banana packing process due to curfew hours</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “The effects of this pandemic on our production are delayed because of the curfew.” (IDI-04) ✓ “The curfew was at 6 PM. Therefore, at 5 PM, we need to stop our work due to strict restrictions.” (IDI-05) ✓ “We were unable to work overtime because the curfew begins at 9 p.m., and we are concerned that we will be stranded in that area.” (FGD-01) ✓ “Therefore, we need to work harder in order to finish our work earlier and get home before curfew hours.” (FGD-05)
<p>Dealing with problems on Fusarium wilt</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “Before pandemic, the production of our bananas was really good, but now in this time of pandemic, we were suffering with this panama disease, and we were affected with it.” (IDI-04) ✓ “Bananas are infected with panama disease, and due to this pandemic and lockdown, we were unable to work.” (IDI-05) ✓ “Prior to this pandemic, Panama disease was already our problem.” (IDI-06) ✓ “Due to the pandemic and COVID-19 outbreak, the production decreases and it worsen because we were affected by panama disease.” (FGD-06)

In the study, it was found that banana local farmers during pandemic were dealing with rising agricultural input prices. They have dealt with the rising agricultural input prices due to the sudden change in the agricultural sector. It involves rising prices of farm production inputs such as fertilizer, seed, pesticides, energy, and machinery, resulting in output lags demand, and prices rise (Intel Market, 2012). This was also supported by Chase and Roux (2020) stating that



under COVID, banana value chains have been affected in nearly all banana-producing countries. It was found out that prices crashed due to closed markets in some places, while in others, prices increased due to shortages. Further, study found that banana farmers were struggling with the advent of travel restrictions. This was also supported by Puglia (2022) which emphasized that travel restrictions and isolation orders have become one of the main challenges of farmers. The lockdown and transport restrictions caused heavy fruit losses on farms, and the resulting shortage of plantains on the market at high prices has led to greater food insecurity. Aside from this, the farmers were also struggling packaging their banana fruits because of established curfew hours during the lockdown making them struggle more on the production of the crops. This was heightened by Srinivasan (2021) by emphasizing that horticulture farmers fear the imposition of a night curfew that might affect their business since vegetables and other products are transported only during the late hours to major markets in far-off places. The farmers say the night curfew will push them back to square one and will be left with no option other than to leave the produce in the fields to perish as traders will not be interested in purchasing them in the absence of public transport. Lastly, aside from these difficulties farmers faced during the emergence of COVID-19, they also faced another banana disease which is the Fusarium wilt which greatly affects their banana farms. To which, Dar (2021) explained that if left unchecked, Fusarium wilt or panama disease will substantially reduce the Philippines’ exports, disrupt trade in the international markets, and cause suffering for banana growers, farmers, workers, and their families, which may lead to social unrest and economic instability.

Research Question No.2: The coping mechanisms of the banana local farmers with the problems they faced amidst the pandemic.

The major themes and core of ideas for research question number two (2) was presented in Table 2. Participants had their own unique and distinct responses to their own experiences. From the answers of the participants, three (3) major themes emerged: (1) maintaining optimism; (2) drawing strength from one’s family; and (3) starting early the banana packing process.

Table 2
Themes and Core Ideas on the Coping Mechanism of the Banana Local Farmers amidst the Pandemic

EMERGING THEMES	SAMPLE STATEMENTS
Maintaining optimism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “I just laugh with my problem because if you heartedly think, it will drive you crazy. You cannot do nothing because when problem came it will really bring problem.” (IDI-03) ✓ “For me, it is just that you will not go with what you are feeling.” (IDI-04) ✓ “You will not go along with your emotions, and you should find way to solve your problems.” (FGD-01) ✓ “If you had a problem, you should not allow yourself to go with it and do not think that you cannot surpassed, instead you should think on the positive things in your life.” (FGD-07)
Drawing strength from one’s family	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “My number one inspiration is my children and my family.” (IDI-04) ✓ “My inspiration is also my children and will happen if they cannot buy what they want.” (FGD-05) ✓ “It is my family and God that gives me inspiration and strength in life.” (FGD-06) ✓ “My family and my mother, I really work hard for them. Also, in order for me to fed them.” (FGD-06)
Starting early the banana packing process	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “We started early and harvest early because the quality inspector had a pressure time and target hours to finished.” (IDI-01) ✓ “We should really go to our plantation early for the bananas to be process in order for us to finished early and not hit the curfew hour.” (FGD-01) ✓ “We should assemble early in your area.” (FGD-02) ✓ “We should really go there during dawn because there is no inconvenience during that time.” (FGD-07)



The study found that despite the struggles and conundrums that the banana farmers have faced during the pandemic, they remain steadfast and optimistic due to the fact the COVID-19 disease has totally spread in the vicinity. Hence, being optimistic is one solution of the problem. This was supported by Joan (2020) that COVID-19 outbreak offered the opportunity for everyone to reflect on the importance of maintaining optimism and resilience in emergencies. Farmers are challenged to remain as optimistic as possible. How they show up in a crisis has a significant impact in the economy. Aside from being optimistic, the farmers as well mentioned that they get their strength from their family who depends on them. They remained focused and calm as they had family to feed. This harmonizes also with the proposition of Boutselis (2020) which claimed that when faced with a crisis, the strength of a family can often be one of the most important support structures to farmers who were trying their best to remain sane. With proper communication and a desire to work together as a family, that strength can be fostered and used for any family problem. Since curfew hours were implemented during the pandemic, one of the strategies and coping mechanism of the banana farmers was to start the packing process of the banana early. This is for them to finish the job before curfew hours. Likewise, this is for them to create a plan that gives them a roadmap for being productive all day and working without distractions (Staffing, 2019).

Research Question No.3: Insights of banana local farmers with the problems they faced amidst the pandemic.

The major themes and core of ideas for research question number three (3) was presented in Table 3. Participants had their own unique and distinct responses to their own experiences. From the answers of the participants, four (4) major themes emerged: (1) lack of government support to farmers; (2) staying disciplined at work; (3) importance of financial literacy during this time; and (4) importance of hard work in these trying times.

Table 3
Themes and Core Ideas on the Insight of the Banana Local Farmers to Co-Farmers and with others in general

EMERGING THEMES	SAMPLE STATEMENTS
Lack of government support to farmers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “They should visit the farmers and know their problems in order for them to report the situation to the government, because it is their duty and responsibility to inform the higher authority of what is the situation of the farmers.” (IDI-03) ✓ “They should go to the field it is not just all about theory for us to know and identify the needs of the farmers.” (IDI-04) ✓ “They did not give anything to the agriculture aspect, including our president did not give anything, whenever they found a problem with regards to a specific product, they just study on it. It is about financing in the farmer’s side. They should have subsidies for the affected farmers especially this time of pandemic. Those people in MAGRO should extend their help to those farmers who really in need.” (FGD-02) ✓ “They should help the farmers financially in order for them to recover their areas. Also, those people in Department of Agriculture should go in the field in order for them to know what are the things that should be done to improve our agricultural sector.” (FGD-04)
Staying disciplined at work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “There are government protocols that should be followed and always wear face mask.” (IDI-01) ✓ “It is all about discipline of the workers and disciplining ourselves to the protocols implanted this time of pandemic.” (IDI-06) ✓ “My workmates should really focus and do good in their work in order not to bring harm to the area since it is everyone’s source of income.” (FGD-04) ✓ “They should be serious in their work because once the area had a less production it would also reflect to the income of our boss, if that happened, they would also give us less income.” (FGD-07)
Importance of financial literacy during this time	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “You should be thrifty and have savings.” (IDI-03) ✓ “First thing that is importance is that you have something to finance to buy inputs and fertilizer that is needed in the area.” (IDI-04)



	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “Financing and self-discipline, even though what is your status in life if you are not good in financing and you do not have self-discipline your banana plantation will result to nothing.” (IDI-06) ✓ “They should really control the price of the inputs in order for them not to have difficulty in budgeting.” (FGD-03)
Importance of hard work in these trying times	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ “They should really work hard for them to recover with this pandemic.” (IDI-05) ✓ “They should really strive and do not feel weak because it will really affect their work.” (FGD-01) ✓ “We had a family that needs our help and support that is why we should really strive and work hard.” (FGD-03) ✓ “We should work hard in order for us to support and fed our family.” (FGD-06)

In the study, it was found that farmers were struggling with the emergence of the COVID-19 because also with the lack of support from the government. The government did not give financial support and agricultural resources to these banana farmers. Hence, farmers faced difficulty on their agricultural land. As a result, the agriculture sector has faced serious production issues, such as slow increase in agricultural output, particularly in banana products. Thus, inputs and financing are in limited supply especially for local farmers (Leyte et al., 2021). Despite this, the farmers remained disciplined and hard working so that they can still earn despite the absence of government support. They shared that they are responsible in following the guidelines, which include measures for identifying at-risk behaviors and implementing engineering controls, sanitation and cleaning procedures, and administrative controls, all with the goal of reducing COVID-19 transmission among farmworkers (GPCAH, 2020). Similarly, most of them said they felt their work was a duty and that they were proud to be able to carry it out and help their communities. Some worried about their health, while others felt they were taking few risks by continuing to work, having no choice, and had to continue working to survive (Taylor, 2020). Lastly, during the pandemic, local farmers are engaged in programs whose purpose is to train them how to produce more to earn more money. With this, local farmers learn how to manage their money properly, as well as how to grow and protect their savings. Financial literacy is the first step toward assisting these impoverished farmers in creating economic activity even in the poorest areas so that they can contribute to the country's overall economy. Hence, farmers, even in remote communities, would contribute to the country's economic activity if they learned how to manage their own business funds wisely (Kabagani, 2020).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

As researchers, it is essential that we gain as much insight and knowledge as possible to comprehend why banana local farmers of today are experiencing difficulties and problems, particularly in the field of agriculture. Honestly, having this qualitative research on banana farmers amid a pandemic makes us worried and hesitant. We contemplated that this research would raise controversy and would cause us some intimidation in terms of the conduct of our focus group discussion and as well as the in-depth interviews. The social phenomena in the agricultural community, mainly the banana farmers, amid the pandemic took our attention. Thus, the results made us realize that banana farmers are indeed heroes. They were experiencing difficulties and problems, especially in dealing with agricultural input prices, travel restrictions, banana packing due to curfew hours and Fusarium wilt. However, they were passionate and resilient. We were amazed that amid the COVID-19 pandemic, banana farmers were maintaining optimism and drawing strength from their families. Hence, there were insights that must be put into account, such as the lack of government support to farmers, staying disciplined at work, the importance of financial literacy during this time, and the importance of hard work in these trying times.

The process of this research was not as easy as we expected. Challenges were thrown in our path as we sought those voluminous amounts of insights that were truly necessary in our quest for answers. These clusters of vital information enlightened us as researchers on what the essence behind uncovering the untold stories of the banana local farmers was in their quest amid the pandemic. In this study, we have learned that unveiling the untold stories of the banana local farmers on their quest amid the pandemic has different points to be considered and put emphasis on. We have also learned that the experiences of the local banana farmers amid the pandemic are too difficult to handle. As such, we do encourage our fellow researchers to focus more on this subject matter. To start this advocacy and ignite the passion of our fellow investigators, we have presented this research paper as an advent towards a series of greater quests to learn more about qualitative research on unveiling the untold stories of the banana local farmers on their quest amidst the pandemic which will serve as voice of all voiceless local farmers during the most trying times in the advent of natural emergencies.



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