

mounting cases of viral infection. More and more cities and provinces are being placed under heightened levels of alert.

We also get a different sense from the World Health Organization (WHO). Its chief Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus would not just dismiss Omicron as mild. For him, it's a mistake to consider it as less threatening because it continues to kill people nearly everywhere. "In fact, the tsunami of cases is so huge and quick that it is overwhelming health systems around the world." WHO estimates that some 109 countries may miss the 70% herd immunity target by mid-2022. Unless nations have better access to the vaccines, it is difficult to assume the pandemic is near its end. As the UNICEF also declared, "No one is safe until everyone is safe!"

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(DILG) is severely challenged by its measly budget of P250 million for contact tracing for 2022. Compared to the original request of P5 billion, this allotment will not allow DILG to keep up with this fourth wave of pandemic surge. It is reportedly just enough to fund only 1,000 contact tracers for about a year.

Another handicap looms. We have yet to roll out a digitalized central data warehouse system that would integrate results of testing, tracing, isolating and treating patients for quick retrieval of health management information. A digital system accords granularity to imposition of community lockdown. A more granular, rather than generalized, lockdown is a market-friendly yet safe response to future pandemic surges.

Whether this could be done with a mere 5% of what is logistically required is therefore a big question for advancing our welfare and ensuring safe economic recovery. Two years ago, our health authorities wasted precious time recommending immediate restrictions on international travel. We were also behind in sourcing vaccines that could have somewhat reduced the pressure on our health workers and facilities today.

This is the first serious policy failing.

We agree with NEDA that "even as we temporarily impose more stringent restrictions to contain the spread of the Omicron variant, we have learned to manage the risks and live with the virus." But we hasten to add that we learned only half. Many of us have internalized the health protocols and the imperative of the vaccine. But to completely vanquish the virus, we should be able to consolidate all our learning and our information into what some would call big data. Without the means to digitize our locations at any given time, and

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