

FROM MANAGING DISASTERS TO MANAGING RISKS: KEY EFFORTS IN THE PHILIPPINES

by RJ Marco Lorenzo C. Parcon

“Disaster risk reduction—the frontline of defence against climate impacts—is in everybody’s interest, and it is everybody’s business,” UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon said at the opening of the Third UN World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction in Japan on March 2015.ⁱ

In the last two years, a spate of press releases on disaster risk management underscored the value of strong Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) policies and programs, both in the local and international levels. In March 2015, the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) released the Global Assessment Report (GAR) on DRR in which it noted that a country’s development may only be truly sustainable once disaster resiliency is embedded in its policies on poverty alleviation, health, education and infrastructure development, among others. GAR2015 cautioned that most disasters that could happen have not happened yet.

In ASEAN, the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER)¹ new work program covering 2016-2020 was launched in April 2016. Its goals are to build a disaster-resilient ASEAN and to reduce losses caused by disasters, and a platform for collective regional response. In the Asia Pacific region alone, the United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific’s (UNESCAP) 2015 Year in Review Report accentuated that US\$45.1 billion was lost in economic damages, while 59.3 million people were affected by natural disasters. In the Philippines, the report echoed the Emergency Events Database (EM-DAT) of the Centre for Research on the Epidemiology of Disaster (CRED) which noted that US\$211 million was lost due to Typhoon *Koppu* (Lando) that left 51 dead. This shows the importance of early warning systems, timely evacuations and real-time information sharing between governments and local government units to help reduce the effects of disasters.

This also calls for a change in perspective when it comes to DRR and disaster risk management – from managing disasters to managing disaster risks. Hence, the Philippines and ASEAN must continue to adopt this perspective and commit to strengthen its policies and practices with regard to disaster risk reduction and management.

Minimizing disaster risks: a task with others

The AADMER serves as a basis and foundation for the ASEAN-response towards minimizing and managing disaster risks and enhancing resiliency of communities. Cooperation on disaster risk management in ASEAN had been going on as early as 2008, particularly after the onslaught of Cyclone *Nargis* that left more than 130,000 dead in Myanmar. The Association sent the first ASEAN Emergency Response Team (ERAT) mission to Myanmar. ERAT’s recommendations led to the operationalization of the ASEAN Humanitarian Task Force, among others. This experience exemplifies the need for international cooperation and sharing of best practices in disaster risk management and response.ⁱⁱ

Some international partnerships that are solely focused on disaster risk reduction and management (DRRM) include the Global Facility for Disaster Reduction and Recovery (GFDRR). GFDRR is an international partnership with 25 donor partners and has DRR initiatives aimed to help developing countries considered to be high-risk and low-capacity.

The GFDRR report of April 2012 underlined, among others, the vulnerability of the ASEAN region, stating that Member States are highly exposed to various natural events and [per century], the average total loss due to disasters in the region could reach up to USD 17.9 billion.

Within ASEAN, the Association established the Committee on Disaster Management (ACDM) which coordinates and implements region-wide DRR and disaster management initiatives. ACDM also promotes partnerships and collaboration between Member States and dialogue partners, as well as other international organizations.

ASEAN must continue to promote the importance of minimizing and addressing disaster risk and not just disaster management. With a comprehensive disaster risk reduction initiative, the possible toll that disasters may bring could be minimized. Likewise, in managing disasters, ASEAN must always remember to, “Build Back Better.”

The Philippines faces a constant threat in all fronts

According to the 20-year report of the UNISDR, the Philippines is considered to be the fourth most disaster prone country worldwide with a total of 274 disasters that affected an estimated 130 million people from 1995 to 2015. The Philippines faces numerous natural disaster threats including typhoons, storm surges, floods, volcanic activities, earthquakes, drought, and tsunamis.

The threats brought about by natural disaster have long been recognized by the government and disaster risk reduction and management efforts have been put in place. The government’s response took several forms. The National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC) serves as a legal basis for all disaster-related initiatives by the Philippines. NDRRMP is anchored on four thematic areas with the end goal of having “safer, adaptive and disaster resilient Filipino communities towards sustainable development.”

In 2015, the Philippine Institute for Volcanology and Seismology (PHIVOLCS) issued a warning that a possible mega-earthquake could hit Metro Manila and nearby provinces. The issuance of the warning was due to the fact that the fault line, known as the West and East Valley Fault, tends to move every 400 to 600 years – the last movement of the fault was 357 years ago.

Moreover, information dissemination and educating communities have been a vital part of its campaign to manage risks. PHIVOLCS, for instance, has developed and produced a Valley Fault System Atlas that outlines the general cities and areas that are going to be affected by the fault movement. Additionally, the Metro Manila Development Authority (MMDA) has also instituted several earthquake exercises in Metro Manila with public and private offices taking part in the initiative.

The Department of Education (DepEd) has also required schools to promote family disaster preparedness for earthquakes through several school-based activities as part of the National Disaster Consciousness Month.

At the local government level, the Department of the Interior and Local Government (DILG) and the National Youth Commission (NYC) have signed an agreement that allows the youth to participate in local government activities focused on climate change, disaster risk reduction and preparedness, among others. The DILG’s *Oplan Listo* (Oplan Alert), which seeks to strengthen the country’s disaster response operations, was also adopted by the NDRRMC and is now part of the NDRRMP. Republic Act No. 10121 created the Local Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Offices (LDRRMOs) intended to institute disaster preparedness as a way of life.²

This shows that disaster preparedness is a multi-agency effort and hence, the Philippines and the international community must not only focus on preparedness, but also put great importance on disaster risk reduction efforts.

Reducing disaster risks will not only complement preparedness efforts, but will also greatly contribute to the state’s sustainable development drive to minimize disaster risk while addressing problems related to poverty, infrastructure and health, among others. The Philippines and the international community must focus on preparedness but also place great importance on disaster risk reduction.

The role of women in DRR is crucial, and must be included in disaster risk reduction policies. Women undertake important leadership roles in society and, as such, may truly contribute to the overall management and lowering of disaster risks. Women have roles not just confined to risk mitigation, but also to disaster response and rehabilitation. DRR requires the effort of the whole community. Thus, traditional gender norms should be rejected, and the important role played by each and everyone should be recognized.

Some lessons from Japan and the role of communities

There are several lessons that the Philippines can take from the DRR strategies and practices of other countries. In Japan, DRR strategies take into consideration three lessons and these are the need for adequate support from the government, communities that support each other, and citizens that have a “Help Yourself Attitude.” One of the most important elements that the Philip-

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piners can take from Japan is on the second principle. In Japan, the sense of volunteerism is truly evident especially in terms of communities coming up with various post-disaster revitalization initiatives.

The Philippines in this regard should encourage community-driven initiatives. This can be done by utilizing a whole-of-society approach in DRR planning and implementation. Communities must also be empowered in a way that they will have an active participation in the DRRM planning process and not hesitate to share their own ideas on DDR. Thus, local peoples' organizations must also be strengthened. Not only can local organizations empower citizens, but they can also help facilitate communication and activities between the local government and the community with regard to the overall DRRM plans.

DDR starts at the local level, and hence the LDRRMOs must be strengthened and empowered in a way that they can fully commit and carry out their mandate. They must also be capacitated to create long-term Local DRRM plans that take into consideration the needs of each and every community.

Effects of disasters can be minimized

The Philippines must put premium on risk reduction efforts and must take into consideration three reduction modes – prospective, corrective and compensatory risk management. All these must be embedded in disaster risk reduction and disaster management policies and practices of the country.

The foregoing also illustrates the Philippines' commitment and initiatives to build a more resilient nation through disaster risk reduction. Although the occurrence of natural disasters can never be prevented, their effects and impact can be minimized. Risk management must not be disregarded; it must be embedded in national and local policies of states, and practiced by everyone. States' policies must take risk management into due consideration as it can greatly help save lives and communities while promoting sustainable development. 🌿

ENDNOTES

¹ This agreement entered into force in 2009.

² See "Charging of LDRMMO pay to disaster fund pushed," *Philippine Star*, July 17, 2014. Available at <http://www.philstar.com/cebu-news/2014/07/17/1347171/charging-ldrrmo-pay-disaster-fund-pushed>.

ⁱ THIRD UNITED NATIONS WORLD CONFERENCE ON DISASTER RISK REDUCTION, 1ST PLENARY MEETING press release entitled "'Disaster Risk Reduction in Everybody's Interest', Says Secretary-General", Opening Third World Conference," 14 March 2015. Available at <http://www.un.org/press/en/2015/iha1354.doc.htm>

ⁱⁱ For more information, please see Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction 2015-2030

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