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Revisiting Disaster Management Policy in the Philippines: Some Issues and Concerns*

Introduction

Disaster commonly pertains to drastic destruction of nature, leading to deaths, economic downfall, and instability. With the phenomenon of climate change, disaster is real and natural in different nations, rich and poor, around the globe. Several definitions of disaster have emerged from different literatures, but on the whole, it boils down to devastation. It is a common knowledge that disaster is a natural occurrence in the environment, but it can also be human-induced. Drought, epidemic, earthquake, fire, flood, bio-chemical spill, as well as civil war, are examples of disasters.

The Centre for Research for the Epidemiology on Disasters (CRED) in Belgium defines disaster as an unforeseen and often sudden event that causes great damage, destruction, and human suffering.[1] Disaster does not only leave destruction on the physical environment, but also emotional distraught on people. The National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (NDRRM) Act in the Philippines, on the other hand, defines disaster as a *"serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a society involving widespread human, material, economic or environmental losses and impacts, which exceeds the ability of the affected community or society to cope using its own resources"*.[2]

Owing to its geographical location and tropical climate, the Philippines is considered as one of the most disaster-prone countries in Asia and the world. The Philippines is surrounded by more than 7,100 islands, mostly mountainous with narrow to large coastal lowlands, which are susceptible to various catastrophes. It has northeast monsoon from November to April, and southwest monsoon from May to October.

In 2009, tropical storms *Ondoy* and *Pepeng* devastated the Philippines, incurring approximately P50B worth of damage in properties, and close to a thousand people dead. In 2010, the country was hit 14 times by natural disasters, notably 46% less than the number of times in the previous year. If human-induced disasters such as armed conflicts were to be included, the total number of disaster occurrences in 2010 would reach 202.[3] In 2011 and 2012, tropical storm *Pedring and* typhoons *Sendong* and *Pablo* strongly devastated provinces in Central Luzon and Mindanao. According to the National Disaster Risk Reduction Management Council (NDRRMC), *Sendong* and *Pablo* left 1,453 and 1,067 dead respectively, and a combined total of approximately P39B worth of damaged properties, infrastructure, and agriculture.[4]

To note, natural disasters in the Philippines, which take their massive toll on its natural environment and resources, are aggravated by human factors. Lack of discipline and of disaster preparedness exacerbates effects of disasters to uncontrollable proportions.

Revisiting Disaster Management

"Terminology never stands still," as Twigg of the Hazard Research Center, Benfield University College London (UCL) asserted. According to him, terms evolve by expanding new ones and expanding the old. In the field of disaster management, the term "disaster prevention" in the 1970s had been changed to "disaster mitigation" in the 1980s. This was due to a realization that natural disasters are just impossible to prevent, for they can only be lessened.[5] But even the more realistic term of mitigating disasters per se was later deemed to be unclear. With this, "disaster risk reduction" was thought about as the most appropriate term so far in reducing the risks and impacts of disasters in the post-modern world.[6]

In 1978, Presidential Decree (PD) 1566 had provided the legal framework for strengthening Philippine disaster control and capability. It had also

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established a national program on community disaster preparedness in vulnerable communities. As time went on, however, the Act fell short of addressing other forms of disasters such as tropical cyclones, floods, earthquakes, and volcanoes—the magnitudes of which had not been felt in the past. This paved way in 2010 for the enactment of Republic Act (RA) 10121, otherwise known as the Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (PDRRM) Act.

Designed to cope with disasters and emergency situations, the PDRRM Act led to the formulation of the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (NDRRM) Plan 2011-2018. This provides the roadmap towards a *"safer, adaptive, and disaster resilient Filipino communities toward sustainable development"*.[7] The Act also introduced new approaches in disaster management such as increased participation from stakeholders in local areas, enhanced coordination among concerned agencies, and strategic planning of interconnected courses of action.

While the PDRRM Act appears to be comprehensive, there is a need to revisit some of its provisions in the light of worsening disaster experiences, especially during the past five years. This brief policy study unravels some issues and concerns on disaster management in the Philippines with the end view of inviting a more comprehensive assessment of the PDRRM Act by administrators, lawmakers, and scholars.

Policy Issues and Concerns

It was not just lack of warning, but lack of preparedness that caught people and their community helpless and distressed in the onslaught of disasters. Since typhoons are expected in the Philippines, the extent of damage brought about by the catastrophic storms of *Ondoy* and *Sendong*, for example, could have been mitigated, had there been strict implementation of disaster management in local governments. Under the PDRRM Act, funds from national and local governments can be utilized not only for post-disaster activities but also for pre-disaster preparedness measures. These include disaster drills and training, as well as purchase of necessary equipment, supplies, and medicines.

Disaster preparedness aims to capacitate communities in dealing with emergency and disaster events in order to ensure less damage to life and property. In community-based disaster management, local governments are expected to play active and lead role in identifying potential risks and hazards, drafting their own disaster management programs, monitoring implementation, as well as evaluating outcomes. Concerned citizens in disaster-prone areas must also be empowered through proper education and training in order to mitigate and manage disasters.

Unfortunately, it appeared that disaster preparedness was not given adequate attention by some local government units (LGUs) in highly affected provinces. In Cagayan De Oro City, for instance, twenty-five (25) barangays were devastated by flashfloods brought about by *Sendong* in 2011. This happened despite the conduct of geo-hazard assessment that had identified and warned flood-prone areas in the City two years before the deluge. Caught unaware of any disaster contingency plan, *Sendong* victims claimed they had not received sufficient warning signal from the local government.[8] Lack of communication and coordination between the city government and affected barangays was seen as the reason why the latter had been taken by surprise in the onslaught of *Sendong*. After the typhoon, Cagayan De Oro City, was further challenged by the problem of relocating victims who had lost their homes from the flashflood.

In Davao Oriental, where typhoon *Pablo* in 2012 left 337 dead, surviving victims also pointed to the absence of warning and evacuation order from the LGU. The lack of disaster preparedness resulted in high mortality, loss of homes, and economic destruction in the province. The aftermath of Pablo saw unserviceable bridges and highways, which made relief operations difficult.[9] Davao City, on the other hand, was also not spared from *Pablo* due to lack of infrastructure to mitigate disasters. Four major river systems in the City overflowed to at least 13 barangays, forcing residents to evacuate to safer grounds. The disaster experience in Davao City prompted local officials to undertake necessary measures that will mitigate disasters and other effects of climate change.[10]

Aside from weak disaster preparedness, people unconsciously put themselves at risk when they abuse the environment by engaging in illegal logging, and construct houses in hazard prone areas. People with no discipline have been primary responsible for aggravating effects of disasters, whether natural or man-made. That humans have been notorious contributors to environmental hazards and disaster risks was observed by United Nations (UN) Secretary General Kofi Annan in "Living with Risk: A Global Review of Disaster Reduction Initiatives" in 2004. According to him, *"Communities will always face natural hazards, but today's disasters are often generated by, or at least exacerbated by, human activities".*[11]

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Policy Considerations

In view of the foregoing policy issues, there is a need for focused and comprehensive evaluation of the implementation of the PDRRM Act. It must be taken into account that the Act provides for a review of its provisions every five years, or as may be deemed necessary, to respond to emerging demands of the current environment. Thus, the Act needs to be revisited in a move to incorporate emerging concerns on the effects of climate change, such as worsening weather conditions. The following are some policy considerations that will help ensure a more effective, responsive, and accountable disaster management by government and whole of society.

Capacity Building for Community-based Disaster Preparedness. Considered as frontliners in disaster response, LGUs and local communities are expected to be vigorous in the planning and implementation of disaster preparedness activities. Adequate human, financial, and technological resources are needed to build capacities in preparation for any event of disaster. Using the policy framework provided for in the PDRRM Act, LGUs must invest in community-based disaster preparedness programs, such as development of contingency measures during emergency situations, establishment of early warning systems, as well as provision of accessible and user-friendly geo-hazard maps in every barangay. The cost of investments in preventive measures yields invaluable benefits of reduced risks and manageable disasters. Undermining disaster preparedness has high cost of jeopardizing human security.

Lessons must be learned from disaster experiences, which should serve as inputs to improve capacities for disaster preparedness. It is noteworthy to mention that the Cities of Iligan and Cagayan De Oro managed to make use of unfortunate experiences in *Sendong* to reduce and manage the risk of forthcoming disasters. Thus, as a result of their disaster preparedness after Sendong, the two cities recorded zero casualties in the onslaught of typhoon *Pablo* in 2012.[12]

Establishment of National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Training Institute. As provided for in the PDRRM Act, an NDRRM Training Institute shall be established to train civilian personnel, civic groups, as well as academicians on disaster risk reduction and management. At present, the said training institute has not yet materialized. While some government offices, non-government organizations, and private companies conduct their respective disaster management programs, the said Institute is needed to ensure that educational training and technology use are standardized and upgraded.

In line with this, a standard module on DRRM Training must be established to provide guidelines on disaster management training to LGUs, as well as to civic and private organizations. The module shall ensure the quality and required competencies of trainers that will educate various stakeholders in different areas of the country. To note, while it is the function of government to disseminate information on disaster management concerns, it is also the responsibility of concerned citizens and groups to initiate learning about contingency measures in emergency situations.

In establishing the NDRRM Training Institute, focus must be given to employing scientists and other technical experts, which include seismologists, volcanologists, weather forecasters, and political analysts. Regular conducts of research and development are also required to upgrade the skills and knowledge-base in disaster management.

Integration of Climate Change Adaptation in Disaster Management. The PDRRM Act states that disaster management, along with development planning in local communities, must be attuned to realities brought about by climate change. In a multi-hazard environment, measures that enable communities to adapt to the phenomena of climate change must be incorporated in the PDRRM. Climate Change intensifies impacts of typhoons, floods, and droughts; and thus, increases the vulnerabilities of communities to disasters.

In view of this, the integration of Climate Change Adaptation (CCA) in PDRRM must be pursued to comprehensively manage climate-related disasters and stresses. CCA is defined under the Climate Change Act of 2009 as *"adjustment in natural or human systems in response to actual or expected climatic stimuli or their effects, which moderates harm or exploits beneficial opportunities."*[13] At present, PDRRM and CCA have separate policy frameworks, but both aim to mitigate risks and manage effects of natural disasters resulting from climate change. The two sets of policies must then be integrated and mainstreamed in comprehensive efforts of government and whole of society not only in disaster management but also in overall development planning.

Strict Implementation of Environmental Laws. The effectiveness of the goals and provisions of the PDRRM Act lies not only in its assiduous implementation, but also in strict adherence of the

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Disaster management is a security concern of all. It is more than a matter of national security, it is about existential survival of human kind.

public to other related acts such as on the protection of the environment. Worsening cases of deluge are caused by climate change, but they are also exacerbated by disastrous practices of unscrupulous people. Abuse of the environment—such as illegal logging, industrial pollution, lack of waste management, and other wrongful practices which destroy the ecological balance—will render the PDRMM Act incompetent to reduce the risks of natural catastrophes. Disaster management, thus, calls for comprehensive and integrated courses of action to address complex threats to human security in the events of typhoon, flood, landslide, and earthquake, among others.

Conclusion

Natural disasters are inescapable realities in the Philippines because of its geographical location and humid climate. As one of the most disaster-prone countries in the world, the Philippines has promulgated appropriate measures to manage the onslaught and aftermath of nature-based disasters. The Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction and Management or PDRRM Act of 2010 is one landmark law that aims to institutionalize in community life the judicious practices of coping with and controlling effects of disasters.

The impact of disaster on the lives and ways of living in the community is comprehensive, demanding for complex policies that will promote human security in the age of climate change. With this, disaster management entails interconnected acts, regulations, and programs implemented in the communities by government and whole of society.

An understanding of the phenomena and predicaments of disaster management requires a multi-dimensional perspective of looking into the traditional practices, social, behavior, political dynamics, as well as administrative capacities on the ground. All of these make up the policy context that surrounds the complexity of administering the DRRM Act in the Philippines.

Indications of imminent danger to human security, whether nature-based or man-made, are impossible to eliminate in today's world. Nations can only do so much by managing risks and threats through preventive measures and cooperation from various stakeholders. Concerned agencies and organizations are not just from affected communities nor from the country, but also from other nations that pledge humanitarian aid. Disaster management is a security concern of all. It is more than a matter of national security, it is about existential survival of human kind.

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Endnotes

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