

How should Disasters be Managed? The Government's View on Community-Based Disaster Management

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While a disaster can strike an entire nation, its impact is felt most at the community level. It may strike one or several communities at once. It is these communities which constitute what Carter refers to as 'disaster fronts' (1991: 40). Despite the fact that they are hardest hit, communities have the capacity to respond to threats. They are not passive recipients of aid. In fact, they have the capacity to support themselves. Wenger, writing about community response to disasters, submits that '[c]ommunities can be viewed as problem-solving entities' (1978: 18). It is for this reason that communities should be involved in managing the risks that may threaten the welfare of their members.

Community, according to Hess and Adams, is a 'group of people, who create relations based on trust and mutuality, within the idea of shared responsibility for well-being' (2001: 24). 'Shared responsibility' connotes collective action towards achieving a common goal. In the context of disaster management, the idea of community participation is taken to mean a group of people looking after their most vulnerable members.

An organized community certainly has its advantages. By using what is

available locally, it can facilitate a timely response which, in turn, can spell a difference in saving lives and mitigating the loss of property. The process of organizing also enhances the openness of those involved towards voluntarism, enabling the community to reduce its dependence on either the local or national government in times of disaster.

A HIGHLY CENTRALIZED DISASTER MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

The Philippine Disaster Management System is large and complex. It is fashioned after the military command structure, which is characterized by top-down and logistics-centered responses. The system is highly bureaucratic and frequently operates under explicit or implicit political constraints that impinge adversely on the effective delivery of emergency services.

This is ironic considering that Presidential Decree 1566 (Strengthening the Philippine Disaster Control Capability and Establishing the National Program on Community Disaster Preparedness) provides for a decentralized approach towards disaster management. Laigo (1996) contends that the way policies laid out

in PD 1566 regarding disaster preparedness, sustaining the capability for organizing, and permeating the government set-up with a developmental disaster management philosophy, are implemented accounts for its weakness.

PD 1566 explicitly states a policy of self-help and self-reliance during times of emergencies. It is also quite clear that "each political and administrative subdivision of the country shall utilize all available resources in the area before asking for assistance from neighboring entities or higher authority." However, local disaster management systems are still dependent on the national government because some, if not most, local governments do not have the capacity or the resources to manage the threat themselves.

Take for example the conduct of immediate lifesaving measures. Local governments do not have the capability to effectively carry-out these operations either because of the absence of a trained personnel or inadequate resources. More often than not, both constraints hamper effective rescue operations at the local level. Hence, the conduct of such operations has become the purview of the Armed Forces of the Philippines, the national government agency with trained personnel and the necessary equipment for immediate mobilization.

Is the present centralized set-up efficient? Commentators in the field disaster management suggest that an effective disaster management

strategy should veer away from reliance on outside intervention because it is not always efficient and tends to encourage dependency (Anderson and Woodrow 1989, Gledhill 2001, US OFDA 1998, Quarantelli 1997). Efficiency as oppose to effectiveness is more concerned with the process. Quarantelli differentiates efficiency and effectiveness, the former "requires that the results be obtained in the best possible way" while effectiveness 'means that a desired and intended result has been produced' (1997: 43). For example, a response operation by the military may have effectively evacuated a sizable number of victims from an endangered area but it may not have been efficient in its use of resources, the time consumed or the problems generated.

THE NDCC AND CBDM

The National Disaster Coordinating Council (NDCC), the highest policy-making body in disaster management in the country is aware of the need to develop a more sustainable approach to managing disasters. One of the approaches it has considered to ensure sustainability, efficiency and effectiveness in disaster management is the use of a community-based disaster management (CBDM) approach.

This desire by the NDCC to adopt CBDM was articulated during the "First National Conference on Community-based Disaster Management in the Philippines." From January 28-30, 2003, the NDCC and the Philippine

Disaster Management Forum jointly organized a three-day conference workshop convened to provide a forum for disaster managers and stakeholders from government, nongovernment organizations and the private sector to share experiences and good practices as well as address urgent challenges in the implementation of CBDM.

CBDM principles

This Conference clarified the principles behind CBDM. At the heart of the approach is the concept of participation. Most of the conference delegates agreed that communities should not be treated as passive recipients of aid but rather as problem-solvers. By encouraging participation, people's capacities are used and developed.

So why CBDM? Quite understandably, it is the people at the community level who have more to lose because they are the ones directly hit by disasters, whether these be major or minor calamities. They are among the most vulnerable to the effects of disasters. Long before outside help arrives, they are the first to respond to the emergency. Under the circumstances, the best way to help communities is to make them better prepared to cope with emergencies.

Focusing on CBDM is also important because the people and groups in the communities have a deeper understanding of the nuances of their geography and history. They intimately know the ins and outs of their locality. Thus, they are in the best

position to articulate their needs and decide on what is best for their community.

These premises lie at the heart of the CBDM's plea for community participation. Through this approach, the people's capacity to respond to emergencies is increased by providing them more access and control over resources and basic social services. By building confidence in the community through people's involvement in other development initiatives, the approach encourage individuals in communities to work together, increase their social capital, and achieve high levels of cohesion and cooperation. In so doing the CBDM empowers communities to confidently rely on themselves for disaster preparedness and mitigation measures.

OCD: Towards a more participative disaster management approach

The Office of Civil Defense (OCD), a bureau under the Department of National Defense, has been tasked to serve as the operating arm of the NDCC. It's primary mission is to coordinate, at the national level, the activities and functions of various agencies and instrumentalities of the national government, private institutions, and civic organizations devoted to public welfare. This is necessary to ensure that the facilities and resources of the entire nation is utilized to the maximum for the protection of the civilian populace and property in times of calamities.

The OCD is mandated to perform the following functions:

- establish and administer a comprehensive national civil defense and civil assistance program;
- formulate plans and policies for the protection and welfare of civilian populations in times of war or other national emergencies;
- estimate the material, manpower and fiscal requirements of carrying out the civil defense program; and
- allocate to provinces, cities and municipalities such aid and facilities, materials and funds as may be made available from the national government.

THE PARADIGM SHIFT

As mentioned earlier, the OCD as part of the national defense establishment replicates a military command structure. Its organization reflects a command and control approach towards disaster management. This approach according to Heijmans and Victoria is typical of a “traditional” or “dominant” approach where attention to the disaster response is focused on the hazard and the disaster event itself (2001: 4). The corresponding disaster management strategy is to provide immediate relief through government aid and assistance.

The overarching and central role assigned to government is not an ideal response as it amplifies the weaknesses of communities. First, there is lack of flexibility because the power of local communities is limited

to plans developed and implemented by higher levels of authority. Second, it promotes dependency, making the community incapable of dealing with the uncertainty and complexity of disaster-related decision-making. Third, the ambiguous delineation of roles among government agencies involved in disaster management results in an wasteful overlap in functions.

It is important to note, however, that while CDBP is a correct approach, mobilizing local communities poses a challenge. People themselves do not recognize the importance of their involvement in planning and decision-making process, not to mention the dependency that is sometimes encouraged by outside agencies that support communities.

Cognizant of the growing evidence of inequities fostered by centralized disaster management interventions, the unsustainability of top-down programs and their irrelevance to the specific local needs of vulnerable communities, a paradigm shift is apparent. The OCD is shifting more attention to community-based approaches to disaster management.

INSTITUTIONALIZING CBDM

Strengthening the barangays

Participants of the ‘First National Conference on Community-based Disaster Management’ agreed that a barangay, the smallest political subdivision in the Philippines is a typical community. One way of

institutionalizing CBDM is through the strengthening of Barangay Disaster Coordinating Councils (BDCC). Chaired by the Barangay Chair with members composed of leading personalities, the BDCC is tasked to develop and implement preparedness and mitigation measures for the community. More specifically, the BDCC ought to establish and implement policies and guidelines drawn from the experiences of the city, municipal and National Disaster Coordinating Councils. It is also expected to determine priorities in fund allocation, services, equipment,

and relief supplies as well as receives advisory and reports situation from and to the City/NDCC.

The Chair of the BDCC has the following functions:

- a) select and train sufficient "emergency operations" members;
- b) convene the BDCC as often as needed to effectively implement disaster preparedness planning especially during disaster situations;
- c) assess the extent of damage to life and property;

Case 1: Barangay BF Homes: Barangay Calamities and Disaster Preparedness Plan

Barangay BF Homes of Parañaque City has developed its own Disaster Preparedness Plan to avoid panic and unnecessary actions during natural or human-induced disasters.

The aim of the "Calamity and Disaster Preparedness Plan" is to create a synergy of efforts among barangay officials, team members, constituents assisted by government agencies and other organizations in the prevention and/or actual rescue/evacuation scenario. This serves as an accepted procedure not only for an actual disaster or calamity occurrence but also as a plan to prevent much greater loss of life or damage.

BF Homes is a residential area in Paranaque. It has formed its own BDCC composed of several teams, all having their own responsibilities and tasks based on their capabilities. These teams include the: Communication/Information and Warning Team; Security Team; Supply Team; Transportation Team; Rescue Team; Evacuation and Disaster Relief Team; First Aid and Medical Team; Fire Fighting Team; and Damage Control Team.

The Barangay Calamities and Disaster Preparedness Plan's Implementing Guidelines consists of pre-, during and post-disaster phases. The Pre-Disaster Phase specifies the following actions: the BDCC over-all Chairman shall automatically convene the BC leaders and members for last minute instructions; the Communication Team shall provide all families with warning and information on the kind of dangers to be expected within the next few hours or days as the case may be; the Supply Team carries out an inventory to determine what supplies are needed considering the expected extent of the damages and the duration of the disaster, the Evacuation and Disaster Relief Team identifies and maintains strategic evacuation sites in flood-prone areas, and the Rescue and Medical Teams are on 24-hour stand-by duty during typhoons and heavy rains.

- d) assess if there is a need for assistance from other government agencies, private corporations and the business sector; and
- e) maintain inter-local coordination with neighboring barangays.

ENHANCING THE VOLUNTEER NETWORK

Another strategy for harnessing community participation and institutionalizing CBDM is to strengthening volunteer networks. The United Nations Volunteers describe volunteer action as ‘an expression of people’s willingness and capacity to freely help others and improve society’ (UNV 2000). Everywhere, volunteer groups are emerging to provide a wide range of services to the community. They can be viewed either as partners of the government in the delivery of services or they can be viewed as parallel organizations to government that fill in where there is inadequacy.

CONCLUSION

The number of natural disasters and emergencies in the Philippines remains almost the same. However, the people’s ability to cope with their adverse effects seems to be eroded with time.

It is precisely this situation which makes community in disaster management necessary. Individuals and their communities should be better

prepared for impending disasters and more resilient in the future. At the end of the day, addressing people’s vulnerabilities and their root causes is key to reducing the negative impact of disasters.

The NDCC through the OCD must realize the need to focus not only on providing immediate relief but also on reducing people’s vulnerabilities to future disasters. While it is important to provide immediate relief, the affected population must be given the chance as well to cope should another disaster strike the community. Imparting skills and strategies to community members for them to better cope with hazard will go a long way towards effective disaster management.

It is important to note, however, that communities cannot be expected to reduce vulnerabilities on their own. While they possess local knowledge and coping mechanisms built through years of experience with disasters, their efforts must be complemented by inputs from multiple-stakeholders. In this regard, the NDCC, as the highest policy-making body for disaster preparedness, can play a more facilitative role in ensuring the participation of community members at the local disaster coordinating council level.

The CBDM approach, if adopted as a national policy, will have a distinct effect in reducing the collective vulnerability and insecurity of people affected by disasters.

Case 2: The Barangay Emergency Response Teams-Organized Community Operations Units of the Municipality of Labo, Camarines Norte

The Municipality of Labo is the biggest among the 12 municipalities of the Province of Camarines Norte. It has 52 barangays of which ten are classified as urban and the rest as rural barangays.

Labo is a first class town because of its strategic location in the center of the province and is considered the most populous town. However, it has its fair share of natural hazards that may impinge on its potential for growth and development. Situated in Labo are three inactive volcanoes namely: Mt. Labo, Mt. Bagacay and Mt. Cadig. There are also two major thrust panel lines (faults and earthquake zones) which threaten the northwest portion of the municipality. It is also prone to flooding because of the frequent overflowing of the Labo River. In fact, historians contend that the name Labo did not come from any legal decree but rather from a misunderstanding. A native was said to have been asked by a Spanish Sergeant: "Que pueblo eso este?" (What town is this?) Thinking that the sergeant was referring to the flooding in the area, the native replied, "Labo po ang tubig!" (The water is murky!). And the word stuck ever since, giving a name to the place that resonates with its flood-prone nature.

In response to these threats, the municipality organized a village level emergency response team, the Barangay Emergency Response Teams-Organized Community Operations Units or BERTs-OCOu. The acronym BERTs-OCOu is actually an attempt to associate the name to the local chief executive, a common practice in the Philippines. This imaginative approach to giving names has both its strong and weak points. On one hand, it ensures that the local chief executive assumes ownership of the project which is a good strategy to ensure that it is funded throughout his term of office. Conversely, as its name is attached to a particular politician, the sustainability of the project often depends really on the person sitting at the helm. This is its weak point.

BERTs-OCOu is a community- based volunteer group organized and trained as a quick response mechanism of the barangay before, during and after the occurrence of a disaster. In fact, BERTs-OCOu serves as the response arm of the BDCC. It is specifically tasked to assist the BDCC in warning and evacuating threatened communities. Moreover, the BERTs-OCOu helps the BDCC in hazard mapping and contingency planning.

The volunteer group is organized at the *purok* and is composed of one team leader and 12 members from each purok or block. Each team is monitored by a Barangay council member assigned to that block by the BDCC. Volunteers of BERTs-OCOu are given training on disaster management concepts, first aid techniques, water and fire safety, vulnerability and hazards mapping and contingency planning.

Through this program, the municipality has become aware of the willingness of its constituents to participate in any disaster preparedness or mitigation activity provided that they are given proper orientation on the importance and relevance of the program to their daily lives and their collective future.

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