

In Times of Affliction: God and Preparedness are our Protection

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The Environmental Constraints Map of San Mateo, Rizal depicts Libis in Doña Pepeng Subdivision as one of the thirteen areas that is prone to flooding. Libis is more or less a seven-hectare patch of land located at the embankment of a major waterway, the San Mateo-Marikina River and its tributary, the Nangka River. Dwellers have set-up their houses on this elongated strip of land. The southwestern tip of Libis community abuts onto the juncture where the Nangka River feeds into the San Mateo-Marikina River on an almost 45 degree angle. During heavy and continuous rains, the waters of the Nangka River slam into the turbulent flow of the San Mateo-Marikina River and pushes water back upstream. Floodwaters then begin to inundate houses, arable land, and, in the last few years, erode the river banks and undermine the foundation of houses, causing them to slide into the river.

The origins of Buklod Tao date back to October 1995 when the inhabitants of Doña Pepeng subdivision, North and South Libis of Barangay Banaba in San Mateo contested the legality of on-going activities on an adjacent patch of agricultural land that residents used as their *tumana* – i.e., their piece of

arable land planted with vegetables, corn, watermelon, and other root crops. The land was degraded by a construction company that was erecting a cement batching plant right on top of the *tumana*. Buklod Tao was formed at the height of this community protest. It registered as a non-stock, non-profit peoples' organization on 1 February 1996 with the Securities and Exchange Commission.

THE ORIGINS OF BUKLOD TAO

All organizations have their initial acid test. Ours came with the monsoon rains that accompanied Typhoon Ibiang on 18 August 1997 – only month and 27 days after the formation of our rescue services. The three newly formed all male rescue teams and the all-female health and relief teams implemented a disaster-preparedness plan that quickly formulated in time for the flooding season.

The plan evolved from a one-day seminar-workshop on hazard mapping conducted on 22 June 1997 at our community chapel. The workshop concretized the concepts of hazard, vulnerability and risk assessment as applied to our community. The

afternoon session focused on the formation of three rescue teams: one each for South Libis, North Libis, and the *sentro* of South and North Libis. Our newly organized CBDM charged each team with the following tasks: (1) setting up an early warning system utilizing megaphones; (2) rescuing flood victims using boats, ropes, and flashlights; (3) providing evacuation assistance to two identified evacuation centers in the community; and (4) formulating a simplified counter-disaster plan. Our seminar-workshop culminated in an oath-taking by new members, the inspection of the fiberglass mould for our boats, and its transport (hand-carried by members) to the shop of another member who fabricates fiberglass items for motorcycles. The three rescue teams were subsequently equipped with boats, ropes, megaphones, first-aid kits, and flashlights. They drilled by the river with neighborhood children loaded inside the boats.

Typhoon Ibiang (international code name, Winnie) with 160 kph winds, rising to gusts of 195 kph near the center was inside the Philippine Area of Responsibility from 15-17 August 1997. On its way to eastern China, the typhoon enhanced the southwest monsoon, bringing heavy rains to the western sections of Luzon and Visayas. On 18 August 1997, the Mt. Oro rainfall intensity gauge in Montalban recorded a total rainfall of 146 mm, up from the 5mm registered the previous day. Similar rainfall figures were documented at the Boso-Boso rainfall intensity gauge. The readings were significant for the

CBDM because the river systems of Mt. Oro and Boso-Boso feed into San Mateo-Marikina river. With very high accumulation of surface runoff, the water level gauge for the San Mateo-Marikina River in Montalban topped 25 meters at 10:00 p.m. on 18 August.¹ It started to recede at only 5:00 a.m. on 19 August.

Throughout that ominous night on 18 August until dawn the following day, all our DM teams were dispatched with their paraphernalia to their respective areas to conduct early warning, rescue families trapped in the flood, evacuate people to the chapel and elementary school, and keep a record of the number and whereabouts of evacuees. We realized this was preparedness *during* a disaster event.

The Buklod Tao Reading Center was the site of our emergency operations. The meetings throughout the typhoon and the evaluation after the flooding were held in the Center. On normal days, the Center, based at the carport of our residence as founding President, offers reading materials on the environment to adults and children. When the weather was fine, children from two to twelve years old, usually congregate in the Reading Center to read or simply gaze at the colorful pictures of land and sea animals, trees, rocks, shells and minerals. Some would choose to color outline sketches of houses, boys, girls, animals and trees on the pages of donated used books.

In the wake of the typhoon, there were still hungry evacuees at the chapel and the school turned

evacuation center. The third phase of disaster management commenced. Buklod Tao's CBDM called for relief deliveries to those most affected by the flood. After the one-hour emergency evaluation meeting, Buklod Tao's EOC contacted the National Office of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) and the Citizens Disaster Response Center (CDRC). DSWD advised Buklod Tao to coordinate their relief operations with the local DSWD. Upon the advice of the parish priest who saw the extent of the needs of the evacuees, I, as the association's president went to the Municipal Hall to see the local DSWD head who endorsed the request for relief packs for the Dona Pepeng evacuees.

The Typhoon Ibiang experience, however, disclosed a good partner in CDRC. Its Metro Manila Coordinator assured us over the phone that the needed relief items would be delivered either that afternoon or early the next morning.

On the morning of 20 August, a CDRC pick-up vehicle arrived at the Buklod Tao Emergency Operations Center (EOC) and unloaded: two sacks of rice, forty-five small cans of sardines, three kilos of mung beans, one kilo of dried fish (dilis), and two five-gallon containers of potable water. CDRC staff also provided blank forms to be filled in by the head of our relief team for appropriate reporting on the manner in which Buklod Tao conducted its relief delivery operations. Numbered stubs were distributed to the evacuees that afternoon, while the lady members of

our relief team weighed and repacked the goods. Actual distribution commenced mid-afternoon and lasted till 9:00 p.m. that night.

This was the first official contact of Buklod Tao with CDRC. It was not my first time to interact with the Center, however. In August 1995, a group of trainers from CDRC were commissioned by the Ministry of Social and Human Development/Social Action Center of the Diocese of Antipolo to conduct a three-day live-in seminar/workshop on Disaster Management. I attended the training as a *tagadiwa* (animator) for the Basic Ecclesial Communities (BEC) of the parish at the time.

The BEC formation is one of the programs of the Ministry. It aims to introduce peripheral communities of the parish to the life of communal prayer, love, and communion that characterized the small communities of early Christians. The poor and marginalized are given priority in the BEC, which envisioned a participatory church with preferential option for the poor. In line with the participatory character of the BEC, I organized as *tagadiwa*, six *buklod* or cells of 10 to 12 neighbors in North and South Libis that met weekly. Since the meetings were held on weekdays, the housewives were the ones who represented their family in the *buklod*'s liturgical discussions.

The participatory spirit of the BEC and the existence of community-based cells made it easier to tap into the CDRC training on CBDM because their underlying philosophies resonated with each other. The training inspired me

to integrate the approach in the bukloids, an idea that was not immediately acceptable to the majority of bukloid members. It took another two years for the seeds of CBDM to germinate in our community. Following is an account of how this came to be.

MOBILIZING A COMMUNITY

In the latter part of September 1995, Sitio Doña Pepeng (the site of Buklod Tao) was surprised to learn that the nearby tumana, an 18,105 square meter-piece of arable land located on the embankment of the San Mateo-Marikina River was purchased by a construction company. Since 1947, the community had been self-sufficient in fresh vegetables, thanks to the plants grown and harvested in the tumana. Apart from its provision of food, the tumana also served as a natural catchment for floodwaters from the San Mateo-Marikina and Nangka Rivers. The tumana no longer serves this function. A free patent land title awarded to a well-to-do physician and resident of the nearby town of Marikina in 1968, which was sold to the construction company, gave the latter discretion to disregard the provision in the land title to demarcate and preserve as permanent timberland a 40 meter strip of land from the riverbanks. The proviso stipulated that the land strip was to be planted exclusively to trees of known economic value and ought not be cleared even for ordinary farming purposes.

The construction company did not follow this proviso. It started drilling a

deep well within the 40-meter easement to extract groundwater for the industrial use of its proposed cement batching plant. Interestingly, an earlier attempt in 1991 by a quarry operator from the town of Montalban to establish a rock crushing plant on the tumana had been overwhelmingly rejected by subdivision homeowners. However, the cement company had a much easier time because it acquired the title to the land in November 1995 after winning the contract to construct the Batasan-San Mateo Bridge located about 200 meters from the tumana. Inquiries lodged at the municipal office revealed that the construction of a cement batching plant was allowed to expedite the construction of the bridge. In fact, the company had the full support of the Sangguniang Bayan and the Mayor who passed a series of municipal resolutions (Resolutions No. 95-110 and 95-112) approving the project and re-classifying the tumana from agricultural land to industrial use.²

The six bukloids were consulted during their weekly 'bibliarasal', a one and a half hour session in which cell members pray the rosary, read the gospel for the coming Sunday, engage in a few minutes of silent meditation and share insights. Since the sharing was headed by the tagadiwa, the discussions after the liturgical exercises served as the group's informal perception survey at the grassroots level on the construction. The discussions revealed an overwhelming opposition to the construction of the cement batching plant for many reasons, among them:

- Exposure of children to the very real risk of being run-over by traversing cement mixer trucks;
- Inhalation of cement dust day in and day out;
- Pollution of the San Mateo-Marikina River with cement sludge;
- Disappearance of our tumana;
- Likelihood of water shortage;
- Possible illegality of the cement batching plant near a major river and its being built on agricultural land despite municipal resolutions and ordinances to the contrary;
- Noise levels; and
- Changes to the elevation of the tumana area as dumped filling materials would make the level of our houses lower, increasing our vulnerability to flooding.

Our community wasted no time in organizing ourselves to oppose the construction of the cement batching plant. For its part, the construction company quickly commenced its illegal activities: dumping filling materials at the tumana area until late at night, drilling holes to extract underground water for industrial use, and constructing a perimeter wall to protect the site from floodwaters, so rendering the immediate residents more vulnerable.

These acts aroused our communal survival instinct. We had no choice but to move against perceived hazards and risks. We foresaw our vulnerability and witnessed it increase with the construction and eventual operation of

such a cement batching plant adjacent to our community. As a community, we decided to have none of these.

We embarked on a program of community advocacy for our own and our children's sake and instituted a program of disaster mitigation, albeit of a non-structural nature. First, we sought assistance from Saligan, an alternative lawyers group based at the Institute for Social Order in Ateneo de Manila University. Saligan, in turn, referred us to Tanggol Kalikasan, the legal arm of the Haribon Foundation, since our issue was environmental in nature. We wrote the Sangguniang Bayan requesting a public hearing to discuss the merits and demerits of the project and were accompanied to the subsequent session by a lawyer from Tanggol Kalikasan who acted as our counsel. A signature-gathering campaign was launched in the community to dramatize to the Mayor of San Mateo our strong opposition to the establishment of a cement batching plant in our vicinity. To prevent the truck haulers from dumping filling materials on the tumana, we barricaded the entrance to the site with tree trunks, cement posts and old galvanized iron sheets and posted placards with messages denouncing the project. People joined the picket, lighting bonfire through the long nights of protests.

Through our own initiatives, the issue was elevated to the office of the Sangguniang Panlalawigan of Rizal province and letters were sent to all the board members stating our case and requesting their support. On two separate occasions, three board

members conducted on-site inspections to acquaint themselves with the situation. The municipal agrarian reform officer of San Mateo followed suit and also conducted her own investigation. In February 1996, the whole community including the school children staged a protest march to the town plaza to gather in front of the munisipiyo. Just as we were leaving the subdivision, our way was blocked by a squad of policemen determined to prevent us from proceeding any further. However, thanks to the timely intervention of SP board member Atty. Enrique Rodriguez who was able to mediate with the police officer-in-charge, we were permitted to continue with our protest march.

Through the legal assistance of *Tanggol Kalikasan*, we also lodged a formal complaint to the executive director of the National Water Resources Board (NWRB) on the issue of the illegal extraction of ground water for industrial use by the construction company. The complaint resulted in two appearances at the quasi-judicial board of the NWRB. Key officers and members of Buklod Tao were present at a conference called by the technical director of the Environmental Management for Protected Areas Systems of the Region 4 Office of the Department of Environment and Natural Resources (DENR). Moreover, we were summoned to attend a public hearing at the Laguna Lake Development Authority in the provincial capitol to discuss air, water and noise pollution relative to the cement batching plant. At all times, I was anxious to maintain

close communication and liaison with the diocese. The presence of the diocesan in-charge of BEC and the diocesan program coordinator for the Social Action Center during the public hearing at the Sangguniang Bayan greatly uplifted all the bukloids. As a final step, we sent an open letter to the Mayor, questioning the legality of the municipal resolutions and ordinance that approved the conversion of the land from agricultural to industrial use.

Throughout the protests, our bukloids were undergoing a rite of passage, a maturing of sorts. From a mere liturgical-bible reading-meditation-sharing of insights group that held weekly gatherings, we had journeyed to a new level of liberation that I had been told about during the BEC-CO training of the diocese. Although this word 'liberation' was never uttered during the entire advocacy process, it manifested itself in the praxis for the community: we had no other option but to act and free ourselves from the clutches of political arrogance, utter disregard for the welfare of the marginalized by the more influential and the rich, and the eventual enslavement of the entire community to the clutches of flash floods, inundation, siltation and pollution of the nearby rivers.

Our predisaster, nonstructural mitigation initiatives lasted seven months. Buklod Tao emerged victorious in many different ways. We were able to prove that the united voice of the peripheral communities could become a resounding clarion call for concerned government agencies

Counter Disaster Plan sa Panahon ng Baha

SENARYO I: Patuloy na malakas na buhos ng ulan sa loob ng anim na oras.

PAGKILOS: Bantay-ilog; iaktibo ang EOC at ROC; early warning; pasimula ng komunikasyon sa CDRC, DDMC- parish at diocesan.

SENARYO II: Pag-apaw ng ilog Marikina at Nangka.

PAGKILOS: Paglikas ng mga bata, matanda, babae sa classroom at sa kapilya; headcounting ng mga evacuees; ibayong warning/alarm.

SENARYO III: Baha umabot sa buong tumana at kalsada at dalawang libis.

PAGKILOS: Malawakang paggamit ng rescue boat, rescue rope, ibayong warning, ibayong communication link. Paglikas ng mga pamilya o tao na hindi kumilos sa senaryo II at nakulong na ng lumaking baha.

SENARYO IV: Baha umabot na sa buong subdivison at aabot pa sa Gen. Luna National Road

(Worst Case Scenario).

PAGKILOS: Ibayong warning – matagal na pagrepeke ng kampana ng kapilya, pagdulog sa transportasyon ng mga tao, rescue ng mga naiwan pa sa mga bahay, massive evacuation ng buong sitio papunta sa BANCOM at MARVI HILLS, ibayong communication link sa CDRC, DDMC, sa parokya at head-counting ng mga evacuees.

and civil society to take notice and eventually extend support to a legitimate cause. It was a triumph for the rule of law in upholding the Water Code of the Philippines, the rules and regulations of the National Water Resources Board, and the Laguna Lake Development Authority. Even if we did not find allies in the Sangguniang Bayan of San Mateo, we were able to establish rapport with the Region 4 Office of the DENR and the Sangguniang Panlalawigan of Rizal province which issued a Cease and

Desist Order and a resolution nullifying and voiding the municipal ordinances that were directed against our welfare. The whole episode also served notice to the local politicians of our town that they could not just simply adopt resolutions and ordinances at whim or upon the dictates of the rich and the influential without first consulting the affected stakeholders.

Despite our relative success, damage had been inflicted on our immediate environment. Thus, our pre-disaster preparedness needed to be

reinforced. Preparedness after all is an on-going process rather than a one shot deal. We could not stop with obtaining a single policy or piece of legislation. We had to keep our functional cohesiveness intact for the common good by developing plans to sustain and reinforce our organization.

Buklod Tao was a mere fledgling peoples' organization in 1996. Freshly scarred from political innuendos, harassments, and even legal suits, we set our goals towards the acquisition of much needed resources.

Earlier this paper described the formation and equipping of our three DM teams in a one-day seminar. Buklod Tao was able to conduct the activity with a small grant from the Royal Netherlands Embassy in Manila. Thirty thousand pesos were earmarked for the disaster preparedness component of our project with the Embassy. That small amount was well spent: Php 6,000 for the production of training kits and the Citizens' Disaster Response Center DM Handbook, *Bagyo, Lindol, Bulkan at Iba Pa*; and Php 26,000 for the fabrication of three rescue fiber glass boats, and the purchase of ropes, flashlights, batteries, megaphones, and first aid kits.

The second phase of our pre-disaster preparedness initiatives (following the first phase or the community's all-out opposition against the cement batching plant) can be chronicled as follows:

June 22, 1997: One-day seminar/workshop on disaster management in our community chapel;

June 24, 1997: Purchase of ropes, megaphones, flashlights, and first aid kits;

June 27, 1997: completion and delivery of our first fiber glass boat;

June 30, 1997: completion and delivery of our second fiber glass boat;

July 2, 1997: completion and delivery of our third fiber glass boat;

July 5, 1997: Meeting of DM teams and the creation of a Counter Disaster Plan; and

July 12, 1997: Rescue drill at the river and distribution of equipment to the three teams.

On 18 August or 57 days after we formally organized for disaster management, Typhoon Ibiang brought its heavy rains. Although several houses were swept away by the waters, no one was killed and many people were able to save their belongings. Since then, everyone felt less insecure during typhoons because of flood-level monitoring, early warning monitoring, rescue operations, and the relief assistance activities of the DRC and Buklod Tao.

POSTSCRIPT

Although Buklod Tao is the only people's organization in the newly formed Philippine Disaster Management Forum, it ensures that the presence, voices and interests of communities in CBDM are felt, heard, and upheld. After successfully engaging in disaster preparedness and

emergency response activities, Buklod Tao has expanded the scope of its operations to other vulnerable communities in building-up their own capacities in CBDM.

Word of Buklod Tao's activities have gone the rounds and neighboring communities have requested assistance in the training and formation of their own Disaster Rescue Committee (DRC). Aside from engaging in major community programs, Buklod Tao members have also helped Banaba Extension prepare for disasters. A one-day Disaster Management Orientation (DMO) was followed by a two-day Disaster Preparedness Training (DPT) in January 2002 culminating in the formation of a DRC. Buklod Tao has continued to help this DRC by passing on its old but still serviceable preparedness logistics.

Hazard, capacity, and vulnerability assessments workshops with Buklod Tao leaders as resource persons were also conducted with villagers in four other nearby communities: Riverside

Libis, Riverside Dulo, Riverside Bungad, and Pulang Lupa, all part of Barangay Santo Niño. In June 2002, a two-day DPT was held in Sitio Gipit. A year later, a counter disaster planning session was held and a DRC formed. Upon referral by the Social Action Center of the diocese of Antipolo, Buklod Tao even assisted in the formation of a disaster management committee in a far-flung rural community at Barangay Calawis (Antipolo City), some 40 kilometers from Manila. After a two-day DPT, the Calawis Community-based Disaster Group was formed.

Buklod Tao was even given the opportunity to present its disaster response and mitigation activities in the First National Conference on Community-based Disaster Management that was organized by the National Disaster Coordinating Council, the National Defense College of the Philippines, and the Philippine Disaster Management Forum on 28-30 January 2003 to showcase "good practices" in CBDM and to aid in the process of building safer and more disaster-resilient communities.

NOTES

- 1 Effective Flood Control Operation System (EFCOS) posted the following water level information for the same river on that night: 11:00pm – 25.19 meters.; 12:00am – 25.23 meters; 1:00am, 19 Aug. – 25.36 meters; 2:00am – 25.52 meters; 3:00am – 25.71 meters; 4:00am – 25.84 meters; 5:00am – 25.87 meters.
- 2 These ordinances and a subsequent one (Ordinance No. 96-02) reaffirming this intent were later overturned by a resolution of the Sangguniang Panlalawigan (SP) of Rizal province (Resolution No. 96-38) that adopted: "A Resolution declaring Ordinance No. 96-02 of the Municipality of San Mateo, Rizal as null and void." Furthermore the SP Resolution also "resolved to order the Municipal Government of San Mateo and their assignees to cease and desist from any further action relative to same ordinance."