

# Mobilizing the Support of Less Vulnerable Sectors for Disaster Resilient Communities

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In community-based disaster management, the participation of the vulnerable sectors as primary actors is essential to building disaster resilient communities. Equally important is the mobilization of less vulnerable sectors. While they are external to a disaster situation, their support to diverse disaster management activities initiated by the vulnerable sectors is vital to increasing the resiliency for their communities.

The very definition of disaster denotes the need for external support. For example, the Center for Research on the Epidemiology of Disasters defines disaster as “a situation or event which overwhelms local capacity, necessitating a request to national or international level for external assistance.” A cursory Internet search would reveal that the World Health Organization (WHO), the American Red Cross, and many other organizations subscribe to similar if not identical definitions.

The requirement for external assistance becomes even more necessary in the context of impoverished countries like the Philippines. Situated in an area of high seismic, volcanic, and tropical cyclone activity, the Philippines is predisposed to disasters. Widespread poverty and

the consequent vulnerability of the majority of the country's population complete the scenario of frequent and chronic disasters of severe magnitude. The same widespread poverty limits the capacity of Filipinos to recover from a disaster and to be better prepared for the next hazardous event. It does not help that government has not given disaster management sufficient attention it deserves. A review of the Philippine medium term development plans and the annual general appropriations acts, for instance, show that disaster management (DM) has not permeated government planning and not enough resources are allocated for DM programs.

Any person, group, organization or community external to a disaster area is a potential source of support for building community resilience to disasters, even among vulnerable groups and disaster victims. The farmers of vegetable-growing Baguio City, for example, are known to contribute part of their produce to disaster relief efforts. The community disaster preparedness committees organized by Tabang sa mga Biktima sa Bicol (TABI) in the Bicol Region are also known to part with some of their meager produce in support of TABI's

relief effort, on top of participating as volunteers of the NGO.

The less vulnerable sectors have better means to support the disaster management initiatives of the vulnerable sectors. They possess appropriate knowledge and skills and are financially and materially in a good position to assist the vulnerable sectors. More importantly, however, they are similarly moved by compassion, charity, humanitarian concern, and the universal aspiration for full human development.

The less vulnerable sectors include students who do volunteer work during major emergencies, and members of the academe who contribute to increasing disaster awareness by integrating disaster management into the regular curriculum and launching fund-raising campaigns during emergencies. They also include scientists and professionals who contribute their skills in developing and implementing disaster management projects, as well as entrepreneurs and corporations who donate either cash or other resources to disaster management endeavors. The less vulnerable sector, in its broadest sense, even include foreign donors, be they nongovernment organizations (NGOs), governments, or multilateral agencies.

Disaster management, particularly relief programs, often connote foreign donors or donations that are much bigger compared to resources contributed locally. However, large external grants for entire programs, the free services of medical professionals, and the volunteer time rendered by

students are all of one weave. Regardless of amount, they are all "donations" in support of vulnerable sectors.

Some NGOs involved in disaster management, such as the Citizens' Disaster Response Center/Network (CDRC/N) and the Philippine National Red Cross take on the singular role of mobilizing support, both local and overseas, to the at-risk communities and vulnerable sectors in the Philippines. This mobilizing role involves but is not limited to launching local fund campaigns, organizing volunteers, and accessing foreign grants and donations.

### **MOBILIZING OVERSEAS SUPPORT FOR COMMUNITY INITIATIVES TOWARDS DISASTER RESILIENCE**

In a situation where numerous hazards escalate into disasters and government lacks the resources, foresight and the will to decisively address disaster-related and development issues, NGOs have become significant actors in disaster management. They assume a range of functions, from criticizing government's deficiencies and advocating positive action to complementing its work by delivering services that fill 'gaps' in government's disaster management programs. While they augment government work, NGOs are quick to argue that government should not pass on NGOs the responsibility of attending to the general welfare of disaster victims and at-risk communities.

NGOs often look to foreign grants to finance their operations. The budgets of many NGOs are largely sourced overseas. Foreign grant-seeking is a highly competitive endeavor with uncertain results but grant-seekers persist because the substantial support from foreign grant givers far outstrips local grant-giving capacity. Substantial grants mean greater program coverage, benefiting more disaster victims and at-risk groups. Substantial grants also mean more comprehensive interventions, whose probability of program success in terms of making a difference in the lives of disaster victims and at-risk communities is greater compared to piece-meal projects that are resorted to because of funding shortage. Moreover, from an administrative point of view, there is almost the same amount of effort put to implementing a PhP500,000.00 project and a PhP5 million project.

But partnerships with foreign grant-givers are not made in heaven. It is not uncommon for southern NGOs to bemoan, albeit privately or among themselves, increasingly stringent donor requirements: different guidelines (for applications, proposals and reports), performance indicators, financial reports and monitoring systems of funding donors as well as changing policies and priorities. The grumbling is not completely without basis. Imagine a relief or other program where several donors contribute funds. In terms of reporting alone, the NGO for a single project will prepare a different report for each of the contributing donors. Some say it is a matter of cutting and pasting in order

to conform to a specific guideline and format but experience proves that it is much more than that.

In the recent Emergency Southeast Asia Network (EM-SEANET) Workshop on Improving Data Quality for Natural Disasters and Complex Emergencies, discussions inevitably led to the same issue of donors adopting different grant-giving guidelines.\* A participant coming from a Philippine government agency forwarded a less popular view that grant-seekers have no choice but to accept this reality. A more non-conformist view, supported by many participants, however, was to advocate for the development, and adoption by donors, of standard guidelines. The international workshop participants, most of them with long years of experience in disaster management, and representing governments, academe, NGOs and multilateral agencies, believed that standardization of donor guidelines is a realistic objective.

The issues on guidelines, reports, indicators, monitoring and evaluation are variations of the theme of accountability and performance. Donors in general entrust humanitarian aid and grants to NGOs or other intermediary organizations with the expectation that the latter will act as responsible stewards of the resources intended for identified program beneficiaries. They expect that aid will be used efficiently and in a manner that will be most beneficial to program beneficiaries.

Grant-seeking and grant-giving can be portrayed as an accountability chain, where the southern NGO is

accountable to the northern NGO, and the northern NGO is accountable to the back donor, if the northern NGO accesses back donor funding for the southern NGO's project. The southern NGO must satisfy the demands for accountability and transparency of the northern NGO who must in turn satisfy the demands of the back donor. The back donor must also satisfy the demands of some other higher authority. Finally, all are being held accountable by the public, especially if they receive public contributions or donations.

In the biannual meeting of the Active Learning Network for Accountability and Professionalism in Humanitarian Action (ALNAP) held in New Delhi in October 2002, a "radical" view on accountability was forwarded. Drawing from her long experience with CDRC and later the Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC), Zenaida Delica-Willison observed that the issue of accountability is often a top-to-bottom affair. She proposed that 'upwards accountability' should also be increasingly looked into in the relationships among grant-givers and grant-seekers.

The proposition was radical because most participants to the biannual meeting came from multilateral agencies, governments and northern NGOs. There was only a sprinkling of southern NGOs. But upward accountability is not a totally new concept. In the Philippines, people's organizations demand transparency and accountability from NGOs, who often act as intermediaries seeking funding for the projects of

people's organizations and communities. This practice is indicative of the fact that the efforts to transform and empower communities and people's organizations are bearing fruit, and that the relationship between NGOs, POs and communities is healthy and vibrant. Nevertheless, the present arrangements put the southern NGO at the receiving end of accountability and transparency demands from the top (northern NGO and back donor) and the bottom (people's organization and community). In the Philippines, there is even the additional demand from government agencies, which by legislative fiat have licensing and accreditation powers over NGOs.

Southern NGOs are sensitive to this issue because many lack the institutional capabilities necessary for them to satisfy competing demands coming from various sources – demands that are often not backed up by requisite capability building support that will enable NGOs to meet rising expectations. Many grants do not provide sufficient support for program administration, expecting that this will be part of the local contribution of the southern NGOs. Institutional capability building projects also often don't get funded. This disqualifies small NGOs who may have developed good projects in collaboration with POs and communities.

In the less than ideal situation that currently prevails, the proposal to develop and adopt common guidelines for monitoring and reporting disaster events, for project applications and for monitoring and reporting project

implementation is a welcome development. However, how this progresses or if this will progress at all remains to be seen. Meanwhile, southern NGOs have no other recourse but to work bilaterally on improving relationships with donors to a level of trust that would allow for minimal narrative and financial reporting and monitoring visits. This would give the NGOs more time to pay more attention to operational program concerns. Achieving this level of trust presumes of course that the funding relationships entered into by the NGO are a product of diligent and responsible matching of PO and community needs and capacities (including that of the NGO) with the resources being made available by donors and a clear specification of donor expectations of NGO, the PO and the community concerned.

The development of the relationship between CDRC and the Dutch Relief and Rehabilitation Agency (now CARE Nederland) is illustrative of how building mutual confidence and trust can reduce the administrative burden of NGOs. In 1997, when CDRC and DRA collaborated on their first project, DRA required monthly narrative and financial reports, on top of quarterly monitoring visits. This was the first demanding engagement of CDRC in terms of frequency of reports and monitoring visits. While it had the capability to meet this demand being a relatively big and stable organization, CDRC's regional centers had less personnel and would therefore have to exert more effort to meet CDRC and the donor's reporting and monitoring demands. CDRC and the regional

centers approached this issue by showing DRA that they were capable of meeting the requirements. At the same time, CDRC and CDRN pointed out to the donor that the requirements were drawing staff from away from operational concerns, and that it was therefore in the best interests of the program and the program beneficiaries that the requirements were relaxed. Over time, as CDRC and the regional centers proved their reliability and with built-up donor trust, reporting requirements were significantly reduced. The resulting partnership between the two organizations thus became even stronger.

The strong collaboration between CDRC and CARE Nederland facilitated the successful implementation of projects that increased community awareness of disasters, provided community members basic disaster preparedness skills, enhanced community capacity to respond to emergencies, and trained them to implement and manage simple disaster mitigation projects.

But even well-developed partnerships characterized by such values as transparency and mutual trust, respect of internal processes and organizational independence, well-defined and observed roles and responsibilities, close cooperation and long-term support, and commonality of development framework do not ensure sufficient and uninterrupted support. Grant-giving bodies change policies and priorities. They are also sensitive to public opinion and mass media pressure (which is understandable, as the funds they

dispense often come from public sources). Thus, even in partnerships that have lasted the better part of two decades, it is not surprising to find the financing of NGO programs drying up or, at the very least, reduced. Changing priorities and reduced funds pose a big challenge to NGOs, who have taken on the responsibility of facilitating the match between the needs and capabilities of the vulnerable sectors and the kind of support being offered by grant-givers.

Eventually, as the need for financing relief programs and other disaster management activities persists because of recurring and chronic disasters, grant-seeking NGOs are usually told to seek assistance elsewhere, and to increasingly tap local sources. Reversing the balance between foreign and local financing in favor of the latter is even suggested.

It is true that NGOs have yet to take full advantage of local resources in their various forms. On the other hand, to suggest reliance on local sources as the primary source of financing operations over overseas sources is self-delusion and a cop-out. Local resources are simply not sufficient to take the place of international humanitarian assistance. The economy does not create enough surplus resources to finance humanitarian action. The reality is that for many more years, this balance will remain tilted in favor of support coming from outside the country, if the disaster management programs of the NGOs are to make a significant impact on the country. Even the Corporate Network for Disaster

Response (CNDR), through which member-corporations course their relief and other forms of assistance, has to tap foreign grant giving bodies such as the USAID for major projects

However, NGOs must still aim to strike a balance between mobilizing local resources and tapping foreign grants for financing humanitarian and disaster management projects. Employing more creative means, NGOs must increasingly mobilize local financial, material and human resources.

## **MOBILIZING LOCAL SUPPORT**

While local donors cannot yet supplant the financial capacity of foreign donors, they nevertheless possess a unique character that is equally important for community-based disaster management and in building community resilience to disasters. Local resource mobilization is usually associated with fund campaigns. Such campaigns often accumulate goods such like used clothes, food items ranging from rice, canned goods, instant noodles, milk and bottled water, and to a limited extent, cash donations. (The value of locally donated goods always far surpasses local cash donations.) Not sufficiently recognized, however, are the brain and brawn power, of local donors which are valuable contributions in and of themselves.

The CDRN has long recognized the role of the less vulnerable sectors in disaster management. Mobilizing local resources and sustaining local partnerships are accorded great

importance by the network because it entails more sacrifice to contribute to disaster management in the context of chronic crisis. Local contributions are valued because they are statements of solidarity with and support for vulnerable sectors. There is greater empathy between the two groups as they experience the same disasters, although they differ in the degree of their vulnerability. The motivation on the part of the donors therefore goes beyond simple humanitarian concern to the shared aspiration of becoming more resilient to disasters by jointly addressing both immediate post-disaster needs and long-term vulnerability reduction.

CDRC mobilizes the solidarity and support of the less vulnerable sectors through its local partnership development program which consists of three inter-related components: networking and institutional partnership building, volunteer organizing, and sustained local fund campaigns.

The sustained, year-long, local fund campaigns evolved from CDRC's earlier practice of issuing a public appeal for donations each time a major disaster occurs. Realizing that the stockpiling of relief goods is an important disaster preparedness task, the one time fund campaigns developed into sustained year-long ones. Designed to develop a culture of preparedness among CDRC partners and contacts, such campaigns also contribute to the network's efficiency in delivering services during actual emergencies. After all, from an operational point of view, fund

campaigning during actual disasters intrudes into emergency operations, although CDRC recognizes the reality that donors are more responsive to appeals during actual emergencies.

Institutional partnership building and volunteer organizing is the solid foundation on which the successes of the fund campaigns are built. Institutional partnership agreements often include explicit provisions to initiate or support CDRC's fund campaigns, especially during major emergencies. Volunteers also initiate their own fund campaigns in support of CDRC, or support the regular CDRC staff tasked with running the fund campaign.

Institutional partnership building is premised on mutually beneficial relations, graduating from the one-way flow of benefits where the partner institution contributes to the needs of CDRC without getting anything beyond psychic income in return. This practice was reversed in 2000 when CDRC, with UNICEF support, assisted the Philippine Women's University (PWU) in improving their level of disaster preparedness. It conducted disaster preparedness training among teaching and nonteaching personnel, helped update the disaster contingency plan of the university, and conducted a campus-wide evacuation drill. At the time, the PWU had been a consistent benefactor of CDRC's fund campaigns.

The PWU experiment in two-way partnership proved successful. It increased disaster awareness among students, faculty and nonteaching

personnel, improving the university's level of disaster preparedness, while boosting the fund raising efforts of CDRC. This experience has since been replicated in many schools and universities such as the St. Scholastica's College, Miriam College, San Beda College, Philippine Science High School, all in Metro Manila, in Maharlika Institute of Technology in Tawi-Tawi, and the Mambajao National High School in Camiguin.

CDRC's partnership with Samahang Operasyon Sagip (SOS) is another case of an institutional linkage based on mutually beneficial relations, although of a slightly different nature. SOS is a volunteer organization of medical students and health professionals that provides free medical services during disasters. By agreement, CDRC taps SOS for volunteers when disaster situations require emergency health services. This arrangement was first tested during the implementation of an ECHO (European Commission Humanitarian Aid Office)-funded relief program in 1999.

The arrangement was a success from the perspective of CDRC and SOS. From CDRC's viewpoint, the health component of the relief program was completed according to schedule and specific component objectives were met. In fact, the component surpassed the planned results because SOS combined dispensing emergency health care with education inputs to health care. While patients were waiting for their turn to be attended to by volunteer health practitioners, mini-seminars on health

care were conducted by SOS volunteers.

For the perspective of SOS, on the other hand, their partnership with CDRC allowed them to fulfill their mission even if they fail to raise the funds necessary to finance their emergency operations. Their volunteers have also gained greater awareness of disasters and disaster-related issues because of their involvement in the operations. Consequently, SOS has committed itself to continue volunteering their professional skills for future disaster relief efforts.

Judging from CDRC's experience with SOS, science and technology and other professional organizations can be tapped for their specialized skills to undertake or support network activities such as participatory rapid appraisal, disaster risk assessments, and post-disaster field surveys. Business groups can be asked to address warehousing needs or to supply relief goods at competitive prices and on short notice. The range of institutional partnership arrangements that can be set up are numerous and varied.

CDRC's institutional partnerships with schools and universities have facilitated volunteer work. The presence of a formal institutional partnership, however, is not a prerequisite to volunteer organizing. Volunteer organizing involves the formation of quick reaction teams and disaster volunteer teams in schools. Quick reaction teams activated during emergencies



undertake a wide range of emergency response-related activities such as fund raising, information dissemination, participation in field assessment surveys, disaster monitoring, and repacking and distribution of relief goods. In fact, disaster volunteer teams can have annual plans and undertake year-round activities. Aside from engaging in fund raising and participating in emergency response activities, they may also involve themselves in advocacy activities, project implementation and monitoring, community integration, training and education. CDRC has organized quick reaction teams and disaster volunteer teams in schools and universities in Metro Manila as well as in far-away Camiguin and Tawi-tawi provinces.

The possibilities inherent in local volunteer organizing, networking, institutional partnership building and resource generation are wide-ranging, as the experience of CDRC and CDRN attest. This is one of their sources of strength. The regional centers in particular, despite the limited number of regular staff working on shoestring budgets are able to undertake large operations and deliver significant support to communities and people's organizations as a result of local volunteer organizing, networking, institutional partnership building and resource generation. In one sense, CDRN is a network of networks, as each member develops and nurtures its own volunteers, partners, and networks.

## CONCLUSION

NGOs perform a very important role in transforming at-risk communities into disaster resilient ones – that of mobilizing support to initiatives of communities and people's organizations. This role demands a deep sense of responsibility on the part of NGOs, who must see to it that in the mad scramble for financing for humanitarian and disaster management programs, they do not lose sight of the reason for seeking grant, which is to facilitate the delivery of assistance appropriate to the needs and capabilities of disaster victims and at-risk communities. The debate over policies, guidelines, reports, monitoring visits and evaluations can be seen as driven by the common desire of all disaster management actors to improve the system's ability to deliver the assistance to engaged target beneficiaries on the ground.

The southern NGOs, the organizations responsible for operations on the ground, work in very difficult environments. Limited resources allow them to maintain a very lean staff. Since NGOs cannot provide competitive compensation, sufficient means of transportation, and adequate communications and office equipment, they often lose good people to other organizations. While working with NGOs, the staff is often exposed to potentially dangerous security situations. Yet NGOs persevere in their work, driven by their commitment to provide humanitarian assistance, save lives and property, and make a difference in the lives of

disaster victims and at-risk communities.

The economic realities of a developing and disaster-prone country like the Philippines limits the potential of local support to outpace international support and the possibility of freeing the country from relying on humanitarian assistance from the international community, at least in the immediate future. However, this remains a long-term goal.

At present, the issues about guidelines, reports, monitoring and evaluation can best be addressed bilaterally by both grant-seekers and grant-givers. Building mutual trust and respect, fostering greater cooperation and understanding, and underscoring the common motivation of compassion, charity, humanitarian concern, and the aspiration for full human development are means of ensuring productive bilateral discussions. By not losing sight of the joint mission of donors and NGOs, which is to aid and comfort disaster victims and at-risk communities, grant-givers and grant-seekers may be able to resolve outstanding issues. It is not unreasonable to expect though that northern NGOs and back donors, collaborating with southern NGOs, people's organizations, and

communities, can make the work of aiding and comforting disaster victims and at-risk communities less difficult and more fruitful through standard guidelines for applications and reporting.

Community-based disaster management provides a fresh approach and opens up a new arena for mobilizing the support of less vulnerable local groups to disaster management initiatives at the community level. With imagination and creativity, local support can still be substantially boosted. The unique character of such support can be effectively combined with overseas contributions to create a synergy that external substantial grants by themselves might not be able to achieve. There is enough evidence to show the positive contributions of overseas support to the transformation of at-risk communities into more resilient ones. The full potential of local support is just not being actualized. The challenge to all disaster management actors — vulnerable sectors, people's organizations, non-government organizations, and donors — is to contribute their share to unleashing the power of combining overseas and local support to building disaster resilient communities and replicating them all over the country.

## NOTE

- \* Organized by the Centre for Research on Epidemiology of Disasters (CRED), University of Louvain in Belgium, and the University of the Philippines in Manila, held in Manila 3-4 June 2003, with funding support from the European Union.