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Ketsana and its Aftermath: Lessons on Social Resilience

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Typhoon Ketsana in the Philippines has exposed both the weaknesses of government-led disaster preparations and the strengths of civil society in responding to the crisis. Clearly planning for disaster is vital. There are also lessons from the outpouring of voluntarism in the aftermath.

TYPHOON KETSANA has left much of Manila submerged in floodwaters. As of 2 October, approximately 300 people have died, and over 2.2 million people were directly affected by the resulting floods. While the country frequently experiences typhoons, Ketsana poured more rain than any in Philippine history, exceeding a record set over 40 years ago.

Civil Society at the Forefront, Government at the Rear

The response from Filipinos at home and abroad has been massive. Thousands of Filipinos have trooped to evacuation and relief centres to volunteer in processing and distributing food, supplies and equipment to victims of the disaster. Using social networking websites, mobile phones, and blogs, they have been able to pass vital information and on areas affected, the locations of people in need of rescue, and where to donate relief goods and cash. Volunteer efforts included the creation of a missing persons database using GoogleMaps software. The mobilisation of volunteers and donations has proceeded independently of government intervention, exceeding government efforts in collecting and distributing food and emergency goods packages.

The government, in contrast, has been criticised for its poor response and its lack of preparation for the disaster. The weather bureau has blamed the disaster on climate change, saying that there was no way the government could have anticipated the rapid flooding. This was contradicted by reports that deforestation contributed to the floods. Defence Secretary Gilbert Teodoro, head of the National Disaster Coordination Council (NDCC), was criticised for having insufficient rubber boats and helicopters deployed at the onset of the Typhoon. Many people have been rescued not by the police or the army, but by volunteers creating makeshift boats out of whatever they could find. In anticipation of another typhoon, the President announced a preventive evacuation of affected areas, to avoid repeating earlier mistakes.

As disaster relief proceeded apace, some politicians were reported to have capitalised on the disaster to boost their political capital. In one case, people who did not possess coupons bearing the visage of an ex-president were not allowed to claim relief goods. President Arroyo herself contributed to confusion by designating the presidential residence as an evacuation centre, cancelling that order, and reverting back to the original plan. Another policy which has hindered relief efforts is the official policy of taxing goods and aid sent from abroad, unless these are routed through the Department of Social Welfare and Development, the ministry designated to distribute aid.

A Missing Partnership?

While the spirit of voluntarism among *Manileños* has been impressive, insufficient efforts have been undertaken to coordinate the volunteers and the flow of donations to critical areas. The government has not attempted to coordinate its efforts with that of civil society, nor has it provided a system to allocate and guide volunteers to the worst affected areas. In some evacuation centres, there has been an excess of volunteers. In others, the lack of them has hampered the distribution of relief goods. The fact that the missing persons database mentioned earlier was created by a volunteer exemplified the ingenuity of private individuals. But it also revealed that the NDCC had yet to come up with a system of identifying and rescuing missing persons.

It is clear that civil society has taken a leadership role that is normally filled by the government. However, the Philippine government should not abscond its responsibilities and instead engage civil society in an equal partnership. Given the massive support offered by the private sector, the government should create a comprehensive plan for coordinating its rescue and disaster relief efforts with civil society. By improving the situation map based on data collected by volunteers, the government can efficiently distribute its rescue efforts, and also mobilise volunteers in areas it cannot reach. It can also tap bloggers and social networking sites to disseminate information on flooded areas to avoid, shortages of key resources, and of the identities of rescued survivors. Finally, relief centres should have a system for processing volunteers for specific duties and areas of operations, to ensure that energy and manpower are not wasted.

Alternative Form of Social Resilience

The considerable efforts that volunteers have contributed should not be discounted. Many working professionals have taken unpaid leave to contribute to the distribution of emergency goods. Graphic artists have created awareness posters for free. Filipinos abroad have pooled donations for the aid agencies, and have tried to raise awareness about the disaster in their host countries. Despite the inadequate government response to the disaster, individuals have taken it upon themselves to aid victims of Typhoon Ketsana in any way they can.

The Filipino term for this phenomenon, *bayanihan* (loosely translated as “mutual cooperation for the public good”) illustrates a social resilience that has ensured the survival of civic unity despite the depredations Manila has endured. Resilience is not determined solely by the level of disaster readiness a state maintains, but also by a people’s attitude towards adversity. Despite the Philippines’ weak political infrastructure, despite entrenched corruption and prevalent poverty; ordinary people have maintained a strong *bayanihan* spirit.

The crisis has deeply affected millions of Filipinos, but it has also brought out the best in them through the spirit of voluntarism. The Philippine government should appreciate this resource and ensure that it is used intelligently by channeling it and allowing it complement its own efforts. Other countries with similar vulnerabilities should also examine this untapped resource and examine how its potential can be realised in the event of natural disasters. By doing so, they can ensure that their own social resilience is enhanced.

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