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Food Security Post-Calamity: A Chronic Dilemma

By Jurise Athena Oliveros and Paul S. Teng

Synopsis

Many Asian countries are highly susceptible to climate hazards, resulting in food insecurity. The magnitude of the devastation of typhoon Haiyan should serve as a clarion call for regional action to improve food security in the region.

Commentary

TYPHOON HAIYAN which swept across the central Philippines in November 2013 left in its wake widespread devastation. The number of lives lost exceeded 5,000. The gargantuan damage caused to property and the agriculture sector has made a significant dent to the economy of the region and serve as an ominous reminder of how the country in general remains vulnerable to natural disasters.

The affected areas encountered multiple problems in the aftermath of the typhoon chief of which was the lack of access to food and water. Distribution of food, water and medicine was hampered by an incapacitated local government and damaged infrastructure particularly roads and communications. Surviving victims were left to scour for food and basic necessities from the massive heaps of rubble that were their homes. As the country began to recover, discussions have been rekindled on long-term solutions and disaster responses.

Typhoon aftermath

While there was an influx of aid from countries around the world, distribution of food had been paralysed by impaired transport and communication as well as an immobilised local government. The adverse impact of natural calamities exacerbates the perilous food security in the Philippines and other Southeast Asian countries posed by volatile commodity prices, waning agricultural productivity and changing food demand.

Under threat were the three main dimensions of food security – supply of food or its availability, access to food and the utilisation of food. These were causes for alarm as they could result potentially in civil unrest, economic decline and political instability. Severed access to food in the wake of the typhoon led to increased reports of violence, panic, looting and hoarding.

Hence distribution of food was a priority for relief efforts. However the task of providing food access initially overwhelmed the government. A week after the catastrophe, there were still reports of families unable to receive food relief due to the lack of coordination and a visible chain of command and distribution.

The impact was amplified since the typhoon struck during the crucial harvesting period, affecting smallholders who were dependent on the harvest for subsistence and income. Besides crops and livestock, agricultural infrastructure and production equipment were also heavily damaged. These losses will consequently depress the agricultural output of the country.

With an apparent shortfall in production the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) of the United Nations has been prompted to downgrade the 2013 rice production forecast for the country. This could potentially impact the global rice market if the Philippines were to import a large amount of rice to make up for the loss.

A chronic problem

Although the magnitude of this typhoon was unprecedented in Philippine history, typhoons are not unique to the country. Storm surges have also hit the country many times in the past based on the historical records of the Department of Science and Technology's Project NOAH. The Asian region in general is likewise disaster-prone. Based on UNESCO data from 1980-2008, Asia recorded the highest incidence of natural disasters in the world and registered the highest economic damage, amounting to US\$23 billion per year, mainly due to flooding, storms and earthquakes.

The recurrence of natural disasters has been concentrated among developing countries in the Asian region where the majority of people greatly rely on the agriculture sector. This puts the region at a great disadvantage because weather vagaries and fluctuation patterns could critically disturb agricultural productivity and threaten food security and economic growth. Although the FAO defined impact from shocks such as natural disasters as transitory or seasonal food insecurity, data shows how natural hazards have been a long-standing problem of the region.

This chronic recurrence of transient food insecurity as a result of natural disasters calls for greater coordinated effort from the region to find longer-term solutions.

Relieving transient food insecurity

Much work is needed to restore the devastated communities back to normalcy and help smallholders who have suffered enormous losses, which ultimately depends on the near-term and long-term policy responses of the government. Furthermore the problem of chronic food insecurity, as precipitated by transitory shocks like typhoon Haiyan, affects not just the Philippines but Asia as well.

However, despite the higher frequency of these cataclysmic events, the region generally lacks a distinct mechanism or an institution that would provide efficient linkages between national policies and regional initiatives in response to these events.

Regional dialogues and initiatives should be promoted since countries tend to be complacent once the impact of transitory shocks wanes and signs of recovery set in.

Given the high risk of climate hazards threatening food security, it is critical for the region to become more involved in developing more effective food-based safety net programmes to improve food security in the region. There have been negotiations in the WTO regarding creation of international stockpiles and revolving safety net funds to cushion the impact of transient shocks. One such initiative is the ASEAN Plus Three Emergency Rice Reserve (APTERR), which pools reserves from member countries and acts as buffer stocks for food emergencies.

This regional mechanism could potentially be useful if constraints surrounding political commitment and distribution can be sorted out. Given the higher stakes for Asia, a regional mechanism with a broader scope would be key to addressing the problem and improving food security in the region.

Jurise Athena Oliveros is a Research Assistant in the Office of Graduate Studies & Professional Learning, National Institute of Education. Paul S. Teng is Professor and Dean of Graduate Studies and Professional Learning, NIE, and Adjunct Senior Fellow at the Centre for Non-Traditional Security (NTS) Studies, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University (NTU).