

A hard Act to follow: disaster risk reduction in the Philippines

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Since 2011, more than 9000 people have died in four major typhoons in the Philippines. The lives of millions of other Filipinos have also been impacted by the thousands of other small disasters that routinely hit the archipelago. It is little wonder then that disaster risk reduction (DRR) in the Philippines is taken very seriously. But, despite this focus — and some positive legislation such as the Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act — successful implementation has proved difficult.



The Philippines has been widely praised for its leadership in DRR. Many international organisations, including the United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction and global Non-Government Organisations (NGOs), have promoted the country as a model for governments, civil society organisations (CSOs) and local communities elsewhere in the world.

The Philippines' leadership stems from the separate and combined actions of government agencies, NGOs, CSOs and local communities in fostering DRR at all levels of society. The country is particularly well known for being one of the places where community-based and participatory DRR emerged back in the 1970s and 1980s. Community-based DRR was then spearheaded by local NGOs and CSOs. It was driven by a genuine will to reform society and raise the everyday living standards of millions of poor Filipinos, especially those most vulnerable to disasters. DRR in the Philippines has therefore always been politically charged.

The political advocacy of NGOs and CSOs has been progressively scaled up to the national level through increasing interactions with government agencies directly or indirectly in charge of

DRR. More than a decade of lobbying for institutional change, supported by the impact of back-to-back typhoons that [hit Metro Manila in 2009](#) ^[1], led to the passing of the Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act (RA10121) in 2010.

This new institutional tool has been acclaimed worldwide for being one of the most progressive of its kind. There are two key reasons for this. Firstly, RA10121 empowers local stakeholders with opportunities and resources to engage in DRR. This marks a radical departure from the sole disaster response and relief activities which prevailed until 2010. Secondly, the act recognises, if timidly, that marginalised social groups — such as women, children, the elderly, people with disabilities and ethnic minorities — are particularly vulnerable.

Yet, despite all of this, the impact of disasters remains staggering. Those four typhoons — Sendong in 2011, Pablo in 2012, [Yolanda in 2013](#) ^[2] and Glenda in 2014 — resulted in thousands of deaths, widespread damages and a tremendous impact on Filipino communities. The scope of this has prompted President Benigno Aquino III to reaffirm a greater role for the national government and re-emphasise disaster response and relief activities at the detriment of local actors, including vulnerable people, and DRR.

But, in reality, these recent disasters neither challenge the relevance of community-based DRR nor the nature of RA10121. The few local governments which have taken opportunities offered by the new institutional framework and fostered community-based DRR have performed well in the face of recent natural hazards. For example, the municipality of San Francisco, in Cebu, has been commended for evacuating an entire small island before Yolanda struck the region in 2013, thus saving all of its inhabitants. Up north of Luzon, the city of Dagupan is also regularly praised for avoiding major disasters despite recurrent typhoons and flooding events.

Yet expanding community-based DRR through widespread implementation of RA10121 has proved challenging. It requires time and political will. Despite numerous training programs organised by national government agencies and NGOs, many local government officials are still unaware of the opportunities and resources offered by the new institutional framework. Many continue to think in terms of disaster response and relief rather than pre-emptive risk reduction. Others are stuck in client-patron relationships which hinder meaningful participation of those at risk. Nevertheless, local governments are still essential stakeholders for achieving widespread outcomes and reducing the risk of disaster on a large scale.

Ultimately, recent events and the relatively limited impact of both community-based DRR and RA10121 underline that the root causes of disasters lie far beyond the scope of isolated DRR initiatives. Disasters reflect people's everyday hardship and vulnerability, which are grounded in an array of structural, socio-cultural and political economy processes at both the local and international scale. Those who suffer from disasters are disproportionately drawn from the margins of society. They are often those who are forced to live in hazardous places and in precarious instances to sustain their daily needs without the proper means to protect themselves from rare or seasonal natural and human-induced hazards.

Addressing the root causes of people's vulnerability to natural hazards thus requires much more than just the DRR and Management Act. Community-based DRR alone is also insufficient

to tackle structural issues which lie beyond the hands of those who suffer from disasters. Rather, reducing people's vulnerability necessitates a [more equitable distribution](#) ^[3] of resources, wealth and power within society. This requires structural reforms geared towards improving the wellbeing of the millions of Filipinos who currently struggle to meet their daily needs. In the end, disaster risk reduction is about everyday development.

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[1] hit Metro Manila in 2009:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2013/03/08/disasters-in-southeast-asias-megacities-protecting-the-informal-sector/>

[2] Yolanda in 2013:

<http://www.eastasiaforum.org/2014/01/21/past-lessons-for-haiyan-recovery/>

[3] more equitable distribution:

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