

Responding to the Environmental Extremes and the Economics of the Times - Part 2

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In

a span of two months from late September to early November, the Philippines was hit by three typhoons that flooded majority of Manila

and Central Luzon, and caused massive landslides in Northern Luzon. The enormous volumes of rainfall swelled rivers and the water released from overflowing dams inundated towns and cities along waterways and settled in floodplains. Landslides in mountain areas buried villages.

Relief and rescue efforts were stretched to breaking point, and a state of calamity was declared. The death toll was around 700, with thousands rendered homeless, and total damage is in billions of pesos.

Activities are now underway for major reconstruction of roads, bridges, communication lines, and other infrastructure. Calls for better disaster preparedness from various sectors were heard anew. Disaster reports and typhoon bulletins hogged national headlines. PAGASA, the government's weather bureau, is getting attention not only in relation to its task of providing weather updates, but also in its oft-repeated request for better instrumentation. Master plans for housing development in Metro Manila of 30 years ago financed by the World Bank are being dredged up and questions are being asked why the recommendations were not followed. The post-disaster impact is seen and felt in crowded evacuation centers, in the outbreak of water-borne diseases, in the calls for protocol review in dam water release, and local governments bear the burden in the massive clearing-up operations required.

Year in, year out, we go through these struggles of re-living disasters brought about by weather and geologic events. We listen to an annual state of disaster address as government and its bureaucracy continue to respond inadequately.

So what has changed now, apart from the new numbers of lives yet again lost to avoidable unfortunate circumstances?

- Ondoy struck Metro Manila hard and highlighted the disaster vulnerability of other areas well where previous disasters occurred such as Albay, Aurora, Quezon, Ormoc, Cotabato, Surigao, Samar, Leyte.

- Ondoy also hit middle-class subdivisions and gated villages and is raising questions on appropriate housing development and planning. People's vulnerability to disasters if they are living in hazard areas was given more focus as celebrities and common folk alike were hit.

- Media reporting is broadening beyond statistics and is learning from the science, the facts, and the need to better comprehend news events. Environmental awareness such as solid waste management and climate change-related information are increased.

- Internet-based communications such as Twitter and Facebook served as warning systems.

- There is recognition of some community and local government efforts that are integrating and implementing disaster preparedness in vulnerable areas.

- Risk management is now seen as integral in development planning.

Last 23 October, the President signed into law Republic Act 9729 or the Climate Change Act of 2009. The President also designated a special body chaired by a businessman and a cardinal that will undertake a study of the causes of the recent disasters and look for fresh aid and manage the distribution and disbursement of these funds. Obviously, these national actions were spurred by the recent disasters and questions remain as to whether these will have meaningful impact in the next disasters to come. In the climate change discussions and global deals to be negotiated in Copenhagen next month, the Philippine experience along with other countries similarly situated, is a painful reminder to the rest of the world that the present situation needs to change. Nature is defining how it wants to proceed in the scheme of things and we are part of its definition. For countries like the Philippines, adaptation is our safety net and needs critical support.

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