

CITIZENS' PARTICIPATION TOWARDS SAFER COMMUNITIES

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The key elements of good local governance is transparency in operation, accountability to the people whom elected officials vowed to serve and commitment to citizens maximum participation. Empowering the communities to design programmes and activities that will protect them to potential disaster risk is one of the best indicators of good local governance. This is also a good way of maximizing local capacities and resources on the one hand and reducing risks and vulnerabilities on the other hand. Overall impact is enhanced local governance.

Introduction

The close of the 1st Millenium and the beginning of the 2nd Millenium were marked by disasters of natural and human causes. The earthquake in Turkey and Taiwan, the floods in Mozambique in Africa, the violent confrontation of forces between Chechniya Russia in Europe's and the eruptions of volcanoes especially in the Philippines in Asia – these are some of the recent disasters that have destroyed properties, crops and human lives.

These disasters affect large areas but it is at the local level that the impact is greatest. Residents of the stricken area bear the brunt of a hazard's destructive force. They are those who perform survival acts and coping methods to roll with or escape the effects of a disaster while it is venting its fury.

In the same vein, the local government unit (LGU) of the affected area is the front-line government entity which first delivers assistance and supports to the disaster victims. Ideally, then, the capability of the local authorities should be equal to the demands of disaster management concerns.

Experience in the Philippines has shown that involvement of the citizenry in disaster management has enabled families residing in disaster-prone areas to better cope with the impact of a hazard and recover from the aftermath of a disaster in a shorter time.

Participation of the citizenry in local governance is an imperative. Strengthening local capacities in a systematic way is the strategy to institutionalize the participatory principle in local governance.

Good Local Governance In Risk Management

The policy of good government enunciates the principles of transparency, accountability and participation, in the performance of its executive, legislative and judicial functions. These principles are actually practices in democratic governments. At the local level, these principles are carried out in the manner of relationship between the local authorities and the local populace.

Good governance aims to respond to the needs of the citizenry. At the local level, good governance has to consider the participation of the residents in the identification of needs, assessment of risks and planning of risk reduction measures.

Essentially, this means that the local government unit has a mechanism, which allows the various stakeholders in the community to determine what each stakeholder considers its need. This mechanism will also allow for the involvement of these stakeholders in the crafting and implementation of a plan intended to reduce risk through the development and management of community resources.

The risk reduction plan itself would encompass the pre, during and post stages of every recurring and possible disaster identified by the residents. In this manner, the needs at every stage are appropriately considered and the corresponding social services prepared.

The carrying out and maintenance of this mechanism must be related to the mandate of the local government unit and its officials. Both the mandate and mechanism should be clear to the local authority.

A corollary requirement is the presence of support from the national and intermediary government units in policy or legislation and in operational terms. Absence or lack of such assistance spell out the difference in the effectivity of the needed participation of the community.

Finally, a citizenry that is capable of accessing the participatory mechanism is also needed. A capable citizenry contributes to the viability of good local governance.

Problems At The Local Level

As a hazard strikes a community, the degree of preparedness of the local populace and the local authorities sometimes spell the difference between the occurrence of a disastrous event or not.

In areas where a hazard regularly "visits", the populace build coping methods albeit in an unorganized way. The demand for survival forces people to "invent" way to withstand a disaster.

On the other hand, local authorities who already know the cycle of disaster management oftentimes lack the skills and/or resources to undertakes activities to operationalize the measures for risk reduction.

This is most clear in the Philippines which has a comprehensive legislation to address disaster events. The provisions of this law mandate the national, regional, provincial, city/municipal, and barangay (village)* officials to organize "Disaster Coordinating Councils/Committees" (DCCs) with delineated functions and to conduct a series of activities to operationalize these structures.

The barangay authorities are left to themselves in setting up the disaster coordinating committees, which, in most cases, are "shell" organizations. Lack of or limited resources at all governmental levels has been the usual reason for the non-assistance to the formation of these village structures.

However, this seeming problematic situation can be remedied if the local authorities allow the participation of the local populace. The quality of participation that seem to be most suited to the formation of an involved citizenry is one which is not forced or coerced.

People's Participation in Saving the Community

The barangay of Talba, in Central Luzon, Philippines, with a population of 779 families or 4,674 people was situated along a river through which lahar** from Mt. Pinatubo had flowed. The possibility of an overflow in the near future was a real danger.

Municipal and barangay authorities were in constant communication through hand-held radios in monitoring the lahar flows from the volcano. The existing Barangay Disaster Coordinating Council had a chairman and committee heads in the persons of the barangay captain and the councilors, respectively. The different committees had no members and the barangay officials did not know how to operationalize the structure.

*barangay or village is the smallest political unit in the Philippines

**lahar is an Indonesian term that refers to volcanic debris and molten lava deposits

A Non-government Organization (NGO) focusing on disaster management was requested by a health-service NGO working in Talba to assist in the training and setting-up of a disaster management group in the community. The NGO complied with the request and established a community-based group, known as Barangay Disaster Response Organization. The participation of a barangay councilman in this affair facilitated the interface of the Barangay Disaster Coordinating Committee and the peoples organization, by making the members of the latter group also members of the committees of the former group. The Barangay Disaster Response Organization, however, maintained its identity by holding regular meetings with other organizations and stakeholders in the village.

Among the first activities of the community's disaster mitigation plan was the sandbagging of the area along the river's route and the construction of "uplifted" walk path, which was also made of sandbags, for the residents. The sandbags along the shoreline were intended to slowdown the flooding of the area in case a rampaging lahar flow strikes the village.

In 1995, a lahar overflow destroyed the village of Talba; in this event, the government communication system was disrupted and failed to give the proper warning to the residents. It was the parallel warning system developed by the community people that warned them on time to vacate the area and avoid any loss of life. Resources of the community like privately-owned small boats, jeeps and a truck were used to move the village's population to safety.

At the evacuation center, the Barangay Disaster Response Organization members augment the national government's health personnel in the delivery of services to the survivors of lahar rampage.

In the new area where the affected families of Talba were finally resettled, the barangay officials who joined them have been able to secure the needed services of water, electricity, and health assistance from the resettlement officials. The organized community were easily mobilized for action by the officials in support of requests made to the resettlement officials. The peoples organization and the local authorities complemented each other in the acquisition of services, ensuring of the safety and welfare of the members of the community.

Rejoinder

In the Talba experience, the local authorities were "open" to, encourage the peoples organization. and agreed to a cooperation mode instead rivaling each other.

The involvement of a barangay councilman in the peoples organization enhanced this cooperation. This also points to the willingness of some local authorities to share their responsibilities to the local populace. This kind of cooperation enhances their relationship.

Allowing the people organization to maintain its identity instead of coopting it or forcing its integration with the government structure, increased the "goodwill" and facilitated mutual support between the two sectors.

A trained and organized citizenry can undertake lifesaving measures that complement the goals of the local authorities. They can initiate activities that can be sustained even after the occurrence of disasters.

Therefore, in areas where active people organizations or groups can be tapped to complement a local government's lack or limitation, their participation has been proven to ensure the community's welfare in face of disaster risks.

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