

Unpacking insights on the Department of Disaster Resilience



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From just mere responding to disasters, the Philippines had a policy shift in dealing with these disasters by embracing preparedness. Even before Typhoon “Yolanda” wreaked havoc on our communities, the Philippines was among the first few countries to craft landmark legislations on disaster risk reduction and climate change – the “Climate Change Act and the Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act.”

The main essence of that law is to build the disaster resilience of communities, and to institutionalize arrangements and measures for reducing disaster risks, including projected climate risks, and enhance disaster preparedness and response capabilities at all levels.

However, it took a few more years before notable policy changes could reach the implementation stage, and these happened in the aftermath of Yolanda.

Although the laws were enacted before Yolanda, it was the devastation wrought by the monster storm that proved to be the game-changer.

The typhoon hastened the implementation of these laws, starting with unlocking the funds for disaster risk reduction (DRR) programs and projects.

The unprecedented devastation further showed the gaps in the contingency plans and emergency management arrangements including the weaknesses of the institutions in managing large-scale disasters.

While we may admit that, in this era of the coronavirus disease 2019 and climate emergency, we cannot prevent disasters from happening, we have the opportunity to reduce the impacts if the right disaster preparedness measures are taken.

A study revealed the weakness of the existing law in terms of grounding and implementation, which the same study claimed has been highlighted in a sunset review. It pointed out the lack of high-level institutional leadership that can effectively pursue and direct disaster risk reduction and management (DRRM) initiatives at all levels of the bureaucracy.

Three key elements

In my opinion, there are three elements in the continuing discussion on DRRM vis-à-vis the creation of the Department of Disaster Resilience (DDR).

The first key element is strengthening of institutions that should include institutional dynamism at the local level. As part of the governance structure, accountability, participation and transparency are seen to be the key features

that will foster development and support risk reduction. A truly effective system requires clear leadership and accountability mechanism.

The current National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC), a working group of various government, non-government, civil sector and private sector organizations, is administered by the Office of Civil Defense (OCD) headed by an executive director. The OCD is under the Department of National Defense.

The NDRRMC, chaired by the Secretary of National Defense, is composed of no less than 44 member agencies most of whom are represented by department secretaries and heads of national government agencies.

The paper titled “Creation of Department of Disaster Resilience” authored by engineer Carlos Centeno, class president of the executive master in Disaster Risk and Crisis Management Cohort 2 at the Asian Institute of Management, said that the proposed DDR will now be headed by a full-time Cabinet Secretary who will be focused and have the command to pursue the mandates of the proposed department – not one rank lower than his/her counterparts.

The proposed DDR, Centeno said, will be able to address the full needs of the disaster management cycle. He added that this will provide the mechanism that will ensure a holistic, comprehensive and integrated approach to DRRM as its four phases –mitigation/prevention, preparedness, response, rehabilitation and recovery – will now be led by a single agency. On this note, he concluded that no matter how we strengthen the OCD, the OCD still cannot do acts that are reserved by law to a department.

The second key element is capacity building within institutions. Capacity building within institutions translates to operational competencies especially in times of disasters. A study found that institutional capabilities and disaster management performance were positively related to disaster-oriented competencies.

A whole-of-government approach that involves the synergy of the local government units, the government-owned and -controlled corporations, and other government agencies is a possible key success area, Centeno said. He posited that the awareness of their respective roles in the whole process will hopefully ensure cooperation among the different government agencies. He added that it may be time to reactivate the Reserve Officers Training Corps and the National Service Training Program graduates especially in times of rescue and relief operations.

The third and last key element is the participation of the private sector and civil society organizations in DRRM must be given recognition and significant attention. This should include the active participation of the youth and other vulnerable sectors in disaster-related programs, policies and projects.

In my brief assessment, these three key elements can be an added consideration in strengthening the Philippine Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act of 2010.

Notwithstanding the institutional issues, the allocation of a budget for another department is another critical concern. Data from the Department of Budget and Management showed that a new department will require at least a billion to cover salaries, maintenance and operating expenses, and capital outlay. Given our current economic contraction, a billion can be added to jumpstart the economy.

On the final note, whether we strengthen our existing structure or create a new department, a single organization that is independent and standalone who will be responsible for overseeing the strategy to prevent, prepare for, respond to and recover from human-induced disasters is needed. And this

organization should have access to sufficient funds, manpower and considerable resources to fulfil its mandate.

I wish our loyal readers a blessed Christmas and a brighter 2021.

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