

From the eyes of a beholder: where vulnerabilities surrendered to community wills

October 21 to 24 were the dates set for the CBDRM exchange programme, where a group of community-based disaster risk management (CBDRM) practitioners from India visited a faraway community in the northeastern tip of Central Luzon, Philippines. Facilitated by the Global Network of Civil Society Organisations for Disaster Reduction (GNDR) and coordinated by its member and national focal point of the Philippines, the Center for Disaster Preparedness (CDP), this exchange programme was part of a three-year action research programme, generously funded by USAID OFDA.



Photo - 1 Exchange Participants from India and Philippines

We were forced to reschedule the dates for this visit three times –the second due to Cyclone Mangkhut when its expected landfall coincided with the planned dates of our visit. In 2014, the World Disaster Report ranked Philippines as the second most vulnerable country to disaster. The country lies in the Pacific Ring of Fire, where 80% of the earthquakes occur. Around 20-25 typhoons ravage the country every year, leading to the loss of lives and millions of peso damages to infrastructure and livelihood. About 220 known volcanos are dotted across the country, at least 22 of which are considered active.



Photo: Arriving at this remote, beautiful island is challenging

Barangay San Ildefonso, a part of Municipality of Casiguran under the Province of Aurora and where we went for this visit, is only accessible by a 90 minute ride on small country boats. This somewhat detached Barangay (village in Filipino language) sits in the middle of the Pacific Ocean and is inhabited by only 310 families. Though a discussion of establishing 'Aurora Pacific Economic Zone' is currently on-going, Casiguran is still in the list of 20 most underdeveloped municipalities in the country. Barangay San Ildefonso with mountainous



Photo - 2 one of the few similar community canines - a proxy of ongoing poverty and malnourishment

terrain has only one small piece of arable land, which is no good for producing rice for more than 5 families. As a result, seasonal fishing is the single livelihood available to its inhabitants. Talking about agriculture, there are coconut and banana trees in the mountains – but they bring no competitive edge as these two items are abundantly produced throughout the country and have little economic value. The community has very limited access to health and education services – a small health centre with no doctor and a primary school that can only offer education up to 6th grade. The community is completely dependent on the products and services from the mainland which is only accessible through two-hour bumpy rides through the

Pacific Ocean. There are no shops in the island. In this era of the 21st century, there is no cellular network, let alone internet in this community. Yes, you read it right – the visitors were completely detached from their Facebook timeline and WhatsApp messaging during the entire time of the visit.

But when it comes to disaster preparedness, Barangay Sal Idefonso shines bright. Despite all the shortcomings and challenges due to its geographical and social attributes, the community decided not to yield to the whims of the nature. In 2008 Alay Bayan-Luson Inc. (ABI), a regional centre of the Citizens Disaster Response Center (CDRC), initiated a Community Based Disaster Risk Reduction (CBDRR) programme in this community and trained its members in different aspects, including but not limited to, disaster preparedness, emergency response, first aid etc. They also helped the community to form different specialised groups and trained them how to keep those running. ABI formally left the community in 2011, after the completion of the project. But today, after withstanding 7 long years with no external support and numerous disasters of different kinds, the groups still stand strong and keep running at their full effectiveness.

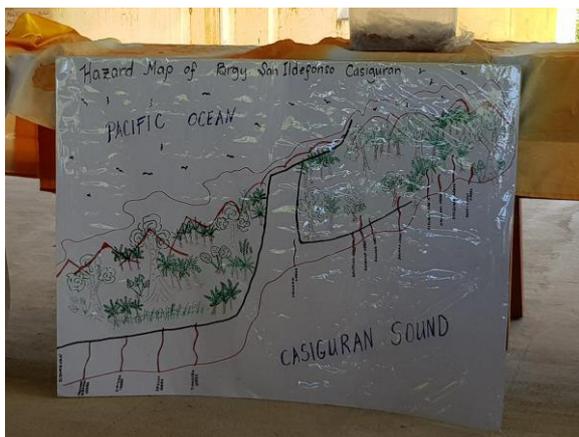


Photo: Disaster Management committees and their outputs

As a part of their disaster preparedness, the community now has four distinct committees, namely the Health Committee, Education Committee, Emergency Response Committee and Advocacy & Networking Committee. These committees are permanent and work closely together both during disasters and outside of disasters. They all work under SIDMA (San

Ildfonso Disaster Management Agency), a people's organisation they formed to ensure close collaboration among the committees. With clearly defined roles and responsibilities, these committees try to ensure the community is ready for all unforeseen disasters and disruption. They showed the visitors their updated hazard maps, evacuation route map, contingency plans etc. The visitors were also enchanted to their theatrical presentation on how the Education Committee disseminates early warning, the Emergency Response Committee ensures evacuation, and the Health Committee measure blood pressure and provides herbal remedies to distressed evacuees when required.

It was a rough journey for the visitors to get to Barangay San Ildfonso. We were required to take an 11-hour long drive through the roads in the mountain, coupled with a 90-minute boat ride in the ocean and 15 minutes on a tricycle. But it all felt like a wise investment when we left the community with renewed knowledge and understanding of how a community can reduce all its vulnerabilities if it comes together and decides to work against them. The community we visited still needs to walk a long way to become resilient, but it is on the right on its path because its preparedness is very much rooted in and owned by community members themselves.

"For my work, I have to travel to many remote places in India. But understanding the extreme remoteness of this place, the severe everyday hardships the community needs to go through and the level of exposure to different vulnerabilities and threats, I was in the verge of shedding tears. But above all, the way this community remains ever ready to help themselves is really encouraging and can strengthen the morale of CBDRM practitioners everywhere."

Samuel Peter, Director, DRR Unit, Habitat for Humanity India.



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