

'One Safe Future' in the Philippines

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The Philippine government's 'One Safe Future' programme relocated disaster-affected poor families in areas where structures enabling opportunities are lacking.

In 2013 Typhoon Yolanda (internationally named 'Haiyan') put the Philippines on the television screens of the entire world when it drove the country to its knees, with a toll in lives in the thousands and damage to property in the tens of billions of dollars. Typhoon Yolanda had found its place in human history as the strongest typhoon ever formed and had notoriously become the evil face of climate change.

The world is dealing with the reality that it had never been as vulnerable to calamity as it is now, due to climate change. As for the Philippines, whether one calls it an act of nature or climate change, experiences of disasters have imposed the need on the government and its policymakers to prepare in terms of laws and policies (either enforcing those that exist or creating new ones) to prepare the country. Changes can now be seen in the strengthening of disaster risk reduction programmes, the formulation of preventive action plans from the upper to lower tier of the leadership, and the establishment of coordinating councils to facilitate the fast dissemination of information.

Left and right, national and local, there have been initiatives and efforts to fix the defect

in the country's shield against disaster by re-thinking its urban and rural land use. This renewal entails the uprooting of families from one place and transplanting them to government-prepared relocation sites. In the national capital region of Metro Manila, for instance, where the population has grown in part due to economic migrations of families from distant rural parts of the country, the administration launched a five-year housing programme (2011-16) to relocate families living in danger, from high-risk areas that are not suitable for housing to safer ground.

The programme, called 'One Safe Future', is commendable as it aims to rescue families living alongside or on stilts in waterways. In fact, the families did not take much convincing, partly because there is an allotted budget but mainly because the families themselves had had enough. They were quite willing to move out for their own safety, especially after the experience of Typhoon Ondoy in 2009 which flooded Metro Manila to a depth of 20-30 feet. This willingness of the families who historically have been adamant about continuing to live in their dangerous dwellings is a development that the government



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has to take advantage of, especially in this country that has a lot to improve in practising just and humane demolition and eviction.

There are some 104,000 affected families with an average household size of slightly more than five persons and an average family income below the official poverty line. In their view, if there was ever a reason to give up their present living conditions – apart from leaving the danger areas – it was to start their life anew and escape chronic poverty by getting some fresh opportunities that relocation could offer them. They also mentioned getting back their pride by moving on from being squatters to home-owners.

But nothing could be more dramatic than leaving the place that for a long time you consider your home regardless of how dismal the situation is, and establishing a new life in an environment that has been chosen for you. Thus, as every resettlement practitioner knows, involuntary relocation of families incurs many accompanying risks to life and livelihood whose impact can only be mitigated if the government carries this out under a social development lens.

Evaluating the programme

Therefore the Presidential Commission for the Urban Poor through its Informal

Settler Families Unit conducted research on the short-term impact of the programme on the well-being of families that had been relocated to ten resettlement sites between 2013 and August 2014.

Going to the sites, it is noticeable how far they are from the commercial centre and with poor accessibility to the road network. The sites are tracts of land in far-flung locations with thousands of houses in rows. Being detached from the hub of the formal economy and livelihood, there has to be something that can compensate for this problem in distance and opportunities in order for these communities to thrive.

At first sight the families did what we Filipinos do – they smiled as if all is fine. But when we asked them how they are and they realised what we had come to discover, people in the community readily aired their anxieties. They lamented that although they escaped the dangers in their previous dwellings, they did not escape the disaster brought about by hunger. Sixty per cent of the surveyed families reported a decrease in family income, with some remaining unemployed since being resettled. This is further exacerbated by the inadequate and irregular provision of basic services, like drinking water and power, access to health, and education for school-age children. They assert that life in the resettlement site is doubly hard.

From a danger zone, they say, they seemed to have been relocated to a death zone. They had never experienced such difficulty, in which they have to beg for basic services. Some of their neighbours had gone back to the city, feeling betrayed by the government. This is very disturbing to hear, and alarming. Why, despite all its efforts, did the government fall short of meeting its promises of improved well-being for every family they relocate? It is not clear whether the fault is a policy lapse and an ambiguous working framework or the poor implementation of the programme by the agency tasked to carry it out under the operational framework.



Destruction wrought by Typhoon Haiyan in the town of Tanauan in the Philippines, November 2013.

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Worsening poverty in every resettlement site is the result of a collapse in the very structure of opportunities. These opportunities should have been created prior to the relocation of families or, at the very least, there should have been a subsidy programme to help families gradually restore their quality of life.

Back in their former communities they used to have a source of income and reliable networks in the neighbourhood. Almost everything they needed was within reach in the city. Displacement has taken away this life and replaced it with distance, unmet provision of basic services and unknown neighbours. If this practice continues, the government can never achieve its goal of One Safe Future for the resettlers.

The One Safe Future resettlement programme is laudable in terms of its multi-sectoral approach and a wider participation space for the affected families. Nonetheless, the short-sighted view of a 'safe future' for the resettled families that involves no more

than keeping them safe from flooding gets in the way of seeing the greater demands of actually securing a safe future for the resettlers in the new context. Taking them away from the waterways is only the first and easiest of many challenging subsequent steps. Current post-resettlement efforts of the programme should capitalise on its multi-sectoral and participatory approach, and redirect resources towards meeting the basic needs of the families and rebuilding social trust by re-establishing our society's structure of opportunities. A nation can never overspend on the basic needs of its people.

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