

Headline: PH and climate change: Some areas for progress

Byline: Julian Doczi and Benjamin Franta

Published Date: 12:21 AM October 24, 2015

Section: opinion

Word Count: 5711

Content:

Filipinos are well aware of the threats they face from climate change. The effects of Typhoon “Lando” are yet another example of the Philippines’ vulnerability. Things will get hotter, the wet season will get wetter, and the dry season will get drier, too. The big question: What can be done about it?

We are two researchers from the United Kingdom and the United States. Over the past year, we studied climate-related disasters in Philippine cities and their effects on economic growth. We examined “Sendong” in Cagayan de Oro from 2011, “Frank” in Iloilo from 2008, and “Yolanda” in Tacloban and Samar from 2013. Our two studies were separate and independent, but our findings were very similar:

We found three important areas for Philippine cities to work on to help build their resilience to climate-related disasters: managing upstream watersheds to prevent floods; improving land rights, livelihoods and relocation programs for informal settlers; and tackling issues of political turfing and the padrino system in disaster planning and response.

Watershed management. Many Philippine cities, like Cagayan de Oro and Iloilo, are located in flat areas between upland watersheds and the coast. During heavy rainfall, water drains from these watersheds into the cities below. Deforestation causes water to drain faster, which can cause flash flooding and soil erosion that damage cities and hurt agriculture.

Managing the soils and forests of Philippine watersheds can reduce disaster risk to cities and stabilize livelihoods in the provinces. Cities like Cagayan de Oro and Iloilo have watershed management councils, but these need more attention and investment. These councils can share experiences and learn from each other to accelerate their progress.

Informal settlements. Often, informal settlers are hurt the most by climate disasters. They may be living in dangerous areas, such as riverbanks, where no one else wants to build. And during disasters, they are often unwilling to evacuate, because they fear the theft of their belongings.

When a disaster strikes an informal settlement, it has long-lasting consequences for the entire city. Local government units often attempt to relocate informal settlers after a disaster, but this can take years, is expensive, and interrupts the livelihoods of the people being relocated.

Life in these relocation sites is often unsustainable. We heard the common phrase, “Safe na kami dito pero mamamatay sa gutom” (We’re safe here but we’ll die of hunger). Relocating people away from informal settlements in the city does not address the reasons they were living there in the first place, which include a lack of livelihoods in the provinces, a shortage of affordable housing and transportation, and difficulties in joining the formal economy.

Addressing informal settlement is a big challenge and will take time, but it’s important to make progress where possible to reduce disaster risks. For example, LGUs and nongovernment organizations can help people to live in less hazardous areas while maintaining their livelihoods and social networks.

Politics and the padrino system. The padrino system is a challenge all over the Philippines. How and whether to reform it is a question for Filipinos to decide, not overseas researchers like ourselves. However, we observed that the padrino system often makes climate-related disasters worse.

First, political patronage from LGUs sometimes contributes to the growth of informal settlements in dangerous areas. Further, many barangays are completely dependent on patronage from their representatives to obtain funding for basic facilities like evacuation shelters. Without patronage, they are extremely vulnerable to disasters. Finally, government officials who are appointed to their posts through patronage often lack the experience they need to do their jobs well—and this can become a serious problem during and after disasters.

We noticed that during and after disasters, political turfing is common: Politicians distribute disaster aid to their supporters. This causes aid to be distributed unevenly, and some barangays are left out. In our experience, even politicians who are skilled at the padrino system can see that it is creating problems during disasters. We believe that it is important to recognize how it can sometimes make disasters worse, and then develop some strategies for avoiding or reducing these problems.

These three issues—watershed management, informal settlement and political patronage—were widespread in our studies of climate-related disasters in the Philippines. The importance of each issue varies from city to city, but they are present throughout the country. Each is a long-term social, political and economic challenge that affects almost everyone and will benefit from people working together—to advocate for political reforms, sustainable livelihoods, secure land rights, and environmental protection.

Addressing these issues will strengthen the work that people are already doing to reduce the risks of climate disasters.

Climate resilience is a big challenge for the Philippines. The good news is that working on it can help address issues that are important for the whole country. It's something that all Filipinos should have a voice in, and that all Filipinos have a stake in.

Julian Doczi is a senior research officer in water policy at the Overseas Development Institute in the United Kingdom.

Subscribe to our daily newsletter

By providing an email address. I agree to the Terms of Use and acknowledge that I have read the Privacy Policy.

Benjamin Franta is a researcher at Harvard University in the United States. His work was supported by Manila Observatory and USAID