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Byline: Junefe Gilig Payot

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RECENTLY, I visited Tacloban for the first time since Typhoon “Yolanda” devastated the city and left more than 6,000 people dead two years ago. I stayed in a hotel sequestered by the government from the Marcoses. It was rundown but still bore hints of Imelda Marcos’ “edifice complex” during her family’s dictatorial rule. I immediately thought of the hashtags #worsttragedyever and #neveragain. They would be applicable to both Yolanda and martial law.

To my surprise, Tacloban now seemed to bear little trace of the devastation, maybe because post-disaster recovery activities have been going on for two years. But perhaps it was also because the communities worst affected by Yolanda and unable to recover fast were hidden from the public eye. Often, the families most vulnerable to climate change impacts like flooding and storm surges, build their makeshift houses away from the main roads: along esteros, seashores, and riverbanks. Hence, one will unlikely notice when typhoons obliterate them. In life and in death, they are often ignored.

I flew to Tacloban to talk about the central and critical role of local government units both in providing shelter under the Urban Development and Housing Act (Udha) of 1992 and in addressing climate change under the Climate Change Act (CCA) of 2009. The participants were engineers and urban planners of the cities of Tacloban and Ormoc and the municipality of Hernani. The talk was part of the UN Development Programme’s (UNDP) “Project: Recovery,” which aims to build resilient communities in the localities devastated by Yolanda, mainly through the provision of decent housing.

The Udha and CCA were passed two decades apart but no two laws can be more intimately related today. After all, climate change exacerbates shelter deprivation and lack of decent shelter increases vulnerability to climate change. Indeed, it is not difficult to see how typhoons—the frequency and strength of which have increased due to climate change—could render thousands homeless at once, such as what “Ondoy,” “Pablo,” “Sendong” and Yolanda did. But conversely, lack of strong shelter in safe locations exposes people to climate change impacts like flooding. I thus urged the participants to seriously address housing and climate change simultaneously.

Climate change vulnerability is also inextricably linked to poverty. According to Mark Pelling, a noted expert in climate change vulnerability, the poor are most vulnerable to climate change not only because of their exposure in high-risk locations and the low quality of their houses, but also because of their low adaptive capacity. At the risk of oversimplification, adaptive capacity refers to the ability to prepare against climate change impacts and recover from their adverse effects.

For example, poor families are less able to prepare against floods compared to better-off families who can reinforce their sturdy houses (or stay in hotels, if necessary). After a flood, the better-off can also readily draw from their savings to build back their businesses or return to work in safe buildings. This is in contrast to the poor who have meager savings, if any. Their livelihoods may also be climate-change-sensitive. For instance, when the streets are flooded, the padyak driver or the ambulant street vendor cannot ply his trade. Indeed, one cannot talk about poverty and climate change separately.

Hence, it was strategic for the UNDP to prioritize housing in Tacloban as a way to reduce the climate change vulnerability of communities. Strong houses in safe locations reduce the exposure factor. Housing can also help increase adaptive capacity since houses are not just sites of protection but also sites of production among poor families (e.g., the sari-sari stores and the mananahi). Better income from home-based livelihood means greater ability to prepare against and cope with climate change impacts. Housing can therefore address poverty and vulnerability to climate change at the same time.

After my visit to Tacloban, I came across the 10-part series of the Inquirer on the agenda of the presidential candidates. Happily, one of the issues tackled was climate change. But sadly, some candidates could only offer motherhood statements. Most of them also failed to link climate change to the other issues such as poverty, much less housing. They need to improve their level of analysis, or hire better advisers.

Among the presidentiables, one had a sensible climate change agenda. Although it can still use a lot of nuancing, it is potentially a pro-poor climate change agenda because it seeks to increase the resilience and adaptive capacity of communities, especially vulnerable sectors. It therefore acknowledges the differential nature of vulnerability to climate change: that some groups (e.g., the poor) are more vulnerable than others and need greater attention.

The agenda also focuses on communities, which is crucial because climate change impacts are felt at the community level and must be understood at this level for interventions to be responsive. However, any agenda must explicitly acknowledge the vulnerability of both rural and urban poor communities. As in other developing countries, the unfortunate tendency in current climate change policies in the Philippines is to focus almost exclusively on rural (agricultural) groups although the urban poor are equally, although differently, vulnerable.

Hopefully, whoever becomes president or LGU executives will make good on their promises and translate these into effective pro-poor programs. Meanwhile, let us demand that our candidates demonstrate an acute understanding of the challenges facing the country, particularly poverty, housing and climate change. We should also demand that they examine the interconnectedness of these challenges to effectively address them.

Junefe Gilig Payot recently obtained an MSc Poverty and Development degree (with a focus on climate change, housing and participatory urban planning) through a Chevening Scholarship awarded by the UK government.