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Headline: Disaster risk reduction should be ‘apolitical’

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THE FIRST time we sat down with Cedric Daep in his office at the provincial capitol of Albay, he was quick to correct a brochure on hazards that the national weather agency had just distributed.

Blue ball pen in hand, he encircled mistakes he had detected, including “cyclone”—“We don’t get cyclones… We should be consistent and use only ‘typhoon,’” and “mudflow”—“This shouldn’t be lumped together with landslides…. They’re very different.”

Fifteen minutes later, Daep put down his pen, shaking his head. “I will call Pagasa later,” he said, referring to the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration.

He said it was necessary to correct the brochure because inconsistencies in weather and climate terminology could confuse the public. He didn’t need to add: And maybe cost lives.

To keep more than a million people in Albay safe from increasingly stronger storms is no easy feat. A lot of the credit is due Albay Gov. Joey Salceda, the face of Albay’s zero-casualty policy, who on his first term as governor prioritized disaster risk reduction and management (DRRM), and has continued to advocate for greater action against climate change on the national level in the Philippines.

But while the country knows the governor as Albay’s Mr. Zero, another individual has contributed to the zero-casualty goal long before Salceda’s election. This man’s decades-long career in DRRM (something Salceda acknowledges and depends on) has earned him the moniker Mr. Disaster, but the locals know him simply as Cedric Daep, head of the Albay Public Safety and Emergency Management Office (Apsemo).

“When Cedric Daep speaks, we spring to action,” more than one Albayanon told Inquirer.Net.

Seeing that Albay is exposed to almost all natural disasters, Mr. Disaster conceptualized in 1995 a self-sufficient department under the Albay local government tasked with implementing DRRM programs in the province.

In the same year, the provincial board institutionalized that department, now known as Apsemo, as “a permanent countermeasure” to the disasters that stunt Albay’s development.

Along with assistant head Jukes Nuñez and a permanent staff of 13, Daep’s priority in Apsemo is not only to prepare Albay for the numerous disasters it faces annually—severe flooding, storm surges and landslides wrought by typhoons included—but also climate change adaptation, the long-term goal of the office.

All this begins with the province’s zero-casualty program, which relies on three key features: An early warning system, evacuation procedures and communication rules for all groups involved.

Against misinformation

Apsemo, which will turn 21 in January 2016, has taken it upon itself to stop the spread of misinformation.

The staff started within their ranks: To expand Apsemo, Daep studied meteorology, volcanology and seismology, among other disciplines.

One staffer was assigned to learn hazard and risk mapping, so the office could update their maps on their own. Updating these risk maps, Daep said, was a necessary step in preparing for the potential disasters.

In 1991, before Apsemo's creation, Albay invested in hand-drawn risk maps of more than 700 villages distributed between the province's 18 cities and towns.

Almost 25 years later, the maps now include more data, but the basic information remains the same. From these maps, Daep said they were able to pinpoint which areas were in danger from what hazard, and how many families could be affected per hazard.

Since 2006, Apsemo's budget has increased from P27.7 million to P70.2 million. Apsemo is divided into five divisions: Plans and operations, research, education and training, traffic management and administration.

Daep points to Apsemo's institutionalization as the key factor that helped Albay implement its zero-casualty policy for many years and, in the process, gain worldwide recognition in DRRM for its successful programs.

"The core reason behind Albay's [preparedness] is the institutionalization. There is a clear institution to handle the situation and a clearly identified point person who will stay even if there is a change of governor," Daep said.

Disaster risk reduction, he added, should be "apolitical."

As Apsemo is an institution separate from the governor's office, Daep, Nuñez and the rest of the staff are not replaced after every local or national election, allowing them to implement long-term plans not only in disaster risk reduction but also in climate change adaptation.

Experience and heart

Santo Domingo Mayor Herbie Aguas also credits the town's zero-casualty count to his officers, who make up for the 4th class municipality's lack of funds with their experience and heart.

One such person is the municipal DRRM officer, Edgar Balidoy, who trains the town's farmers in climate change and how it affects their produce.

Training, Balidoy said, comes in phases. "One year, we teach the science [behind climate change]," and next year's topic can cover "preparedness," or how to mitigate climate change by planting more trees and cleaning up the town's canals.

"Surround yourself with hard-working people, rescuers, those who are good at their job and have the heart for DRR. You can't go wrong," Aguas said.

As long as there is heart, he added, lack of funds is not a roadblock to DRRM and climate change adaptation, he said.

“I don’t make lack of money an excuse in DRR,” he said. “In the first place, it’s how you approach saving your people. There are a lot of things you can do for free: Tap the province, ask NGOs (nongovernment organizations). It’s how you network.”

Among the organizations Albay connects with is the Philippine Red Cross, which regularly participates in Albay’s DRRM planning sessions.

Another NGO that has supported Albay’s DRRM efforts is the Japan International Cooperation Agency, which has worked with the province since 1990.

Their most recent joint project was building six schools to house evacuees during disasters. With typhoon-resistant roofing and reinforced walls, these schools are equipped with kitchens, separate bathrooms for males and females, and water sanitation devices.

Always learning

Daep is aware that the life-saving measures Apsemo has put in place will not be enough to save more lives in the future if Albay will not properly adapt to climate change. After all, typhoons batter Albay only on 15 of the 365 days in a year, so what’s there to do while waiting?

Apsemo needs more than ever the cooperation and participation of all sectors. “We cannot do it alone. Even if we do it within a period of 50 years or 100 years, without the participation of other sectors, we cannot do it,” Daep said.

Salceda’s Team Albay is one way Apsemo has been partnering with local agencies. Composed of doctors, engineers and other trained medical personnel, the humanitarian group has served as an avenue for Daep and Nuñez to teach Filipinos the science of climate change and disaster preparedness, alongside medical missions and other humanitarian assistance provided.

Aside from Team Albay, the province has also partnered with national government agencies on a number of projects. An example is the current partnership with the Department of Environment and Natural Resources on mangrove reforestation, the strengthening of indigenous varieties of produce and container gardening.

Albay’s Climate Change Academy also incorporates the importance of protecting the environment in climate change adaptation in its modules.

But is all this enough to truly adapt to climate change?

Jessica Dator-Bercilla, Christian Aid senior advocacy and policy officer for Asia and the Middle East, questioned whether the Philippines—Albay included—is devoting enough effort and time to combat climate change, especially considering the country’s vulnerability.

“The Philippines is [focusing only on] disaster preparedness. But we’re not addressing the root causes of vulnerability,” she said. “Each year we’ll have a lot of people to save because we’re not giving attention to their plight, to the impacts of inequality that render our people more vulnerable.”

Inequality, Bercilla stressed, worsened Filipinos’ vulnerability to disasters.

In the Disaster Risk Framework, risk equals hazard, in this case natural disasters; exposure, in this case how prone the area is to destruction caused by a disaster; and vulnerability, in this case the

people's ability to cope with a disaster. Humans cannot control hazards, but if the goal is to save more lives in the future, both exposure and vulnerability must be dealt with.

The Philippine Statistics Authority reported that as of 2014, 25.8 percent, or more than a quarter, of Filipinos still live below the poverty line. The percentage is higher, if you ask the people directly; an average of 54 percent of Filipinos surveyed by independent outfit Social Weather Stations in 2014 said they were poor.

"If [the Philippines is] already doing climate change adaptation, we should have already thought of what plants to plant in 2030, in 2050. We're not yet there. We're still at the phase of saving lives for the next hazard. We're still at the phase of building resilience," Bercilla said.

(Editor's Note: The Inquirer Group is covering the historic climate change conference in Paris, which starts today. This special report, which can be read in full and in multimedia format at inquirer.net/climatechange, is part of the Inquirer Group's Pinas to Paris campaign.)