

Keyword: climate-change

Headline: Extreme weather events and conflict (3)

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Published Date: 04:15 AM August 16, 2022

Section: opinion

Word Count: 726

Content:

Cotabato City—Here in the seat of the autonomous Bangsamoro region, some regional and local officials do not seem to realize the urgency of the impacts of climate change in more than 1,000 barangays within it. Members of our small research team noticed that some officials in executive level positions tend to brush aside issues and challenges posed by the intersections of extreme weather events and community security, and on how some of their so-called urgent programs (like dumping a town's solid wastes near a barangay road) have even aggravated the negative consequences of such environmental phenomena. In contrast, community members seem to be more insightful than their leaders.

Community discussion participants of the four towns covered in our study (Datu Piang, Rajah Buayan, Datu Salibo, and Pagalungan) shared how they coped with extreme weather events, sans government aid. These municipalities have one thing in common—they are situated in low-lying parts of Maguindanao province that are straddled by the sprawling Ligawasan Marsh, one of the Philippines' largest wetlands. These areas are flooded even on rainless days: heavy downpours in mountainous areas from Bukidnon in Northern Mindanao; Isulan and Esperanza towns in Sultan Kudarat province cause water levels in local rivers and streams to rise.

Prolonged droughts make waterways dry up, creating patches of arable land for planting crops that can be harvested after two months. Community members welcome this, but it also gives rise to tensions among them since they compete against one another to plant on these artificially created patches of land. Community members who own work animals shared being wary of gumandel (Magindanawn pun on the English word "commander") that refers to cattle rustlers. The Magindanawn root word gandel means "to pull." A gumandel pulls a carabao or cow stealthily in the dead of the night, and this is done easily and faster during prolonged droughts. Informants also shared they have witnessed how victims of cattle rustling resorted to violent confrontations against suspected perpetrators. This is one root cause of revenge killings, locally referred to as rido (a Maranaw term) or to kapedsulia (Magindanawn term for revenge).

Older community informants also recalled that at the height of martial law years (1970s), violent encounters between Philippine military forces and Moro rebel fronts intensified in the Ligawasan Marsh areas. A prolonged dry season facilitated the mobilization of army tanks and other war materiel, causing more casualties and damaging huge swaths of corn fields. One former rebel group member shared that he and his brothers had planted corn in one hectare of their farmland and were about to harvest the corn when military tanks flattened their corn field, destroying it completely. The money they would have received from the sale of their corn was intended for their mother's hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca) as their gift to her.

One municipal official said in an interview that they have come to "befriend water," as flooding is almost a daily occurrence in the areas we studied. One research team member asked the official the meaning of "making friends with water," expecting the municipal government will implement climate change mitigating measures for flood control, among other related initiatives. But for them, "making friends with water" simply meant that all of their social and cultural activities will be held in the Pulangi or Rio Grande de Mindanao.

Given this simplistic understanding of the nature of water and flooding, local officials will realize too late that not preparing to mitigate its effects can wreak havoc on their already impoverished local government units, destroying poorly constructed infrastructure and other facilities. Community tensions can also arise, as resources become scarce and costly to acquire during episodes of natural disasters. In the words of former UN secretary-general Ban Ki-Moon, the “Extreme weather events continue to grow more frequent and intense in rich and poor countries alike, not only devastating lives but also infrastructure, institutions and budgets—an unholy brew which can create dangerous security vacuums.”

Our community respondents have felt this security vacuum during heavy rains that happened when government forces chased suspected rebel or terrorist groups in the marsh. As one of them said, “dito, umulan ng bala at tubig” (literally: it rained bullets and water here).

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