

Headline: A new climate

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It's only logical that the Philippines, the poster country for climate change and its effects, should adapt the Sendai Framework of Action on disaster risk reduction (DRR). The new framework is a 10-year plan that pushes proactive instead of reactive approaches by both the public and private sectors to minimize risks in an age when natural disasters are occurring faster and stronger than ever before.

The new framework "will give the Philippines a validation of its policy-strong and political commitment that DRR is the way to go," Margareta Wahlstrom, the head of the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, told the Inquirer's Jerry Esplanada last week at the 3rd World Conference on DRR in Sendai, Japan. Wahlstrom observed that the Philippines already had "all the instruments, the framework, the theories," but that "the challenge is so much what happens at the local level." She noted the Philippines' "tough geography," as well as "how the system works and how ... resources are channeled down, the capacity strengths, who is monitoring or supervising DRR efforts..."

Weather disturbances beset this country with near-metronomic regularity, but recent years have seen shocking typhoons and storms that killed thousands, displaced entire populations, and ravaged infrastructure along with bumper crops. The period 2011-2013 alone set a high-water mark in misery. In 2011, Tropical Storm "Sendong" left 1,268 people dead and damage estimated at P15.553 billion. In 2012, the passage of Typhoon "Pablo" resulted in 1,067 deaths and P36.949 billion in damage. And in 2013, Supertyphoon "Yolanda" left in its horrific wake 6,293 dead and total damage placed at P39.821 billion. It also made history as the strongest typhoon on record to make landfall. (Late last February, visiting French President François Hollande said his glimpses of the devastation wrought by Yolanda in Guiuan, Eastern Samar, inspired him to ask the world community to unite to stop climate change at the 21st Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change to be held in Paris in December.)

But with each storm, the government has been prodded to prepare better. Last year, Wahlstrom praised the government's handling of Typhoon "Ruby," its past experiences seemingly paying off. "All arms of government, including the [weather bureau Pagasa] and the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council and [local government] units like Tacloban City pulled together to save lives and minimize the damage inflicted by this disaster event," she said in a statement.

All this serves to show the urgency of having a working framework to guide a developing country such as the Philippines in finding ways to minimize the risks perennially facing its people and resources. To demonstrate its resolve, the government sent a 61-strong delegation led by Sen. Loren Legarda and Social Welfare Secretary Dinky Soliman to the conference on DRR in Sendai. A number of the Philippine delegates actively took part in the various panels in the conference attended by an estimated 6,000 representatives from almost all the 193 UN member-countries.

Perhaps the Philippines' shining example of a proactive approach is the work done by the local government of Albay led by Gov. Joey Salceda. Albay has been ranked as most vulnerable to tsunamis among 80 provinces in the archipelago. But the Albay Public Safety and Emergency Management Office—the first such office organized by a local government unit—has taken great strides to protect its people from the fury of nature. In 2014, Albay achieved its goal of zero casualty from Typhoons Ruby and "Glenda."

Albay's record in disaster risk reduction is noteworthy and should be emulated by other provinces, and other at-risk developing countries as well. Priority in government concerns and strong political will, as well as people's continuing education and discipline, should equip the Philippines in reducing disaster risk. It is time for a new climate for fighting climate change.

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