

Representations over a Tropical Storm Disaster and the Restoration of Everyday Lives for Urban Poor Victims in the Philippines

– The Case of Typhoon Ondoy –

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Abstract

In this paper, the urban poor victims of a natural disaster caused in the Philippines by Typhoon Ondoy in September of 2009 are examined. Focus is put on the steps taken before the disaster and restoration period of the marginalized people of Metro Manila as well as the way these people conduct their everyday lives. Whenever a natural disaster occurs in the Philippines, there is the belief that natural disasters are the act of God and that both the rich and poor suffer damage equally. However, this conceals the awkward truth of the social structure in the country; the poor are more vulnerable, less privileged, and have little access to resources, as proven by the Ondoy disaster. In this paper, the author describes how these marginalized people dealt with the typhoon and what practices were seen during the restoration phase.

Key words : Philippines, Ondoy, Urban poor, Everyday lives, Community, Resettlement

1. Introduction

Two tropical storms, named “Ondoy” (also known as “Ketsana”) and “Pepeng” (Parma), hit urbanized areas of Manila and Baguio over a short period of time in September and October of 2009. The calamities caused by Ondoy alone totaled nearly 300 lives and affected 3.1 million people within Metro Manila and its suburbs, resulting in the biggest devastation of the past forty years (850 lives were claimed and 7 million homes were flooded in Luzon). The urban poor, who constitute half the population of Metro Manila, were the victims most affected. Yet, what seemed peculiar with Ondoy was that the rich and middle class also suffered. What was the real situation, how did the media report this and created disaster conception, and above all how did the poor respond to this?

In this report, the author focuses on the process and content of the media coverage together with the steps taken before the

disaster and the restoration period of the marginalized urban people, and the way these people conduct their everyday lives. The author analyzes newspaper articles and other news sources to illustrate the discourse used by the media, looking into two months worth of articles from the Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI) after the disaster from these consecutive tropical storms. The author chose the PDI as it is the most influential and most read English newspaper in the country amongst all social classes^{*1}). The paper is also connected to one of the two biggest broadcasting networks and thus shares the same news sources and tone of argument. On top of these

^{*1}) A survey conducted by Synovate, the market research arm of Aegis Group Plc., in July of 2007 found that among more than 1.34 million Filipinos who read English newspapers and belong to the ABCD classes in Greater Manila, 46% read the PDI, 44% the Manila Bulletin, and 36% the Philippine Star. Yet it is hard to say that the PDI is an indicator of public opinion since not all the classes can read English and afford buying copies everyday.

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materials, the author's experiences in fieldwork from 1996 up to 2010 are referred to here.

2. Ondoy: a Great Equalizer?

In the early stages of the disaster, the PDI called Ondoy a "great equalizer." With the headline "No rich, no poor for Ondoy's onslaught," a writer tells the story of a middle-class resident who was surprised to see that the water was near the second floor since "this is a middle-class subdivision" (Lopez, 2009), indicating the expectation that upper-class subdivisions should not be affected by such natural hazards. In another article, it was stated that the "flooding made no distinction between the rich and the poor." It included the story of a woman, working in the Supreme Court, who showed anger for not being saved by rescue choppers. One survivor said that it reminded her of the biblical story about the Great Flood and Noah's Ark" (Andrate *et al.*, 2009). An article published a week after the disaster contained a headline declaring that "Ondoy" was a great equalizer. In it, the writer stated, "the rich in their gated communities suffered just as much as the squatters in their shanties" (Cruz, 2009).

Seeing the tone of the arguments put out by the PDI, a writer for *Bulatlat*, a pro-human rights internet newspaper based in Metro Manila, claimed that the blame should be put upon the system, not the weather:

The newspaper was attempting to bolster the view that the Filipino class system had nothing to do with the disasters, and that the lives of all Filipinos are shaped by the same forces of nature, even by fate or by God (Boehringer, 2009).

Admittedly, nearly one-third of Metro Manila was covered by the flood, including Magallanes Village (a high-end residential district). The flood caused Provident Village, a middle-class subdivision located in the interior of the inverted S-curve of the Pasig River, to suffer more than 50 fatalities (Yap *et al.*, 2009)^{*2}. However, the great majority of the victims were the marginalized people living in urban shanties built along canals, riverbanks, and lakeshores. The onslaught of the flood, caused by nearly a month's worth of rain falling within six hours, swept away what little materials they possessed and, above all, confined or washed away their families as well (Yap, 2009).

The amount of suffering cannot be equal between the rich, or rather, the middle-class and the poor. The material loss was not the same in that the higher class could recover their losses

through insurance coverage. For the poor, the loss of work tools was a debt on their shoulders that they had to pay back. In a *Bulatlat* article by Ellao, a man had to pay his company for damaged work tools worth 100,000 pesos, while he was earning only 7,000 pesos a month (Ellao, 2009a).

The difference between the two was that the poor were more vulnerable, less privileged, and had little access to resources. During evacuation, many did not leave their houses in fear of losing their properties from looters, or because they thought that leaving the house meant dispossessing it since they were squaring off with the authorities over the occupation of land (Yap, 2009). They did not hear precautionary safety information such as when or where to go, especially the newcomers (Salamat, 2009). These newcomers did not comprehend most, if any, of the information, as some of them, new migrants, could not understand Tagalog but instead spoke a different mother tongue^{*3}. The poor did not have stable houses able to withstand being submerged. They did not have ways to call for help such as by telephone or internet, nor did they have a big network of family and friends. They were not influential enough to receive help from authorities like the police and military (Presse, 2009)^{*4}.

Instead, what the poor had were "informal arrangements" (as opposed to "formal arrangements" by the government and from international support), which the Ondoy victims sought help from (Jimenez-David, 2009a). Support extended from family, friends, and social networks is vital for people in their everyday lives, not to mention during hard times. This strong social network, however, is generally not seen in other social strata. During this disaster, however, a quite a number of the middle class people offered to help, such as by giving materials and opening their residences as temporary shelters (Andrate *et al.*, 2009, Cabal *et al.*, 2009, Kwok, 2009). The media commended this action and spirit of volunteerism, and one reporter commented that "The capacity of the Filipino to rise above himself, to think of others before self, in times of disasters has been noted again and again, and for good reason, which is that the Filipino does it again and again" (Quiros, 2009).

Greg Bankoff, the author of "Cultures of Disaster" (2003), writes that the exposure to centuries of repeated disasters had affected the behavioral patterns of the Filipinos, and

*2) The blame for the disaster in Provident Village fell on the developer of the subdivision which neglected the geographical risk of flooding as well as the authority that gave permission in order to enact a high residential land tax instead of the low tax placed on idle land. See Marcy Racelis, "'Ondoy's message,'" PDI, Oct. 20, 2009.

*3) For example, not all migrants such as Muslims from the southern Philippines could speak Tagalog, as armed conflict in their homeland had prevented them from schooling. Some came to Manila in order to work abroad for their means of survival. One of the problems affecting Muslims are that they might have difficulties in evacuation center due to food restrictions from their faith.

*4) Military speedboats came to rescue the residents of Magallanes Village as early as the day the flood hit Manila, whereas slow governmental action was taken in other areas. See, Alison Lopez, "No rich, no poor for Ondoy's onslaught," PDI, Sep. 27, 2009.

that this has cultivated the Filipinos' sense of bayanihan*⁵) (spirit of cooperation and volunteerism). Bankoff also noted in a forum held at a university in Baguio in July of 2009 that "bayanihan would be important in understanding how the Philippines could become the model for the world's disaster risk management" (Cabreza, 2009).

A week after the disaster, according to the geologist's findings, the blame was put upon these informal settlers, nevertheless much of the victims were the urban poor (Tandoc, 2009)*⁶). Owing to this, those 107,139 families living in the danger zone would be relocated to the place outside of the capital region (Burgonio *et al.*, 2009). The marginalized living along waterways are not to be allowed to return and will instead be relocated. They are considered as inutile existence nevertheless of their functional role in a "highly unequal society" of the metropolis (David, 2009). A prominent sociologist Randy David quotes:

These communities are an abundant source of inexpensive house help, drivers, gardeners, handymen and private security personnel. Politicians tolerate and coddle them because of the votes they represent. They themselves do not see the danger to which they are exposed, or, if they do, they tend to minimize these while highlighting the benefits they derive from living under such circumstances. Every society thus settles down to a way of life, where danger is normalized and risk becomes more or less calculable (David, 2009).

Thus, living near their sources of income but in the danger areas is a survival strategy for these societal "others." Needless to say, they would not voluntarily live in a place like the danger zone, which is the only place where people in their position can survive, as there are no other places to live in the city that they can afford.

3. Resettlement and Restoration

With the help of local governments, the administration is instituting a program for returning to one's residence called Balik-Bahay, a program for returning to one's province called Balik-Probinsiya, and a program for relocating informal settlers to relocation sites in Laguna Province, Rizal Province, and those in other nearby provinces (Labro, 2009, Ellao, 2009b, Cinco, 2009). In the Balik-Bahay project, a family will be given 1,000 to 2,000 pesos, and in the Balik-Probinsiya program, travel fare will be granted to those who

enroll in the program (Ellao, 2009b).

These measures are not new to the government. Together with postwar reconstruction, Manila faced rapid urbanization caused by an excessive population influx as early as the 1950s. In response to the overpopulation in the growing slum areas, the government attempted to push migrants back to their provinces by implementing a Balik-Probinsiya program with little effect since the migrants later moved back to the city. From the 1960s to the late 70s, these informal settlers were relocated to danger zones such as riverbanks and garbage dumps and to vacant public and private land. The government put up four relocation sites outside of Manila and transferred these slum residents. However, as Starke pointed out, before long nearly one-third had moved back to their previous dwelling sites, again making a living in a dangerous place (Starke, 1996).

There are other troubles as well. Based on the author's short-term observations from 1996 to 1998 in the Sapang Palay relocation site in San Jose Del Monte, Bulacan Province, the breakup of families and bigamous marriages were among the serious problems faced by the residents since the fathers lived alone in the city apart from the family for work. On top of these difficulties and abandonments, the administration showed a lack of consideration to the relocatees by relocating them to places lacking social and material infrastructures such as food, water, health services, schools, sanitation, street lights, cheap transportation, and job opportunities. They were relocated at random without any consideration to the relationships from their previous residences. From these lessons, the trend for dealing with slum dwellers no-wadays shifted to non-transferring solutions such as on-site upgrading and community mortgage programs coordinated by NGOs.

Even though resettlement was inevitable, merely 300 families were relocated among the 500,000 on the list as of mid-October 2009. Women are expected to play a more crucial role in rebuilding efforts (Bordadora and Papa, 2009). Jimenez-David writes that women organize their neighborhoods and communities for the long haul ahead:

Men soon have to return to the urgent task of survival; women keep an eye on the future, aware that their efforts today will affect their children and grandchildren (Jimenez-David 2009b).

In relocation-site societies especially, since men are likely to move back to the cities in order to make money, the presence of women will increase.

When conducted fieldworks in the aforementioned site in 1997 to 1999, the author noticed that a majority of barangay (barangay means village; the smallest administrative unit in the Philippines) counselors, auditors, treasurers, health

*5) Bayani means hero. In the Philippines, Jose Rizal, a martyr for the independent revolution, is regarded as a national hero. Today, overseas workers are called "bagong bayani" in recognition of their sacrifice for their family.

*6) Although both squatters and subdivisions bore the brunt of the finger-pointing, only the squatters have become the target of relocation.

workers, and leaders of sitio (sitio means “neighborhood community”) were consisted of women 30 to 70 years of age. These women mentioned that their spouses were either deceased or working in Manila but returning only on the weekends. Indeed, Metro Manila was a two-and-a-half hour bus trip from their residences. These women were mobilizing neighborhoods to implement support projects, organize Christmas and sports festivities, and hold religious activities, thus involving children and youth to participate in community strengthening. Gaillard, who studied volcano victims in the Philippines, also supports my findings. In his paper, Gaillard states that even if people are relocated, they choose to go back to their place of origin if their social lives do not bring a sense of attachment to the land prior to economic security at the relocation site (Gaillard, 2008). A women’s role, thus, becomes more vital in reinforcing a sense of community.

4. Conclusion

In this report, the author tried to look into the disaster and how people perceived it by analyzing periodic articles from a newspaper and a journal. In the early period of the onslaught of the tropical storm Ondoy, the media was claiming that both the rich and poor experienced the same suffering, thus bringing mythical conception of the disaster. Eventually, it became clear that the conditions between the two were different; the poor suffered more due to material damage and a lack of information resources, among others. Moreover, the poor, who reside and work out of the danger zone, were blamed for exacerbating the disaster, while the rich, including the policy makers, have a need for their manpower. Later on, the articles gradually shifted on the relocation of the urban poor from the danger zone. Yet, anxiety toward the inequalities and instabilities of the socio-economic situation still remain even if the poor are to be moved to the outskirts of the metropolis.

The measures and policies of resettlement have become a mainstream issue in dealing with slums and squatters, and they have yielded results to certain extent. Still, for the families, it is much more favorable to live in a slum. One factor why relocation will take time is that a qualified relocation site needs to be constructed (Dizon, 2009), and another is hesitation from those living where relocation sites are based who fear raising crime rates in these areas (Cinco, 2009). In the meantime, the society will likely find, as has been the legacy of the Philippine government, that these resettlement programs will be overshadowed by other emergent and more prioritized issues and thus postponed as future projects.

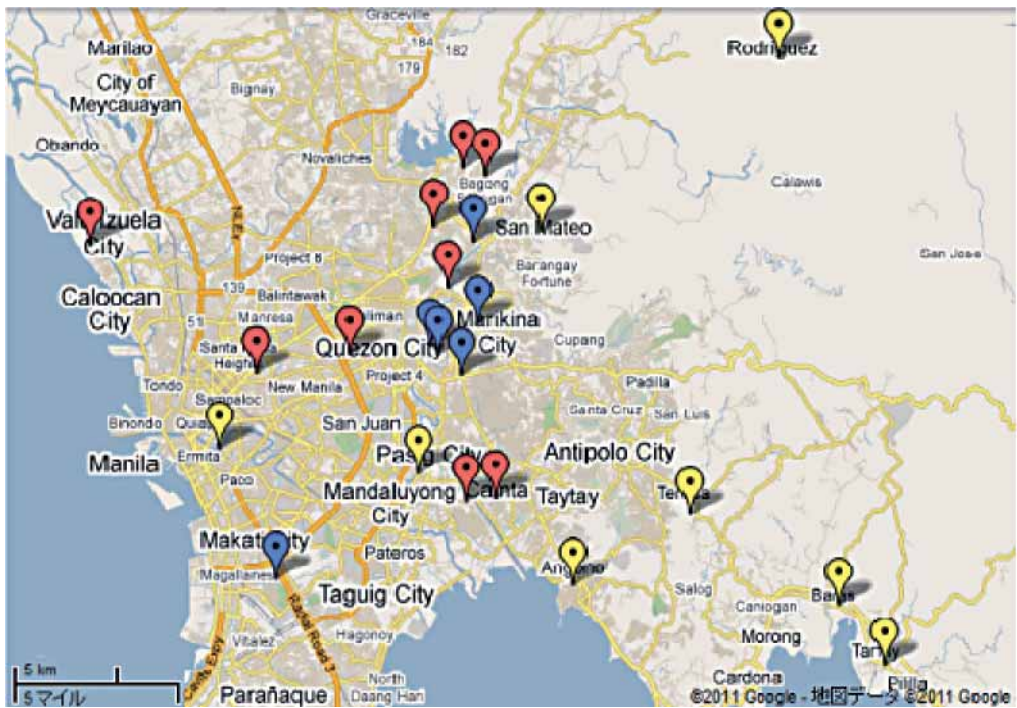
Yet, assuming that the social welfare of these people would be enhanced, it would be desirable to bring up the voices of the masses to foster sustainable development. Now that nearly half of the population of Metro Manila is living under

the poverty line, we have to know what sort of life, society, and relationship these marginalized people are attempting to reconstruct.

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Map : Locations of Disaster-affected Areas Sited in Articles.

Note : Red pins indicate the urban poor areas, blue pins indicate the upper and middle class villages and subdivisions, and the yellow pins indicate indistinct places.

Source : Pins placed by the author with courtesy of Google Maps.