

The Philippines after Haiyan/Yolanda and the politics of reconstruction: The long Road to Recovery - A Long Road to Freedom

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The official and traditional mourning period of forty days after the disaster in the Philippines (November 8 - December 18, 2013) has just been finished. It should be the period of painful acceptance of the loss of their loved ones and healing of their emotional and psychological wounds. It should also be a time to look at themselves in order to rebuild what is left with their houses and livelihood.

However, at this juncture, one cannot help but ask questions like: what is there to rebuild or to recover? Does this mean going back to the pre- disaster period?

It should be recalled that the hardest hit region by the Super Typhoon Yolanda/Haiyan (STYH), which are the Eastern Samar and Leyte or the Eastern Visayas, is the country's third poorest region. Nearly half of its 4.2 million populations are made of low-income copra workers and fisher folks. There has been a stark absence of sustainable development framework as the local economy had been politics driven and extractive industries like mining and logging which directly affected the fragile ecosystem to its natural barriers against calamities like the super typhoons.

This situation resulted to chronic poverty to its general population. The case of Eastern Visayas for instance would clearly illustrate this poverty situation, which simply turned from bad to worse. In 2009, 47% of its population was under poverty line and in 2012; it (poverty line) nosedived to 60%. The region (Eastern Visayas) has the widest income gap nationwide with 30% of its working population earning eight times more than bottom 30%.

The worsening poverty situation of the people in Eastern Visayas (as well as in other parts of the country) has deprived millions of people of their capacity to protect themselves from natural (or even the manmade) calamities and of the means to recoup their losses after the disasters.

It is not surprising then to know that almost 90% of the hardest hit population by the STYH are the poor and 40% of those killed are those over 60 years old who could not save themselves from such ferocious disaster.

The abovementioned situation was the pre-disaster condition of the people in the regions hardest hit by the STYH. The Yolanda survivors would not want to go back to such disposition when one speaks of rebuilding or reconstructing their lives. It should not be the rebuilding of the mistakes of the past.

REBUILDING LIVES AND CORRECTING THE PAST

President Benigno “PNOY” Aquino and his administration have estimated the total damage of Yolanda to \$12 billion and the need of the total amount of \$130 billion for reconstruction and rehabilitation. PNOY had mentioned such amount during the meeting of the international donors for the Reconstruction Assistance for Yolanda (RAY) two days ago. The PNOY administration has also defined different phases of the reconstruction and rehabilitation activities, which are six months for critical period, short term, would be one year, and medium term will be for four years.

This coming 24th of December 2013 there will be turnover of bunkhouses in Tacloban and by this time a promise of the secretary of energy (Sec. Petilla who is from Samar) that 100% of the electricity will be completely restored in the cities and urban centers. Obviously, the PNOY administration with the local elites have been making it clear that the extractive industries and politics driven development framework will never be touched and therefore will be restored during the reconstruction and rehabilitation period.

Meanwhile, the Yolanda victims have barely survived from the devastation with daily dependence on the food ration coming from the non-governmental institutions and organizations coming from both domestic and international. The food packages from the government are finally reaching their target beneficiaries, if at all, in a rotten stage.

There are documentations that several victims to human trafficking have been happening in the affected areas where young women are lured to prostitution. Hovering around are the vultures in the persons of illegal recruiters for the potential Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and where they can exploit and make profit for those Yolanda survivors turned into OFWs.

Rehabilitation and the rebuilding plan should not be committing the mistakes of the past. It should begin with the total stop of mining and logging activities and operations. One should bear in mind that more than ten years ago (2001) there was a great disaster in Ormoc City where flash floods had killed more than five thousand people and yet, aside from the immediate reaction after the infamous event of mentioning about the ban on logging activities, it has been intentionally forgotten. Everybody knows that the political and economic elites are behind the logging and mining activities.

Clear signs are shown now, that the idea of reconstruction is actually rebuilding the mistakes of the past. It will be creating the conditions where the people will be exposed once again and become more vulnerable to the worst disasters like Yolanda.

The rebuilding and reconstruction should be framed in such manner that economic and social inequities should be fundamentally addressed and a system that creates oppressive mechanism which make the poor people and their communities highly vulnerable to natural and manmade disasters should be dismantled.

The rebuilding and reconstructions are not simply about building infrastructures like shelters and bridges; it is about democratic governance and peoples’ empowerment. Therefore, it is most of all about respect of basic rights of people to rebuild themselves in all stages of its implementation whether it is in the construction of climate-change resilience houses, any long-term livelihood programs or even in the rehabilitation of the mangroves in the coastal areas. In all these phases, the survivors should be principal spear headers for the simple reason that they are rebuilding their own lives and communities.

The people through their own organizations with the development institution should initiate a strategic plan and implement programs that will reduce their long-term vulnerability to disasters

and installing mechanism for recoument process in the post disaster period.

However, such activities need emancipatory mechanisms, genuine land reforms for the farmers and the protection of fishing rights for the fisher folks.

In other words, a lot of things should be done in changing the system before we can adopt programs to minimize if not eliminate the structures which creates high vulnerability of the poor people to disasters of the climate change.

This is a long and winding road for the majority of people to avoid disastrous effects of typhoon and floods but in our warmed world, there cannot be a shortcut.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

As has been mentioned earlier, that Eastern Visayas the hardest hit by the Super Typhoon Yolanda is also the third poorest region of the country. Before the monster typhoon hit the area, more than 50% of its 4.2 million populations were under poverty level. The chronic poverty in the region has turned bad to worse from 47% in 2009 to 60% in 2012 and to unimaginable level this year especially after Yolanda.

The worsening economic marginalization and the political alienation of the majority of its population have turned the region into fertile ground for insurgency. Recruitment for the Communist Party of Philippines (CPP) and its armed wing-New People's Army has been very easy. Peoples have been frustrated and desperate with the blatant corruption committed by the ruling economic and political elites in the region that they do not have to think twice when approached by the CPP-NPA and join their ranks.

It is not surprising then, that Eastern Visayas, particularly in Samar has been known to be the most advanced of the military wing of the CPP in terms of cadres' development and size of its NPA formation. It should be noted that the first battalion size of the NPA was organized in this region. It has also been known that the NPA and its faster recruitment made the area their pilot area for the intensification of their tactical armed guerrilla offensives. The natural and human resources in the region have been conducive for such experimentation. The result of the intensification of the armed struggle led by the CPP has caused additional burden to the majority of the poor people in the area. This has been evident that after more than 40 years of this type of revolutionary movement, it has not brought positive gains for the people or makes their lives less miserable.

Moreover, one can easily notice that there has been a big gap in the development of civil society organizations and the open mass movements especially in the town and urban centers. The development of the open mass movements to push for meaningful reforms in the different aspects of the peoples' lives, are intertwined with the development of peoples' mass organizations and development institutions. Definitely, peoples' options here are limited to the armed form of struggle. The stress of the CPP-NPA in the areas (as in other areas) is the development and intensification of armed struggle using the Maoist strategic direction working for the protracted peoples war with the political line of surrounding the cities from the countryside.

The struggle for reforms such as developing the mass movement for the genuine land reform and protection of fishing rights of the peasant and fisher folks respectively has been neglected. Such neglect has direct impact on the development of political empowerment and helps make a change in position of power between the few political elite and the majority of the poor people. This obvious neglect has been one of the decisive reasons of unpreparedness of the basic masses to

protect/recoup themselves against disasters in the past as well as the super typhoon like Yolanda.

It is not surprising then that relief teams found themselves dealing with unorganized people and survivors when they made their interventions for Yolanda victims and survivors. Even the practice of Oriental Medicine, which in the past had been the trademark of the presence and influence of the CPP/NPA in the area and the people, had been obviously absent.

In the construction and rehabilitation phase, it is a very important that Yolanda survivors should be helped to organize themselves in order to become effective drivers for their own recovery. The absence of peoples organizations in place will make the work more difficult but less complicated because one has to start the organization with less baggage of the negative experience.

The building and strengthening of the survivors' organization should be the first to be done in order to face and confront the issue of rebuilding and reconstructing the emotional and physical damages. It also insures that we are not building the mistakes of the past.

The direction of building and strengthening of the peoples' organizations should be to help in the development of peoples' mass movement towards achieving concrete democratic reforms. The process will definitely help strengthen peoples' empowerment in their day-to-day struggle against climate change and the disasters it will always bring upon the people. Positive results of the open mass movement of the peasant to own the land they till will also strengthen their rank to use organic agriculture method in order to mitigate the negative results of the global warming. Moreover, it is also building their (peasants) power in order to liberate themselves from the political alienation of the elite. In other words, their economic activities have brought them to political emancipation and therefore can make themselves more prepared for the disasters and for recoupment process after the disaster.

Meanwhile one has to consider seriously the paradigm and its possible shift being followed by the left like the CPP/NPA in the affected areas. In rebuilding and reconstructing the society, the context of the intensification of the disastrous effects of the climate change should be factored in. At this stage and as proven by several decades of experience, the peoples' protracted war (PPW) as strategy is not definitely making the majority of the poor people less vulnerable to disasters brought about by the climate change. Serious rethinking of the relevance of such strategy should be in place. Otherwise, such strategic orientation in pursuing revolutionary objectives regardless of how noble one is claiming, is actually adding burden and difficulties upon the people whom we vow to serve. In addition, one has to consider the government's framework in facing the realities of climate change and its paramount interest of perpetuating the existing exploitative and oppressive system.

At this point, one can say that the best and effective way to face the consequence of climate change is working for a system change and major reorientation of existing paradigm from both the right and the left.

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P.S.

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