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COMMENTARY

COMMENTARY : What went wrong? Like sound of 1 hand clapping

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MANILA, Philippines—It is a policy rule that hazards (floods, earthquakes) are natural, but disasters human. It is not about allocating blame.

A lot happens when systems fail, hardly traceable to any individual or agency. But we must consider the possibility of policy failure, otherwise, we will not learn from Tropical Storm “Ondoy.”

Consider how surprised we were, in 2008, when another typhoon (Frank) went left, not right, and overwhelmed Aklan and Iloilo. Here we are, a year later, and nothing has changed.

Let's not blame climate change, soap opera, etc. for our shortcomings.

It hurts to ask if deaths were avoidable, but analysis requires it. We have no answers, only questions. How could floodwater have risen so fast in some areas (chest deep in less than an hour, by some accounts)?

A rainfall of 410 mm is tremendous. But is it beyond what we design systems for? Perhaps not. If design flows are based on history, then would not Oct. 27, 1978, be more apropos, when the Angat watershed had 2,730 mm of rain—one would suppose “normal” design flows to be somewhere in between.

Indeed, many things suggest organizational problems. Why was there no system for warning residents about flooding, breached dams and possible drowning?

Nothing unusual in bulletin

The Ipo Dam started spilling water as early as 1:20 a.m. Saturday, and Angat and La Mesa Dams (different watersheds but connected by aqueducts) would follow. Was there no communication between them and with agencies/LGUs downstream? With so many agencies (PDDC, OCD, MWSS, Pagasa, Napocor, LGUs, Mayor's Office, NDCC, MMDA, etc.), why did residents receive no evacuation order? Was the MM5 weather model predicting hundreds of mm of rain, even the night before? As for people paying more attention to soap operas than bulletins, what bulletins would they have heard?

The weather bulletin of 11 a.m. Saturday the 26th said: “This disturbance is expected to enhance the southwest monsoon and bring rains over central and southern Luzon and Visayas. Residents living in low-lying areas and near mountain slopes in areas affected by the Southwest Monsoon and those under signals no. 1 and no. 2 are alerted against possible flash floods and landslides ... The public and the disaster coordinating councils concerned are advised to take appropriate actions and watch for the next bulletin to be issued at 5 p.m. today.”

What, in that message, suggests anything unusual, and what are “appropriate actions”? Filipinos are by now so used to these standard warnings. Working back, one asks, why keep water in the dams so high, far above the “upper rule curve” (for example, Angat was almost 25 meters above) heading into typhoon season?

Organizational failure

If the answer is: It is unclear who was supposed to do what and when, then that is organizational failure. Partly, it may be because staff below the Direk, Sec, or Usec have no initiative to make decisions—this is exacerbated by Direks/Secs/Usecs who run agencies as if they were their personal kingdoms.

After the Kobe earthquake, the Japanese realized that the civil self defense force needed to act autonomously without the governor. This is NOT a money issue—to tell people, leave or you may drown, that does not require funds.

The plans, programs are all for show.

Some will point to some silver bullet—e.g., community-based management, use of high mobile phone penetration, Metroplan, etc.

This is misleading—it requires multiple strategies, including reforming day-to-day agency practice.

Some will say, wait till we finish the DRRP (Disaster Risk Reduction Plan), but this is like hazard mapping—when the result is a hazard map that sits on the shelf gathering dust, the situation is worse than before.

Most clueless about NDCC

The organizational chart for disaster management is useless. We need lower-level persons trained in action on the ground. We need public systems for monitoring project delivery, calamity fund disbursement.

We need local scenario planning—staff who act out: What if the first floor of the hospital is completely flooded, how do we act?

Most people have little clue what the NDCC does, so how useful could it possibly be? And what do they do during the off-season? Just sit around, waiting for disasters to happen?

On the other hand, if the DRRP assigns a greater load to LGUs, the needed training and capacity building would be challenging.

Is the agenda of government, the opposition, media, NGO, more important than the life of a person? Media may be becoming more expert at political gamesmanship than factual reporting.

Some media organizations take sides with various political personalities, so when one (or two) of these makes a spectacle on the Senate floor, media is enraptured. In this circus atmosphere, the technical and the factual are first to go.

Wanted: Truth seekers

What is needed is a public process of truth-seeking. It is probably not something to be done by Senate, which has squandered opportunities for fact finding and given us soap opera instead.

We need an independent blue ribbon committee. It needs to be assembled by consensus and designed to include people perceived to be neutral, with no personal agendas.

Perhaps it should be part of the unfinished DRRP process. We have yet to enact the Disaster Risk and Reduction Bill despite nine other Senate bills drafted prior to this one.

In the United States, we sometimes critique bureaus for overemphasizing formality, rational procedures, legalism, etc.

Here, we find ourselves saying the opposite—we seriously need to professionalize and formalize project delivery, assign individual responsibility for assigned tasks—otherwise, when everything is informal, we get institutionalized “bahala na,” a culture of unprofessionalism.

We need programs, memorials and citizen’s forums aimed at remembering. We need to monitor changes, post-Ondoy. Elsewhere, such a disaster would warrant resignations and dismissals—we should allow this, as it serves purposes beyond mere scapegoating. It is a sign that things cannot remain the same, that life is not so cheap.

Disasters, tragic as they are, present a short window of opportunity during which real change can happen. A year from now, we will look back and ask, did we find out what went wrong, did anything change, did our country turn a corner?

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[^ Back to top](#)