WAR DISASTER MANAGEMENT OPERATION IN THE CONFLICT AFFECTED AREAS: THE EXPERIENCES OF PIKIT, ALEOSAN, MIDSAYAP, NORTH COPTABATO, SOUTHERN PHILIPPINES

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Abstract

Both Government Agencies and Civil Society Organizations which have carried out the War Disaster Management Operation in Pikit, Aleosan, Midsayap, and Pigkawayan, North Cotabato, Southern Philippines have extended food and non food relief assistance for the Internally Displaced Persons. In addition, Core - Shelters were provided for IDPs whose houses were totally damaged during the war while financial assistance for those partially damaged. Clustering approach, coordination and sharing of information with other humanitarian actors, and designation of field workers were the common strategies used for the IDPs' social preparations for relief assistance. However, Civil Society Organizations that have no funding support went for house to house, school to school, and solicitations through Masjid in the pursuit of their efforts to extend assistance. While the readiness and prepared of IDPs for pre- disaster was low due to the slow mobilization, and inadequacy of goods and services extended, improvements were made during the disaster period. Furthermore, after the disaster, the IDPs were provided goods and services for rehabilitation, while recovering from the effects of war.

Key Words: War Disaster Management, Conflict Area, Southern Philippines

Introduction

The outburst of war between the Philippines Government and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front after the failed Memorandum of Agreement for Ancestral Domain (MOA-AD) signing on August 5, 2008 in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia was inevitable. Apparently, this another round of man-made calamity was the result of the government's abandonment of its earlier commitment for peace after the GRP and MILF panels have, jointly concurred and subsequently initialed the final draft of the proposed covenant that was supposed to guarantee for the lasting peace in the Southern Philippines.

The aborted signing of peace agreement was fueled by some local leaders, especially in the Province of North Cotabato who have popularized the negative implications of the proposed autonomy rather than the

promising gains and benefits for the lasting peace in the war torn areas. These people led several protest rallies opposing the approval of the MOA-AD, and using the affected residents of the proposed expanded autonomy as front liners.

The opposition parties found solid vindication with the Philippine Supreme Court issuing temporary restraining order declaring the MOA –AD as unlawful. Arguing that the rule of law should prevail, the Supreme Court elucidated that the MOA-AD did not pass through public consultation, and therefore, not known to the people. As a consequence, the opposition parties celebrated for the winning the legal battle, while the Bangsamoro People again fell to the wiles of the government, and thus, became frustrated.

As an expression of frustrations, some MILF Commanders have started to attack government installations in the municipalities of Pikit, Aleosan, Midsayap and Pigkawayan, North Cotabato. What seems to be more appalling and unacceptable in the "humane society" were the irresponsible killings of innocent civilians, including children by armed groups vehemently denied   by the MILF fighters, and so with the Armed Forces of the Philippines (AFP). The war has also escalated to the neighboring provinces of Maguindanao, Lanao Del Sur, and Sarangani which were simultaneously attacked by the rebel groups.

Resulting from this man-made catastrophe was a massed evacuation of local residents, especially those that come from the interior areas. This scenario was worsened further with losses of life and properties due to crossfire, and exchange of artilleries. As consequence, thousand of Internally Displaced Persons were distributed in different evacuation centers.   Their conditions were   horrible that nobody under any normal circumstance can ever tolerate. Local residents were yearning for food for survival. The provisions of social services were inadequate to respond to the needs of these Internally Displaced Persons in the evacuation centers. Thus, many children including adults died because of too much congestion, and lack of medicines.

Nonetheless, whether the Government of the Republic of the Philippines (GRP) and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) could still resume the true wisdom of the peace talk, and come up with the final agreement for lasting peace in the Southern Philippines is not the main concern of this paper. This process will take a long road to go without definite time table.

Basically, this paper is interested to find out how Government Agencies and Civil Society Organizations have carried out disaster management operation for the Internally Displaced Persons in the municipalities earlier mentioned. Specifically, the paper is sought to find out 1) What are the Government Agencies and Civil Society Organizations which have carried out the Disaster Management Operation in North Cotabato, and the nature their assistance extended for the IDPs? 2) What are the strategies adopted by Government Agencies and Civil Society Organizations in providing assistance? 3) What is the level of readiness and preparedness of the community for disaster response? And 4) what policy implications on GO and CSOs Disaster Management in North Cotabato results from this study?

The Concept of Disaster

Disaster is characterized as the episode of chaos, death, injuries, damaged properties, displacement of families and inadequate basic supplies. Disaster, either large or small can happen any time. Thus, it is always advantageous to be prepared all the time. Events ranging from purely local disaster such as flood, earthquake, fire, epidemic and armed conflict are all potential catastrophes. Every year considerable losses of life and properties are experienced from disasters triggered by natural causes, technological accidents, human carelessness and war. This situation prompted the government to provide emergency support and financial assistance to the victims of the disasters and for relief and rehabilitation work in the affected areas (Abletez, 2000).

Types of Disasters

There are three major types of disasters:

1. Natural Disasters are disasters brought by natural causes such as floods, earthquakes, droughts or volcanic eruptions.

    The randomness and suddenness of natural disaster are sometimes their most devastating qualities. Davis (1993) stated that nature's way is some monumental system of checks and balances, designed to control the world's population.

    These things seem to be unsettling to scientists. In an effort to make order out of disorder, they tried to identify and then track the pattern in natural disasters. Even the most cursory examinations of the world's natural disasters indicate that human fatalities have steadily decreased, largely because mankind has learned to pay attention to certain warning signs and signals.

    On the other hand, throughout history man has attributed natural disasters to a divine cause. Other causes are complex such as poverty-ridden populations who, through a multiplicity of economic factors, are forced to live in the direct path of monsoons and typhoons and are put at the mercy of floods cause by the rape of ecology by uncaring governments and individuals. Sometimes, mass inefficiency is the culprit. But more pervasively, these natural disasters are exacerbated by simple, primal greed, and are immediate manifestation of corruption.

2. Man-Made Disasters are catastrophic caused by man's stupidity, neglect and avariciousness (Davis, 1993).

    Although human error is the euphemism that is commonly used to describe the reasons for most man-made disasters, it is not altogether accurate. Human error is present when an airline pilot, using his best judgment, miscalculates the fuel left in a rapidly emptying tank or the distance to a runway. And human error is present when a navigator of a ship, in panic situation, steers out of the safety of deep waters into the disaster of a reef.

    In man-made disasters, government often plays ill-starring roles. The cover-ups that are universally present after disaster have occurred, the misinformation before they happen, and the failure to conduct proper inspection of such vital parts of vehicles, all indicate government culpability

    Further, in mad-made disasters, it is what occurs before or during these emergencies that matters. The judgment made by a ship captain, an airline pilot or the decisions made by fire chiefs or rescue squads, the advice given by experts to engineers fighting to bring an industrial plant under control spell the difference between disasters and accidents. While in natural disaster one can blame it on the fate itself, represented by the overwhelming presence of the overpowering forces of nature. People may be in the wrong place at the wrong time when a natural disaster occurs like a tidal wave or an earthquake strikes.

3. Technological disaster is caused by technical failure or leakage in a nuclear plant that caused so much human suffering and death.

    While there are horrible and disgusting experiences in disaster, there are also some good lessons that can be learned. The qualities of bravery and knowledge can emerge from disasters. Tragic heroes go to their deaths bravely and learn from their errors before they die. Time after time there are indelible acts of courage that shine like stars in an otherwise dark sky disasters. For example, the rescuers that risk their lives to go into a burning building, the flight attendants and crews who faced down terrorists are proofs that there is goodness and courage in human being that no disaster can entirely destroy.

Disaster Phenomena: The Philippines Experience

In the Philippines, the most common natural disasters that hit the country are floods, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and fires. Aside from these, there are man-made induced misfortunes that inflict much more damages to property and exact countless lives. The armed conflicts or violence ranging from massacre to mass slaughter. In war time or even normal times, violent incidents have been victimizing people from all races and regions with diverse ethnic groups and religious beliefs. Mass murders of the innocents such as women and children are often prompted by partisan politics or ideological bias or by religious differences Abletez (2000) as cited by Alangca (2003). Other forms of violence include ambuscades, bombs or grenade explosions, shooting incidents and civil disturbance or armed conflict due to rebellion. There are also sensational crimes such as rape with homicide, bank robberies, kidnapping for ransom and massacres.

Disaster Response: Coordination Activities Before, During and After Disasters

The government has created organizations purposely to mobilize resources in times of disaster. These agencies are tasked to provide concerted and coordinated disaster control efforts from the national down to the regional, provincial, city/municipal and barangay levels. Under the calamities and disaster preparedness plan, National Disaster Coordinating Council exercises direction and control, through the office of the Civil Defense, over-all emergency operations from the regional down to the lowest political subdivisions. The council coordinates the department's support and assistance. It likewise provides top management and control over multi-department types of disaster stabilizations.

During disaster, relief is the most urgent measure as claimed by ADPC (1991). Food becomes the most important consideration in times of disaster. Scarcity not only of food but also of water are major concerns in this situation (DOST, n.d). Thus, the USAID emergency assistance programs ensure that food and life-saving assistance are provided to areas severely affected by violence or natural disaster. It aims to increase food security of vulnerable populations and strengthen indigenous efforts to resolve conflict and promote reconciliation. The major activities of the USAID include: emergency food assistance programs that provide basic food items to those most in need; humanitarian aid to Internally Displaced Persons which provide services on clean drinking water, shelter, seeds for agriculture and other critical services; and lastly is the Quick Response to Conflict and Crises which focuses activities on the conflict prone regions of Aceh, Maluku, West Papua, Sumatra, and East Nusa Tenggara (http.//www.usaid.gov). The basic responsibility for undertaking the relief and rescue operations is of the State government concerned. However, the government of India is intimately involved at every stage in providing financial, technical and material support. A control room under the scarcity Relief Division is activated and functions round the clock during the crisis period. The control room receives messages from the affected states regarding damages and assistance, if any, required for relief operations. Immediate action is taken on the request of the State Governments.

On the other hand the rehabilitation activities are focused more on recovery and reconstruction. For example, in China, rehabilitation including the recovery of production and social life is also a very effective measure for disaster reduction. The Chinese government reserves an annual budget of RBM 1 billion for the purpose. Moreover, when major disaster strikes, additional sources of assistance are forthcoming from social insurance, domestic help and international support. For better cooperation in the international community, China appeals for the establishment of a unified information system that can provide timely information concerning natural disaster to the leadership of the country and to the concerned departments. This will be of great benefit for the government and the departments to respond to natural disaster rapidly, to adopt proper policies and to take natural disaster reduction measures (ADPC, 1991).

The Disaster Coordinating Councils at the regional, provincial, municipal/city and barangay levels complement the national Disaster Coordinating Council.

Aspects of disaster attended to are health service, relief service, information service and rehabilitation services. The health service is aimed at protecting life through health and medical care of the populace; preserve life through proper information and mobilization of all medical resources. The basic concept of the health service is local government community effort.

The main purpose of relief service is to minimize human suffering in times of disaster and civil emergencies. Relief operations pertain to the people in affected areas because of calamity. It comes in the form of emergency feeding, emergency housing, and emergency clothing

The importance of information in reducing disaster

In spite of the continuing technological advances, disaster still continues to grow. Emergency managers continue to be called on to make decisions during disaster events, as well as in the pre and post disaster phases. In order to make optimal decisions to reduce the loss of life and property, stakeholders must be able to obtain the needed information in a format that is appropriate for their capabilities (OGC Discussion Paper 1999).

Thus, despite of excellent efforts by many groups the approach to provide information for disaster management is not effectively utilizing a wealth of data that resides with various organizations, and that existing technology could deliver to disaster manager's important information that could save lives, reduce damage to property, and lessen the environmental impacts of disasters. The inability to access information and the lack of standardization, coordination, and communication are all obstacle that need to be overcome (NCR, 1998; in OGC Discussion paper, 1999).

Many efforts have been expended throughout the disaster community to articulate issues and to characterize the dynamics and the interrelationships that need to be accommodated in a viable information management strategy. The goals are to improve decision making before, during and after emergencies through better access to quality data and information. The major focused are the identified users who should be provided information specifically designed to meet their needs. Various data types are integrated and effective dissemination and access plan is necessary for the success of the information network.

The four main areas for improvement in information management are
1. Locating information
2. Assessment and evaluation of information integrity, currency and accuracy
3. Assimilation and integration of new information
4. Application that incorporates new information to produce customized, understandable domain specific results.

Series of recommendations emerged from the NRC which includes among others the provision of international, national, regional or local maps showing how hazards and risks vary in space and time. Further, there should be estimates of probability of occurrence of hazardous events as well as estimates and examples of potential effects especially for structures. Real time display of what is happening during the course of a disaster, structures. Real time display of what is happening during the course of a disaster, systems for contingency planning and codes, standards and construction methods for structures should be provided. These are important components in any workable framework for comprehensive disaster management. These components will then become the basis for technology specifications and the delivery of capabilities (Alangka, 2000).

Methodology
Research Design
        The study employed both qualitative and quantitative methods for research. The qualitative potion was used to obtain the data pertaining to assistance extended by both government and civil society organizations for the IDPs, while the qualitative side elicited information pertaining to the disaster readiness and preparedness of the war affected families. These methods were mutually reinforcing one another, and shed lights on how effective was the disaster management operations carried out by both government and civil society organizations for the war affected families in North Cotabato.

Techniques in Data Gathering
        An Interview Guide Questions were prepared for obtaining the necessary information pertaining to the disaster management operations in North Cotabato. These guide questions shed lights on how effective was the government and civil society organizations in responding to the crisis that caused for the displacement of thousands of families in Pikit, Aleosan, Midsayap and Pigkawayan respectively. To be more precise, the research adopted the following techniques:

1. Using the guide questions, the researcher had asked for an interview with Key Informants (KIs) at three levels:
   a. Members of the Disaster Coordinating Council, more particularly, the Local Government Officials at the provincial and municipal levels such as the Governor, Mayors or their representatives, and other members that could speak about their activities in responding to the crisis.
   b. Heads of Government Agencies like the Department of Social Welfare and Development, Department of Health, Department of Interior and Local Government etc. that have extended assistance for the IDPs.
   c. Heads of Civil Society Organizations such as Non Governmental Organizations (NGOs) and Donor Agencies that have played significant roles in responding to the IDPs during disaster time.
2. Close coordination with the contact persons in the field or even to those IDPs who have already returned back to their respective places for focus group discussions. This strategy was used to validate information obtained from the interviews with the Local Government Units, Government Agencies, and the Civil Society Organizations.
3. Usedof secondary data such as documents available from both government,   and the Civil Society Organizations related to their assistance extended for the IDPs. These documents were valuable materials in analyzing how these institutions became helpful for the needy in times of disaster.
4. Participants-observation- the researcher together with his assistants have immersed with the IDPs to gain   direct information about their living condition, and validate himself the veracity of information obtained from the series interviews and questionnaires administered.

Findings and Discussions
        The research   highlights showed the following major findings:
   1. Both Government Agencies and Civil Society Organizations that have carried out the Disaster Management Operation in Pikit, Aleosan, Midsayap and Pigkawayan extended food and non food relief assistance for the IDPs.

        Both Provincial and Municipal Governments through Provincial Social Welfare Development Office (PSWDO) and Municipal Social Welfare Development Offices (MSWDs) of Pikit, Alesoan, Midsayap and Pigkawayan have extended food and non food relief assistance

for the IDPs. Food assistance constituted rice, noodles, sardines, cooking oil, and salt etc, while the non food items constituted soap, water jug, blanket, pillows, mosquito nets, utensils etc. These food and non food assistance were also supplemented by CSOs such as Philippine National Red Cross, Operation Blessing, Alisan Foundation, Development and Charitable Project Committee, Consortium of Bangsamoro Civil Society, United Nations World Food Programme, and OXFAM respectively.

2.   Core - Shelter and Housing Assistance

The IDPs of Pikit, Aleosan, Midsayap, and Pigkawayan whose houses were totally damaged during the war were given a Core-Shelter Units, a small type of house for the IDPs, while those whose houses were partially damaged were given P5,000 for repair purposes. The Provincial Government, through the PSWDO has requested for augmentation of funds from the National Government for these Core Shelter and Housing Assistance through the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council and Office of the Civil Defense.

3.   Distribution of Medicines, and Campaign for Health Care, cleanliness and Sanitation

The Department of Health, through their Municipal Health Offices had distributed medicines for common sickness, such as cough, fever, headache and diarrhea for the IDPs of Pikit, Aleosan, Midsayap and Pigkawayan. These Municipal Health Offices had also campaigned for cooperation of IDPs for cleanliness and sanitation of their environment. The Organization of International Migration (OIM) also supplemented by implementing Cleanliness and Camp Management Program, including construction of small toilets at the IDPs Evacuation Centers.

4.   Maintenance of Peace and Order, and Security for the IDPs

The Department of Interior and Local Government, through the Philippine National Police (PNP) had deployed PNP personnel at the IDPs Evacuation Centers of Pikit, Aleosan, Midsayap and Pigkawayan for the maintenance of peace and order, and security purposes.

5.   Psychosocial Activities - Counseling

The MSWDOs of Pikit, Aleosan, Midsayap and Pigkawayan had conducted group counseling sessions for the IDPs: Adult and Children purposely to release tensions and help them get relieve of   their traumatic experiences of the war.   This psychosocial activity wascomplemented by the Community and Family Services International (CFSI) which implemented Child Rights Project purposely to fill in the learning gaps of children in Libungan, Toreta, at the same time release their traumatic experiences due to the war, and live normally.

6. Feeding Program
The United Nations Children Educational Funds (UNICEF) had implemented 6 months feeding program for IDPs' Children in the evacuation centers of Pikit, Aleosan, Midsayap and Pigkawayan. Such feeding program used included milk, oath meal,milk, sugar and noodles.

7. Distribution of Water Pumps and Toilet Bowls

    In order to respond to the problems of shortage of water supply for drinking and washing, and improper waste disposals at the evacuation Centers, OXFAM and the Organization of International Migration distributed Water Pumps and Toilet Bowls for the IDPs of Pikit, Aleosan, Midsayap and Pigkawayan respectively.

8. Organization of Peace Rally and Peace Forum, and State of Bakwit Address.

    The Consortium for Bangsamoro Civil Society had organized a Peace   Rally and Peace Forum participated in by representatives from the Military, MILF, Religious, local Leaders, students etc held at the Notre Dame of Midsayap, North Cotabato. The purposes of this activity were a) to demand for the stop of the war b) fall out of military from their operations c) safe return of the IDPs to their barangays, and d) serve justice for the victims of human rights violation during the war. In addition, representatives from Catholic-Bishop Conference of the Philippines, Bantay Ceasefire, Military and local leaders were also invited in the "State of Bakwit Address" organized to explain that the IDPs were not reserved forces of the rebel group. These people were purely civilians and needing assistance.

Strategies in Extending Assistance for the IDPs.

9. Clustering Approach
    The MSWDOs of Pikit, Aleosan, Midsayap and Pigkawayan have organized the IDPs into different clusters. Each cluster was composed of 7 to 10 families purposely to facilitate the smooth distribution of goods and easy management of IDPs in the evacuation centers. This clustering of the IDPs was also strengthened further with the support of the Organization of International Migration under its camp and management program.

10. Coordination and Information Sharing with Other Humanitarian Actors equally extending assistance for the IDPs.

    Coordination and sharing of information pertaining to the IDPs from Barangay to the Municipal and Provincial levels, through the PSWDO and MSWDOs were commonly observed by both Government and Civil Society Organizations. This strategy was usedfor the social preparation of the IDPs to ensure that the distributions of food and non food relief assistance were effectively delivered to the real and deserving ones.

11. Designation staff to facilitate social preparation, and interventions

    While the Municipal Social Welfare and Development Office of each municipality affected by the war has an assigned Social Worker to do the validation and assessment of information pertaining to the IDPs, the CSOs on the other hand involved in the disaster operation have also

designated their own field workers to do their own validation, assessment and coordination with other agencies in preparation of their interventions for the IDPs.

12. House to house, school to school solicitations, and donations of goods through Masjid.

CSOs that have no funding support, including other concern individuals such as Students, Teachers and Religious leaders went for a house to house, and school to school solicitations. Imams (Religious Leaders) in different Masjid had also asked for donations from the public of whatever kind purposely to extend assistance for the IDPs.

Disaster Preparedness and Readiness

13. The level of readiness and preparedness of the IDPs in pre-disaster period was low due to the slow mobilization of concerned agencies e.g. DSWD, DOH, LGUs including CSOs as well as inadequacy of goods and services provided.

14. Despite of the aforementioned inadequacies of goods and services provided in the Pre-Disaster Period, but during the Disaster or actual period of evacuations, these were improved by the concerned agencies, like the DSWD, at the Provincial and Municipal levels, DOH and LGUs, including the CSOs.

15. After the Disaster, the IDPs were provided goods and services that helped them sustain their living condition while recovering from the effects of the war.

Conclusion

The Disaster Management Operation in North Cotabato, after the Failure of the MOA-AD was carried out by both Government Agencies and Civil Society Organizations. These agencies were common in extending food and non food relief assistance for the Internally Displaced families of Pikit, Aleosan, Midsayap and Pigkawayan respectively. Food Assistance constituted rice, noodles, sardines, oil, and salt, while the non food items were those of sleeping blankets, mosquito nets, utensils, pillows, and water jug, and including water pumps and toilet bowls which were extended by CSOs. There were also psychosocial activities and counseling conducted by government and civil society organizations purposely to relieve the IDPs from their traumatic experiences of the war. In addition, IDPs whose houses were totally damaged during the war were provided Core Shelter, while those which were partially damaged were provided some financial support for repair.

On the other hand, both Government Agencies and Civil Society Organizations have adopted clustering approach, coordination and sharing of information with other humanitarian actors, and designation of field workers to facilitate the social preparations and interventions as common strategies in extending assistance for the IDPs. However, those CSOs that have no funding support went for a house to house, and school to school solicitations, and donation of goods through the Masjid in their interest to extend assistance for the IDPs.

Finally, while the level of readiness and prepared of IDPs for pre- disaster was low due to the slow mobilization, and inadequacy of goods and services extended by responsible agencies, these short comings were improved during the disaster periods. Furthermore, like the Indonesian Post Disaster experience in 2003 and 2006 respectively (Josef, 2007), the IDPs were provided goods and services after the disaster period for rehabilitation purposes, while recovering from the effects of war.

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