Typhoon Haiyan: Ensuring participation and justice in the reconstruction process

By Jess Agustin, Programs Officer for the Philippines
One year after Super Typhoon Haiyan, (known locally as Yolanda) survivors are still struggling to return to normal lives. This tragic event of November 8th, 2013, not only wrought devastation upon the Filipino people, but it also revealed how the remnants of the old colonial, feudal and authoritarian legacies that Filipinos have been trying to undo for decades now, are still impacting their lives.

DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE has a long history of involvement in the Philippines. Its regular development program in the country is mainly focused on land reform and access to resources for impoverished rural and urban communities. For years, and with increasing frequency, Development and Peace has also been responding to natural disasters, including typhoons, volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes.

In the immediate aftermath of Typhoon Haiyan, DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE responded swiftly by contributing close to $1.5 million to the emergency relief activities of Caritas Philippines-NASSA and the ecumenical group Church World Service. In coordination with Catholic Relief Services, and with $2 million in additional funding from the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade and Development Canada, Development and Peace has also launched the construction of transitional houses that can last up to 5 years in Eastern Samar for 6,600 people.

Despite the massive logistical challenges and widespread destruction, these initial relief efforts enabled millions to survive, especially the poor living in rural and hard-to-reach areas.

**Developing a reconstruction plan: Assessing the impact on the most poor and vulnerable**

While still tending to those needing emergency assistance, DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE also began to consult with its partners and the communities they work with, to develop its reconstruction plan. It became evident that rebuilding storm-ravaged areas, while staggering and complicated, offers DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE and its partners a unique opportunity to redress the conditions of poverty that made people so vulnerable in the first place.

Even before Haiyan hit the Visayas, it was one of the poorest regions in the Philippines with 4 out of 10 families living below the poverty line. The most vulnerable survivors in this region are also the poorest segments of the population. They include coastal and tenant farming communities who are normally without land and housing rights. Coastal residents are now threatened by forced evictions due to the declaration of “no-dwelling zones” by the government, even as relocation sites have yet to be identified,
while tenant farmers, who depend on their small crop share under the traditional sharing system, were completely devastated after Haiyan destroyed their crops.

Our partners therefore saw the Haiyan destruction as an opportune moment to replace unjust social and economic arrangements with new, just and resilient socio-economic, cultural and political structures and institutions.

**Long-term reconstruction plan required for real change to happen**

For survivors and organizations working with them, building back is a demanding process as it entails addressing pre-existing social issues, including housing and land rights. The government, at both the local and national level, is at a loss as to how to address issues that require solutions from within, for instance, exercising its power to expropriate land for shelter or the relocation of victims, and effectively implementing its agrarian reform program.

As a result, rehabilitation and reconstruction has been painfully slow. Within the government, key actors issue confusing, and oftentimes, contradictory orders on the direction of the government’s rehabilitation efforts.

From the outset, DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE saw its reconstruction program as more than a rapid humanitarian intervention, but rather as a deliberate attempt to break that vicious cycle of disasters and chronic poverty.

With our partners, we recognize that responding to this disaster is not simply about recovery and reconstruction. *The greatest honour we can give to those who have lost their lives and their homes in this tragedy is to ensure that we have done everything to address the underlying risk factors which resulted in such massive loss of life.* We also know that Typhoon Haiyan will have a major influence on discussions currently underway at the United Nations on developing a new global framework for disaster risk reduction that includes the impacts of climate change.

**DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE**’s integrated program (emergency, reconstruction and development) requires that we not only reach those most in need and vulnerable, but also demands that we go beyond the provision of immediate assistance – and even midterm reconstruction. Bridging the short-term and long-term needs of people has been a formidable challenge. It requires careful planning and acute understanding of the context since the program cannot limit itself to returning affected communities to
their pre-disaster circumstances in the rush to spend funds and comply with the demand for immediate and tangible results.

DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE’s plan is part of a collective effort that looks at post-Haiyan reconstruction as a means to address the worsening poverty, socio-economic inequality, and the general state of powerlessness that underlies the people’s vulnerability to natural disasters in the first place.

Following the emergency phase, DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE has been gradually and systematically implementing its reconstruction and rehabilitation programs in four interrelated areas:

- Provision of sustainable permanent shelter (housing as a process);
- Rebuilding local economies and achieving food sovereignty;
- Establishing healthy and functioning communities (including creative psychosocial interventions); and
- Fostering a democratic space, treating people as survivors and participants, and not victims on the side-lines waiting for experts to decide.

DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE is implementing these long-term objectives through four program streams:

1. The Caritas network in the nine dioceses;
2. The longstanding partners of DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE;
3. The establishment of an advocacy funding mechanism; and
4. A showcase “model” community.

Using a community organizing approach to promote sustainability

DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE has advocated for the use of a Community Organizing (CO) approach in the response to Haiyan that goes beyond the efficient distribution of relief and recovery assistance. The CO approach is designed to ensure that poor people can form strong organizations that have a powerful voice and can engage with local and national governments.

With the support of DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE, Caritas Philippines-NASSA has integrated community organizing into its reconstruction plan. As a result, more than 50 community organizers have been trained and dispatched to nine dioceses that have shelter, livelihood, and disaster-risk reduction teams. Integrating the CO approach was considered a first in the humanitarian work of the Caritas family, and it has already yielded results in some communities, giving confidence to survivors to negotiate with local authorities, some of whom were able to acquire land and supplementary funding from their local governments.

As the government announces the roll out of its own reconstruction plan and budget, which was approved the week prior to the one-year anniversary of Haiyan, the CO skills acquired by communities will further help them to be involved in the management of the whole reconstruction process, and to be conscious of the risk of being used or manipulated for partisan politics as national elections draw near.
The poor should not become poorer

Alongside the CO approach, DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE is also supporting the call of its partners for transparency and accountability in the use of public funds, particularly monies for huge infrastructure projects. Its partners are assisting local communities in monitoring corporate sector involvement in large purchases and public contracts, and demanding public participation in overseeing the long-term impact of all these activities on communities. DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE has set aside a locally-managed fund for these type of monitoring, investigative and advocacy initiatives.

Confronting the challenges of sustainable housing

A year since the tragedy, there has been no single permanent relocation and housing site that has been offered by the government. The slowness of this process re-victimizes typhoon survivors. Although permanent relocation plans for typhoon victims are still in deliberations, they are not expected to be realised until two or more years. These plans, which few have seen, involve resettling traditional fishing communities away from the coast and their source of livelihood (fishing and markets). Many humanitarian agencies are building shelters on rented land or land over which homeowners hold no legal rights, placing the sustainability of shelter projects in jeopardy. Moreover, what the government had deemed “no build zones” they have now changed to “no dwelling zones,” which is viewed to favour big corporations and land speculators. The lands previously occupied by the victims of the typhoon have now been declared “no shelter zones” and “central business districts,” which means they can’t be used for residential purposes. Sadly, the “disaster capitalism” that was seen in other post-disaster experiences of other countries, where a tragedy of this scale and complexity is being used for corporate profiteering and to advance anti-poor governmental policies (in this case, the removal of coastal communities for tourism, shopping malls and large scale fishing) that can’t be implemented in normal times, is a risk here.

DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE in partnership with the Urban Poor Associates (UPA), Caritas Philippines-NASSA and the Archdiocese of Palo on the island of Leyte have recognized the need to establish an “Integrated, People-Driven Model Community” where people can have their lives back, build resilient houses, community centres, schools, rebuild their livelihoods, and continue to strengthen the community
organizations that were formed by UPA at the outset of the emergency. The permanent relocation site is expected to benefit 700-1,000 poor families, mostly small fishers, small farmers and urban poor families. The people in the evacuation centres or tent cities can’t wait any longer. A year in, the evacuation centres, tents and even the bunk houses are causing adverse effects to their physical, emotional, socio-economic and spiritual well-being.

The Model Community will serve as a showcase to demonstrate to the government – local and national - and to the international community that near, or in-city relocation is viable and realistic regardless of the constraints imposed by the “no-build-zone policy,” and that the people have the right to live in areas accessible to their original source of livelihood. Most importantly, it will show that the poor and marginalized are not just passive recipients in the recovery and reconstruction process, but an integral part of the (re)building of their own community. The Model Community will strive to be a prototype community that will integrate a supportive social environment. To achieve this, the plan will integrate various aspects of ecological design and building, permaculture, green production, etc.

**Building a better future**

As the first year of our response comes to an end, DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE believes that its program will enable the more marginalized sectors of the population to be self-reliant, climate-resilient, and less vulnerable to future disasters. In collaboration with our partners and with the lessons learned from our solidarity work in other countries, we hope that this reconstruction program will help communities become better organized and capable to address longstanding issues of poverty, vulnerability and powerlessness.

Sadly, with climate change set to increase, Super Typhoon Haiyan represents the shape of things to come - stronger storms and rising sea levels that will compound into deadly storm surges. The Philippines will need sustained support and programs to prepare for more storms like this. Ultimately, it also needs action on reducing the threat of climate change.

DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE’s Haiyan reconstruction program requires the full integration of emergency, reconstruction and development programs. It recognizes the fundamental importance of accountability to, and the
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democratic participation of, affected populations. It ensures that the funds provided to assist the needy, and to rebuild homes and livelihoods will remain as assets for sustainable development well into the future. Our dream is that our efforts will contribute to eliminate systemic poverty and inequality and prevent reproducing the same vulnerabilities that existed prior to this disaster.

To learn more information about DEVELOPMENT AND PEACE’s work in the Philippines:
www.devp.org/thephilippines