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STATE OF CALAMITY

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It's like clockwork. After a region is hit by a disaster, the immediate response is to put it under a state of calamity to allow local governments to tap five percent of their budget for calamity purposes. This has been the practice for a long time. But most often, the calamity fund of local governments is not enough to cover the damage wrought by natural and man-made disasters, and usually, a region experiences not just one but more than two disasters in a year.

The way the calamity fund was legislated under Republic Act 7160 or the Local Government Code of 1991 limits its use for relief and rescue operations. Meaning, a calamity has to happen and the local legislative council has to pass a resolution declaring a state of calamity in an area before the fund can be mobilized.

But since the damages from natural and man-made calamities often amount to billions of pesos, the fund itself is just a drop in a bucket of what is needed even for relief operations. Local governments had to wait for funds from other sources, like a supplemental budget to be passed by Congress or a special disbursement coming from the Office of the President, to fully respond to the immediate needs of their constituents.

Worse, the fund for rehabilitation is not channeled through local governments but disbursed through national government agencies that have projects of their own and they usually do not consult LGUs what areas badly need intervention.



This happened to Guimaras when it was hit by an oil spill in August 2006. When the national government released funds for the rehabilitation of the island-province, a number of national government agencies spent them on projects not identified as priority areas for intervention in the framework of rehabilitation crafted by a multi-sectoral task group and approved by the provincial government of Guimaras.

On the other hand, the so-called P8-billion Paglaum Fund that will supposedly finance the rehabilitation of areas in Panay Island that were affected by Typhoon Frank in June 2008 seems to have become hopeless because the proposed Simplified Net Income Taxation Scheme (SNITS) Law is not likely to be passed. The proposed tax scheme intends to limit the expenses that professionals and the self-employed could deduct from their gross incomes to reduce their tax liabilities. The money to be raised from it would constitute the Paglaum Fund.

More calamities are then experienced: Local governments could not adequately respond to disasters due to lack of funds, national government agencies do not coordinate with local governments on how to use calamity funds channeled through them by the national government, and the national government promising more than it is capable of giving.

The fact that the Philippines is a disaster-prone country should already give the government a new lens at which to look at how calamities should be addressed. As the cliché goes, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. But while disasters could not be totally prevented, measures can be instituted to mitigate their effects, and avoid loss of lives and properties.

The rules on how to use of calamity fund should have been revised long ago to allow local governments to use portions of it for disaster mitigations. Since LGUs are not allowed to charge against the calamity fund the trainings on disaster preparedness in communities because, those who seriously want to invest in disaster preparedness and reducing risks are forced to use portions of their annual budget for capital outlay in buying equipment for disaster relief operations. Capital outlay is supposed to cover the regular personnel, operations, and infrastructure requirements of the LGUs.

Moreover, national government agencies should partner with LGUs in the implementation of rehabilitation programs. While some chief executives may also be guilty of favoring their political supporters as far as dispensing projects is concerned, national government agencies should play an important role in seeing to it that everyone should get a share of the pie.

As climate change worsens, local governments should now invest in knowing what risks they are facing individually and collectively, and institute mitigating measures to parry these risks, also individually and collectively. Disaster risk reduction and disaster risk preparedness are much more cost-effective than rescue and relief that is not based on preparedness. Installing early warning devices and conducting community-based trainings as components of inter-local government cooperation for bioregional planning have also been found effective in bringing down the number of casualties during disasters.

The Philippines may be less responsible for climate change but it is highly vulnerable to it. And it is going to be hit the hardest because it is a poor country. Preparedness is therefore the key. If there is community preparedness, people would know what to do during calamities even if some government agencies fail to warn them.