# Chapter 9
# Rethinking Crisis Communication at a Time of Climate Change: Lessons from the Philippines

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## 9.1 Introduction

The chapter argues that crisis communication needs to be rethought in the context of climate change, and lessons must be learnt from the Philippine experience. In particular, crisis communication should focus more on:

- creating messages attuned toward the social construction of disasters;
- promoting dialogues rather than simply disseminating information;
- incorporating new media as part of the media mix;
- utilizing a community-based information flow parallel to the traditional top-to-bottom approach.

Before tackling these shifts, it is necessary to provide the context in terms of natural disasters and climate change in Philippines. The chapter also discusses the traditional methods in crisis communication and the lessons learned in this regard—such lessons give rise to new approaches in crisis communication at a time of climate change.

## 9.2 The Philippines and Natural Disasters

The Philippines is a disaster-prone nation. It is part of the "Ring of Fire," the "Belt of Pain," and the "Typhoon Alley." The "Ring of Fire" refers to the string of 452 volcanoes extending along a tectonic fault line from New Zealand to North Sumatra and then going from Japan to South America through the coast of North America. The Philippines has 37 volcanoes, 18 of which are still active. The "Belt of Pain,"

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on the other hand, is an area of extreme seismic activity stretching from below Hong Kong to Malaysia and Singapore, while the "Typhoon Alley" is the path usually taken by storms generated in the Pacific Ocean. Due to these conditions, the United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction (UNISDR) reported that the Philippines was fourth in the world among countries hit by disasters over the past 20 years. It had a total of 274 disasters from 1995 to 2015, trailing behind the USA, China, and India. The Global Assessment Report on Disaster Risk Reduction (2015) estimates 1817 deaths and an economic loss of USD 1.66 billion due to earthquakes, floods, and storms from 2005 to 2014.

In dealing with the situation, the Philippines used to have a traditional approach, which viewed natural disasters as one-off events to be responded to by the government and relief agencies. The focus was on the physical devastation; the social and economic implications were not well appreciated. Disaster management was synonymous to disaster response. Hence, in 1972, the Office of Civil Defense (OCD) was given the task to coordinate with the government agencies, private institutions, and civic organizations for the "protection and preservation of life and property during emergencies" (Letter of Instruction No. 19, 1972). The OCD replaced the National Civil Defense Administration (NCDA), which was created through the Civil Defense Act of 1954. In 1978, the Presidential Decree 1566 (Strengthening the Philippine Disaster Control Capability and Establishing the National Program on Community Disaster Preparedness) was enacted to serve as the legal basis of the National Disaster Coordination Council (NDCC). The NDCC consisted of several government agencies involved in disasters such as Department of Health, Department of National Defense, Department of Public Works, Philippine Information Agency. The OCD would serve as the NDCC's operating arm and secretariat. With this, the OCD's capability in disaster control was strengthened.

Given its orientation, the NDCC and OCD were more reactive—focusing further on emergency management and on emergency specialists and hazard scientists. It had an "all hazards approach," i.e., surveillance of geophysical, hydrometeorological, terrorism, epidemics, civil disturbance, infestation, and nuclear/radiological hazards. In terms of communication, it followed a more traditional top-to-bottom route. Communication about disaster preparedness and response flowed from the central authority to the 17 regional centers. It's Media Relations and Communications Unit provides messages to the print and electronic media. During typhoons, however, the Philippine Atmospheric Geophysical and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA) acts as the warning agency—providing the necessary information to the media and municipal/city governments. The media, in turn, disseminate the information to the public, while the municipal/city governments relay the warning to the *barangays* (villages).

In the mid-1980s, some NDCC members and civil society groups lobbied for the amendment of PD 1566 or change it entirely. They felt a need for a paradigm shift from disaster preparedness and response toward disaster management. After the catastrophic effects of typhoons Ondoy (Ketsana) and Pepeng (Parma) in 2009, PD 1566 was replaced by Republic Act 10121, which was enacted on May 27, 2010.

The act signified a proactive orientation emphasizing prevention and mitigation. It represented a more bottom-up and participatory communication approach and changed the view of disasters as merely physical hazards to include an integrated approach to sustainable social and human development. The act likewise referred to climate change as "a change in climate that can be identified by changes in the mean and/or variability of its properties and that persists for an extended period typically decades or longer, whether due to natural variability or as a result of human activity."

The Climate Reality Project (accessed from https://www.climaterealityproject.org/blog/how-climate-change-affecting-philippines) reported in January 2016 that the Philippines has been struck more often and severely because of climate change. Half of the ten deadliest tropical storms that hit the country occurred since 2006. Given climate change, the ocean's surface temperature has increased over time, allowing more and more heat to be released into the atmosphere. The additional heat in the air and ocean resulted in more frequent storms. The Global Climate Risk Index 2015 listed the Philippines as the number one most affected country by climate change based on 2013 data. This situation has devastating economic effects on the country. A destructive typhoon season costs two percent of gross domestic product and costs another two percent to rebuild lost infrastructure. The country loses at least four percent of gross domestic product each year due to tropical storms.

Recognizing the impact of climate change, disaster management in the country dealt more with risks specialists, economic managers, and development partners. Its approach shifted toward building the resilience of communities to natural disasters. It expanded the membership of the NDCC from 19 to 38 and transformed it into the National Disaster and Risk Reduction Management Council (NDRRMC). The proactive stance of the NDRRMC to address disasters was strengthened with the institutionalization of the new NDRRM Framework signed on June 16, 2011.

The chapter now presents its main arguments on why (in line with the paradigm shift) crisis communication should focus more on creating messages attuned toward the social construction of disasters; promoting dialogue rather than simply disseminating information; incorporating new media as part of the media mix; utilizing a community-based information flow parallel to the traditional top-to-bottom approach.

## 9.3 Creating Messages Attuned Toward the Social Construction of Disasters

In traditional crisis communication strategies, it is often taken for granted that the dissemination of geophysical, scientific, and official messages hold the key to successful communication. Such strategies do not consider the perception and understanding of communities regarding hazards. Hence, there had been many

instances where communities/individuals refused to be evacuated and/or have not undertaken the necessary preparations. Concretely, when typhoons Sendong (Washi) in 2012 and Ondoy (Ketsana) in 2009 hit the country, people did not expect them to be so strong and disastrous in spite of constant signals and water level warnings in the media. As a result, typhoon Sendong (Washi) claimed 1268 lives, while typhoon Ondoy (Ketsana) left 464 people dead.

Pante et al. (2013) explain that disaster preparedness is often viewed from the perspective of formal institutions; the perspectives of those who suffer are ignored. In reality, however, disaster response is a moment of agency. People need to make fast judgments and organize a response. They need to rely on family, friends, and local heroes. In a participatory action research conducted with a community organization in the town of San Mateo, the authors found out that the local community differed with the government in viewing disaster preparedness and response. On one hand, the government offered the residents a relocation site in another area so that a riprap can be constructed to lessen soil erosion. They were likewise promised an amount of Php 5000 (around USD 100) to construct new homes. On the other hand, the residents argued that although they will have physical security in the new area, their economic security will be compromised due to lack of jobs. It made more sense to them to stay rather than relocate. They just had to be resilient to the challenges posed by disasters.

For this reason, the community residents formed an organization to deal with disaster preparedness and response. The organization has equipment such as boats, first aid kits, and cleaning materials. They also have sandbags, an evacuation site (nearby school) and conduct workshops on first aid and rescue. Aside from constructing a community map, they have designated health volunteers who kept the surroundings clean. For them, it is better to stay in the location and manage the disaster's effects rather than go to an unknown place to live. They have achieved this with some success. During typhoon Ondoy (Ketsana), the community did not have any casualties. Residents feel that they are 75% ready for the next disaster. In official and popular discourse, however, community residents such as the ones in San Mateo are depicted as stubborn who unnecessarily place burden on the government with their refusal to relocate. They are also shown to be the cause of flash floods as their household wastes block the waterways.

The truth is communities respond to disaster preparedness and respond in various ways. Some may be proactive but most would not. Viloria et al. (2013), in a study of Iligan city *barangays* (villages), discovered that most communities were not prepared for typhoon Sendong (Washi) in 2011. Around 28 out of 44 *barangays* (villages) were severely damaged with 17,709 families affected, 652 confirmed dead, and 808 reported missing. Only one *barangay* (village) was able to create and implement its disaster reduction and management plan, aligning theirs with the one of the city government. It had its own response team and conducted a house-to-house information drive. The rest of the *barangays* (villages) were basically unprepared. They did not conduct information drives and did not have proper equipment attributing these failures to a lack of budget.

Bankoff (2004), however, provides an interesting view on the differences in disaster preparedness of communities. According to him, hazards are socially constructed. "People's actions are influenced by their cultural interpretation of what they are experiencing." Behaviors that appear illogical to relief workers may be entirely rational in the context of the operating schema of the individuals experiencing the hazard. Bankoff (2004) presents at least two perceptions about disasters. For one, the Filipino belief system places the forces of nature at the service of the divine command. Being hit by a disaster is an expression of a vengeful deity. For another, natural disasters such as typhoons have been feminized. PAGASA provides female names to typhoons to reflect the maternal perception of nature of the Filipinos, where nature is the bountiful mother and humans are her wayward children who need to be reminded of their powerlessness from time to time.

Ladrido-Ignacio and Perlas (1996) concur stating that disasters are multidimensional affecting the ecological, economic, material, psychological, social, and spiritual. It causes both material damage and human suffering. Hence, it is imperative that disaster response should focus both on the structural and economic losses and on the human person. Human beings respond to disasters at three levels—physical, psychological, and social. Victims of disasters may be classified into direct, indirect, and hidden. The dominant psychosocial effect of disasters is the experience of loss of control; the need to depend on others for survival. In this sense, the key is to transform the disaster victim into a survivor. The victim is passive and feels powerless, while the survivor has regained a sense of control and is able to meet the demands of the situation.

Both Bankoff (2004), Ladrido-Ignacio and Perlas (1996) illustrate that disasters are a perceptual and psychological phenomena; occurrences that take place and shape in people's minds. In this sense, it is important to deliver messages that are contextual; not just to focus on the standard, geophysical, scientific, and official dimensions. In this manner, crisis communication strategies may be more effective as they become more relevant to the receivers. In communication parlance, messages are directed toward receivers, but senders must have an understanding of the receivers, and they should not assume that one key central message will work all the time. The government should understand the reasons for a community's refusal to evacuate or failure to prepare for disasters in order to construct appropriate messages.

## 9.4 Promoting Dialogue Rather Than Simply Disseminating Information

In the Philippines, the mass media are perhaps the most vital conduit for information about disasters. It is the first to cover disasters being proactive in chasing such stories. In several instances, it has put its reporters at risk—showing them in the disaster locations. The International Development Unit of the Australian

Broadcasting Corporation or ABCID (2014) observed that "media personalities and organizations have a strong following across the country." Radio reaches 85% of the households with 1000 stations. Television, on the other hand, covers 99% of the population with 200 stations.

The government has a number of agencies that monitor hazards ranging from weather to volcanoes and epidemics. These agencies provide warnings and advisories to the OCD, particularly its Operations Center. The Center forwards the warnings to local disaster management councils and sends alerts and situation reports to the media. ABCID (2014) distinguishes the approaches taken by the national and local media after receiving this information. The Manila-based national media focus on the severity of the event and question government responsiveness. The provincial media look into how to prepare for a disaster and report more on the facts. The local media are more engaged with the citizens after a disaster.

However, in the case of typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan), there was definitely something wrong in the crisis communication strategy. Esteban et al. (2015) conducted a survey among survivors in the islands of Samar and Leyte. They found out that only 47% of respondents understood what a storm surge was. Most respondents (56%) mentioned that they never experienced damage from coastal hazards and were not aware of the threat of storm surges. As a result, respondents did not know how to prepare for such occurrence. Esteban et al. (2015), through group interviews, discovered that local authorities and residents alike, although warned of the possibility of seven to eight meter high waves, were not aware that storm surges can manifest as floods. Local hazard maps (created by local authorities) underestimated the potential damage of storm surges. Many expressed that it would have been better comprehended had the media described the event as "tsunami-like." Kure et al. (2016) concur that the main problems hindering evacuation efforts were the "lack of disaster education, poverty, and inappropriate evacuation facilities. Many people did not know what a storm surge could do to them." This resulted in people staying on their land instead of evacuating.

Most respondents (52%) mentioned that they got information about storm surges mainly from the electronic media (more than 75%) and, to a lesser extent, from family members. They (69%) also assessed the information about storm surge to be moderately useful. In the fourth National Communication Research Conference (2014) held at the University of the Philippines-Diliman, the author listened to the confessions of two journalists (one newspaper and one television) admitting that they did not realize what a storm surge can do and that they were not also prepared. In this sense, it is clear that two-way communication (such as dialogues) may be more effective as compared to one-way communication (such as mass media) to mitigate the impact of disasters.

Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) caught the country by surprise. There was no forced evacuation of residents—many deciding to stay in their homes. The first responders in the locality also became victims. There was a communication blackout between the capital and the locality. Due to these and more, over 6300 persons perished in the typhoon while 1031 were declared missing. Damage to property was estimated at USD 2.86 billion. Around 13 million people across the Visayas region were

affected. Statistics showing the devastation clearly indicated that the country was not prepared for the super typhoon. Typhoon Haiyan was classified as Category 5 with peak winds of 230 km/h. Low-lying areas and coastal communities were hardest hit, with some areas completely washed away. Flooding extended for one kilometer inland on the east coast of the Leyte province. It was the storm of the century.

Garnett and Kouzim (2007) point out the media treat disasters as one-off events and not as something to anticipate within technological, political, ecological, and economic systems. For this reason, they have developed a conceptual lens for understanding crisis communication, which includes not only media relations but also interpersonal influence, interorganizational networking, and technology showcase. They assert that emphasizing multiple lenses reduces the risks that result from applying one lens predominantly. Interpersonal influence rates high in agency since actors in this lens tend to be proactively involved in the crisis. The interorganizational networking perspective involves communication among agencies, while the technology showcase prioritizes the application of technologies for communicating before, during, and after the crisis. There is a need to promote stakeholder dialogues and multiple communication platforms to ensure greater understanding about disasters. Otherwise, relying mainly on the mass media may have deadly consequences.

## 9.5 Incorporating New Media as Part of the Media Mix

Disaster management utilizing new media comes as no surprise. The ABCID (2014) notes that there is 100% mobile phone penetration in the Philippines. Time spent using mobile devices, especially among younger Filipinos, is now greater than time spent accessing traditional media such as television, radio, and print. Also, mobile users claim that 15% of time spent on the device is for information gathering. Given these, plus the fact that the country has one of the highest short message service (SMS) usage rates in the world, it is imperative that new media be made part of the crisis communication media mix.

Republic Act 10639, also known as the Free Mobile Alert Act, was introduced in June 2014. It requires mobile service providers to send out warnings from relevant agencies. With this, disaster management organizations include the use of SMS service in providing early warning notices to the public. Several government agencies communicate to the public through both mass media (using the traditional mix of scheduled bulletins and press releases) and social media. Custodio et al. (2014) document how various disaster management-related government agencies in the country utilized Facebook and Twitter. Paladin et al. (2014) investigate the usefulness of Twitter messages sent by the universities, national media, and local government during typhoons as perceived by students studying in the Intramuros (Manila) area.

There are innovative examples illustrating how new media have become part of the crisis communication media mix. Rappler.com, the country's only online news and information service, has an integrated disaster coverage. The service monitors social media for trends and encourages people to take action relying on the Internet and mobile penetration to create an alternative distribution platform. Erharuyi and Fairbairn (2003) suggest mobile geographic information handling technologies to support disaster management, which would enable a mobile user to access, use, and upload geo-information and processing capability anytime, anywhere, and anyhow. Cool et al. (2015) assert that social media have played an important role in public health message dissemination, particularly as a tool in emergency preparedness and response. Proactive communication provides important health information and advice to the public to adopt protective behaviors that augment disease surveillance post-disaster, reduce public confusion and allows for better resource allocation. According to them, Facebook users in the country comprise 97% of the urban and 69% of the rural dwellers. To reach the public, new media have become indispensable.

## 9.6 Utilizing a Community-Based Information Flow Parallel to the Traditional Top-to-Bottom Approach

Both government and nongovernment organizations in the country have shifted toward disaster risk reduction (DRR) as an approach to Community-Based Disaster Risk Management (CBDRM). There is recognition that disasters can be prevented or reduced by enhancing the capabilities of communities to cope with hazards and resist its impacts. The Partnership for Disaster Reduction Southeast Asia (2008) acknowledges that it is important to use local knowledge about hazards in the formulation of disaster risk reduction plans and strategies. Vulnerable groups in the communities should be considered as a key resource and frontline actors in the process of planning and implementation.

The Citizens' Disaster Response Center (CRDC), in line with this new thinking, has an orientation program where it prepares both "less vulnerable" and "most vulnerable" sectors in coping and getting over disasters via education. Through its experiences, the center learned that it is better to rely more on the community's own talents, skills, and resources in disaster preparation, mitigation, and rehabilitation. For CDRC, "the key to people's empowerment is developing the ability and confidence of community folk to decide and chart their own development direction, which includes capacity-building programs against disasters." Part of the disaster preparation includes the creation of hazard maps (checked by *barangay* officials) and the improvement of community-level warning systems (Kure et al., 2016). In this manner, local communities can better cope with the crisis situation and transform themselves from being hapless victims to becoming survivors of disasters.

The significance of community-based communication during crisis situation is also underscored in the Asian Development Bank Manager Handbook (2008), written by W. N. Carter. The aim of the public awareness programs is "to promote an informed, alert, and self-reliant community capable of playing its full part in support of and in cooperation with government in all relevant disaster management matters." In undertaking public awareness, the community needs to know what the disaster will do, the best immediate action to take, how to help other community members, what the government has planned, how to participate in disaster communication, and how to improvise shelter and sustenance. Messages to be communicated include community needs, government assistance programs, seasonal preparedness reminders, and post-impact information. Information channels include community gatherings, existing government programs, popular sporting events, church, voluntary organizations, school programs. To be successful in building resilient *barangays* (villages), there is a need for a strong community-based communication. Information flows taking place within a community complements the traditional top-to-bottom approach.

## 9.7 Conclusion

Given its geophysical location coupled with climate change, the Philippines has had more than its fair share of disasters. As shown in this chapter, the country has learned lessons and has moved from the reactive emergency management approach toward the proactive disaster management strategy. As it develops the present paradigm further, the country's disaster managers need to rethink crisis communication in ways that create messages attuned toward the social construction of disasters; promote dialogue rather than simply disseminating information; incorporate new media as part of the media mix; utilize a community-based information flow parallel to the traditional top-to-bottom approach. And hopefully, by rethinking crisis communication, local communities will be more resilient and better able to cope with disasters at a time of climate change.

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