

Critical Reflections on Approaches to Enhance People's Participation in Humanitarian Actions in the Philippines

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Abstract

Despite the significant contribution to save lives and reduce suffering after a disaster, there is global and historical discontent on how humanitarian actions or disaster response projects do not connect with community development. Often, participation is limited and is confined to project consultations. This has led to humanitarian actions being disconnected from existing community development efforts. Worse, it can undermine them. This article provides a synthesis of the different approaches applied by civil society organizations to enhance community participation in disaster response. Drawing from the author's own experience as a humanitarian worker and ongoing conversations with various CSOs, this article examines these approaches using the ladder of participation of Arnstein's (1969) ladder of participation and identifies the different ways people are enjoined in humanitarian action. The article ends by asserting how community organizing during a disaster response—an approach often disassociated with emergency action—can lead to more strategic, more sustainable, and more transformative outcomes in affected communities.

Keywords: *people's participation, humanitarian action, community development*

Introduction

The significance of disaster response or humanitarian action in saving lives and reducing the suffering of disaster-affected populations is undeniable. The role of communities as first responders when a disaster strike is also noteworthy. Community members provide timely and relevant disaster response to disaster-affected people primarily because of their

proximity, presence, and knowledge. The opportunity to mobilize collective action and advance solidarity in the community make disasters fertile grounds for self-organizing and community development. For example, many grassroots groups were organized during the pandemic to provide food through community pantries, to assist school children through learning hubs, or to serve as platforms to access relief goods.

But behind the benevolence, many accuse humanitarian actions of breeding a culture of dependency (Vera et al., 2022; Adeso, 2015). Tarpaulin bearing a politician's face during a relief distribution brings suspicion of patronage politics in the community. The sight of expats living in high-end hotels and brand-new logo-bearing vehicles creates speculation of self-indulgence using donated funds. One community organizer shares the impact of a heavily-funded disaster response on their community:

Sa laki ng response, nasagasaan yung aming mga ginagawang pag-oorganisa. Nagbago ang kultura ng komunidad sa pagtutulongan. Nawala ang sama-samang pagkilos. Naghahanap na ngayon sila ng kapalit sa bawat pagkilos o training. [With large disaster response projects, our organizing in the community has been undermined. The culture of solidarity in the community changed. Collective action is lost. Now they are looking for compensation for every action or attendance to trainings.]

The discontent is global and not new. The discussions on linking disaster relief to development started as early as the 1980s and continue today (Ramet, 2012). Originating from the funding disparity between humanitarian and development projects, the issue has been further deconstructed leading to the Grand Bargain in 2016. The Grand Bargain is an agreement amongst some donors and organizations “who have committed to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the humanitarian action, in order to get more means into the

hands of people in need” (The Grand Bargain, n.d., para. 3). The debates exposed the inequalities in access between local and international actors to humanitarian funding, the gross inefficiencies of the humanitarian system, and the lack of accountability of the humanitarian industry. Sir Mark Lowcock (2021), the previous United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator said:

The biggest failings of the humanitarian system is that agencies do not pay enough attention to what people caught up in crises say they want. ...the humanitarian system actually is set up to give people in need what international agencies and donors think is best, and what the agencies have to offer, rather than giving people what they themselves say they most need (p. 2).

The concern for downward accountability to disaster-affected people has led to the development of multiple humanitarian standards (e.g., Humanitarian Accountability Partnership Standard). There are several elements in operationalizing downward accountability (e.g., transparency, feedback and complaints mechanism, responsive duty bearers, participation), but a primary factor is the level of participation of the affected community in the humanitarian action (Cuaton, 2019).

Participation is a broad concept whose meaning depends on people’s ideological position or the nature of interventions in a community (Claridge, 2004). Participation as used in development has been critiqued as the new tyranny that does not necessarily lead to empowerment or societal transformation (Cooke & Kothari, 2001). Instead, Hickey and Mohan (2004) suggested that:

Participatory approaches are most likely to achieve transformations where (i) they are pursued as part of a wider (radical) political project; (ii) where they are aimed specifically at securing citizenship rights and participation for marginal and

subordinate groups; and (iii) when they seek to engage with development as an underlying process of social change rather than in the form of discrete technocratic interventions (p.159).

This dilemma worsens when applied to the emergency context of humanitarian projects. The Participatory Revolution workstream of the Grand Bargain (2017) provides a two-page working definition of participation. It recognizes that disaster-affected communities must be informed and included in decisions of humanitarian actors through ongoing processes of dialogue in the design, implementation, and evaluation of the disaster response. However, confining “participatory revolution” to the ambit of the disaster response project where responding agencies and donors are central decision-makers makes it functional to sustain the social order that complies with accountabilities to donors. This is hardly revolutionary to the humanitarian industry nor aligned to the central paradigm of participation for transformative empowerment.

While widely coveted in the sector, empowerment is loosely “operationalized” into humanitarian practices recognizing the long-term and process-oriented nature of empowerment. Cash programming is already considered empowering since it gives people the power to choose the aid they want. Power analysis is supposed to be conducted during damage and needs assessment (DANA) to ensure that marginalized households are included in the beneficiary list. But otherwise, the manifestation of empowerment in humanitarian actions is assumed to be embedded in the participation of affected communities in the disaster response.

This study investigates the quality of participation in humanitarian actions. It specifically asks, when and how can participation in disaster responses empower communities? While distinct from each other, participation for empowerment opens

platforms for substantial decision-making and opportunities for building critical awareness of agency, power dynamics, and control over resources. Investigating the quality of participation provides insights to the intention of responding agencies and the wider link of humanitarian response to community development.

Specifically, this paper will:

- Describe the various approaches applied by responding agencies in enhancing community participation of marginalized and disaster-affected communities;
- Illustrate how these approaches influence the intensity of participation in various stages of the disaster response project; and
- Explore how varying approaches and intensity of participation lead to different links between response projects to community development.

Methodology

This paper is borne out of a critical reflection of my review of research on the humanitarian sector and my experience as a humanitarian worker. Among my previous research, I rely heavily on data gathered from the following:

- Focused group discussions (FGD) of leaders and members from eight disaster-affected communities and key informant interviews with representatives of the three responding local non-government organizations (NGO): The communities are in the provinces of Maguindanao, Biliran, and Cagayan. Two communities experienced slow-onset hazards (i.e., conflict), while the other six communities faced rapid-onset hazards (i.e., flood, typhoon). Data gathering was done from May to June 2019.
- Interview of representatives of nine implementing partner NGOs of an International NGO: Online interviews were conducted in October 2020 (Vera et al., 2021).

Online interviews of eight people's organizations (PO), six faith-based organizations, 31 NGOs, and 13 international NGOs/donors. All the national and local organizations identified themselves as development-oriented but have conducted small to large scale disaster response projects. Online interviews were conducted from January to March 2021 (Vera et al., 2022). More importantly, the paper draws from my experience and conversations with disaster-affected communities, responding agencies, and humanitarian colleagues. While my work with disaster-affected communities dates as early as the 1991 Mt. Pinatubo eruption, I draw much of my insights from 2009 onwards when I became more exposed to the politics of humanitarian industry and more critical of the dynamics between local and international agencies responding to disasters.

This paper is limited to the medium to large scale projects of civil society that were funded by international donors or their partners. These medium to large scale projects have mostly been required by donors to have community participation to ensure relevant, effective, and timely interventions. Though participation is recognized to be more enhanced in self-funded and small-funded actions, these medium-funded to large scale projects have a stronger tendency to disrupt or undermine current community development. Moreover, the critical reflections are drawn from the general approaches used by civil society in implementing medium to large responses, based on firsthand accounts. While my previous work provided specific case studies, this article provides an overview of the terrain of the initiatives to facilitate community participation in humanitarian work in the Philippines.

The article first provides a framework of analyzing participation by reviewing the ladder of participation vis-à-vis the different stages of a humanitarian response project. This is followed by mapping the different actors in a disaster response to describe the different relationships and power dynamics amongst stakeholders. The next section categorizes the different approaches commonly used by humanitarian actors to facilitate and enhance

participation of affected communities. The effect of using these approaches on the intensity of participation at different stages of a disaster response is then discussed. The final section then describes the resulting outcome on the link between community disaster responses and development.

Examining Participation in Humanitarian Action: A Framework

Specific dimensions identified in participation schemas of Prieto-Martin (2014) were considered, namely: affected and involved actors, intensity of collaboration, and stages of participation. To reduce confusion, intensity of collaboration and stages of participation are referred to in this paper as intensity of participation and stages of the response project, respectively. The other factors (i.e., institutionalization level, and transparency and deliberative intensity) are noted but not elaborated to provide a more concise paper. Commonly affected and involved actors are identified. The seminal work of Arnstein (1969) on the ladder of participation is used to describe the different intensity of participation. Specifically, the steps of the ladder used in this article are described as follows:

1. Informing: Affected communities are made aware of their rights, responsibilities, or options but with minimal opportunity to provide feedback or influence the intervention.
2. Consultative: Affected communities or their representatives (e.g., local government units [LGU], leaders of sectoral grassroots organizations) are asked for inputs through interviews, surveys, or group discussions without assurance that these inputs are taken into account in the final decisions.
3. Placation: Representatives are made part of advisory or decision-making committees. This remains tokenism if representatives exercise minimal accountability to their constituency; representatives lack ability to negotiate with LGUs and responding

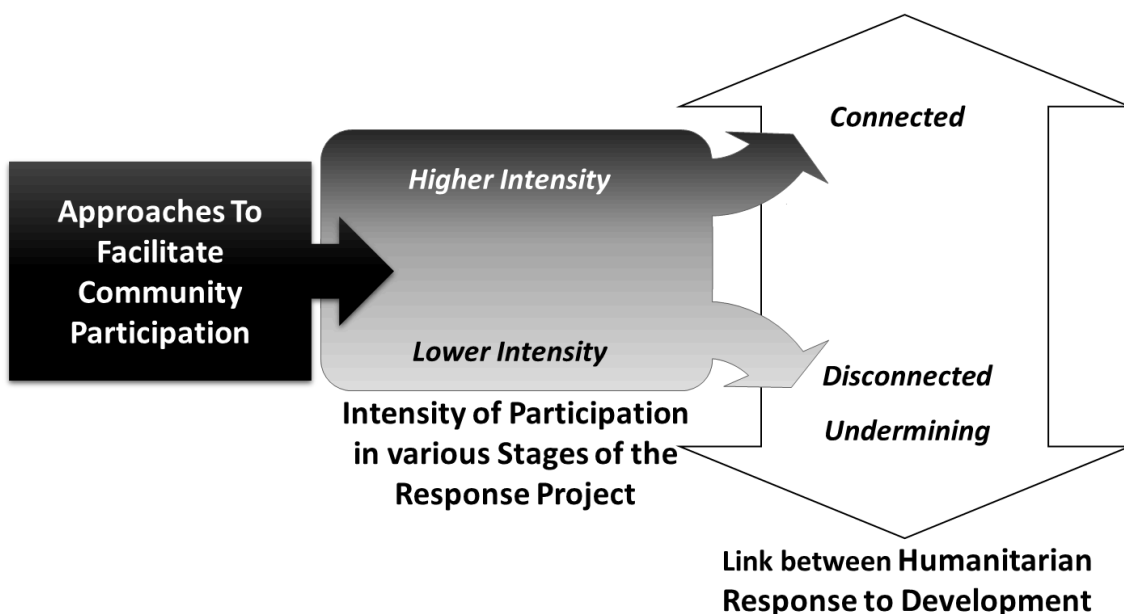
agencies; and the responding agency retains the power to judge legitimacy and feasibility of representatives’ advice.

4. Partnership: Affected communities, responding agencies, and other stakeholders agree to planning and decision-making responsibilities through formal structures.
5. Task Delegation: Accountability to specific parts and activities is assured to the affected community after they have negotiated for dominant decision-making authority over the program.
6. Community Driven: Affected communities govern, manage, and negotiate conditionalities of the program.

These are not assessed based on the method described in participation schemas since it was originally intended to assess specific cases and not a range of cases as done in this paper. Instead, relationships amongst the identified actors are described with vulnerable and marginalized community members as the central player. These elements are consolidated in intensity of participation in various stages of the response project.

Figure 1

Framework of Analysis



The project cycle of a typical disaster response will be used to define the Various Stages of the Response Project, namely: (a) Assessment, (b) Planning, (c) Beneficiary Selection, (d) Implementation, and (e) M&E. These stages are for illustrative purposes only since a typical response project can have multiple iterations.

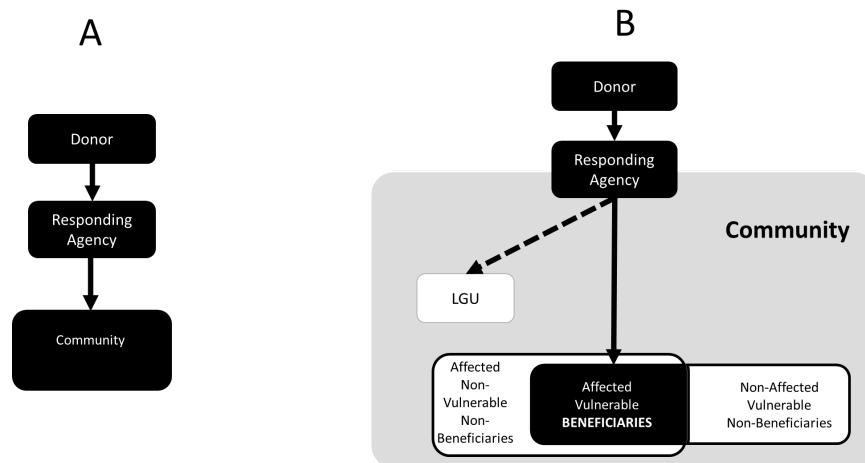
In addition, the previous research recognized that responding agencies sometimes applied different approaches to enhance community participation. These approaches and their impact on the intensity of participation in various stages of the response project are elaborated. Different scenarios on the resulting link between disaster response projects to community development processes are then discussed. By investigating these, different relationships between the supposed duality of humanitarian actions and community development are inferred.

Different Actors in a Disaster Response and their Relationships

Figure 2A shows the three main actors in a disaster response project, namely: (a) the Responding Agency, (b) the Community as beneficiaries, and (c) the Donor.

Figure 2A

Actors in a Disaster Response



Several factors can already be drawn from the relationship of the three main actors that impact participation of the community. The responding agency has upward accountability to the donor. This includes mostly formal conditionalities and requirements (e.g., time-sensitive needs assessment and proposal, evidence-based reports and audits, organization due diligence, action through a consortium with other donor partners, etc.).

When preferences voiced by the community are difficult to implement, responding agencies sometimes blame conditionalities of donors. For example, community leaders often appeal to give aid to all affected households even if this means providing aid below prescribed humanitarian standards. Responding agencies reason out that donors require that they comply with standards and select only the most vulnerable. While interviewed donors admit their preference for compliance with standards, they deny that this is a requirement. Ironically, most humanitarian standards promote downward accountability to affected communities.

Downward accountability of the responding agency to the community makes good sense in terms of fulfilling the humanitarian mandate, manifesting humanitarian principles, and providing evidence of value for money to donors. However, the terms “downward accountability” to the community and “upward accountability” to donors manifest the centrality of perspectives of responding agencies. If humanitarian standards push for a more community-centric response, then there is a need to frame perspectives of accountability and other critical elements (e.g., participation, development, coordination) from the community's point of view.

Some responding agencies highlight “participation” in their organizational vision-mission statement. However, they acknowledge that participation differs in their development work from their humanitarian projects. While participation in their

vision-mission entails politically empowering the community, participation in their humanitarian projects is downplayed to consultations and securing community volunteers during implementation of the project. The inherent nature of the disaster response projects (i.e., rapid, short-term, temporary, dole-out) is not aligned to their overall development mandate that is process-oriented and strategic, and aims to build capacities.

The community recognizes surging responding agencies only have short-term projects and can easily divert resources to other affected communities. As such, a dominant factor that suppresses voice is the desperate need to sustain a good relationship with the responding agency. While minor complaints are tolerable (e.g., missing items, clarification on beneficiary criteria, etc.), complaints against major decisions and whistleblowing on staff offenses are rarely raised. Conflicts created by the response are often managed by the community internally. As such, maintaining the vertical relationship with the responding agency by accommodating their ways of working is the top priority of communities. The second priority is to sustain horizontal relationships with other community members by troubleshooting internal conflict.

Figure 2B is an expanded diagram showing other actors involved in the disaster response. This is already a simplified diagram since the chain of responding agency partners, the cascading government units, and the multiple sectors in the community can easily overwhelm the web of relationships.

A critical set of actors are those affected but are not selected to be beneficiaries because they are considered less vulnerable. Local officials and beneficiaries mostly make a case for inclusion of all affected by the disaster, even if they are aware that they would likely receive lesser aid. For local officials, providing for their constituents is the primary concern. For the selected beneficiaries, avoiding conflict in the community is a priority—especially if

these less vulnerable neighbors are those who provide support in their times of need. Several responding agencies admit turning a blind eye when beneficiaries organize their own redistribution to provide for those who were excluded.

The local government unit (LGU) is mandated to coordinate all humanitarian actions in the community to ensure that redundancy of limited aid is avoided. While Republic Act 10121 provides that humanitarian agencies remain autonomous and independent, local responding agencies complain about local patronage politics (e.g., bloated beneficiary list, diversion of aid to bailiwick, credit claiming, etc.). For rights-claiming community organizations who are used to local contestations, such issues are easily identified and thwarted. But where POs are formed by local politicians themselves, such schemes are not detected or not addressed. Moreover, when surging responders rely mostly on local officials to access affected communities, such officials become gatekeepers of both aid and participatory platforms.

Responding local organizations complain that the burden of accountability and facilitating participation is on their shoulders instead of the LGUs, which is the primary duty bearer. The LGUs are not obliged to comply with humanitarian standards and are able to avoid controversial roles. During the FGDs, LGU officials mention that they actively engage in making beneficiary selection criteria and validating the beneficiary list. However, the LGU officials cede to the responding agency the decision to select beneficiaries to avoid being accused of excluding their constituents. This transfer of accountability can be minimized if disaster response is meant only to fill the response gaps of the LGUs. Instead, some donors observe that LGUs and different responding agencies seem to compete amongst each other.

Approaches to Facilitate Community Participation

All responding agencies interviewed conducted consultations. General assemblies were sometimes conducted but these were meant primarily to disseminate information to the community (e.g., agency introduction and contact information, type of intervention, beneficiary list, donors, etc.). However, the different studies revealed various approaches applied by the responding agencies to facilitate participation or representation of the community. These include the following:

- Coordination Approach: Coordination with LGUs only;
- Multi-Sectoral Platform (MSP) Approach: Creation of MSP in addition to coordination with LGUs;
- Community Organizing (CO) Approach: Communities organized to eventually lead the disaster response in addition to coordination with LGUs; and
- PO-Led Approach: PO based in the community lead the response.

The simplest and most common approach is the Coordination Approach since it is the minimum requirement and allows the responding agencies to cover more ground. Some responding agencies create an ad hoc MSP when they want to deepen their response in a specific community. A few responding agencies undertake the CO Approach to enable the community to actively engage and eventually lead the disaster response. The last approach occurs when disaster-affected POs initiate and lead the disaster response themselves in their communities. The last approach is considered rare since the response projects referred to are medium and large-scale response projects.

The list is by no means comprehensive as combinations and variations of approaches are applied to adapt to the disaster context, the resources available, and the changing capacities of the community and the responding agency itself. The approaches are presented

to illustrate the potential for enhancing participation, and later to draw out key factors for participation to lead to empowerment.

Coordination Approach

All organizations interviewed coordinate with the LGU. When responding agencies surge (i.e., rapid response of organizations who are often not local to the community), such coordination with the LGU becomes the default point of entry. The responding agencies rely primarily on sectoral representatives or local community organizations recognized or close to the LGUs to serve as the primary voice of the affected populations. This approach becomes limiting as allies of the LGUs are favored and those who are not are sometimes excluded. Some responding agencies even claimed that most of the community organizations were organized by local politicians.

Because of the short-term nature of disaster responses and the aim to serve more communities, efforts to enhance the quality of participation do not go beyond the coordination or initial consultations. Consultations are mostly limited to the DANA. For agencies compliant with humanitarian standards, complaints response mechanisms are installed. If possible, engagement with existing organizations to coordinate with the community and facilitate the distribution of relief goods were mostly done.

Multi-Sectoral Platform (MSP) Approach

Where the responding agency places more weight in participation, they create an ad hoc MSP. This is composed of representatives from the LGUs, Barangay Health Workers or Barangay Nutrition Scholars, community organizations and sectors, etc. The LGU convenes the body for action coordination, needs assessments, beneficiary criteria development, logistical planning of distribution, complaints response mechanism development, and

monitoring and evaluation (M&E). In areas of conflict, the MSPs also provide security information for the responding agency.

Because patronage politics is common, the responding agencies usually exert strong influence on the MSPs to ensure impartiality and neutrality. By having relatively more presence in the community as compared to the coordination approach, frontline staff of the responding agency gain the needed trust from the communities. This becomes an advantage as formal consultation/feedback mechanisms are not fully effective, as discussed in succeeding sections.

Community Organizing (CO) Approach

An enhanced approach is to organize affected communities into groups or organizations. This challenges the assumption that process-oriented approaches cannot be conducted in cases of emergency. Local organizations claim that this has long been practiced in a country with a long history of community organizing (CO). However, this practice has become fewer as humanitarian project timeframes became shorter and the demand to cover more beneficiaries became stronger. Moreover, agencies used to limit response in their area of responsibility, unlike the recent trend where organizations surge into areas they do not operate in.

The Survivor and Community-Led Response (SCLR) immediately organizes and trains clusters of affected households to allow them to participate meaningfully right from the initial disaster assessment (Antiquesa & Corbett, 2018). Other organizations—many of which use CO as a primary approach in their development work—organize the affected population after the assessment and planning stage. This allows the community to participate in the implementation stage and eventually lead the undertaking.

Responding agencies argue that such collective experience, capacity, and engagement with other stakeholders have strategic impact that goes beyond the response timeline. For example, in a community affected by conflict, the usual relief distribution was conducted by a responding agency amongst internally displaced people (IDP). But since the responding agency was able to secure resources to operate beyond six months, CO was simultaneously done to enable the IDPs to create a community-based protection mechanism that can eventually lead to the establishment of peace zones in the resettlement area.

Peoples Organization (PO)-Led Approach

The fourth approach is an off-shoot of either community self-organizing or the CO approach, regardless if the context was a disaster or not. The approach recognizes the capacity of existing PO in the disaster affected locality to lead the disaster response. This challenges the dominant narrative that disaster-affected local organizations are not competent to conduct humanitarian projects or have lost their capacity to mobilize people or implement projects. Ironically, this narrative remains dominant even if the Philippines have four decades of practice of locally-led disaster response (Vera et al., 2021). Such capacity of affected-POs was highlighted during the global response to the COVID 19 pandemic. Pre-positioned POs were in the frontline as international humanitarian agencies and national NGOs were on the sidelines.

Being part of or integrated in the community, local organizations have the local knowledge and social capital that can lead to relevant, appropriate, timely, effective, efficient, and sensitive humanitarian interactions. But more importantly, locally-led response can:

- Enhance their own capacity (i.e., through offered trainings/workshops or the actual leading of disaster response project) that will be relevant for future disasters;
- Directly connect the disaster response project to their existing development work; and

- Transform existing power relationships with different community stakeholders by having more control over emergency resources. (Vera et al., 2022)

However, it is rare that POs directly access funds for disaster responses. Access oftentimes is channeled through partner NGOs or through networks or federations they belong to. Many POs consider their capacity to quickly conduct assessments and write proposals too weak such that they do not even submit disaster response proposals. Other POs are not confident of undertaking the rigorous M&E, reporting, and audit requirements that they would rather that projects go through NGOs that can handle these requirements while they lead the operational aspects of the response.

The Case Study: Bottom-Up Leadership in the research report “Local Humanitarian Leadership: The View from Local Actors” (Vera et al., 2021) illustrates the PO-led approach. While funding was accessed through various intermediary organizations, KABALIKAT re-designed the original COVID-19 response project of an international NGO to align with their initial response plans. The resulting response was based on issues and concerns of families with infected members (e.g., stigma felt by entire families, lack of essential amenities of isolation facilities, need for community connection of isolated families); capitalized on existing KABALIKAT members and initiatives (e.g., community mini-grocery served as an emergency stockpile); strengthened disaster response capacities and social capital of KABALIKAT; and mobilized KABALIKAT’s network to fulfill stringent reporting and financial management requirements (Vera et al., 2021).

Intensity of Participation in Various Stages of the Response Project

At each stage of the response project, the intensity of participation with respect to the different approaches used to enhance community participation is discussed below. Figure 3 summarizes the findings.

Assessment

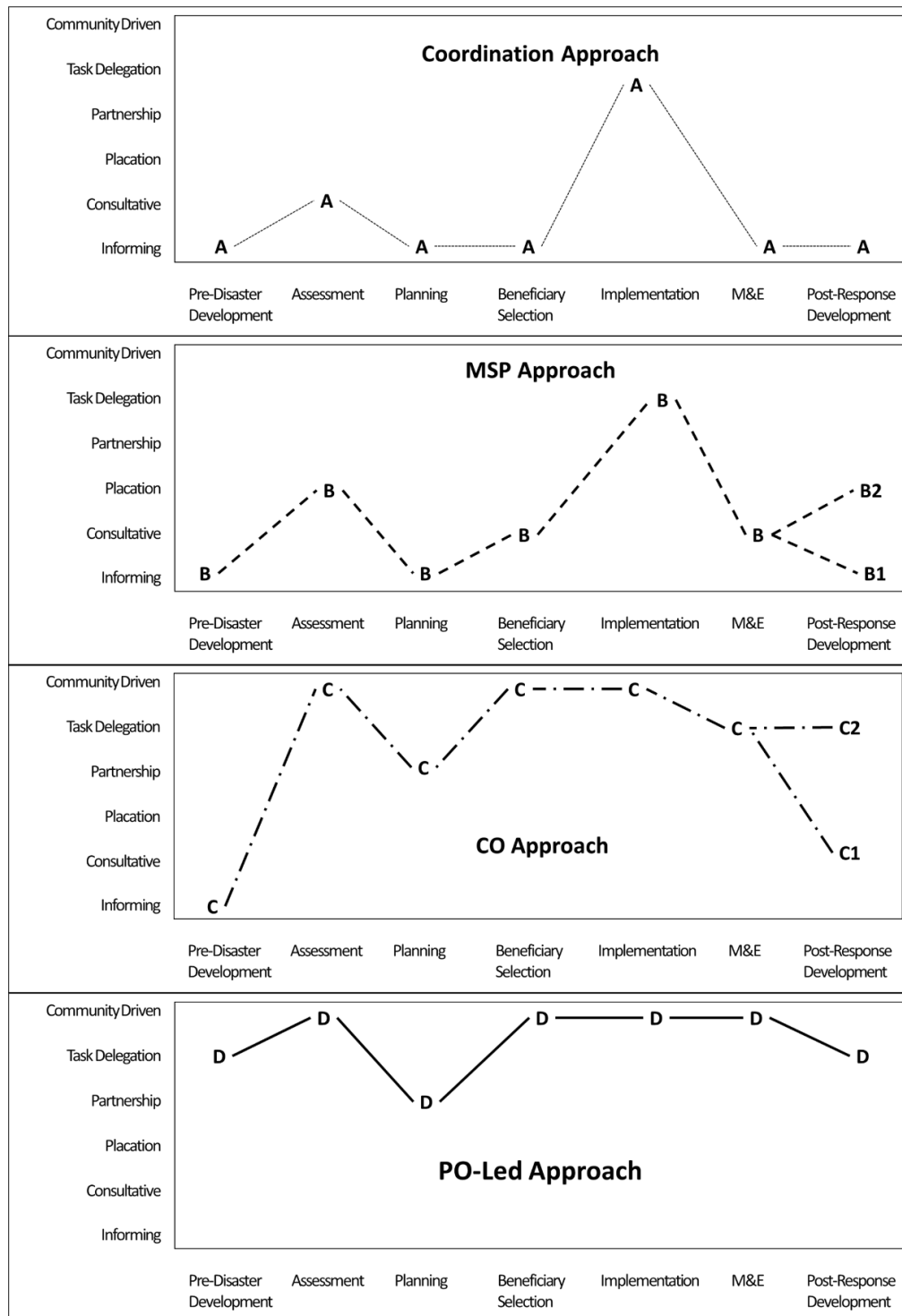
The DANA (simply referred here as the assessment) is a crucial stage of the disaster response since project participation is often associated with this stage. Reference to downward accountability is often based on the relevance of the aid to the identified needs and wants of the community during the assessment consultations.

However, the context of the assessment stage is far from ideal. Because of the urgency to provide relief, the turnover from the disaster to the submission of the proposal is less than one week. Responding agencies must reach the disaster-affected area, identify the most affected, and conduct consultations with people in dire need of immediate aid in the most difficult context within a couple of days.

As such, surging responders using the Coordination Approach rely on available official information, rapid consultations in evacuation centers, or quick interviews with accessible households. The limited information gathered is usually extrapolated to cover adjacent communities that were not assessed. Voices of the most vulnerable and those located in geographically isolated and depressed areas (GIDA) are mostly left out. Only agencies who are deliberate in serving these GIDAs reach the remote communities. In many cases, basic food and non-food items are already brought and distributed because responders are uncertain if they will return.

Figure 3

Intensity of Participation vis-a-vis Stages of the Response Project



Only a few local organizations mentioned that they were able to conduct separate consultations for men and women during needs assessment. Aggregated data makes it

difficult to provide for the special and differential needs of vulnerable sectors (e.g., persons with disabilities, women, children, indigenous people, LGBTQ, etc.). Practical needs are assumed by responding agencies who have prior intimate knowledge of the sector. Moreover, the information gathered is often based on template checklists for pre-determined lifelines and cluster-based sectors (e.g., shelter; Water, Sanitation, and Hygiene (WASH); infrastructure). The status of community stakeholders, power relationships, status of protection of rights, etc. are hardly asked.

At most, the intensity of participation for Coordination Approach is at the consultation level only. However, these conditions do not make consultations useless. The “token” consultation becomes a starting point for participation. An IDP living in an evacuation center said, “If no one asked, no one would ever know what we want.” This respondent talked with different LGUs and agencies before asking for aid but was rejected since he did not meet the criteria or was not a constituent. Only when they were visited by the responding agency were they able to receive aid and capacitated to organize themselves.

Furthermore, most responders deliberately limit the level of engagement with communities to manage expectations. Since responders themselves are uncertain in accessing funds for a response or if they actually select that specific community, they will not commit to providing the voiced needs.

But those who use the MSP and CO approaches are more deliberate in serving specific communities and sectors. Such approaches are needed to gather intimate information in GIDAs and on vulnerable sectors to be able to provide for their special and differential needs. Some responding agencies even revise template checklists to include power relationships in the community. Those who create MSPs can reach placation level because

their extended stay and effort to create MSPs establishes a level of trust and openness with the LGU and the community.

For those who organize communities where there were previously none, the SCLR becomes a game changer in terms of providing affected populations the decision to assess and determine the aid they will receive (Antiquesa & Corbett, 2018). The community (or a set of households) are given the opportunity to organize themselves, capacitated in simple project development and management, and provided aid based on their collective proposal. Unlike cash programming, which is household based, SCLR allows the community to revive their social capital to exercise their freedom of choice. Intensity of participation can reach all the way to community driven.

For those using the CO Approach, the initial assessment may only reach the level of consultation since the community has not yet been organized at this stage. However, the daily interactions and groundworking increases the intensity of participation. This can eventually reach community-driven levels, as intended by the community organizers.

With PO-led Approach, the intensity level can also reach community-driven. The intimate knowledge of the PO of the community because of their presence even before the disaster allows them to anticipate damage and needs. The PO's familiarity on who and where the vulnerable are enables the PO to seek and engage them openly. Moreover, being known by the vulnerable sectors makes local organizations easily accessible for follow-up. Such follow-ups are not only for information sharing but also to make the local organizations accountable to the planned response.

Planning

Despite the value given to the rapid DANA, the link between the consultations and to the eventual response is not straightforward. First, the results of the DANA are used to

determine if the humanitarian organization will respond or not. Civil society organizations are not expected to substitute LGUs in responding to small to medium-scale and localized disasters. Second, the response is determined by the agency's experience, capacity, funds raised, and ability to access the affected community. Third, the assessments are shared with coordination hubs (e.g., LGU, network of humanitarian responders, etc.) with the intention that needs not covered by the agency can be covered by others. In summary, the assessment will influence but not necessarily determine the actual response in the community. Thus, the critique against the social accountability of responding agencies to the expressed needs of the community comes as no surprise. In many cases, affected communities seek support for food and recovering livelihoods, but often receive other services instead. Where community leaders and members are made aware of the specific services that the agencies can provide (e.g., WASH, medical services, legal services), consultations serve as mere validation of such services.

The planning stage is mostly a closed space of power between the responding agency and the donor for those who use the Coordination, MSP, and CO approaches. The responding agency serves as a mediator of the community at this stage. The effectiveness of the responding agency as the voice of the community depends on the intensity of participation during the assessment stage. As such, those who created an MSP can articulate more specific needs of the community and vulnerable sectors.

As mediators on behalf of the community, the participation agenda shifts to transforming the planning stage into a joint decision-making platform between the donor (or intermediary funding organization) and the responding agency partners. Many donors and international NGOs claim joint decision-making during the planning stage, but these are mostly bilateral agreements with responding agencies with pre-determined budgets. Joint decision-making requires deliberate agreements between the donor and all its responding

partners to convene to prioritize communities and response interventions, and to negotiate allocation of the limited budget for all responding agencies. The effort to manage the power dynamics amongst the donor and all its partners pays off as this leads to better quality of strategy (i.e., depth and variety of strategies, connectedness with development work), timeliness, and clarity of project parameters (Vera et al., 2021).

For the CO approach, the SCLR organizes the community for them to assess and determine the response they need. While budgets for each community (or cluster of households) are already predetermined, the essence of having community-driven intensity of participation for empowerment is established. Aside from self-determination of response, community capacity is enhanced from the experience and learnings in the collective analysis and planning, negotiation with responding agency, and collective action for the chosen humanitarian action.

With PO-led approach, participation reaches community-driven. The PO, being organic to the community, represents themselves in the planning stage. The case study “Bottom-Up Leadership” of KABALIKAT in BASECO during their COVID-19 response exemplifies this scenario (Vera et al., 2021).

Beneficiary Selection

A selection process is conducted to ensure that the most vulnerable benefit from humanitarian action. Aid is meant to provide equity to the most vulnerable who have less opportunities to recover immediately. Though repeatedly explained, such practice is difficult to understand, especially if LGUs are distributing aid to all their constituents albeit in lower quantity or quality. Such a selective process is easier to rationalize if the distribution of aid was not done when communities were desperate to survive.

Unlike the planning stage, the controversial beneficiary selection process is an invited space for participation. Participation is critical to gather input on what makes households vulnerable in their specific context. It is also meant to reduce confusion by providing space for consensus building. The beneficiary list is then drawn up and validated.

Many responding organizations claim that they ensured participation in formulating the selection criteria. However, most community leaders strongly deny this and claim that they only validate the beneficiary list and push for more constituents to be included. Apparently, community leaders and local officials distance themselves from the process to avoid getting the ire of excluded community members. This practice of limiting participation to informing and consultation has been observed in the Coordination and MSP approach.

On the other hand, PO-led Approach took full responsibility for the beneficiary list. Many complained that the beneficiary list initially forwarded by local officials were padded. These were easily corrected since the organizations are familiar with the community members.

Implementation

Community participation during the implementation stage is observed to be high for all approaches. Intensity of participation rose to task delegation level for the Coordination and MSP Approach. Such increased participation leads to practical results such as wide information dissemination, mobilization of volunteers for distribution and other support services, conflict resolution, and adaptation to changing contexts. Moreover, participation is remarkable when the humanitarian action benefits the entire community (e.g., community water system, community protection, community contingency planning and disaster preparedness, etc.).

Enhancing participation during implementation is deliberate as this serves as therapy for survivors of traumatic disasters. According to the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) Guidelines on Mental Health and Psychosocial Support in Emergency Settings, “As people become more involved, they are likely to become more hopeful, more able to cope and more active in rebuilding their own lives and communities” (IASC, 2007, p. 92).

For the CO and PO-led Approach, intensity of participation can reach up to community-driven levels. The implementation stage becomes an opportunity for POs to exercise collective action.

Monitoring & Evaluation

Only a few responding agencies conducted after-response evaluations. However, no community members interviewed participated in the development of such evaluations (i.e., providing input to what questions need to be asked and what needs to be evaluated).

Responding agencies compliant with humanitarian standards set up multiple formal channels to receive complaints and feedback. These include a complaints box, visibility of contact numbers for complaints, complaints committee, etc. These mechanisms allow opportunities for communities to voice out their gratitude, file complaints, or clarify processes and selection criteria. These did not necessarily influence decisions of the responding agency, but it allowed opportunity for them to troubleshoot project implementation.

A key component for complaints to be registered is transparency. Beneficiaries must be aware beforehand of what they will receive. Being unaware of or unable to negotiate for their entitled aid diminishes the ability of the community to hold the responding agency accountable. FGDs with beneficiaries reveal that they were only informed of the details of the aid just minutes before the release. Many were surprised, especially since

standards-compliant responses went well above their expectations. As such, complaints were few. Feedbacks were filled with expressions of gratitude from beneficiaries. Responding agencies rationalized that this lack of transparency was for the security of the beneficiaries since the standards-compliant aid were substantial in value. More importantly, the secrecy was meant to manage expectations. However, internal conflict in the community simmers as news of the content of the aid spread to disgruntled non-beneficiaries.

Community members usually refrain from filing substantial complaints through the formal channels. The fear of straining relationships with the responding organization, being shamed, or disrupting local political dynamics hinder community members from using formal channels. Instead, complaints are channeled informally through trusted community organizers or local leaders. As such, intensity of participation is low for Coordination (i.e., Informing) and MSP (i.e., Consultative) approaches and high for CO and PO-led approaches (i.e., Community Driven).

Pre-Disaster and Post-Response Development

Across different FGDs and interviews, only a few local disaster risk reduction and management councils (LDRRMC) were mentioned to be fully functional and non-partisan before disasters. Other participatory community governance platforms (e.g., local development councils [LDC]) were not probed but a similar case may be implied based on anecdotes of different respondents. As such, participation levels before the disaster were limited to informing for the Coordination, MSP, and CO approaches, except where active local organizations existed. Note that this does not discount the fact that there are several progressive local politicians who maximize inclusion and community participation through these mandated platforms.

For the MSP approach, the intensity of participation varies in the post-response development stage from informing to placation. Most mentioned level is informing level. This rose to placation level (i.e., where trust is built amongst stakeholders, but decision-making powers stay with LGUs) when these were present, namely:

- **Constituency consultations:** Spaces for decision making in local government can only invite a limited number of individuals. As such, representatives will need to have continuous opportunities to consult their constituents. Where leaders are merely appointed to serve as representatives without institutional backing, the changing issues and concerns of the community are not necessarily voiced out.
- **Level of rights awareness:** Beyond project requirements, responding local agencies have mentioned raising awareness of communities on rights that the community needs or the agency advocates. These include rights on basic human rights, indigenous people rights, land and housing tenurial security, environmental protection and natural resource management, gender, community health, participatory local governance, etc.
- **Operational platforms:** Community participation continues if mandated local participatory governance platforms are operational (e.g., LDC, LDRRMC, local housing boards, etc.). In many cases, the mandated platforms exist but there is limited political will to activate these.
- **Support network of like-minded actors:** Federations and alliances at the higher levels (i.e., from municipal to international level) and other sectoral formations in the community provide other services to the MSPs or community organizations (e.g., capacity development and learning support, access to information, campaigns). These networks become crucial not just for the tangible services, but also for the solidarity of local policy advocacies and influence when tensions arise with local politicians.

While not observed, levels can go higher than placation if the community organizations in the MSPs have the above and already pursue more collective action, advocacy, and rights-claiming with the LGU. This is like the CO approach where the level of participation can reach up to partnership level.

With the CO approach, intensity of participation can fall to consultation level if the PO lies low.

But it can reach up to task delegation level when it sustains its collective action, like the PO-approach. Several POs have been observed to set up their own DRR committees, engage with the LDRRMC, and implement contingency measures in later disasters. In a conflict area, community protection mechanisms are established by the IDPs and the military shares information with the PO.

Outcomes: Relationships Between Humanitarian Response and Community Development

In discussing the outcomes, several scenarios are presented that illustrate the connection between the response and rehabilitation projects to community development, namely: Response Disconnected with Development, Response Undermines Participatory Development, Response Leads to Participatory Development, and Community Development-Shaped Response.

Response Disconnected with Development

The usual scenario of disaster response projects disconnected to existing development in the community is illustrated in Figure 4. The disaster response provides a significant impact to the lives of the affected families. However, the effects are confined within the project itself such that effects do not transcend outside project timelines, are rarely felt

beyond the affected families, and do not impact wider community development. This scenario is observed with the Coordination and most MSP approaches.

Figure 4

Response Disconnected with Development

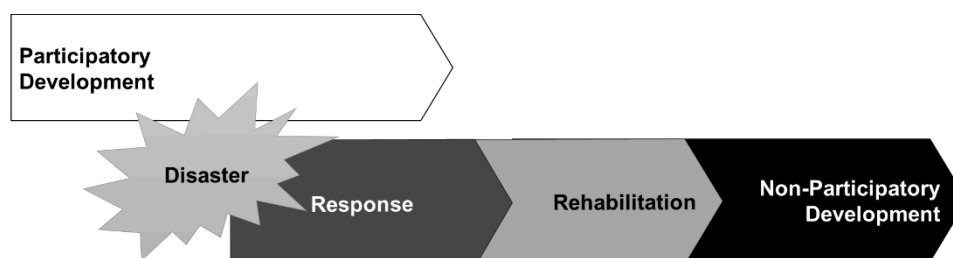


It is important to note that community beneficiaries in FGDs claimed that all the provided services were relevant and significant when they were provided—even if these were expressed or not during consultations. Such is attributed to the experience of the humanitarian agency in responding to a wide range of disasters and the focus on providing specific services only.

In this disconnected scenario, the existing participatory development or non-participatory development continues. It is assumed that existing vulnerabilities of the communities remain the same or have worsened due to the disaster.

Response Undermines Participatory Development

The worst-case scenario where the response undermines participatory development is shown in Figure 5. This occurs when heavily funded disaster response and rehabilitation projects disrupt existing participatory development processes of POs and local NGOs. This worst-case scenario mostly occurs with the Coordination approach, but some cases have been observed for the MSP approach.

Figure 5*Response Undermines Participatory Development*

In one FGD, one of the affected non-beneficiaries exclaimed, “I helped my neighbors take shelter in my house even though my family was also affected. But because I can help, I was not given any aid. Next time, I will no longer help my neighbors.” Such community conflicts created by having selective beneficiary lists were repeatedly mentioned by various groups. The conflict appears to be a mere collateral damage for having impartial disaster response for the most vulnerable. However, the repercussion lingers in the community long after the disaster response.

The culture of dependency was a general complaint by interviewed local organizations. Being provided food or cash for work or attendance, some local organizations complained that community members suddenly refused to practice mobilizing their own resources as local counterparts (e.g., shouldering their own transportation and food expenses for training, meetings, and collective actions). Where there are several responding agencies, some beneficiaries delayed rebuilding their homes despite receiving repair kits to still be eligible to receive aid from other agencies. One local NGO ranted that external responding organizations “slowly kills locally-based and small service providers.” In an extreme case where international NGOs poached staff and leaders of local NGOs, the local civil society was decimated as only two out of the 13 previously existing organizations remained operational after the disaster response.

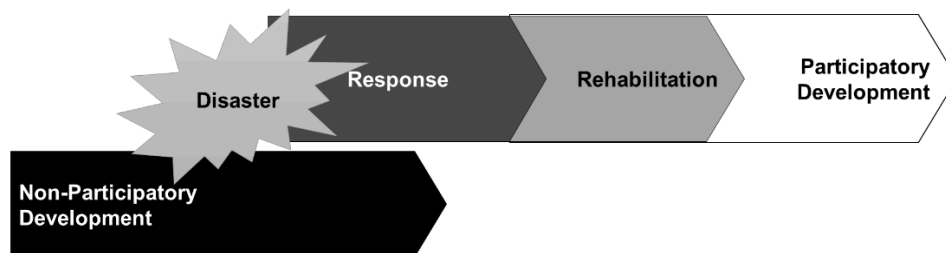
Being present after the disaster response project, NGOs and POs claim that they had to troubleshoot issues left by surging responding agencies.

Response Leads to Participatory Development

An ideal scenario is when the disaster response leads the affected community towards participatory development (See Figure 6). Most development organizations conducting disaster response yearn to use the disaster response to spark societal transformation and align with their vision-mission statements to empower communities. This was observed for the MSP and CO approaches.

Figure 6

Response Leads to Participatory Development



This scenario is attributed to the: (1) actual intervention, (2) the participatory practice in the response, and (3) the approach used to enhance community participation by the responding agency.

Specific humanitarian interventions link the response directly to participatory development. Many responding organizations include DRR capacity building and mainstreaming (e.g., participatory risk assessments, participatory contingency planning), resulting in active involvement of organizations and representatives in LDRRMC. Some provide rights awareness and capacity building on issues specific to affected sectors (e.g., gender-based violence, rights of children, informal settlers, etc.). Further, responding

alternative law groups conduct rights awareness and provide legal services to enable affected populations to claim state-mandated benefits. The conduct of family conversations during the Marawi siege affirms the dignity of IDPs and encourages women to take leadership roles.

For others, their practice in humanitarian action can potentially influence affected communities toward participatory development. Many showcase the practice of Core Humanitarian Standards to LGUs since they consider some practices as benchmarks for good governance (e.g., consultations, complaints response mechanisms, etc.). To counter the culture of dependence, some NGOs delay the release of aid to compel LGUs to release their allocated DRRM funds for their constituents or to revive the spirit of *bayanihan* (Filipino spirit of communal unit and cooperation). Some are consciously raising awareness on humanitarian malpractices to encourage affected sectors to be critical of other responders and the state. National networks of NGOs, POs and faith-based organizations manifest the principle of subsidiarity to enable local members to take leadership in the disaster response.

But the most critical factor considered by responding agencies is the approach used. The scenario is mostly observed where the CO approach is applied. The SCLR capacitated and encouraged clusters of affected households to determine, voice out and collectively act on their chosen intervention. Organized communities in conflict areas arranged security protocols with local authorities and military to ensure protection of their evacuation centers. Organized survivors of Super Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan) in Tacloban successfully campaigned against anti-poor policies (e.g., no-build zone that deprived survivors of humanitarian support), negotiated with LGUs and national agencies to provide aid and subsidize fees, and self-organized for estate management of their resettlement site.

On the other hand, the MSP approach provides a space for dialogue and relationship building amongst the vulnerable sectors and key community stakeholders. By going beyond

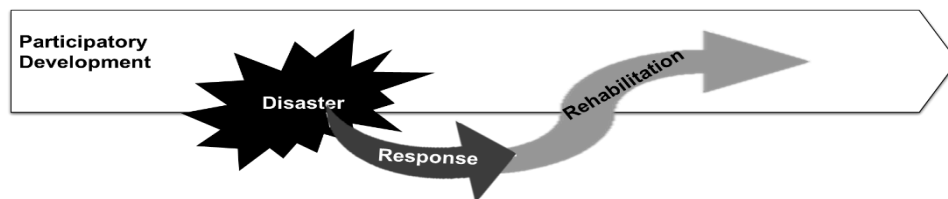
functional coordination, LGUs and affected communities are exposed to participatory processes that can be practically applied to community development. Disregarded communities caught in conflict suddenly were recognized by the LGUs and included in bottom-up budgeting processes.

Community Development-Shaped Response

Where POs—particularly rights-claiming POs—lead the humanitarian action, the result is a Community Development-Shaped response (CD-Shaped Response) (See Figure 7). Rights-claiming organizations, as opposed to those formed to just access resources, are more experienced and capacitated in negotiating with donors and other dominant stakeholders in the community. Though not observed, it is recognized that POs organized for accessing resources can reinvent themselves and be capacitated to be more politically vocal.

Figure 7

CD-Shaped Response



The PO-led approach is a paradigm shift from the inherent limitations of humanitarian projects that disconnect it from development. The disaster response ceases to be a stand-alone project but becomes part of the numerous collective actions undertaken to contribute to community development. While the project objectives, activities and resources are restricted, the humanitarian interactions with the community and other stakeholders are boundless.

Some POs mentioned that they accessed disaster-affected communities infested with insurgents by using their own backchannels. Unmet needs by specific response projects were

not easily dismissed but were pursued to be addressed through social capital, collective action, or advocacy.

Participation transcended its transactional function for the project and became part of the wider political agenda for the community. Consultations were not limited to formal gatherings as PO members used house-to-house visits and other informal channels to gather changing needs and concerns of neighbors. Raising expectations was a non-issue, as community members were aware of limitations of the PO or were part of the initiatives in resource mobilization. Issues of patronage politics were better handled since the community leaders were already used to local power dynamics.

Most importantly, a PO-led approach allowed the continued transformation of power relationships between the grassroots organization and other community stakeholders despite disasters. PO leaders were able to mobilize even disaster-affected members for DANA, to plan and implement relevant responses for both PO members and non-members, and influence LGUs to direct resources where it was lacking. Where aid cannot be channeled directly, POs were able to effectively coordinate with LGUs and partner NGOs. The goodwill provided by conducting a disaster response was used by POs as leverage in participatory governance platforms to push for projects, policies, and budgets long after the disaster. These instances allowed different stakeholders to appreciate and recognize the capacity and influence of the PO.

Conclusion and Recommendations

This paper explored community participation to look at approaches and opportunities on when and how disaster response projects empower (or disempower). Participation in disaster response projects was examined by identifying the common actors and their power relationships, the various approaches employed to enhance community participation, the

resulting intensity of participation in different stages of the response project, and the impact of these approaches in linking the disaster response to development.

Several key findings were noted. First, in disaster response projects, power relationships go beyond “upward accountability” to donors and “downward accountability” to the community. Such a limited lens confines participation and empowerment into merely being a product of the responding agency’s political will. From the perspective of the community, different vertical and horizontal power relationships emerge. These not only hinder participation in the project but also compel them to offset damage done by the project.

Second, while not the norm, responding agencies apply different approaches to enhance community participation, specifically the MSP and CO approach. These can potentially lead to better levels of collaboration at different stages of the disaster response project and enhance the link between disaster response and development.

Third, various factors that hinder participation, linking response to development, and empowerment can be overcome by the PO-led approach. This requires reviewing the narrative that disaster-affected community organizations do not have the capacity to lead the response. This means that the reach of the disaster response would be limited to the sphere of influence of the PO. Such an approach has at times shown how a disaster response is shaped by existing CD practice and principles.

So how can disaster response projects empower marginalized and disaster-affected communities? The following are some recommendations to consider.

For responding agencies, it is necessary to be deliberate in conducting a power analysis in the affected community and enhancing the quality of participation of the marginalized community. Though power is behind the concept of participation in decision-making, empowerment is far from being a straightforward outcome when viewed

from the limited lens of a project. This is further worsened when communities are desperate for aid and responding agencies/donors have the power of the purse. While formal and auditable mechanisms (e.g., standardized DANA, community consultations, complaints response mechanisms, visibility) can be installed to enhance downward accountability, the effectiveness of these are dependent on the rights awareness, trust on the responding agency, and the negotiating capacity of the community. As such, enhancing the capacity of the community and integrating in the community will make empowerment a purposive agenda and not a mere incidental outcome.

For donors, focus on partnerships—instead of projects—with community organizations. While it is an impossible task to establish partnerships in every corner of the country, recognize that many of these rights-claiming POs are already affiliated horizontally with alliances, networks, and coalitions and vertically in federations and confederations. Partnerships can be established at these supra-organizations, with agreements on subsidiarity whenever a disaster response project needs to be conducted. Moreover, emphasize depth rather than reach by limiting the scope of disaster response projects to the sphere of influence of the PO. Compelling POs to cover more ground than they can manage will only force them to imitate surging external agencies. Having many small responses may incur more transactional costs, but this is outweighed by the strategic long-term impact on the participatory development.

Lastly, reframe humanitarian actions and interactions from a development perspective. Much of the discourse in linking response to development starts from a humanitarian perspective, such that it appears the community only started existing after the disaster struck. By reframing disasters as part of the lifecycle of any developing community, humanitarian interactions become mere ingredients to the ongoing struggle of marginalized communities. Community development does not disappear and should not be disregarded

when a disaster strikes. Instead, the continuation of community development that is participatory, self-reliant, empowering, equitable, and accountable should shape the programming of disaster responses.

This study does not disregard the significance and relevance of humanitarian actions. Most of the affected poor have been sincerely thankful for the aid they have received and its role for them to bounce back after a disaster. The study instead looks at how such humanitarian interactions can be even more strategic, sustainable, and hopefully transformative. While problems and issues persist in the context and project implementation, the learnings gained in meaningfully participating and leading the disaster response contribute towards the empowerment of the people to meet their needs and aspirations.

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