

Why disaster preparedness is important



Now that it's officially the "rainy season," perhaps it's time to review some lessons from the past and what they tell us about disaster preparedness. I recently attended the UN Global Platform for Disaster Risk Reduction conference in Cancun with a delegation led by Undersecretary Rick Jalad, director of the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council. The message was pretty clear: The world (and the Philippines in particular) has made great strides in disaster preparedness, and the investment has paid off in terms of lives saved. But economic and asset loss have yet to be contained because of the lack of relevant programs. Lives are saved, but people remain victims of and impoverished by disaster.

In September 2009, Tropical Storm "Ondoy" (international name: Ketsana) hit Metro Manila and neighboring provinces. Over a month's worth of rainfall fell in just 12 hours, leaving more than 700 people dead and some 450,000 displaced. Damage was recorded at \$1.09 billion. The absence of a warning system caught people flatfooted and unaware of the floods that ensued.

In November 2013, Supertyphoon "Yolanda" (international name: Haiyan) barreled into central eastern Philippines, making landfall in the provinces of Samar and Leyte. It was the strongest storm worldwide to ever make landfall in the recorded history of storm-tracking, with winds reaching 315 kilometers per hour and a storm surge of 4.6-7.0 meters (14-21 feet). Yolanda left 6,340 casualties and 1,058 missing and almost \$3.0 billion in damage. Forecasts were made and typhoon warnings issued early. But because the people either ignored the warnings or didn't take them seriously, the loss of life and damage were unprecedented because of the general lack of preparedness.

We founded the Philippine Disaster Resilience Foundation (PDRF) in 2009, after Ondoy, to basically focus on disaster response and recovery. Its original name was Philippine Disaster Recovery Foundation, but after Yolanda, we began to shift our strategy to disaster

prevention and preparedness. In mid-2014, we decided to focus on resilience and changed our name to reflect this new thrust, while still keeping engaged in disaster response and recovery. We felt, like many others, that “an ounce of prevention was worth a pound of cure.”

One of our strategic decisions was to establish an Emergency Operations Center (EOC), which was envisioned to provide storm-tracking information as well as a map of hazard risks such as earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and floods. By overlaying this data against maps indicating population and key facilities like airports, ports, roads, utilities, and other important infrastructure, we plan to mobilize disaster preparedness efforts well before typhoons hit.

As important as the hardware and software behind the EOC, we built a network of over 80 companies ready to mobilize before disasters. We organized these firms into eight clusters or committees on themes like Power and Energy, Water and Sanitation, Telecommunications, Resilient Infrastructure, Emergency Supplies, Finance and Insurance, Logistics, and Healthcare. We also jointly drew up a common manual of operations and organized periodic drills.

We built a prototype EOC in the central business district of Makati and began operating it in June 2016. We have completed designs for our main EOC to be located in Clark Special Economic Zone in Pampanga, and started construction last month.

It has been well documented that investments in preparedness can result in significant savings in relief and rehabilitation expenses. Since 2013, storms and typhoons have hit the Philippines (as they do 20–25 times a year). However, intensified focus on preparedness and prevention by both the government and the private sector have resulted in fewer casualties. Communities are now able to bounce back more quickly after a calamity. In our view, the results are clear: Disaster preparedness saves lives.

We now need to move to our next challenge: to use disaster risk reduction methods to cut economic losses and damage to homes, buildings and infrastructure.