#### Abstract

# **Links and losses**

The relation of environment and disasters in the Philippine context (2012-2014)

### Introduction

Decades of exploitation and abuse of the Philippines' natural resources and environment have caught up with the present, and have multiplied the violence and destruction suffered by victims of disasters. The last two years (2012-2014) under the Aquino administration are marked with tragedies resulting from the licensed destruction of ecosystems for profit, government neglect, and the deepening poverty in the country.

This view on disasters as man-made phenomena, however, is obscured to cover up the roots of destruction. Big companies and government agencies use excuses such as 'force majeur' to acquit themselves in crimes committed against the environment and the people. Instead of addressing the people's vulnerability, government officials have often used the people's stubbornness as scapegoat for the government's neglect. Another term used too often is 'climate change,' a convenient excuse especially as climate change enjoys increasing global awareness.

This study by Center for Environmental aims to relate the prevalence of disasters to the continuing degradation of the environment, and identify environment-related factors that increase disaster risk. In conducting this study, CEC reviewed data and reports from the government, independent organizations and international institutions. The period covered by the study is also delimited to August 2012 – August 2014, noting that 2012 was the release of CEC's first state of the Philippine environment research. As such, this study is limited to data produced within the timeframe and to the capacity of data sources.

## Continuing environmental degradation, increasing disaster risk

The Philippines ranks high in global risk reports. Recent events such as Yolanda mark the country as disaster-prone, and highlight the low capacity and high vulnerability of the Filipinos. This situation is borne of several factors, one of which is the country's affinity to natural hazards due to its location and geography. Seated in the Pacific Ring of Fire and a regular pathway of typhoons, the country seems a natural backdrop for various disasters.<sup>1</sup>

Yet, natural hazards alone do not make a disaster. Factors such as people's vulnerability, the presence or absence of infrastructures and structure to counter disaster, all come into play in creating a disaster event. For instance, Cuba, which often experiences earthquakes, reports few to zero casualties when the hazard hits. On the other hand, wealthy countries often hit by disasters Japan are able to recover more quickly and easily than poor nations like the Philippines.<sup>2</sup>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Citizen's Disaster Risk Center. Retrieved July 28, 2014 from http://www.cdrc-phil.com.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> Khan, M. (2003). *The Death Toll From Natural Disasters: The Role of Income, Geography, and Institutions*. Tufts University and Stanford University.

In the 2012 World Risk Report, the Philippines ranked third.<sup>3</sup> In part, a reason for the country's inclusion was "the rapid degradation of the environment," which has been found to increase the risk of disaster events.

This observation can only be validated by surveying the current state of the Philippine environment. Mining liberalization and destruction continues, with the number of metallic mines in operation increasing by 28%, from 26 to 46 in just two years. The Philippine marine ecosystem also suffered oil spills, coral reef grounding and other maldevelopment projects that polluted resource rich waters and adversely affected the livelihood of fisherfolks. The current estimates of forest cover at 6% to 25%, meanwhile, fall below half of the country's needed forest cover for sustainability: 54%.

The direct state of the environment contributes to worsening the effects of natural hazards. Deforestation increases by four times the extent of flooding, while loss of vegetation increases threat of landslide. Conversely, a healthy environment can shelter the people from the harsh forces of nature—lower human mortality has been recorded in places with intact coastal ecosystems.

Here in the Philippines, deforestation due to legal logging in Mindanao has resulted in the death of thousands<sup>7</sup> and the wipe-out of whole communities in Iligan and Cagayan de Oro in Northern Mindanao during Typhoon Sendong. <sup>8</sup>

In CEC's perspective, factors increasing the people's vulnerability and disaster risk could be summarized into thus:

- 1. Overexploitation of natural resources.
- 2. Reconcentration of natural resource (land) to a few.
- 3. Militarization of communities.
- 4. Climate change impacts.

### **Conclusions**

The review of the current state of the Philippine environment shows that environmental degradation persists, and that control over natural resources remains with the few elite who are the least vulnerable to disasters due to their relative economic capacity. On the contrary, to the poor, whom are highly vulnerable to risks easily become affected by disasters due to their incapability of coping with its aftermaths.

The Philippines do have resources for development, thus, it should be used for a genuine development – genuine land reform and national industrialization – for the benefit of the people. But instead of pursuing a genuine development for Filipinos, the government policies and laws clearly liberalize and

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> United Nations University - Institute for Environment and Human Security. (2012). World Risk Report.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Mines and Geoscience Bureau. (2014). *Mining Industry Statistics*.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> Rappler. Retrieved July 20, 2014 from http://www.rappler.com.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> Inquirer Online. Retrieved July 20, 2014 from http://inquirer.net.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> Center for Environmental Concerns – Philippines. (2014). Forestry Paper.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> GMA News Onine. Retrieved July 21, 2014 from http://www.gmanetwork.com/news/story/242114/news/nation/areas-affected-by-sendong-urgently-need-water-for-drinking-cleaning

spoil big transnational corporations on the extraction, exploitations and plunder of our country's natural resources, resulting to rampant environmental degradation which often increases the possibility of disasters.