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Taking charge: Rebuilding lives, building the future

By the Policy Study, Publication, and Advocacy
Center for People Empowerment in Governance (CenPEG)
November 30, 2013

The big foreign financial loans and Congress' supplementary \$2.28bn budget meant to bankroll reconstruction efforts in Visayas and other provinces battered by a 7.2 magnitude earthquake and a supertyphoon are not enough to bring lives back to normal. Nor should funding be seen as the main strategy for what some international lenders call as the "massive challenge" of reconstruction.

Along with the destruction wrought by the earthquake that hit Central Visayas in October, Supertyphoon Yolanda's Nov. 8 wrath on Leyte, Samar, and other Eastern Visayas provinces left more than 5,000 people dead (at presstime), thousands more missing, more than 1M houses wrecked with entire villages washed out by storm surge, 17M people displaced, and economic losses by as much as \$15bn.

The crisis calls for the people themselves rising up to the challenge. It calls for people's organizations, NGOs, and other stakeholders acting more decisively given that big business and so-called "economic experts" are placing themselves in the frontline of the massive economic rebuilding by the Aquino administration that earlier froze into inaction as Yolanda landed. If this does not happen, the millions of victims of the double whammy may yet suffer even more untold losses under the rapacious greed of investors and corrupt politicians out to make a killing from the post-disaster rehabilitation.

Ensuring the critical role of the people in rebuilding their own lives and livelihood as swiftly as possible is urgent

considering that the region's fragile state – ecologically and economically – will make disasters expected to strike in the coming years with more vengeance.

In retrospect, Eastern Visayas particularly Samar and Leyte was already in its most dire state before Yolanda struck. The region (2012 pop.: 4.2M) is the country's third poorest with 40% to 70% of its provincial populations poor. Despite 26 years of the much-touted comprehensive land reform, nearly three million farm workers mostly in coconut plantations earn a measly P50 a day. Most rural households had neither electricity nor potable water. Struggling with inadequate hospital services, the region also registered the lowest literacy rate in the country.

The economic and physical vulnerability of the region to disasters had been chiefly the result of extractive industries that depleted its forest, mining, and marine resources. Thus Yolanda's fury left more than half of the region's population uprooted with macro-economic losses estimated at \$14bn. With negative economic growths registered in previous years, the region's post-Yolanda economy is expected to dive by 10% and poverty far worse.

While thousands of people anguish over missing relatives, investors and the administration's economic managers see a different sight - a window of opportunity, they said, of turning the catastrophe into business growth stimulated by foreign loans and government funds. Business' gung-ho spirit is driven by profits expected to be raked in from infrastructure rebuilding such as roads,

schools, and commercial buildings to electricity, telecommunications, or even “disaster tourism” which is already underway in both Bohol and Cebu. Left to investors, land developers, and so-called urban planners, the reconstruction of the Visayas provinces will only favor corporate greed the way it happened in hurricane-hit cities in the U.S. as well as in calamity areas of Haiti, India, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. In Iraq, a \$100bn rehab fund went to war industries, construction firms, and other American companies with no signs of normalcy and stability established following 10 years of U.S. aggression.

Unbeknownst to these disaster entrepreneurs real reconstruction should look after human need particularly in provinces long suffering from the more vicious forms of man-made disaster - poverty, exploitation, and government neglect.

Rebuilding the Visayas provinces is a governance mission. It is an issue of public access to correct information and democratic participation as well. It is a long-term task that counts a lot on political will, unified leadership, the key role of various stakeholders, and resources. It should ensure that reconstruction fund goes to where it is intended. Unfortunately, the very same government machineries, agencies, and interest groups led by political clans responsible for turning the region's economic potential to a lost opportunity and living conditions unprotected against calamities remain at the helm of power. Similarly, can the national government that proved to be inept at managing a crisis situation be able to take the driver's seat?

The national government cannot take charge of the rehabilitation of the typhoon- and earthquake-ravaged areas by itself and also because of its failed performance in such undertaking. To illustrate, despite billions of pesos poured for their rehabilitation in past decades many logged and mined areas across the country show no visible signs of community life and ecosystems being restored. Billions of budget allocations and foreign assistance pumped into conflict-ridden areas in Mindanao have gone to waste: Moro communities remain the country's poorest so that the depressing social and economic conditions continue to fuel rebellion. Elsewhere, food security is increasingly threatened by the destruction of marine grounds that remain un-rehabilitated - again despite billions of funds earmarked in the name of “sustainable development”. In Metro Manila, the inutile billion-funded, decades-old flood-prevention programs in Venice-like Navotas and Malabon dramatize governance failure.

Word has spread around that even NGOs have taken interest to “watch” over the billions of pesos of aid for relief and rehabilitation. But after failed and futile attempts, even if well intentioned, by private groups to “watch” over government's miserable record at public spending, the lesson told is that the task now should go beyond or transcend “watching.” The people and/or their organizations must assert their right to participate in decision making, on where these funds must be spent and how.

The reconstruction policies and programs that are now being “mapped” by the government should not be finalized until the ravaged communities represented by their organizations are consulted. Better, any reconstruction program should set up new mechanisms and institutions that ensure people's participation and their needs prioritized. People's involvement in the reconstruction scheme is critical in ensuring that the billions worth of resources coming from foreign and local sources are used for the intended objectives. It is crucial in thwarting opportunism in “public-private partnerships” where companies and public officials reap profits and kickbacks from procurements in infrastructure-rebuilding and other projects.

Moreover, the traditional mode of reconstruction that centers on infrastructure building or, at most, restoring pre-disaster ante should be replaced by a strategic approach that emphasizes capacity-building for long-term results. Post-disaster reconstruction is an opportunity for reassessing obsolete development models and working out radical reforms. These radical reforms range from institutionalizing people's mechanisms in public governance to planning new economic strategies intended for the poor such as genuine land distribution, socialized housing, setting just minimum wages, to minimum emergency grants for small industries without preconditions.

Crisis brings out the worst from those who see rebuilding in terms of monetary gain. But it also brings out the best in people. They alone - the millions of displaced families along with some trustworthy public officials - hold the future in their own hands. Reconstruction is a time for organizing people toward rebuilding lives. It's time for people to take charge.

Aquino III's power of the purse and patronage politics

By the Policy Study, Publication, and Advocacy
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The decision of the Supreme Court (SC) on Nov. 19 declaring as unconstitutional the pork barrel system singularly reaffirmed the public clamor for its abolition. It is, however, a premature conjecture made by some sectors that the high court ruling spelled the end of political patronage. It does not. The high court ruling may have removed lump sum and unauditible discretionary funds for legislators but the enactment of yearly national budgets remains open to political compromises between the president, Congress, and other vested interest groups.

The SC ruled the controversial multi-billion Priority Development Assistance Fund (PDAF) – a major source of pork barrel for legislators – as well as the allocation of Malampaya funds for non-energy projects and the presidential special fund (PSC) as unconstitutional. It also directed the prosecution of public officials and private individuals for criminal offenses related to the illegal use of the controversial funds. The SC ruling was issued in response to petitions for the PDAF abolition and in the wake of the launching of a people's initiative seeking to end the pork barrel system.

Although it is commendable, the high court ruling was released too late the day or several years after billions of taxpayers' money had been plundered by legislators in cahoots with government agencies, LGUs, and criminal syndicates in the guise of "PDAF." It is as well a symbolic indictment against all sitting presidents, including the incumbent one who, in their motive to make Congress a mere rubber stamp and weaken the check and balance

system and separation of powers, have supported the pork barrel system and used it to extract political concessions from Congress thus making patronage politics as resilient as ever.

The SC ruling, however, should not lull us into thinking that the pork barrel system and all forms of corruption and plunder by politicians and the powers that be are over. Certainly, the wielders and beneficiaries of patronage politics and corruption remain in power at the national and local levels, hence, greed will always find insidious ways. The culture of impunity that sustains corruption – in the government, legislature, LGUs, military, business and other sectors – is a generational problem whose solution should not stop with the SC ruling.

The SC ruling not only left the chief executive more powerful with his power over the purse now more centralized. Patronage politics exercised by the president is even stronger – any legislator who wants a piece of the budget in the guise of a project for his own district should now bow before him. A rubber stamp – that is how Congress has played its role.

In the end, the partial resolution of the systemic issue of pork barrel should be attributed to the profound expression of outrage by the taxpayers themselves acting as one to bring decency, integrity, and morality in government. The power of the people has been exercised once more. It's good that the high magistrates listened.

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