

Typhoon Washi/Sendong and Disputations between Urban Poor and City Government in Cagayan de Oro, Philippines

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Abstract: Following the concepts of environmental legitimization crisis and environmental justice, this study deals with socio-ecological conflicts resulting from erroneous norm, environmental degradation, climate change and inefficient implementation of socialised housing policies for the urban poor in Cagayan de Oro, Philippines. The Piso-Piso Program established housing projects which were built in areas deemed as No Build Zones. When typhoon Washi/Sendong hit the city in December 2011, the main victims were mostly from these places. Social housing welfare was evidently deficient. The city government allowed marginalised residents to settle in disaster-prone areas. In spite of that, there was no resistance coming from the urban poor. The resistance only occurred after the effects of the typhoon were encountered. This paper analyses the tolerance of the city government and non-resistance of the urban poor preceding the disaster. Further, it examines the policies of the government and its reaction to the demands of the urban poor following the disaster. It argues that environmental crisis can be considerably limited through environmental justice.

Keywords: environmental legitimization crisis, urban poor, environmental movements, Washi/Sendong

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Grassroots environmental movements in the Philippines actively engage in protecting the environment by empowerment. The Task Force Macajalar in Cagayan de Oro (CDO) has grown to more than 2,000 members since its establishment in 1991 and is the largest party chapter of the Partido Kalikasan (Green Party), is campaigning against logging and other environmental issues. It led the launching of the Save CDO Movement which is composed of Typhoon Washi survivors, church, media, civil society organisations and other environmental advocacy groups. On this account, the movement demonstrates the “environmental consciousness of local communities” (Ünaldi, 2013, p. 10). This paper shows how environmental and civil society movements empower the urban poor.



Figure 2: This picture shows a No Build Zone in Cala-cala where it was occupied by residences. There was only debris from shattered houses in the aftermath of Washi. It was taken by *All Hands Volunteers* in January 25, 2012.

Source: adapted from Marshall & Goldstein (2006).

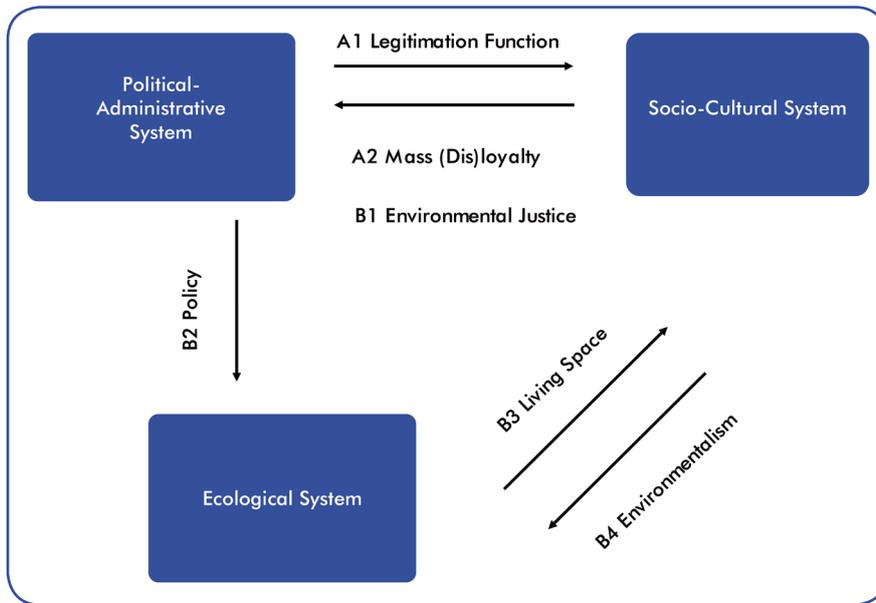


Figure 1: Environmental Legitimation Crisis and Environmental Justice Systems.

Based on environmental legitimation crisis theory, this paper takes in the correlation among the political-administrative, socio-cultural, and ecological systems. In the case of CDO, the political-administrative system or resource agency refers to the government; while the socio-cultural system pertains to the urban poor, victims of Typhoon Washi, civil society and the rest of the citizenry. The ecological system that supposedly bestows “living space” (Marshall & Goldstein, 2006, pp. 216, 217, 220) covers the disaster-prone resettlement areas.

Environmental legitimation crisis occurs in two stages. The first stage (process A1 □ A2) demonstrates the

(Marshall & Goldstein, 2006).

The second stage (process B1 □ B2 □ B3 □ B4) evinces how the urban poor together with civil society exert pressure on the government to improve policies in order to counter future environmental crisis. The improvement of policies, i.e. disaster risk reduction and management, is borne out of environmental justice. The involvement or empowerment of the urban poor together with civil society in the conservation of the ecology showcases respect for human rights and right to protection from environmental deterioration. Procedural environmental justice operates with these movements and principles (Schroeder et al., 2008). Safe living spaces, i.e. se-

ills abolishing mining and logging in CDO. It ends with the formation of livelihood programs for the survivors.

Tragedy of Washi

Deforestation coupled with intense rainfall culminated in flash-floods running through the river basin of CDO in December 2011. Totally damaged houses numbered to 7,317; while partially damaged houses tallied to 12,635 (NDRRMC, 2012a). The post-Washi survey showed CDO had the highest number of totally destroyed houses in No Build Zones, which held an estimated number of 2,700 families/35,000 persons.

REACH (2012) pointed out, “No Build Zones have been declared previously but not necessarily enforced, which is why so many houses were located very near to the river systems, particularly in build up urban areas” (p. 26). This obvious crisis leads to critical questions: Why did the city government tolerate the habitation of No Build Zones and why did the inhabitants not protest even if they were inhabiting fragile habitations?

Tolerance and Non Public Protest

The Piso-Piso Program and the norm of a “typhoon-free Mindanao” served as bases for the city government’s complaisance and the non-public protest of the urban poor. In the initial stage preceding the environmental crisis, the government exhibited legitimacy by delivering social housing projects to the urban poor. The latter in turn accepted the social services as indication of mass loyalty.

The Piso-Piso Program allocated socialised housing with each deed of sale worth one peso (Php 1). It is worthwhile noting that beneficiaries received deeds of sale without land titles. This is contrary to the local government’s stated goal of furnishing “permanency and complete solution” (Office of the City Council of CDO, 2005, p. 183) for housing needs. It is neither a permanent nor absolute without the issuance of land titles. In other words, the beneficiaries did not have legal possession of their housing units.

CDO, as one of the major cities in Mindanao, was always perceived to be safe from typhoons. This image was extremely pervasive to the point that occurrences of typhoons and floods

Source: Tagupa, H., Legaspi, N. H., Gorra, V., & Montellano, I. (2014). Xavier Ecoville: Brick by Brick. Cagayan de Oro: Xavier University Press. p. 58.



Figure 3: The Xavier Ecoville Resettlement Project in Lumbia.

were forgotten in history. The critical point came in the wake of Washi when the “erroneous belief of a ‘typhoon-free Mindanao,’” (Montalvan II, 2014, 12) ushered in public awareness.

Protests and Empowerment

The legitimization crisis of the city government manifested when Typhoon Washi destroyed the social housing projects. The deficiency of the Piso-Piso Program indicated the government’s failure to deliver a legitimization function. Disloyalty of the urban poor was shown through public demonstrations and non re-election of the city mayor. The public protests initiated by social and environmental grassroots movements, such as Save CDO Movement, Balsa Mindanao and Gabriela, empowered the urban poor to press for secure habitations and prevention of ecological destruction.

A multitude of citizens gathered at Saint Augustine Metropolitan Cathedral to offer petitions in the Eucharist for the perished victims of Washi. The archbishop of the archdiocese of CDO and advocate of environmental justice Antonio Ledesma SJ presided over the holy mass. Afterwards, a public procession ensued from the cathedral up to the premises of the Provincial Capitol where the formal establishment of the Save CDO Movement was fulfilled by signatures from the assembly. The movement proposed short and long term schemes for the displaced families. It offered immediate aid efforts. It then formulated a longstanding plan to mitigate future environmental catastrophes particularly for those urban poor living in disaster-prone districts (Corrales, 2012). Procedural justice took place through the call for public participation.

Save CDO Movement eventually filed a lawsuit against the city mayor Vicente “Dongkoy” Emano. It also accused him of deserting his responsibility as chair of the CDO Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (CDRRMC). He failed to organise the council on the advent of Washi, completely ignoring the urgent need to respond to the calamity. The movement successfully brought the case to the Office of the President which in turn ordered the mayor to respond (Palace urges Emano to answer complaint, 2012).

Mayor Emano disregarded the complaint filed by Save CDO Movement.



Figure 4: The Ecoville Livelihood Center.

He blatantly recommended “that residents be allowed to return on condition that there would be a more efficient evacuation system wherein if a typhoon strikes in the future, they would leave the area immediately” (Yu, 2011, p. 2). This meant that he allowed the No Build Zones to be reoccupied.

The Commission on Audit (2013) was instrumental in the process of procedural justice. Its duty to audit and report the allocation of rehabilitation funds addressed transparency and accountability. Its audit report exposed anomalies in the city government. The administration of Mayor Emano was liable for the embezzlement of funds; however, the mayor denied the allegations (P123M na donasyon para sa mga biktima ng Sendong, 2013). Emano ran once more for mayoralty; however, the citizens did not let him win.

Disaster Risk Reduction and Green Policy of CDO

The Philippine National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act was enacted in agreement with the ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response. Its functions comprise disaster preparedness, prevention, mitigation, response and rehabilitation. It allocates the Local Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Fund (Senate and House of Representatives of the Philippines, 2010). In parallel, the CDRRMC was created in 2011 under the leadership of Mayor Emano. It was then augmented due to procedural justice. Social and

environmental movements pressed for direct political action. Consequently, CDRRMC’s budget increased in 2012.

The Representative of the Second District of CDO Rufus Rodriguez filed House Bills 00033 (Rodriguez, 2013a) and 00045 (Rodriguez & Rodriguez, 2013b). The bills impose a logging ban in CDO and declare CDO as a mining free zone, respectively. Rodriguez blames logging and mining activities as the causes of Washi. The direct effect on the ecology prompts a modification of policies. The Green policy is now on the agenda.

Rehabilitation Projects

The church, NGOs, INGOs, universities and international community hold a tremendous role in the rehabilitation process. For instance, Xavier University-Ateneo de Cagayan donated five hectares of land to secure resettlements for 550 households in Xavier Ecoville in Barangay, Lumbia. The urban poor survivors now participate in livelihood training programs to sustain their means of income and augment their skills. Xavier Ecoville Multi-Purpose Cooperative organises seminars for entrepreneurial development. Skills profiling, wholesaling, microfinance credit, food catering, propagation of ornamental plants and manufacturing of net bags are operative at the present time (Tagupa et al., 2014). The significant improvement of the survivors succeeded because of safe living spaces and environmentalism; however, sustainability is needed to ensure secure livelihood.

Source: Tagupa, H., Legaspi, N. H., Gorra, V., & Montellano, I. (2014). Xavier Ecoville: Brick by Brick. Cagayan de Oro: Xavier University Press. p. 39.



Figure 5: 2014 Sendong Commemoration.

Conclusion

Environmental justice as exemplified by citizen involvement serves as a force to mitigate environmental legitimization crisis. The strongest typhoon after Washi was Bopha/Pablo in 2012. Unsurprisingly, the incidence was minimal compared to Washi. The NDRRMC (2012b) declared only 29 totally destroyed homes and 114 partly destroyed homes in CDO.

I emphasize that environmental legitimization crisis is alleviated not only by empowerment alone but also by vigilance and determination. The citizens learned a critical lesson from Washi, which is not to let it happen ever again. Typhoons are becoming rampant in Mindanao because of climate change; nevertheless, the residents of CDO are quick to react and prepare whenever there are warning signals. In sum, empowerment, vigilance and de-

termination can be sustained as long as the society possesses socio-ecological concern.

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