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Building resilient cities from the community up: lessons from Manila

In the Philippines, a grassroots organisation (DAMPA) has helped vulnerable communities in flood-prone urban areas tackle issues of food insecurity, under-nutrition and climate change. Diverse but mutually reinforcing interventions are helping communities organise to help themselves, and to participate in local decision making that feeds through to (and helps implement) national policy.

Overview

Manila, the capital of the Philippines on the eastern shore of Manila Bay, is bordered by the cities of Navotas and Caloocan. Its total population is approximately 1.6 million inhabitants, making Manila the country's second most populous city behind Quezon City.

Climate change is already affecting weather in the region. Rainy seasons are unpredictable and bring sustained heavy rain, causing severe flooding in the cities' streets. Large areas of Manila, and neighbouring cities like Quezon and Navotas, have high-rise buildings built on reclaimed land. This worsens flooding as it lengthens flood waters' path to the sea.

Poor and overcrowded communities living along the banks of the cities' rivers and creeks are particularly vulnerable as many of them live in overcrowded conditions; often three or four families living together in one house.

Frequent rainy season flooding makes water too polluted to drink and also makes it difficult to deliver safe drinking water to vulnerable communities. Communities are exposed to illness and disease such as diarrhoea (children and older people are particularly vulnerable), damaging their nutritional status.

But families also struggle to access adequate clean drinking water during the dry season. Most people living in these areas do not own the land their house is on and have no legal right to piped water. They must buy containers of water costing 10 pesos (US\$0.2) each. A family can spend approximately 100 pesos per day (US\$2) just to ensure they have enough clean water to drink.

More frequent storms during the rainy and typhoon season bring additional hardship to fishing families. Dangerous weather conditions that prevent local fisherfolk from fishing mean less money to buy food.

Flooding and poor weather conditions that damage vegetable plantations also reduce supply and drive up the cost of food, so people cannot afford to balance their diets with vegetables and fish. During sustained flooding, most of the urban poor depend on a diet of noodles and rice.

These rising costs and the climate change impacts on family incomes undermine vulnerable households' ability to get enough nutritious food, causing malnutrition, particularly in children. This problem is even worse for pregnant women, for whom inadequate nutrition causes dangerous malnutrition in newborn babies.

In response, local communities in Manila and

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JOINED-UP APPROACHES

neighbouring cities are taking action. This case study looks at the way people living in the Parola Compound have responded with support from DAMPA – a grassroots federation of people's organisations. The study highlights how such grassroots organisations can help create more responsive local and national decision-making channels and how joined-up approaches let communities improve food nutrition and water security, and access to services, so creating more resilient communities.

Interventions and impacts

DAMPA's association with the Parola Compound group started in 1996 as a response to the community's insecure land tenure. Since then, DAMPA has worked with community leaders, focusing in particular on management training that shows leaders how to organise as a community and make that organisation sustainable. DAMPA has helped link the Parola community to external stakeholders, such as government agencies or barangay officials (a barangay is the country's smallest administrative division, equivalent to a village, district or ward). Through such 'local to local' negotiations and dialogues, the Parola Compound community has been able to resolve some of its problems.

The Parola community's approach to tackling issues of food insecurity, under-nutrition and climate change is multidisciplinary, that is with support from DAMPA it responds to the many challenges facing vulnerable households through a range of diverse but mutually reinforcing interventions, including:

Savings and loans. People can save money in their community organisation, and can also borrow when needed, for example for tuition fees and at times of disaster. Repayments are over a 3–4 month period, with 1 per cent monthly interest. This empowers people to support family education or medical needs even when household income might be reduced.

Climate adaptation, disaster preparedness and early response. The community is improving its resilience to climate change by building flood-resistant housing. An early warning system has also been implemented, using older community members' local knowledge of flood prediction. And some community members have been tasked with the responsibility of joining a Quick Response Team that is trained to raise the alarm and help people move to evacuation centres. This team is well trained, physically fit and knowledgeable on preparedness, relief mobilisation and first aid.

Income diversification. Developing alternative income sources is an essential part of increasing resilience to climate change related shocks while ensuring food and nutrition security. One example is growing food in urban gardens. These gardens are carefully located on higher ground and are managed by the community – with men, women and young people getting involved. They grow medicinal plants and vegetables and the initiative helps nutrition in several ways. Families can get free or low cost nutritious fresh vegetables close to home, reducing travel needs and freeing up time and resources, particularly for women, which can bring better food security and nutrition for the whole household. The DAMPA training team also supports women community members by teaching new ways to earn money, for example making and selling bananacue – a popular snack that can earn sellers between 300 to 400 pesos a day – or cold drinks for sale during the dry season – such as Sago at Gulaman made from tapioca starch and jelly.

Safe drinking water. The community is working with local authorities to provide clean safe drinking water, for example by using community savings to leverage matched local government investment.

Food security and nutrition. The community is creating community food reserves for emergencies as part of their disaster risk management strategy. It is also setting up a feeding programme to assist vulnerable families that do not have enough to eat, and have been cutting out meals to make their supplies last longer.

Health. A local community pharmacy makes it cheaper for people to buy medication and vitamins because travel costs are cut.

DAMPA and the community are also working with partners to take advantage of national policies that support local action – and to hold government accountable for delivering these. The Philippines Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction Acts give new community rights. DAMPA provides awareness training on these and how communities can be involved through their Barangay Climate Change Council and Barangay Disaster Risk Reduction Council. This feeds into both local and national government and involves local government officials who can work with the community to build its resilience.

DAMPA also works to raise community awareness that 5 per cent of local government spending should be allocated to disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation, working closely with the community and local government, religious and other



*Drinking water
for sale on the
streets of Manila*

DAMPA

organisations to find local solutions and ensure these inform emerging policy.

Main achievements and challenges

In working with the Parola Compound community, DAMPA has built on its expertise in linking grassroots communities with key decision makers to address hunger, nutrition and climate change across various sectors.

And by engaging with local communities on health, nutrition, food security, water and education issues, DAMPA brought actual demand-based proposals into discussions with local government.

Speaking as one voice, local organisations were better able to tap into the local decision-making processes, providing a previously missing link between local and national policymaking. Over time, these community decision-making processes help strengthen local government's responsiveness and accountability to people's needs and demands.

DAMPA has always taken a joined-up approach to engaging with communities, varying its practices depending on partners' specific situations and needs. This joined-up understanding means DAMPA can foster integrated solutions within communities, achieving impact across sectors including women's

empowerment, access to loans, income diversification and overall community resilience.

Examples are DAMPA's work to empower women with training that supports income-generating opportunities, which in turn benefit families' food security and nutritional status. In addition, DAMPA's work on community gardens has given communities access to a more balanced diet through locally available freshly grown vegetables and an income stream that allows families to supplement their diets with alternative food sources.

Organisations like DAMPA also play a crucial role in ensuring new rights and knowledge emerging from national policies are effectively communicated and applied throughout the country. Following awareness-raising on the new Climate Change and Disaster Risk Reduction Acts, communities are participating in decision making through their council barangay representatives, in turn connecting the local to national levels.

DAMPA is now promoting a platform of community practitioners on climate change and disasters risk reduction. These practitioners have agreed with some local officials at barangay level to collaborate and work together for climate change adaptation and disaster risk reduction. This inclusive and participatory approach is a good strategy that

JOINED-UP APPROACHES

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Members of a local water cooperative with their water supply

helps local people and government jointly build resilience. DAMPA has been key in promoting quick response teams that can prevent and manage risks during times of extreme weather and disasters. It is now working with communities in other regions, replicating this work further afield.

Of course, DAMPA still faces many challenges. Despite national laws, DAMPA finds local actors can be unwilling to take action. This is partly due to government funding constraints on implementing the Climate Change Act locally. In addition, some communities and local officials are still not aware of the new laws, and so are unlikely to spontaneously mobilise or support DAMPA's actions.

Communities themselves also face challenges when forming grassroots organisations, working across disciplines and when joining up practices between rural and urban areas. Firstly, climate change related disasters reduce poor communities' capacity to bounce back and build resilience. Secondly, DAMPA observes a lack of political will for resilience building. And because there is little knowledge of best practices, and methods differ widely across disciplines, it is very difficult to promote interdisciplinary approaches. There is a particular lack of practices and approaches exploring links between rural and urban areas. Finally, men's patriarchal attitudes and women's inadequate rights remain a challenge to ensuring full and equal ownership of community resilience-building activities.

Lessons

People's inclusion and participation when local and national governments develop policy is necessary to secure support for building resilient communities. But to participate effectively and implement adaptation measures, communities must be organised and work together to address food security, under-nutrition and climate change.

Collaboration and partnerships with networks and allies (for example different sectors and the government) are needed to improve people's food and nutrition security while creating resilient communities.

Responsive policymaking that takes a joined-up approach to food, nutrition and climate change is essential to ensure appropriateness, ownership and sustainability. But to form sustainable organisations, communities need basic knowledge of community management and strong leadership.

Grassroots organisations, like DAMPA, can bridge the gap between policymakers and communities as they can represent a diverse set of stakeholders and are flexible enough in their approaches and capacity to innovate. They are ideal partners with whom to test and evaluate the successes, and potential trade-offs, of joined-up approaches. In the future, an organisation's capacity to monitor cross-sector benefits and trade-offs will play a crucial role when working to reduce hunger, support nutrition and mitigate or adapt to climate change.