

Case study - Cities at Risk: a case for better planning, management and policies

*Filipinos are always the victims of earthquakes, typhoons floods. But before disaster hits again, write **Gabrielle Iglesias**, an Information and Networking Coordinator of the Asian Disaster Preparedness Center in Bangkok, Thailand and **Lowie Rosales**, a UN-HABITAT human settlements officer in Fukuoka Japan, new efforts have to be made at city level to reduce the dangers of such calamities.*

Many Filipinos do not really feel secure in their cities when it comes to natural disasters. Each time typhoons hit the country claiming hundreds of lives and cutting a trail of destruction, there are power outages, trees blocking roads, vehicles overturned, and renewed calls on the authorities to ban big advertising billboards. Too often, they go flying and kill people and crush cars and buildings when they slam back into the ground.

When the capital Manila was hit on 28 September this year by a typhoon that blew through 32 cities, local authorities declared a state of emergency. Millions of people were unable to go to school or work, offices shut down, along with sea, air and rail transport. It took more than a week to start functioning again and caused many millions of dollars of destruction.

The disruption of power, water, transport, stock and currency trading has as much impact as the physical damage and casualties. However, these complex life support systems are part of the natural attraction and comparative advantage of cities vis-à-vis rural areas.

Good urban governance is the key. Inclusion of the citizens is a must. There is a need for a city consultation process so that collectively agreed solutions can be put in place.

One example is the PROMISE project in Dagupan City. Located on Lingayen Gulf on the island of Luzon, Dagupan with a population of just over 130,000 people (according to the census in 2000), is the main port and commercial and financial center of Pangasinan province and Northern Luzon.

The city's Disaster Coordinating Council, which normally meets only in response to emergencies, formed a technical task force to reduce disaster risk. July 16 has been declared a day of remembrance in Dagupan in commemoration of a devastating earthquake that hit the city in 1990.

The authorities arranged a series of community training workshops, and has also set up neighbourhood early warning centres in eight areas prone to floods. These areas now have special evacuation centers, hazard maps, evacuation plans, and problem area surveys. Citizens are helping monitor rising river water levels and relaying the results to a central city hall information office that uses the latest space-based geographic information system (GIS) technology.

The Dagupan early warning system constantly being updated and adapted to local requirements is a good example of how cities can work with their citizens to reduce the risk of disaster.