

TASK FORCE FOOD SOVEREIGNTY

A Statement on the Effects of Typhoon Lando

KaTrining is a farmer from the province of Cagayan, and a member of the farmer's group KABAPA. She is a small producer tilling 2 hectares of land in Cabanatuan. Primarily planting rice, she is among those who fell victim to Typhoon Lando's wrath. A mixture of shock, disbelief, and gloom took a hold of her as she came to her fields to inspect her crops in the morning following the storm. The irrigation canals gave way during the height of the storm and the water proceeded to drown most of her crops. She says that she would be lucky if should could to save as much as a third of her harvest. With all her losses, it would be highly unlikely that she could break even this planting season.

Ka Eddie, on the other hand, is a member of the farmer's group PKMM from Nueva Ecija. Keep in mind that a Storm Signal Number 4 was raised in this province. However, earlier reports came out that there is nothing to worry about. Imagine the surprise of the farmers then when the storm arrived and brought with it the strength of a super typhoon. Like in other parts of the Philippines, agricultural production in Nueva Ecija is scattered and mainly unorganized. While some farmers are already harvesting, others have just started the planting season. None of whom were spared from the ravaging of the storm. The irrigation canals gave way, and the fields were flooded and subsequently buried in mud.

Stories like these are just a few of the narratives unfolding in the countryside following the aftermath of Lando.

Social Disaster

Typhoon Lando struck a few weeks ago, affecting a large part of Luzon. It is said to be the strongest typhoon of 2015 by far. It brought strong winds, heavy rainfall, and subsequent flooding that did significant amount of damage to property. It is estimated that 1.2 million have been affected by the severe flooding that destroyed homes and roads; not to mention the 751 schools which have also been damaged. The official death toll is currently at 46.

Lando is among the new super-typhoons, a product of the changing climate. Nowadays, Climate Change is an undeniable fact. There is overwhelming evidence pointing to its existence and its effects on storms. This is evident in the case of the Philippines, as our country has been continuously hit by typhoons that only ever seem to be getting more destructive. However, we have to be wary of all explanations that carelessly apply Climate Change as a scapegoat for government ineptitude and incompetence. We have to remain critical so as not to fall for the pitfalls of 'naturalizing' disasters. We have to remember that all disasters have a social component to them, and that the extent of damage itself is also highly contingent on social factors.

If we think about it, the Philippines is in the Typhoon Alley. These tropical storms are nothing new, as we are battered by an average of 20 such storms in an annual basis. With each strong storm comes millions of pesos in damages and a death toll that gets no less tragic with each passing year. However, it is important to note the lack of improvement in terms of disaster risk reduction and management. Time and again, the Philippine government is caught off-guard and unable to respond swiftly to the needs of their citizen.

Government policies and social conditions help determine the extent of the damage caused by any natural hazard. For instance, basic infrastructures like roads are still not built withstand the strength of these storms. It is not surprising then that many communities become isolated and desolate following a storm's passing. It is also important to mention here that official government policy in environmental matters also only serve to exacerbate the problem. Widespread logging (both legal and illegal) coupled with large scale mining operations ultimately weaken the soil integrity in the mountainous areas of the country. Lastly, we go back to the same basic problem being faced by Philippine society, the widespread and institutionalized poverty. At the end of the day, the social condition that most Filipinos find themselves in is what makes them vulnerable to the ravages of storms and other natural hazards.

Ravaging an Already Damaged Agriculture

It is expected that agriculture will once again be the sector most affected by the storm. It is estimated that damages to property will reach amounts of P9 Billion, P8.2 Billion of which comes from the agricultural sector alone. This is because the provinces and regions most affected by the storm are primarily focused on farming and agricultural production. For instance, most of the rice fields in Nueva Ecija and other parts of the Cagayan Valley have been severely damaged. The same could be said for the vegetable farms in Northern Luzon which Lando also devastated. However, it is perhaps Central Luzon that was hardest hit, with agricultural losses estimated at P7 Billion.

Lando is sure to have consequences for the agriculture, all of which will be felt in the coming months. In particular, Lando is sure to have an effect on the supply and price of rice. However, it is important to state here that these effects will only exacerbate the inherent problems of Philippine agriculture.

We are living in a country that cannot feed itself. Let us not forget that the Philippines is among the world's biggest rice importers today. For instance, in 2015, the government is set to import 1.8 million tons of rice. For the 1st quarter of 2016 alone, the Philippines is expected to import 1.5 million tons. This is triple the original plan, as the shortage has been exacerbated by El Nino. The ravages of Lando is expected to increase the import demand even more. True enough, NEDA is already calling for an increase in the rice import by 1 million tons.

The Road to Recovery: Food Sovereignty

One criteria for examining a state's effectiveness in times of crises is how well it is able to protect the interests of the most vulnerable sectors during these tumultuous times. This would also include the measures being taken to alleviate the effects of the disaster. In both cases of Ka Eddie and KaTrining, the government's response has been limited to giving out relief goods to the affected areas. While this type of response is necessary, one could dare say that it is simply not enough. There is an immediate need for the government to provide technical and financial support to the farmers affected by Lando.

Enacting policies towards the rehabilitation of the agricultural sector should be the government's priority. This rehabilitation should be geared towards empowering these farmers, and not simply fostering a culture of dependence among the victims. In order to do this, the government should approach the issue like so:

First, the government should make sure the farmers and all other victims in Lando-struck areas are getting a sufficient amount of food. This should be the primary priority in the days following the storm itself. Government relief operations, therefore, should not be done in a one-time basis, then leaving the victims to fend for themselves afterwards.

Second, the Department of Agriculture should provide the farmers with the necessary inputs such as environmentally-friendly seeds for replanting and organic fertilizers. This is to ensure that they have the chance to rebuild their livelihood in the storm's wake. This step is of crucial importance because without the government's support, the farmers will have no one else to turn to other than the usurers and the landlords that dominate the rural areas. Needless to say, government support is vital as it will help prevent the farmers from going into debt.

Third, as illustrated by the stories of KaTrining and Ka Eddie, there is a great need to have the irrigation and water ways in the countryside repaired. It would be wise for the government to hit two birds with one stone. The farmers themselves could repair the facilities their farmlands need, and the government could compensate them for their labor.

The first three steps are primarily focused on recovery and helping the farmers weather the storm. The following steps, however, go beyond mere recovery as it suggests ways in which we can move agriculture forward and improve the lives of our farmers.

The next step should be focused on the providing accessible credit to the small farming communities. It is of paramount importance that there should be no exorbitant interest rates and the creditors be given ample time to settle the loan. This step is to ensure that they have access to capital, without ignoring the current situation being faced by the disaster-struck farmers. This would at least give the farmers a fighting chance to rebuild and sustain their primary means of livelihood.

Let us keep in mind that the farmers are the ones primarily responsible for feeding the nation. However, they remain to be a great part of society's most vulnerable sections. In fact, it should be noted that the farmers are among the most vulnerable to hunger. There is great irony in this. The government should take measures to remedy this injustice, and to reward the farmers for their contribution to society. At

the minimum, the government should provide forms of social protection – ranging from health insurance to providing educational support for their children.

Lastly, the government should provide price support for local farmers. This is to protect the small producers from market forces run amok. Price support is a progressive step towards ensuring that they are able to escape from the cycle of poverty in the countryside.

Keep in mind that agricultural resilience, climate change adaptability, and food sovereignty are concepts that go hand-in-hand. The measures presented above are crucial in terms of ensuring that both the small farmers and the agricultural sector become more resilient in the face of stronger storms and the changing climate. By ensuring a strong agricultural sector, we are essentially reducing our vulnerability to disasters. Only in this way can we ensure that the rights and welfare of small farmers like KaTrining and Ka Eddie are protected.