

Workers' Digest

News & Commentaries

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Anti-poor rationalization for natural disasters

THERE IS A TRUE EXPLANATION to why the recent typhoons wrecked such havoc on the Philippines. And there is a humane way to undertake relief and reconstruction efforts.

This is different from the prevailing line propagated by government: The irresponsible squatters and their bad habits. Their illegal structures and irresponsible waste disposal, they say, blocked the natural waterways and aggravates flooding. Thus, it is necessary to forcibly relocate hundreds of thousands of urban poor families from so-called danger zones.

This is one of the most prevalent anti-poor rationalizations for the natural disaster. It strengthens the argument that it is the poor themselves who are to blame for their suffering.

But there's a real explanation to this phenomenon. Since time immemorial, man has faced both the gifts and curse of nature. This relationship is symbiotic and eternal. Man cannot prevent the natural movement of nature. But man can ensure his safety from nature's wrath.

Therefore man learned to build houses as shelter from heat and rain, to make clothes and blankets against the cold, and discover medicines to cure sickness. Without these interventions, man would have long ago succumbed to the forces of nature. In those times when nature inflicts its ruin on society,



Protest at historic Mendiola Bridge for new housing program, land use policy, and debt moratorium

it is because man was unprepared or natural forces were too powerful. But oftentimes it is man that dominates nature and is able to utilize the blessings of the world for his benefit.

It is thus very convenient to blame the poor who chose to live on the edges of rivers and lakes, knowing beforehand that their shanties stand no chance against floods. They probably were unaware of the actual danger posed by Typhoons Ondoy and Pepeng (international names Katsuna and Parma). Whether rich or poor, everybody lives in a degree of uncertainty, though those without options extremely so.

The poor are forced to live even in dangerous areas so they may at least have something to shield them from the sun and the rain, the heat and cold—no matter how miserable life in those places is. It would be truly comforting for the poor of Marikina if instead of low-lying areas such as Tumana, they would be relocated to the safe elite villages like La Vista or Ayala Heights.

Or those living beside the river in Pasig and Cainta towns were to be transferred to Valle Verde or Corinthians Garden. And those squatting on the shores of Laguna Lake were to be brought to the classy subdivisions of Calabarzon. Who would refuse if the poor had such options?

Truly many of the poor live, or suffer, in declared danger zones. But such areas only become dangerous to the poor because they lack the capacity to ensure their safety in such areas. While in many countries, riversides and lakeshores are not necessarily dangerous since they have been able to build strong structures for housing and other uses.

Even the Malacañang Palace, the seat of government, is not considered a danger zone even though it sits right besides the flowing waters of the mighty Pasig River. This is because the swollen waters of rivers and lakes are only able to wash out the rickety shanties not the palaces, mansions and buildings of the rich.

Moreover, it is not the poor who destroy nature. The poor instead are its victims.

First of all, scientists say that the biggest contributors to climate change are the capitalists—the owners of the industries which massively pollute the atmosphere with carbon emissions that cause global warming. Global warming is undeniably the cause of the erratic patterns of typhoons, flooding and drought that the world is experiencing now.

Next is the great destructions done to nature by mining companies and land developers. The wanton quarrying and mining operations in Rizal and Benguet provinces, for instance, are the real causes of periodic landslides there. Mountains are flattened, bulldozed and fenced off by developers to make way for real estate projects or golf courses.

All of these happen with government hardly exercising any oversight since deregulation and privatization are its mantra. Unfettered capitalism rules with the anarchy of individual planning.

Capitalists go their own merry way to exploit man and nature for profit. They do not care if their operations trigger mudslides or their pollution produces acid rains. Do not mind destroying mountains just to acquire the minerals and ores. They disregard the risks of giant dams for what is important is to generate electricity for sale to the market and paid irrigation waters for farmers. What is paramount is profit.

Who is to blame then? Why the poor when they are not the owners of factories, plants, mines, and real estate companies? Why the poor when they have neither voice nor part in any planning for the use or abuse of nature? Why not identify the real culprits and before them show our indignation at their rotten system?

We hold the capitalists responsible for the destruction of nature! We hold the government accountable for its negligence and lack of foresight!

Due to the extent of the damage wrought by the natural disasters, the relief efforts by

public agencies and private institutions will not be sufficient. It is good enough only to tide the affected poor for awhile and not all of them in fact. It will hardly change their current predicament. In the coming days, the masses further face extreme difficulties due to the damage done by the typhoons on agriculture and the lack of government funds for such a contingency.

But the people cannot simply wait. If the masses do not stand up and let their voice be heard, the capitalists and the government will once more plan behind our backs without hearing the demands of the poor and leaving the people to survive by their own means.

We need to act. We need to fight.

First, discard the policies of deregulation and privatization that serve as convenient excuses for governments to betray its responsibility to protect the interests of the citizens.

Second, implement a central and coordinated land use plan and institute a new housing program that will address the lack of decent shelter for millions of Filipino families.

Third, stop the forcible relocation of the poor from the danger zones into death zones where there are no livelihood opportunities and social services.

The poor who were sent to Bulacan, left to fend for themselves and forced to build shanties in relocation areas that were likewise destroyed by the recent typhoons should serve a lesson and a tragedy that must not happen again.

If the poor must be relocated, it should be to decent communities in safe areas, with durable housing and opportunities for livelihood.

This means appropriate planning at all levels of government and the allocation of sufficient funds for the new housing program. This planning must involve and engage experts and the

communities including their organizations.

It is for these reasons that the labor party, the Partido ng Manggagawa (PM) and the Alyansa ng Maralitang Pilipino (AMP) or Alliance of Poor Filipinos press for the following demands:

1. Ensure that relief operations continue as long as necessary and its reaches all the disaster victims;

2. Guarantee the supply of food and provisions for health and sanitation, especially the needs and welfare of women and children in the evacuation centers;

3. No forced relocations. While there is no central housing plan, the national and local governments should provide temporary in-city resettlement areas as soon as possible and make sure that services are delivered until permanent and decent shelter is available;

4. Open and facilitate access to financial institutions such as the Social Security System, Government Service Insurance System, Overseas Workers Welfare Administration and banks for the needs of disaster victims;

5. Stop debt payments. Realign these funds for rehabilitation and reconstruction efforts, and a massive program for decent housing and jobs that can respond to the needs of the poor.

The Filipino people have the capacity to arise from the devastation of natural disasters. We have proven this from past tragedies.

But it is far easier to recover if there is good governance and concrete programs not only for disaster response but also against the more serious problem of poverty. Absent real social change, the people are in constant danger before natural calamities and exploitation by a capitalist system that is at the root of environmental destruction and human poverty.

But a solution exists and it is founded upon the people's unity in struggling for immediate demands and the strategic vision of social change. ###

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