

Climate trouble

A meeting in the Philippines discussed the challenge of climate change and what women can do to deal with it

Soledad Natalia M. Dalisay

Associate Professor of the Department of Anthropology, University of the Philippines, and Co-ordinator of the Office of Anti-Sexual Harassment, UP Diliman. Email: sol.dalisay@yahoo.com.

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How has climate change affected the livelihoods of fishing communities? How have women coped with the challenge? Have government initiatives helped? What can be done to counter the adverse effects of climate change?

A group of 35 women met earlier this year in the Philippines to discuss these important questions. The occasion was the National Workshop on Women in Fisheries and Climate Change, held from 9 to 11 March 2010 in Villa Alzhun Resort in Tagbilaran City, Bohol. It was a diverse group, representing the academic community, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as well as the local administration. Grassroots women leaders, mainly fishers, representing people's movements from the three major regions of the country – Luzon, Visayas and Mindanao – also took part. The group included six participants from Thailand.

During the workshop, experiences were shared and presentations were made by invited resource persons. The presentations made it clear that climate change might trigger sea-level rise; increase in intensity and number of tropical cyclones and typhoons, floods, droughts and storm surges; changes in rainfall patterns; and rising temperatures. Most participants had already experienced rising temperatures. Fishermen were cutting their fishing trips short on account of soaring temperatures. For women, this meant diminished catches and, therefore, the necessity to look for other sources of income. This in turn was leading to the neglect of children as well as strained family relations. Heat exposure reactions, leading to hypertension, coughs and asthma attacks, were becoming common. Increased violence was reported both in the family and the community.

The presentations highlighted the gender-differentiated impact of disasters. It was pointed out that according to statistics, more women than men drown in floods. Women, being responsible for the home, play a key role in disaster recovery but are rarely consulted when disaster risk reduction strategies are planned. Such strategies would be greatly enhanced if they took into account women's coping abilities as well as risk perception skills.

A few case studies were also presented. The case study of Cavite, for instance, revealed that flooding was occurring in areas that had never known flooding earlier, and extreme weather events were being recorded more often. Two areas in Cavite – Naic and Ternate – were experiencing sea-level rise as well as coral bleaching. The weather calendar that fishers had relied on could no longer be used because the weather had become so unpredictable. Cavite was experiencing non-seasonal rainfall. In Sorsogon, frequent typhoons, prolonged heavy rainfall, flooding and sea-level rise were being reported.

These phenomena translated into multiple problems: periods of food insecurity, increased levels of tension in the household and community, loss of property due to strong typhoons, and reduced income because of dwindling fish catches and economic and social displacement. As a result, people were being pushed further into the margins of poverty. Disease outbreaks were commonly reported, increasing the burden for women, the traditional caregivers within families.

Another case study focused on the region of Zambales, where a very strong typhoon in 2009, and the floods that followed, destroyed most of the structures built along the seashore. Houses, roads and agricultural fields were inundated. Salt water had filled the wells that supplied the community with drinking water. This meant that women had to walk long distances to fetch potable water.

Such sharing of experiences was useful for communities to craft collective strategies for climate resilience. The Thai participants at the meeting realised that the Filipino experience had been very similar to their own and that common lessons could be learnt. Strategies for mitigating climate change impacts included community-based resource management initiatives such as mangrove conservation and reforestation, creating artificial coral reefs, livelihood enhancement opportunities for women, and educational interventions. A multi-sector approach involving local organisations in partnership with academic institutions and the media was considered to be ideal.