The Philippines is one of the 12 countries in the world most vulnerable to disasters and climate change. From 1980 to 2009, some 33,000 people died and another 109 million were affected by natural calamities. The nation’s vulnerability stems largely from the 60 per cent of its 1,500 municipalities and 120 cities located along coastal shores. Many of them, like Metropolitan Manila with its population of 11 million, include areas below sea level. Disasters loom large over the country’s future as the weather becomes increasingly severe and unpredictable.

Early on 26 September 2009, Tropical Storm Ketsana, locally named Ondoy, struck Manila and resulted in the worst floods in 50 years. It was followed a week later by Typhoon Parma, known locally as Pepeng. Especially affected were an estimated 220,000 families in the poorest urban neighbourhoods whose flimsy shelters had stood along waterways and in low-lying areas. Such families are accustomed to dealing with typhoons. Early warnings find them hoisting their household items up to the rafters and taking children to stay with relatives or friends on higher ground. Ondoy, however, took everyone by surprise.

A post-disaster needs assessment concluded that Ondoy and Pepeng directly affected some 9.3 million people. Nearly 1,000 deaths were registered. The number of children or women who died or were injured is not known because data were not disaggregated by age or gender. However, a special field team searching for missing or unaccompanied children in Manila and its surrounding areas recorded 47 child deaths and 257 children aged 6–18 who were separated from their families, missing or in need of other assistance. Several children had drowned. Others succumbed to hunger, diarrhoea, dengue and respiratory diseases.

Young people showed resilience and creativity. As long as their cell phones remained intact, SMS networks could track the locations of stranded neighbours and guide rescuers there. Fashioning makeshift boats out of whatever floated, including a refrigerator with no door, they ferried people to safety. They helped clear mounds of mud and hauled away accumulated debris, some of which they sold as scrap. Many had to drop out of school in order to work to support their families.

Disruptions of household earnings in an already poor population seriously affected the health and well-being of children. Hard-pressed even before the flood, parents were forced to cut down on servings of food and stretch what little they had over several meals. Better-off women shared their food with the less fortunate and offered to look after children while mothers searched for work, money or relief goods. Mothers told heartbreaking tales of their children clinging hysterically to them for months afterwards if they attempted to leave the house.

Women showed strong leadership, especially in the recovery and reconstruction phases. By avidly helping others, organizing community responses, finding ways of earning, and demanding that local officials improve disaster management programmes, they gradually brought the populace back to the familiar routines of pre-Ondoy life. Together with the men, they protested or resisted attempts to relocate them to distant sites, arguing that with few earning opportunities there, their children would starve.

In 2011, new legislation was passed to prepare for future calamities related to climate change. Disaster management programmes were strengthened. So, when Typhoon Falcon brought comparable flooding to the metropolitan region, Marikina City ordered evacuations and marshalled rescue and relief assistance in good time. Muntinlupa City reaped the benefits of its ban on plastic bags. Its clear waterways facilitated drainage.

The full benefit of these efforts will materialize too late for the children lost to or traumatized by Ondoy. But improved community data on who and where the children are, coupled with training of local officials and community members in more efficient relief distribution and rebuilding based on community strengths, offer hope to the next generation.

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