



## Benchmarking Concepts of Community Wellbeing in an Area Vulnerable to Disaster due to Volcanic Eruption

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Received 16 December 2016 Accepted 5 May 2017 (\*Corresponding Author)

**Abstract** Victims of natural disasters have countless challenges to face on right after the event. Immediate local government unit and other community leaders are the first line of help to affected communities. The wellbeing of everyone in a vulnerable community is greatly affected by how the local sectors response. A deeper understanding of the concepts of community wellbeing is hereby realized through a qualitative research approach in the field. Several focus group discussions are done with five local sectors in the selected sites. The narratives of the victims are analyzed through thematic analysis in identification of sectoral concerns regarding concepts of community wellbeing.

**Keywords** community wellbeing, leaders, stakeholders, trust

### INTRODUCTION

The recently heightening interest in local community wellbeing (CWB) indicators reflects a growing awareness of their importance in harnessing citizen engagement, strengthening community planning, and encouraging evidence-based policy making (Buot et al., 2016, Lee et al., 2015). Community Wellbeing (CWB) concepts are defined and measured for stakeholders and policymakers to be able to rethink the ways in which governmental priorities are debated and progress is scaled. Earlier studies related to CWB began in the 1960s, but only a limited area had been tackled (Cummins, 2001; Baum, 1999). It is undeniable that natural disasters are indeed real phenomena, and their impacts are becoming all the more pressing especially so with the current climate change scenario. This is why there has been a recent surge in risk reduction planning, capacity building, and community organizing activities.

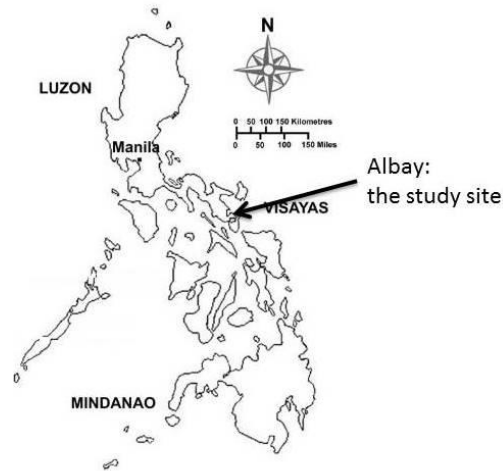
The Philippines has always been prone to natural disasters. Filipinos are no stranger to volcanic eruptions, earthquakes, huge landslides, and typhoons, which are the most frequently occurring disasters in the country. These unfortunate events have always led to significant casualties and losses. From 2000 to 2014, approximately 17,232 died due to natural disasters, in addition to the insurmountable destructions of property reported (CRED, 2015). The goal of these activities is to prepare communities so that they can withstand the impacts of natural disasters and be able to adapt to the difficult situation ahead of them.

This study, which assessed the different concepts of wellbeing from the perspective of the five local sectors, contributes to a better understanding of how people survive the destruction and gradually make progress toward starting again.

### METHODOLOGY

Albay, Philippines was purposively chosen as the province with the closest proximity to Mt. Mayon. Camalig was then chosen randomly from the list of communities (Fig. 1). A qualitative

approach to determine the concepts of community wellbeing (CWB) in the aftermath of the disasters was used. Focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted as a form of group interview using discussion guides developed around the topic of CWB concepts. Probing questions were added if needed in order to encourage more personal responses. Among the sectors represented during the focus group discussion (FGD) conducted were the local government, education sector, business sector, people’s organizations, and socio-civic sectors (Table 1). All participants were survivors of previous disasters. They either lost properties or jobs owing to terrifying and fatal events like the volcanic eruption in Albay. Group sizes varied between 6 to 10 participants representing different The sessions lasted between 1.5 and 2 hours. Pseudonyms were used in order to protect the identity of the participants.



**Fig. 1 The study site, Albay, Philippines**

**Table 1 Focus group participants**

| SITE  | SECTOR      | AGE      |        | MEAN AGE | GENDER |        | TOTAL |
|-------|-------------|----------|--------|----------|--------|--------|-------|
|       |             | Youngest | Oldest |          | Male   | Female |       |
| ALBAY | EDUCATION   | 26       | 65     | 47       | 2      | 4      | 6     |
|       | BUSINESS    | 32       | 70     | 53       | 6      | -      | 6     |
|       | SOCIO CIVIC | 23       | 34     | 27       | 3      | 3      | 6     |
|       | LGU         | 34       | 61     | 49       | 5      | 4      | 9     |
|       | PO          | 34       | 58     | 45       | 6      | 3      | 9     |
|       | TOTAL       |          |        |          | 21     | 15     | 36    |

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Salient Insights from Albay

On September 14, 2014, the provincial government of Albay declared a preemptive evacuation around the 8km extended danger zone (EDZ) of Mayon Volcano (PHIVOLCS, 2014). Several barangays of Camalig, Albay were affected like Anoling, Sua, Tumpa, Quirangay, Salugan and Cabangan. Mt. Mayon did not erupt but the affected families stayed in the evacuation centers (EC) for almost 3 months.

**Education sector:** Six teachers from the public school represented the education sector (Table 1). All of them were married and had children. This sector felt most of the pressures in the wake of a disaster.

Teachers, for example, might not be affected personally by the event but their workplace was usually transformed into an evacuation center. The 2014 volcanic activity did not bring lahar or volcanic debris to their locality, but there were many evacuees who stayed for almost 3 months in the local school.

*Doing duty even with disaster at hand* (Table 2). Although classes were suspended for 2 weeks, the teachers were required to report to duty to help in the evacuation organization. When classes resumed after a while, they had to conduct classes while the evacuees were around. They knew that their students were disturbed physically and emotionally. The tents serving as their new classrooms were hot and the schoolchildren saw the discomfort of the evacuees, too.

“Naiyak ako kase ang mga bata nakabitbit ng pamaypay, nakahubad na. Naiyak ako. Ang init sa tent.” – Mia (*I cried because the children were all bringing fans, they even took off their shirts. I cried. It was too hot in the tent.*)

**Table 2 Thematic analysis of the narratives in focus group discussion of participants**

| Sectors                                    | Themes  |
|--|---|
| Education                                  | Doing duty even with disaster at hand<br>Acceptance of the inevitable                             |
| Business                                   | Better basic services means comfort in life<br>Disaster creates situation for Samaritan to emerge |
| Socio Civic<br>Local Government Unit (LGU) | Welfare for all<br>Dagus dagos (sustainability)   |
| People’s Organization                      | Common sentiments<br>Desires and wishes at disaster time  |

The education sector willingly performed these duties even in the face of danger because they consider it as their moral obligation. They were hopeful that performing their role may bring a bright future to these small kids under their care. The education sector expressed that morality and values serve as the standard and foundation of a community. Respect and concern for the neighbors came out as real values that the community must do collectively in order to engage all towards one community goal. While they were helping the evacuees housed in their workplace, they were expecting that the evacuees themselves and other agencies which were trying to reach out to the affected families must not forget the basics of respect and concern.

*Acceptance of the Inevitable.* While maintaining their duty at the EC, the teachers knew and have accepted the fact that the promises given to them might never come. Glenn shared that they were all working to provide at least an enabling environment for the affected families. They tried to help with the most they could extend. Oftentimes they had to solve with the help of the principal, complaints about the comfort room, non-functional electric fans, and other basic necessities. In 2006, some of them, were themselves victims of the mudflow from Mayon volcano. Those past experiences had taught them countless lessons.

“Kami man ay experience sa bagyo at lahar. Naku nahulog ako sa may tubig. Pero ako talaga survive lang kase kami lang asawa ko. Lahar ay apekted na din. Kalahati na ang tubig. Muntik na abot ang bahay.” – Glenn (*We have our own experience with typhoon and the lahar flow. I fell into the waters. But I had to survive because my husband and I were alone. Lahar was a threat. Water was everywhere. The flood water was almost in our house.*)

Ruth wanted to say that the volcanic eruption may not happen too soon. With this in mind, they wanted to stay put where they were at the moment. A stronger faith in difficult times may have given them more hope to stay (Nelson et al., 2011). But Mia, having experienced almost being killed by the impacts of Mt. Mayon, was ready to move out anytime.

**Business sector:** Six participated from the business sector (Table 1). The participants were all successful in their own field. Pete retired from his work in the US and decided to come back to the

Philippines. Noli, an engineer, started his business by opening a welding shop in the 80s. From there, he created jobs for his neighbors, relatives and other people. An economist, Manuel, made businesses out of the natural resources of Albay. He was into adventure tourism. Both Noli and Manuel somehow benefitted from the occurrence of natural disasters. Alan and Rey were into farming and the youngest businessman, Dani at age 32, was into retail.

*Better Basic Services Means Comfort in Life* (Table 2). As good citizens, the participants said that they paid their taxes religiously and on time. In return, therefore, they expect the government to provide them better basic services. Pete mentioned that he had paid high taxes in the US but never complaint because the services were at par with his expectations. Manuel strongly invoked his idea that community wellbeing could be attained only with improved basic services for all. Noli summed it up:

“Yun pong obligations ay nagagawa. Ang government ay hindi mabibigay sa atin yung services kung hindi natin din ginagawa ang obligations. Ang pera ay dapat maibalik in the form of services. Government should do also their tasks/responsibility very well.” (*Obligations should be fulfilled. The government cannot give us the basic services if we do not fulfill our obligations. The resources we have shared should be given back to the community in different forms of basic services.*)

Insurance was also considered vital for their personal security and for the family in times of emergencies. Everybody in the business sector agreed that insurance was important for emergency cases and acknowledged it as a “social responsibility” of the government. Because both Alan and Rey were in agriculture, they strongly believed that farms should be insured as well. When natural disasters occur, the agricultural farms suffered a lot, even the agricultural animals, too. Alan categorically classified insurance as a “contingency fund and a savings” as well. Rey considered insurance as a “security” for people in the agriculture sector. Even with the destruction of the agricultural products during natural disaster, in this case, volcanic eruption, at least a contingency fund is available to the farmers for recovery purposes. Rey called it a “fall back that will be a source for us to stand again.”

*Disaster creates situation for Good Samaritans to emerge* (Table 2). Disaster to some businessmen meant business. For example, Noli, being in the construction business benefitted in the aftermath of any disasters. But this kindhearted man, never thought about the benefit. He was thinking of his employees every time a suspension of work happened. Although he was not personally affected by the preemptive evacuation in Albay last 2014 he had experienced the after effect of Mt. Mayon’s activity in 2006 and other effects caused by strong typhoons. If not for their neighbors, whom they had not really known before, his family might not have survived. Noli described the disaster as “an eye-opener. And he added that “the best person who could help you would be your neighbor.” He realized that no one had taken time to know more about his neighbors and that disasters brought neighborhood together.

“Naging blessing ang trahedyang ipaparealize nya talaga sa iyo ang maraming bagay na minsan yung kapit bahay mo na hindi mo pinapansin yun pa pala ang tutulong sa iyo.” – Noli (*During disasters, the goodness in the heart was revealed. Tragedy becomes a blessing. One can say that disaster is an eye opener. A tragedy would make one realize that the neighbor you wouldn’t even notice in ordinary days, became the source of help.*)

Whatever the social status, everyone is on equal footing whenever in a disaster. Manuel described disasters as a “great leveler.” Jokingly, he added that social status does not matter if “pare-pareho kayong masasalanta at kakain ka din ng sardinas.” (when everyone was affected by disaster and one had to eat canned sardines.) No one can be choosy about what to eat. On the other hand, occurrence of disasters became a “wake up call” for the government to be always ready. Bicol region, specifically Albay, had a long history of disaster incidence like typhoons, floods, or volcanic eruptions. Therefore, the effort of preparation and mitigation for the worst disaster ever since was at the top on each local government units’ agenda.

**Socio civic sector:** The socio civic participants were young leaders who joined the volunteer group to help the community in times of disaster. Three males and 3 females joined the FGD (Table 1). Their mean age was 27 years old. All of them had their own jobs and they were all singles. A sense of

fulfillment in doing volunteer works and the acquired value in each unique experience were considered essential by each of them.

*Karahayan san Gabos* (Welfare for all) (Table 2). When one gives his/her time in order to extend help to the community, it means sacrifices too. Even though the socio-civic sector participants expressed that they received invaluable lessons by giving their time and they felt fulfilled and happy, a certain part of themselves were also given away. Commitment to help without expecting in return was embedded in each story shared by the participants. Great concern for the affected communities can be shown in all the community works they had participated in. In addition to concern for the welfare of others, it was a strong grass root participation that would help boost one's wellbeing. Jessica showed that real concern for the welfare of the community can be shown even by simply listening to the stories of the afflicted families. Sharing time with the victims was necessary and was expected of them. To be proactive was necessary for the welfare of everyone as shown by "precaution and warnings given." Since the participants were church-based, the spirit of faith and hope were strongly evident in the narratives.

Dace highlighted how participation contributed for the good of the community, and for him, everything was a result of a collective effort. All of the participants strongly expressed that community effort was only successful with concerted personal efforts.

**The local government sector:** The FGD sessions were participated in by members of the barangay council (6), municipal office (1), and one each from the provincial DRRMO, and from the Civil Defense Office (Table 1).

*Dagus-dagos* (Sustainability) (Table 2). Sustainability of the effort from the LGU leadership down to the lowest bracket of the organization was always basic in order to see the seriousness of whoever was in command. Albay is very vulnerable to any Mt. Mayon's activity. In Camalig alone, 6 barangays are situated along the 8km EDZ. A small tremor from the volcano would mean thousands of families would have to be evacuated. Education through continual training and workshops, serve as a constant reminder to the community members that the municipal leadership was really sincere in attaining a zero casualty objective. The health workers present were focused on giving what they commit to do. Just like the political leaders, the health workers, showed consistency in the continuous effort to bring the community to zero sickness. Lou, Lil and Beth shared that they would not stop imparting the right knowledge to the residents. If the people would not come to the health clinics for certain reasons, then they themselves visited them. Specifically, for Lou, she related that "house to house" was an option to take because she considered it as her "social responsibility" to increase the people's knowledge about health.

Jo, a 61 year old kagawad, continued to serve the community even if he lacked the financial capability. He believed that serving meant finding other sources of help by going to the right persons. He always projected a positive attitude to tap other linkages in order to bring help to the constituents. Sense of "*pagkukusa*" (initiativeness) was cited by Lou and Jo. Indeed, the barangay local leadership did not wait lethargically but was more proactive. Security or people's safety for their lives and possessions dominantly echoed in Efren's shared stories. As Jo and Efren narrated, community wellbeing meant a "visible leadership." Not only during extreme events but more so during the planning stage to prevent a disastrous effect of a volcanic eruption (Atkinson and Sapat, 2014). Sustainance of the effort towards "*karahayan*" (welfare) of the entire community started with the individual's initiative and reaching its climax with initiative and dynamic leadership.

**People's organization:** The Mayon's Farmer Association was under the oversight of the municipal Department of Agriculture (DA). Forty-five years was the mean age of the participants (Table 4.1). Six males and 3 females joined the FGD. These farmers obviously were risk takers because they continued to farm even under the constant threat of Mt. Mayon. Their farms were located in Sua, a barangay within the 6-8 km EDZ. During the last preemptive evacuation in 2014, these farmers were personally affected.

*The common experiences and sentiments* (Table 2). Their proximity to the volcano sometimes gave them an edge over other policy makers, national or local. They knew when to stay or flee. But because of the zero-casualty program of the provincial government, these farmers could not refuse to flee during a volcanic activity. During the prolonged preemptive evacuation of 3 months, most of the money saved by the farmers were gone. Going to an evacuation center was not a welcome news but they could not do otherwise. Sonia, being a mother, was always worried about the safety of the children, thus she openly declared that she wanted the needs of the family to be provided while staying at the EC. Elvie and the rest of the participants concurred that they could not just depend on the government for all their needs and therefore they had to work. Because they were farmers and their source of living was from their farms, they wanted to go home as soon as possible. Elvie was vocal about their need to go home. Jona was talking about the sustainability of their source of income which might be destroyed if they stayed away from their farms far too long. Yes, relief goods were distributed but Jona believed that it “was not enough to accommodate the needs of the family” for several months.

*Personal desires and wishes at disaster time* (Table 2). The provision of basic needs was foremost in every parent’s mind in the aftermath of a disaster. During this uncomfortable situation, everyone wanted to have “extra money” for emergencies. Odie and the rest of the participants felt this financial need. Security against crime was also essential in this most troubled times. Thus the visibility of the policemen was a welcome sight for them.

A public leader they could easily approach during extreme need was the plea of Ebie. It was also a symbol of hope for her to see leaders who “were available and willing to help.” In addition to that, Ebie hoped to have a safe neighborhood so that the feeling of security would be enhanced. Emil, the chair of the organization desired to have a safe community for all. For him it meant, safe for him “to move around, and to continue working without mental worries.” Having a safe neighborhood improved the feeling of trust in other people of the community.

A community that experienced intermittent natural disasters have members who are risks takers. In addition, Odie included the people’s “strong faith in God who would not put them into more risks they cannot handle.” Odie shared that the more one takes risks, the more one “becomes strong and determined to survive for the family and the community as well.”

## CONCLUSION

Concepts of community wellbeing can clearly be visible at the wake of disasters, when all the victims were trying to use rationality to understand the damage and the loss. Having intact value system made one to be kind and patient. All the business representatives agreed that a “positive mindset” is necessary when disaster strikes, it will be a temporary state of affairs. Having a positive mind was necessary so that the victims might be able to put everything back, after the experience. Trust in the leadership and unity perhaps can erode but every sector might regain in due time. Faith was what people always arm themselves as fall back during times of fatal disasters.

The decision of what a community needs should be shared by all sectors so that conflict can be eliminated immediately. If everyone works for the good of the community, problems will be solved and the level of community wellbeing can be enhanced.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Southeast Asian Regional Center for Graduate Study and Research in Agriculture (SEARCA) and Agricultural Training Institute through the Expanded Human Resource Development Program (EHRDP) of ATI-Department of Agriculture.

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