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Sembiring, Margareth

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Climate Change, Disaster Risk Reduction and Gender: The Southeast Asia Experience

By Margareth Sembiring

Synopsis

The 2005 Hyogo Framework for Action has called for a gendered approach in disaster risk reduction efforts. Despite being frequently battered by climate-related disaster events, countries in Southeast Asia remain rather slow in mainstreaming gender in their disaster management policies and action plans.

Commentary

THE ASIA-PACIFIC is the world's most disaster-prone region. Close to 30% of natural disaster events that hit the Asia-Pacific between 1970 and 2014 took place in Southeast Asia. The increased frequency and severity of natural disasters is often attributed to climate change phenomenon.

As climate change remains an issue, the recurrence of climate-related disasters at higher intensity is expected, and for this reason, the region must step-up its disaster management practices by accelerating the mainstreaming of gender sensitivities in regional, national, and sub-national disaster management policies and action plans.

Women in Disaster Situations

Owing to existing political, socio-economic, and cultural imbalances in many Asian societies, women are more susceptible to the devastating impacts of natural disasters. Gender role restriction, for example, does not allow women in some cultures to learn to swim, therefore decreasing their chances of survival in flood events.

In many instances, gender restriction isolate women from access to communication and information, therefore hindering early warnings to reach women in timely manner. Additionally, women are often at the forefront of the activities of climate-dependent livelihoods, exposing them more directly to climate-related disaster events. Pregnant and lactating mothers are facing an entirely different set of challenges, and the threat of gender-based violence is looming in disaster situations.

Finding women in the more vulnerable group, however, is not the only reason for the need for gender-sensitive approach to disaster management. On the flip side of the coin, with knowledge of their surroundings and of natural resources, women can play significant roles in reducing disaster risk and managing climate change adaptation.

Gendered Approach in Disaster Risk Reduction Framework

The need to include gender in disaster risk reduction has been realised as far back in the early 2000s and was ultimately made part of the 2005 - 2015 Hyogo Framework of Action. It acknowledges a need for 'a gender perspective [to] be integrated into all disaster risk management policies, plans and decision-making processes, including those related to risk assessment, early warning, information management, and education and training'.

The subsequent 2015-2030 Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction continues to emphasise the importance of incorporating gender sensitivities in disaster response, recovery, rehabilitation, and reconstruction.

The practical translation of mainstreaming gender in disaster risk reduction includes, among others, the creation of gender-specific data and statistics on impact of disasters, the assessment of gender-sensitive vulnerability, risk and capacity, the analysis of gender-specific needs and concerns, gender-sensitive policies, and the inclusion of both men and women in disaster preparedness, response, and recovery.

Slow Adaptation of Gendered Approach

Despite the call for a gendered approach in disaster management, countries in the region have been rather slow to adopt and fully implement it. In the response to Typhoon Haiyan in 2013, gender and gender-based-violence (GBV) were not effectively addressed as they were not included in the initial phases of the humanitarian efforts.

This was despite some independent gender-sensitive initiatives by some INGOs, the Philippine's Department of Social Welfare and Development, and women's civil society movement. The lack of gendered approach was also observed in Indonesia, although the response to the 2010 Mount Merapi eruption was somewhat more gender sensitive compared to the 2004 tsunami response in Aceh.

In many cases, the awareness and practices of gender-differentiated responses are performed by INGOs and civil society actors. CARE, for example, was involved in employing gendered approach in aiding the victims of Typhoon Haiyan. Similarly, Indonesia's National Agency for Disaster Management (BNPB) worked closely with

NGOs in effectuating gender sensitive responses to the Mount Merapi eruption operation.

Separately, Oxfam has been promoting gender element in disaster risk reduction in a number of villages across Southeast Asian countries including in Takeo Province in Cambodia, Jenggala village of West Nusa Tenggara Province in Indonesia, Dedaye Township in Myanmar, and the provinces of Dong Thap and Tien Giang in Vietnam. Efforts by INGOs and civil society, however, would not have a nationwide reach if the governments do not follow up by adopting and integrating gendered concept into their national disaster risk reduction, response, and recovery policies, action plans, and budgets.

Indeed, relevant line ministries and government agencies are still lagging behind although the awareness of the importance of gendered approach is generally already in place. Indonesia's BNPB, for example, has formulated regulations and guidelines to address the needs of women and children in disaster responses. However, Indonesia's 2013-2015 progress report on the implementation of the Hyogo Framework for Action acknowledges that it has yet to have gender-disaggregated vulnerability and capacity assessments in its national multi-hazard risk assessment.

Policymakers' lack of awareness on the importance of gender equality has been identified as one of the factors that hinder the incorporation of gender-sensitive approach in disaster risk reduction. Similarly, the Philippines reported shortcomings in the utilisation of gender-disaggregated data despite ongoing efforts to collect such data. Furthermore, measures to address gender-based issues in recovery are yet to be in place. Vietnam's progress report also shows that gender sensitivities are not fully incorporated and exercised due to a lack of capacity to mainstream gender elements in the country's disaster management policies and responses.

Efforts to Mainstream Gender is Key

At the regional level, gendered approach to disaster management is not explicitly reflected in the 2005 ASEAN Agreement on Disaster Management and Emergency Response (AADMER). As the region continues to prepare itself against the increased likelihood of climate-related disaster events, mainstreaming gender in disaster risk reduction, response and recovery needs to be made a priority in both aiding countries and disaster-prone countries.

Overlooking gender perspective in disaster and emergency situations is often done under the 'tyranny of the urgent' pretext, which need not necessarily be the case if a gender-sensitive approach has been effectively integrated in early planning.

While progress has been moderately made, continued commitment and efforts are needed to ensure that a gendered approach will be fully integrated and exercised in the regional and national disaster management frameworks. Mainstreaming gender is key to effective disaster risk reduction, response, and recovery in the region.

Margareth Sembiring is a Senior Analyst at the Centre for Non-Traditional Security, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), Nanyang Technological University, Singapore.

Nanyang Technological University

Block S4, Level B4, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
Tel: +65 6790 6982 | Fax: +65 6794 0617 | www.rsis.edu.sg