Emergency Situations, Participation, and Community-based Disaster Responses in Southeast Asia: Gray Areas and Causes for Optimism

Loh Kah Seng

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LOH KAH SENG

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Gray Areas and Causes for Optimism

Emergency and participation intersect to form the basis of Community-Based Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (CBDRRM). This article has three aims. First, it explores the criticisms of participatory development in CBDRRM. Second, it highlights how disasters provide insights into participatory development when disasters are viewed not merely as terrible events but as catalysts for social change. Third, the article contends that despite its flaws, CBDRRM is neither hegemonic nor oppressive but can be adapted to the needs and cultures of communities. The article calls for an empathetic form of participation and room for diverse partners to work together.

KEYWORDS: DISASTERS · INDIAN OCEAN TSUNAMI · FLOODS · FIRES · SOUTHEAST ASIA · COMMUNITY-BASED DISASTER RISK REDUCTION AND MANAGEMENT · CULTURES OF DISASTER

Community-based or participatory development has become increasingly popular. Since its emergence in the 1970s as a counterpoint to top-down, Western-centric models, community-based work has moved into the mainstream and is now widely used by public institutions, corporations, and international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) alike. But the growing acceptability of participatory development has also brought about a critical backlash. Assessing a popular variant, David Mosse (2001) warns that participatory rural appraisal has been deradicalized and now serves institutional, rather than community, interests. Bill Cooke and Uma Kothari (2001) go deeper in their critique, tracing participatory development's problems not to its techniques but to an inherent tendency to disempower people.

In addressing the issue of participation, this article makes three points. One, the criticisms of participatory development are pertinent to the parallel approach in disaster response presently termed Community-Based Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (CBDRRM). Just as participatory development claims to remedy the shortcomings of expert-led development, CBDRRM has emerged as a corrective to applied science disaster response. It regards people not as victims but as active participants, possessing the knowledge and resources to cope with a disaster. The article considers how far CBDRRM has been able to achieve this goal.

Conversely, disasters provide insights into participatory development. Compared to chronic underdevelopment, disasters are events that precipitate emergency situations and (sometimes) robust responses from the outside. Much of disaster studies has dwelt, quite understandably, on applied questions of how to assess risk and vulnerability or how to carry out postdisaster relief and recovery (Blaikie et al. 1994). Instead, this article considers the intersection of emergency situations and community participation that forms the basis of CBDRRM programming. This approach raises equally important questions such as: How does a crisis affect a community-based response? What roles do disaster victims and survivors play or not play in such a response? Disasters are not merely terrible events, but can be catalysts for social change.

Third, despite its flaws, CBDRRM is neither hegemonic nor oppressive. Disaster-hit communities have made a range of responses: although some have not benefited from formal disaster work, other communities, or members of a community, have shown themselves capable of playing an active role in coping with a calamity. Where CBDRRM has proven useful, it is not always because people have wholly or passively embraced its expertise, but rather because they adapted it to suit their needs. While there are gray areas in CBDRRM programs, there is also cause for a cautious optimism based on these responses.

Southeast Asia is a useful area of study because it is frequently struck by disasters: the region experienced 12 percent of all recorded natural calamities between 1900 and 1997 (Bankoff 2003b). Using a combination of primary and secondary sources, this article considers three cases. The first case, which draws upon the grim reports by various international agencies, involves the impact of the 2004 Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami on Aceh. The second instance deals with disasters in the Philippines, with a focus on floods in informal settlements in and near Manila. Finally, my archival research and oral history interviews highlight how fires in Singapore's informal settlements helped forge a planned city. The three cases are admittedly of different locales and time periods; Singapore is a city-state without a physical hinterland unlike Aceh and the Philippines. The types of disasters are also diverse: while people may build up resilience to perennial events like floods and fires, they are less able to do so with the rare and more devastating tsunami. The approach here recognizes these differences, but seeks to investigate CBDRRM programming in various contexts in order to better understand the gray area between emergency and participation. A common factor in the three cases is the focus on marginalized groups: informal settlers in Manila and Singapore and Acehnese fishermen. These groups are not homogenous but are divided by social fractures.

The inclusion of fires problematizes the distinction between "natural" and "human" disasters. Nature, as Joachim Radkau (2002) points out, is a social construct that is frequently framed in opposition to human society or as society's victim. Many scholars now accept that human processes precipitate "natural disasters" (Blaikie et al. 1994; Pelling 2003). Still, disaster studies have seldom considered urban fires that, unlike bushfires or wildfires, have human causes. While the risk of urban fires is linked to natural factors such as terrain, climate, and wind speed, man-made issues like densely built combustible housing, lack of piped water, and administrative neglect compound this risk. Urban fires and other disasters occur at the intersection between nature and culture. As Anthony Oliver-Smith (2002) argues, disasters, while extraordinarily destructive, are part of the "normal"

order of things that shape culture. In discussing infernos, this article attempts to enrich this point by linking Singapore's fires to decolonization, national development, and social engineering.

Emergency and Modernity

A serious critique of participatory development is how far it has departed from its radical origins. In the 1970s Paulo Freire (1970), a formative influence, called for a two-way, dialogic collaboration between oppressors and the oppressed. In the 1990s, however, Robert Chambers (1997), a pioneer of participatory rural appraisal, adapted Freire's activist pedagogy to establish a set of group-oriented techniques for working with marginalized communities. Against the radical backdrop, concerns have arisen about how participatory development has been reduced to a set of unthreatening "toolboxes" (Cleaver 2001, 53). In recent times participatory techniques have been appropriated to pursue nonradical agendas such as decentralization and other neoliberal programs (Davidson et al. 2007). Ilan Kapoor (2005, 1203–4, 1215) calls participatory development a "Trojan horse" for "neo-imperial and inegalitarian" forces that is doubly difficult to unmask because it advocates for the Other and relates to deficiencies in Western liberal democracy.

Likewise, CBDRRM is ambivalent on the nature of participation. In a loose interpretation of the term, people participate in prescribed roles in an external program, while a stricter interpretation requires them to be involved in decision making, which is more difficult to accomplish. As Katrina Allen (2006) observes in the Philippines, governments have used decentralization in the name of participation to shift their responsibilities onto the community, without enhancing people's capacity to cope with disasters. To neoliberal NGOs, she notes, community participation is about people being held responsible for financing projects. In contrast, advocacy NGOs view procommunity efforts as a form of social empowerment, which has its roots in the civil society movement in the 1970s and 1980s that helped topple the Marcos dictatorship (Bankoff and Hilhorst 2009). The contrasting interpretations mean that communities may play different roles in CBDRRM programs.

The criticisms are important and to some extent justified. However, this article argues that, while often poorly implemented or misappropriated, the concept of participation remains sound. Many critics still envisage a resurrected or reformed version of it. Trevor Parfitt (2004, 551) defends various aspects of participation, such as its dialogic method, self-reflexivity, and emphasis on group learning. The challenge, he maintains, is to reject its use as a "grab bag of tools" (ibid.). Giles Mohan (2001) similarly wants participatory work to go beyond the community and extend to the national and international arenas.

In addition, despite the flaws, the intended beneficiaries of participation may be able to cope with a disaster in their own ways. Kapoor (2005) notes that its liberational language may still stimulate contestation and hijacking from the participants. Harry Taylor (2001) finds corporate employees quite aware that, propagated in the context of human resource management, participation is merely a way of exhorting them to work harder, although this awareness does not translate into social change. Much then can be gleaned from studying the experiences and responses of the participants. Far from being hegemonic, participatory development is frequently renegotiated, or even resisted. Such responses can be usefully understood as "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985), which are subtle, unorganized, and passive forms of resistance occurring on an everyday basis. These various issues lead us to a number of key questions. For instance, will the aftermath of a disaster result in participatory development being used as a toolkit, or can NGOs still pursue social empowerment amid a crisis? Do survivors reject CBDRRM and retain their customary responses to a disaster, or do they respond more positively to the new expertise?

To address these issues, it is useful to view CBDRRM as a quintessentially modern approach to disasters. It is modern in possessing that unique reflexivity, grounded in scientific rationalism, that a disaster can be prevented or at least ameliorated. CBDRRM expresses what Tania Li (2007) calls the "will to improve," linking it to the applied-science approach that it seeks to balance. Reflexivity distinguishes CBDRRM from perspectives that articulate a spiritual or moral worldview, where disasters are seen as inevitable or as punishment for sinful behavior (Loh 2014). The continuing addition of such terms to disaster response as "community-based," "risk reduction," and "risk management" underlines this reflexivity. It transforms the technical approach to a participatory one, while extending humanitarian relief to predisaster preparedness and postdisaster recovery. The effect is not merely to make disaster work more participatory, but also to render it better planned and more comprehensive, which is a hallmark of the modern mind.

The modernism brings a tension to the CBDRRM precept of treating disaster survivors as collaborators. Because of its scientific basis, CBDRRM will not accept all local perspectives. Its use of concepts such as risk and vulnerability shows that the technical influence remains strong. In contrast Greg Bankoff (2003b) has conceptualized nonmodern "cultures of disaster" in the Philippines, which comprise coping strategies developed over time through people's interaction with a hazardous environment. Among such a repertoire is a messianic view of disasters, tempered by a sense of fatalism toward the unavoidable calamity. Another is the circulation of speculative gossip and rumor about official disaster efforts. These responses are cultural in that they express the values of the community, for whom the state is unreliable and disasters are part of everyday life that belong to a multitude of challenges such as illness and insecure income, which people regularly confront sans the intervention of the state.

Cultures of disaster are rational within the worldview of the community and in light of the constraints they face. Less important than whether these responses work is how they help make sense of a destructive event. For underprivileged or marginalized people living in a hazardous area, accepting disasters as inevitable is not necessarily a sign of apathy, but a gamble that they take within their constraints. Conversely, modern disaster responses, including CBDRRM, are also cultural: they are more optimistic ways, buttressed by scientific confidence, of coping with disasters.

There is also, as James Scott (1998) discerns, a key relationship between such modernity and the emergency that a disaster creates. He observes how it is typically in crisis situations and through emergency discourses that big, state-led projects are imposed onto communities. The modern state, Scott explains, does not merely seek to tame the natural environment, but also to organize communities and render them legible, by transforming values and behaviors deemed to be undesirable. In Singapore the discourse of bad slum and informal housing invented a social emergency, which drove forward the state policy to mobilize households by rehousing them in public housing (Clancey 2004).

The link between emergency and modernity prompts us to consider the social consequences of disasters, especially what words like "participation," "mitigation," "rehabilitation," and "recovery" mean to disaster-stricken communities. While it demands a humanitarian response, a disaster is more than just a catastrophic event: CBDRRM programming is part of a discourse and catalyst for change, both in preparing people for a disaster and helping them recover from it. The envisaged change does not always happen—we read more frequently about poorly planned disaster work. But that it should happen is an intended role of participation.

Two Tsunamis in Aceh

> We were hit by the tsunami twice. Once when it hit our country. Second, because we were not entitled to aid.
> We were unlucky not to have been hit by the tsunami. (United Nations 2006, 34)

> Over time there has been increasing emphasis on accountability to beneficiaries. But our hierarchy of accountability is: 1) the government; 2) donors; 3) beneficiaries. —Field interview, Sri Lanka. (American Red Cross et al. 2006, 24)

As the quotes above show, the tsunami has appeared in two broader discourses: one on poverty and hardship, the other on the failings of international aid agencies. Both discourses share something in common: recovery from the disaster has been difficult and incomplete. The post-tsunami situation in Aceh underlines the complexity of communities, the pitfalls of external intervention, the divisive effects of the calamity, and the implications of development-led recovery.

Aceh is a province of Indonesia characterized by considerable social, regional, and geographical diversity. Anthony Reid (2005) has written of Aceh as part of a Sumatran frontier that historically lacked a shared identity within both the Dutch East Indies and the Indonesian nation-state. In 1953–1962 a movement emerged in Aceh seeking to establish an Islamic state, which challenged the secular basis of the Indonesian state. In 1976 the Free Aceh Movement began a low-grade insurgency for Acehnese independence. The insurgency intensified in the post-Suharto years after 1998 but provoked a sharp military crackdown by Jakarta. The earthquake and tsunami devastated the province, but also accelerated the peace process to resolve the conflict, resulting in the signing of a memorandum of understanding between the two parties in Helsinki in 2005. That the tsunami led both sides and the international community toward a peace resolution highlights how a

disaster can be a catalyst for (positive) change. The role of the international community in disaster response and the peace process weakened Indonesia's control over Aceh (Miller and Bunnell 2013).

However, the people of Aceh were not united behind the insurgency. The World Health Organization (2013, 126) termed the province a "fragmented" society. The separatist Free Aceh Movement was opposed by several political groups that desired the continuation of Indonesian rule. This political fracture stemmed from a population divided into ethnic Acehnese, who comprised half the population, and various ethnic minorities, including highland groups and Javanese migrants in the coastal and lowland areas. The minorities, which supported Indonesian control, spoke different languages and had different cultures from ethnic Acehnese. The political differences also reflected economic and income divides between the urban and rural/highland areas (Tsunami Recovery Indicator Package 2009).

In this multidimensional context the earthquake and tsunami struck swathes of Southeast and South Asia with horrifying results in December 2004 and precipitated a massive response from the international community. The response itself became a problem. In the aftermath a large group of INGOs, United Nations agencies, international donors, and researchers formed the Tsunami Evaluation Coalition (TEC) to evaluate the global response. In its initial reports the TEC charged the INGOs with neglecting community interests. The INGOs, the TEC noted, were accountable to the donors rather than to the victims, who were deprived of a role in their own recovery (Cosgrave 2007; Scheper et al. 2006). The INGOs' failure to consider local needs, utilize community resources, and collaborate with local NGOs created what the TEC called a "second tsunami" for the survivors (Cosgrave 2007, 16).

The INGOs were woefully unaware of divisions based on age, gender, income group, and education in Aceh's communities (WHO 2013). The disaster not only exacerbated these inner divisions, but also created new ones. Some disaster-struck villages were divided by envy and dissension due to allegations that relief goods and land lots were unfairly distributed. The customary authority of village heads was even questioned in some cases (Saiful 2012). In addition the disaster response failed to consider the background of insurgency in Aceh. There were victims of both the conflict and tsunami, but the infusion of international aid targeted only the latter, leading victims of the former to feel aggrieved about their neglect (Christoplos and Wu 2012).

Likewise, the disaster had damaged the economy and infrastructure, which affected many Acehnese, but the INGOs also ignored their grievances. Regionally, international aid focused on the urban areas at the expense of the rural, particularly the coastal and inland areas. At the same time, smaller cities such as Meulaboh received less help than Banda Aceh, the provincial capital (Miller and Bunnell 2013).

Gender issues were particularly salient, as women in the coastal fishing communities had suffered far greater casualties than men. After the tsunami, when survivors fought over relief goods, men gained a clear physical advantage over women, children, and the elderly (Cosgrave 2007). The INGOs also did not know that, because the insurgency involved mostly males, women headed nearly a fifth of the households. Consequently, many women-headed and poor households could not obtain adequate aid, while male, articulate, and better-educated persons received disproportionate amounts (Scheper et al. 2006; Brusset et al. 2006).

In communicating with survivors the INGOs also erred in holding formal meetings in public places, which were generally attended by (male) village leaders and men rather than women (although younger women were more likely to attend). The INGOs did not attempt to reach women in less public areas, such as in or near their homes. Such failures support the well-known critique that participatory work often excludes women as it is usually carried out in male-dominated public areas (Kapoor 2002). The INGOs did not utilize informal means of communication either: Acehnese women commonly obtained information about the outside world from neighbors, fellow villagers, hawkers, and other traders (Scheper et al. 2006; Brusset et al. 2006). In addition Islamic laws on property rights in Aceh favored men. To some extent this inequality was usually ameliorated by the countervailing influence of *adat* (local custom). After the tsunami, however, the INGOs relied on formal procedures, which had the contrary effect of weakening *adat* and denying women their land rights (Nowak and Caulfield 2008).

The relief and rehabilitation program imposed from above and outside in Aceh was implemented poorly and divisive. It was based on the prevailing idea that disaster response should extend from relief to recovery and development. The approach presently termed "linkages between relief, rehabilitation and development" (LRRD) holds that disasters are connected to the problem of underdevelopment, so postdisaster work ought to include developmental reforms. The LRRD framework was implemented in Aceh

with mixed results. On the one hand, as the TEC observed, the INGOs dwelt too long on emergency relief, failing to expand to a rehabilitation program that would address critical livelihood and housing needs (Cosgrave 2007). On the other hand, as late as 2009, the LRRD efforts that were eventually implemented still concentrated on more developed and accessible areas like Banda Aceh, rather than on poor rural areas that needed more assistance (Brusset et al. 2009).

Different regions had experienced the disaster to varying degrees of severity and recovered at different rates. The Tsunami Recovery Impact Assessment and Monitoring System (TRIAMS), a statistical study by national governments of the affected areas and by INGOs like the World Health Organization, found not only that the damage to housing, public health and educational facilities, infrastructure, and livelihood equipment (like fishing boats) differed by district and village, but so did rebuilding and recovery. On the southern and western coasts of Aceh, recovery was slowed by the greater physical damage and logistical problems (United Nations Development Program et al. 2009; Tsunami Recovery Indicator Package 2009). In contrast, the eastern coast of north Aceh, which had a more comprehensive road network, showed better recovery than other parts of Aceh (United Nations Development Program et al. 2007).

The LRRD measures had socioeconomic implications. A cash-for-work program, based on neoliberal ideas of poverty alleviation, was implemented in the tsunami-hit areas, including Aceh, and lauded in some quarters. Rather than being given relief, survivors received payment for cleaning up debris and working in reconstruction projects. However, while the program was useful in giving low-income people access to cash, in the long term it might undermine community self-help (*gotong royong* or the "joint bearing of burdens" in Bahasa Indonesia) (Brusset et al. 2006). The program expressed a neoliberal idea of development, emphasizing individual agency rather than seeking to empower a marginalized group. Its effects demonstrated how communities were not static, but liable to change or weaken after a disaster.

The cash-for-work program also further perpetuated gender inequality. Although the program provided Acehnese women with sewing kits and baking materials, such work was not only unrewarding because of the small local market, but also reinforced women's subordinate economic position relative to men. Widows and women-headed households with children were at an even greater disadvantage because women found it difficult to leave their homes to work (Scheper et al. 2006). Local employers were also more hesitant to employ women (Nowak and Caulfield 2008).

The survivors were also split over the official proposal to demarcate buffer zones along the coast where human development would be prohibited. Some people supported this measure to prevent another disaster, but many fishermen whose livelihood depended on the sea opposed it, despite being hardest hit by the tsunami (Cosgrave 2007). Some people believed that a second tsunami might occur, but others thought it was unlikely and thus their sacrifice would be wasted (Brusset et al. 2006). The notion of "wastage'" highlighted how people were independently weighing competing environmental and socioeconomic priorities.

Admittedly, many of the socially disruptive effects were temporary, precipitated by the emergency situation. In an update on Aceh and other disaster-hit areas in 2009, the TEC acknowledged that many problems had diminished or had been resolved. The tensions and disagreements did not appear to damage community cohesion in Aceh seriously, while its social fabric had been largely restored (Brusset et al. 2009). Nevertheless, these findings do not exonerate the INGOs. Even considering the short term, the INGOs' failings ought to have been avoided, for they deprived marginalized groups of the assistance they most needed. Crucially, too, the return of the social order to the "norm" means that the unequal power structures within communities have reasserted themselves.

Disaster response in Aceh would have benefited from a participatory approach that addressed these power structures and inner divisions. The TEC urged INGOs to work inclusively not only with village heads and through local NGOs and communities, but also with and through vulnerable subgroups such as women, the elderly, the disabled, children, sex workers, sea gypsies, and refugees (Cosgrave 2007; Scheper et al. 2006; United Nations 2006). The TEC emphasized that community-based work was by nature political, for it could not avoid tangling with powerful groups within the community (Brusset et al. 2006). This work also required a more empathetic approach by the international community toward local sensibilities. Many people were wary of the INGOs, perceiving them to be closely associated with the Indonesian government, which they distrusted. Many victims were reluctant to accept the temporary housing provided by the external agencies because of rumors that, if they did, they would not be eligible for permanent housing (Scheper et al. 2006).

Despite the inner divides, community participation remained viable because positive aspects of it surfaced in Aceh. Historically, the insurgency and lack of support from the Indonesian government had led people to utilize informal self-help in coping with livelihood challenges. Families in rural areas assisted relatives who moved to urban areas in search of work. Mosques, livelihood, and student groups based in the cities practiced more formal types of self-help. Migration became an important form of *gotong royong* after the tsunami. Many survivors moved out of the temporary relief centers, where living conditions were poor, to locate relatives and friends elsewhere who could help them. Migration did not occur solely at the family level: in the disaster-hit community of Lambung, men organized dispersed survivors to leave the relief centers and return to their village (Saiful 2012). While it was the disaster that compelled the migration, the moves were not arbitrary or irrational but drew upon community ties. Informal self-help and migration highlighted how geographically separated communities succeeded in bridging the urban–rural divide.

At the same time, the positive role of informal self-help and migration should not be overstated. The TEC found that, while Acehnese would move in search of better opportunities, they rarely departed from their original subdistricts largely because they did not possess the skills to find work in more developed areas. Under these circumstances the poorest households continued to be tied to regions that generated little wealth and incomes and had greater difficulty recovering from the disaster (Brusset et al. 2009). As the World Health Organization (2013) noted, the INGOs did not manage to assist individuals and families displaced by the tsunami who had left the relief centers to live with relatives in the districts.

There is fragmentary evidence of community response at the microlevel that stood outside the main strand of formal disaster work in Aceh. Elderly survivors helped out with chores in the household or in the communal kitchens in the relief centers; they also took care of their grandchildren and the orphans. Such roles did not emerge in a social vacuum, for elderly people customarily assisted their family and community. But because they did not participate in the organized public meetings, the efforts of elderly people usually went unnoticed by relief workers, who consequently also failed to recognize their needs (HelpAge 2005).

Adaptation and Cultures of Disaster in the Philippines

Like Aceh in some respects, the Philippines has a seemingly long history of community-based response to disasters. The CBDRRM initiatives in the country can be traced to the establishment of the Citizens' Disaster Response Center in 1984, which regarded people as playing a major and active role in their recovery from a disaster. Bankoff (2012) has traced antecedents of community-based efforts to religious groups during the Spanish colonial era.

Such a range of initiatives attests to the looseness of the term "participation." While some NGOs in the Philippines may advocate participation, their aims, methods, and perspectives differ significantly from those of local organizations and residents in informal settlements. As Erhard Berner (1997) points out, participation in the Philippines has empowered the NGO sector more than informal settlers, with the former becoming a self-aware force that can articulate alternative ideas to the state. More generally, Kothari (2001) warns that the supposedly inclusive act of participation draws subordinate groups more deeply into the community's unequal power structure, as does the pursuit of a social consensus.

Philippine communities are complex, possessing something of a Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde character. Allen (2006) notes that, as in Aceh, power struggles exist within communities, with local elites attempting to forge and maintain social consensus over other residents. But the communities also have a fairly autonomous nature by necessity: the Philippine state is weak in relation to the country's dominant political and economic interests, manifestly unable, or unwilling, to assist low-income groups. Scholars have written substantially about the problems caused by powerful oligarchic interests, cronyism, and bossism, which have created such a weak state (Anderson 1998; Sidel 1997; Quimpo 2005). Rather than the national government, it is the local bureaucracy at the barangay level that, with a closer relationship with the community, can play a more effective role in disaster response (Loh and Pante 2015).

However, there is considerable variation within the Philippines. As Alfred McCoy and Ed. C. de Jesus (1982) note, localities and regions have a long history of adapting to international influences since the Spanish colonial era. Villages, towns, and regions in the archipelago have developed largely detached from the central influence of Manila. This adaptation is useful

in contextualizing a widely used frame of political analysis in Philippine studies: the patron–client relationship that links the people and political and economic interests. While being in the weaker role, Filipinos remain capable of affecting and redefining the relationship. Benedict Kerkvliet (2002) finds that patron–client relations in peasant communities are replete with everyday politics that, like Scott's weapons of the weak, are small-scale and covert. The patron–client relation is thus dynamic: it may dampen social revolt, but the peasants' support for their patrons is conditional and can be withheld. In his study of the *pasyon* (Tagalog epic narrative on the life of Jesus Christ) in the nineteenth century, Reynaldo Ileto (1979) uncovers how peasant communities creatively interpreted Catholic teachings into idioms of resistance against Spanish colonial rule. Although unorganized, local passive resistance has the potential to contribute to a national movement.

This dynamism is manifest among informal settlers, whose relationship with modernity is one of reciprocal connection rather than opposition or isolation. Informal settlers are closely linked to the city, state, economy, and dominant classes. Their work, migration, and housing express what can be called a culture of improvisation (Antolihao 2004). In informal settlements, as Berner (1997) explains, global and national forces are localized and mediated: the dwellers are able to form fairly cohesive communities and local organizations that uphold their interests. In the 1970s a study of a slum in Santa Ana found the dwellers to be progressive-minded migrants who were adapting to life in the city. The community was forged through social interaction in spaces like streets, barbershops, restaurants, and corner stores, while gossip was a form of social sanction, and distrust of strangers was commonplace (Jocano 1975). Then as now, the positive aspects of community are intertwined with the unequal ones.

Informal settlements are by no means homogenous. The influx of migrants from various provinces into or near metropolitan Manila means that informal settlements usually comprise of long-time settlers and comparatively recent arrivals. Informal settlers are also commonly divided into better-off households and the "dire poor": the renters, who even local organizations have found difficult to mobilize (Berner 1997, 188). Thus, as in Aceh, disasters in the Philippines have affected certain social groups more than others. In Manila, despite the coping efforts of the urban poor, women have suffered disproportionately from floods, being more likely to lose income from work and less able to gain access to public transportation. Seen

as home-bound caregivers, women have also shouldered heavier household responsibilities than men, such as evacuating children and the elderly, while women and older children frequently also have had to queue for relief goods (Zoleta-Nantes 2000).

Given the culture of improvisation, how do informal settlers respond to CBDRRM expertise in the context of a disaster-instigated crisis? Studies of participatory work in the Philippines reveal an inner tension between learning from the community and prescribing solutions to reform it. Allen (2006) has discussed how community-based programs jointly organized by the Philippine government and the National Red Cross can be noninclusive. She unpacks the altruistic connotations to reveal that participation straddles two different roles: drawing upon the community's coping strategies while integrating it into developmental programs. Allen finds that usually the participants were handpicked and had not volunteered; more seriously, the CBDRRM workers often focused on physical hazards rather than local experiences, or they subsumed people's accounts under master narratives that privileged technical expertise. The effect was to disempower the community and weaken its coping capacity.

However, in the Philippines there are cultures of disaster that have developed independently of CBDRRM. At a basic level of self-help members of a community draw upon social ties to help one another, as in Aceh. On a bigger social scale Filipinos have built light thatched and wooden homes, practiced crop diversification, or migrated to safer areas in response to hazards (Bankoff 2003b). At times the cultures of disaster have clashed with applied science. In 1991, when Mount Pinatubo erupted in central Luzon, residents living nearby resisted the government's efforts to evacuate them. They were not completely irrational, being aware of the poor living conditions in the evacuation centers and, based on long-term experience, distrustful of the state bureaucracy (Tayag and Punongbayan 1994). Such suspicion toward external assistance, which may or may not be substantiated, expresses the values and constraints of the community.

In Manila, where metropolitan intervention has been inadequate, informal settlers have demonstrated their agency in combating the city's periodic floods. Neighbors would help one another move their belongings, find alternative accommodation, or provide limited financial assistance. Against an anticipated rise in water levels, the men would practice a rudimentary form of disaster mitigation and strengthen the physical structures

of their homes, while the family would stock up on food and water supplies (Zoleta-Nantes 2000). To identify flood hazards, participatory NGOs have utilized effectively the acquaintance with the environment that children and youths possess. However, they had to take into account boys and girls having different motivations and value-systems for participating; girls tended to act more in the interests of others than boys (Molina et al. 2009).

To some degree informal communities have accepted aspects of exogenous expertise when it has a demonstrable benefit. In Manila informal dwellers working with community organizers have become aware of their own culpability for the floods such as their dumping of garbage into the river and constricting the water flow. At the same time the residents understand the political economy that lies beyond their immediate influence, namely, the lack of access to their settlement by garbage trucks and the building of concrete structures by the government and landowners along the riverbank that also affect the water flow (Zoleta-Nantes 2000). This awareness of self and other is a sign of reflexivity and forms an important basis for community participation.

Admittedly, not all informal communities in the Philippines have accepted formal disaster expertise. Flood victims in Gumang in Sorsogon province, who were preoccupied with livelihood challenges, merely wanted relief goods. By contrast, as in Banaba in Rizal province just outside Metro Manila, the communities in Apas and Bulacao in Cebu City and other areas were more proactive: they organized disaster brigades, installed early–flood-warning systems, and carried out construction work to prevent floods, such as tree planting along the riverbank (Zoleta-Nantes et al. 2011).

An example of successful CBDRRM programming that conjoins modern and customary knowledge is found in the flood-prone informal settlements in Barangay Banaba. In 2009 Typhoon Ondoy inundated these settlements. In the aftermath Buklod Tao, a people's organization formed in 1996 to oppose the construction of a cement plant in the area, continued its efforts to organize the residents to deal with the flood hazard. Buklod Tao, whose leadership included many locals (particularly women), mobilized teenagers to watch the water level of the rivers whenever it rained. In collaboration with Philippine universities Buklod Tao also organized the building of a 3-kilometer-long walling along the riverbank. Its ideas and methods derived largely from external agencies, both state and international, and included concepts such as "risk," "mitigation," "trauma," and "evacuation." The

flood response program was funded by Christian Aid and Hilfswerk der Evangelischen Kirchen Schweiz, the aid organization of the Protestant Churches of Switzerland (ibid.).

Nor were its endeavors limited to disaster mitigation. Buklod Tao also initiated social enterprises to help informal settlers establish sustainable livelihoods. Besides a cash-for-work program that gave people access to jobs and money, similar to efforts in post-tsunami Aceh, the livelihood program also provided funds for starting individual and group businesses (ibid.; Loh 2014). These projects were ambitious in seeking to transform informal dwellers from flood victims into active participants and entrepreneurs. Underpinned by neoliberal ideas of development, the projects raised familiar issues, such as unequal monetary gains and weakening self-help, without addressing the political economy that had caused the underdevelopment and poverty.

Singapore's Fire Catalysts and the Making of a Planned City

Great fires ravaged the informal settlements of Singapore in the 1950s and 1960s, with the biggest one at Bukit Ho Swee rendering 16,000 people homeless in 1961. Singapore after the Second World War was an unplanned colonial city that, unlike Aceh and Manila, did not have a physical hinterland. A quarter of the urban population, mostly low-income families with multiple children, lived in informal areas at the margins of the city. The historical context is instructive: the infernos were not merely disasters but also catalysts for Singapore's decolonization and national development. The fires generated powerful states of emergency by which the British regime, and subsequently the postcolonial People's Action Party (PAP) government, replaced informal settlements with emergency public housing estates. Through the cumulative effects of such disaster-led rehousing, the PAP built a planned city of modern flats that transformed people's lives. The informal settlers had comprised a semiautonomous, in part criminalized, society: they resided in unauthorized housing, hawked and drove taxis without license, and tolerated secret societies outlawed by the state. As their last settlements were erased, these communities were socialized into a model citizenry and workforce of the new nation (Loh 2013). Unlike Aceh and the Philippines, Singapore's fire response helped forge a strong authoritarian state.

Yet, although patron–client relations were not a basic social unit in Singapore as in the Philippines, informal settlers in the two countries were remarkably similar. In both cases they were urbanized and pragmatic, traits that underpinned self-help rather than undermined it. The modernist attitudes of Philippine and Singaporean informal settlers toward life, work, and housing differed from the high modernist version espoused by urban planners and policy makers. Throughout the 1950s, informal settlers in Singapore formed reciprocal ties with nationalist groups seeking the end of colonial rule. They supported leftwing rural associations, which also operated in the city and mobilized urban squatters. These associations assisted them on eviction and resettlement issues, thus providing the mass base for the anticolonial movement. In the 1959 elections their support helped the PAP, then an opposition party, secure power (ibid.).

In 1958 a rudimentary form of community participation emerged when volunteer fire-fighting squads were established in informal settlements. The squads drew upon a local resource—the efforts of unemployed and underemployed youths in the settlements—akin to the teenage lookouts for floods in Manila. At the same time, the squads received the assistance of the state fire department and city authorities. The fire brigade's officers helped train the volunteers and provided basic firefighting equipment (Singapore City Council 1958, 420–22). Other volunteer squads were organized by the PAP's leftwing group, which sought to expand its influence among informal dwellers. The squads effectively combined local volunteerism and political mobilization from above. Although they were unable to resolve the fire hazard as a whole, they managed to extinguish numerous small fires in the informal settlements in the late 1950s and early 1960s (Loh 2013). Informal settlers were thus increasingly tied to the city-state, economy, and national politics after the war.

However, the history of the volunteer squads also offers a pertinent lesson on the ends and means of community participation. To both the British and the PAP, they were a means of social mobilization to integrate informal settlers into the structures of the state. In the history of decolonization lies the irony of the squads: the more successful the firefighting efforts were, the less remained of the community's social autonomy. The PAP, having come to power, decided that Singapore's future lay in planned modern housing, not unauthorized wooden dwellings. The new government preferred a formal industrial economy of fully employed workers, rather than an informal sector of itinerant hawkers and casual workers. In the mid-1960s the volunteer squads were quickly phased out as high-rise public housing estates, built on fire sites after an inferno, replaced informal settlements. The emergency public housing not only provided safe homes for the fire victims, but also transformed the community and city-state. Payment for public housing demanded a regular income, thus laying the basis for social discipline and capitalist development in Singapore (Castells et al. 1990). Fire victims, rehoused in emergency flats and entering full-time work to pay for their homes, soon lost their social autonomy. They would play an important role as workers in Singapore's rapid industrialization in the late 1960s and 1970s.

The birth of a planned city-state through emergency housing transformed Singapore society. In his rich study of rickshaw pullers James Warren (2003) aptly frames colonial Singapore as a "coolie town" built by the forces of capitalism and yet neglected and deemed unruly by the British regime. In the coolie settlement the denizens possessed a worldview about housing, space use, public health, and death that differed from the Western one. In the prewar era Chinese coolies living in the inner city strove to be independent of British urban regulations, which they avoided or contested through passive resistance, as peasants and informal settlers also did in the Philippines (Yeoh 2003).

Like the cultures of disaster in the Philippines, Singapore's informal dwellers possessed an attitude toward the fire hazard that differed from the state's response. The British and PAP governments focused primarily on modern technologies, purchasing better fire engines, improving water supply and road access to the informal settlements, creating fire breaks, and limiting the growth of the settlements. To the residents, however, the threat of fire was an ever-present, even acceptable, danger. They weighed the risks of living in highly combustible housing without adequate firebreaks with the socioeconomic benefits, namely, cheap rents and physical proximity to their workplace, as well as relatives and friends who were sources of assistance in difficult times. Informal dwellers attempted to reduce the fire threat through individual and social vigilance. As a social worker observed, the informal dwellers "lived from day to day. Of course they were quite careful in what they did, hoping that nothing would happen. They accepted it" (cited in Loh 2013, 101–2). This resignation resonated with how Philippine informal dwellers looked upon living in flood-prone areas. Until the formation of the volunteer squads,

however, the efforts of Singaporean informal dwellers could not prevent the outbreak of devastating fires that destroyed their homes and belongings.

Like the mistrust of the state and INGOs in Aceh and the Philippines, urban fires in Singapore precipitated widespread rumors that the government wanted to clear the informal settlements for public housing. These rumors were seemingly groundless, but they were logical in light of the unequal relationship between informal dwellers and the state. The latter had embarked aggressively on public housing development after the war, often without adequate consultation or compensation for displaced informal dwellers, whose settlements were neglected by the state and continued to be susceptible to fire outbreaks. Informal settlers viewed firefighters as opportunists who were less interested in putting out fires than pilfering from the site. In many an inferno, fire victims frequently threatened firefighters, snatching away their hoses to direct them at burning homes (Lim 1994).

In particular the 1961 Bukit Ho Swee fire provoked angry subversive interpretations of the disaster. Many fire victims alleged that the low number of deaths in the inferno (four) indicated a carefully laid plan of arson, while the fire had broken out on a public holiday, resulting in fewer men being around to fight the blaze. People also found it suspicious that the fire engines arrived late (although this delay was due to a late call) and did not enter the settlement (there were no firebreaks). The strongest "proofs" of arson, however, were the new emergency flats the government was building beside the fire site before the inferno, which were quickly completed afterward to rehouse the fire victims (Loh 2013). A Member of Parliament countered the rumors by pointing out that a government that burned out the squatters would not care to rehouse them, but this appeal to reason did not convince many fire victims (Radio Corporation of Singapore 1961).

Rumors thus laid bare the underprivileged and marginalized communities' sense of vulnerability (White 2000). Rumors served as weapons of the weak by which informal dwellers could voice a critique and protest against the state's rehousing program. In Singapore the rumors of arson played an important cultural and psychological role for the fire victims, deflecting onto the government their own responsibility for the calamity, such as their wanton discarding of cigarettes or failure to watch over a cooking fire or burning joss paper, the causes of fires commonly noted in the reports of the fire department (Loh 2013). To informal dwellers arson was a sufficient explanation for repeated experiences of fire-induced destruction

and destitution, by which they could comprehend an unstable and hostile world (Besnier 2009).

The fires decisively broke apart the social tension between the elites of the port city and the semiautonomous laboring masses. The history of the fires—although occurring at a time before the term CBDRRM had been coined—demonstrates how disasters can precipitate social and political transformation. Unlike calamities in Aceh and the Philippines, Singapore's state housing program can be considered a successful case of disaster response, replacing haphazard housing with modern flats of concrete. Its public housing history is framed in a heroic narrative of the deeds of an enlightened government (Loh 2013). Nevertheless, Singapore's experience also sounds a discordant note. The conversion of informal settlers into disciplined workers of an authoritarian state, while not without positive effects for both sides, provides a warning about the disempowering impact of a disaster response that, in the form of the volunteer firefighting squads, was participatory.

Singapore's case also highlights the issue of housing reconstruction in the aftermath of severe disasters in general, such as earthquakes or floods. The field of disaster studies is beginning to recognize the importance of participatory models of housing reconstruction, yet response to the issue remains ambivalent. Such a framework was utilized following the 2003 Bam earthquake in Iran, but despite collaboration between the planners and survivors in rebuilding homes people did not learn much about building safety (Fallahi 2007). In contrast, other scholars have advocated a top-down approach, stressing the need for speedy reconstruction after a disaster (Davidson et al. 2007). This approach may mean either that participation is an inferior way or it needs to be better implemented, but Singapore's emergency flat reminds us that housing reconstruction is a political process, not just a technocratic one: it should take into account local norms and interests and involve community participation, none of which happened in the city-state (Barakat 2003).

Conclusion

We may draw two main conclusions. One, disasters ought to be seen as impactful events in history rather than merely terrible occurrences out of the norm. The disasters in Aceh, Manila, and Singapore underline the limitations and flaws in community-based disaster responses. As discussed

in the scholarship on participatory development, the view of communities as geographically defined, closely knit, and homogenous entities expresses the imagery of a harmonious village or urban neighborhood. This view is simplistic and also excludes nomadic or migratory groups (Williams 2004). In all three case studies there was no such harmonious community; rather, these were social groups that were both cohesive and fractured. The typical community possesses a collective ability to recover from a calamity, based on historical experience or social ties, but it is also divided by unequal power structures that make certain members—women, the elderly, or renters—especially vulnerable. In addition, the community can be weakened further by formal disaster response itself, as exemplified by the impact of the cash-for-work programs in Aceh and the Philippines and of emergency housing in Singapore.

To recognize such divisions within a community is doubly difficult in the state of emergency produced by a disaster, where human and material losses are severe and an immediate response is demanded. The INGOs responding to the Indian Ocean earthquake and tsunami were under such pressure to account to the donors that they failed to see local and regional variation, much less draw upon community resources. In postwar Singapore the state's robust response to fires similarly ignored local interests and capacity; predictably, the outcome was to create a strong state and an eviscerated society—a far cry from the semiautonomous informal settlers who hitherto organized to fight the fire hazard and rebuild burnt-out settlements themselves. Singapore's experience is not exceptional: in Hong Kong devastating infernos in the 1950s and 1960s also paved the way for emergency public housing, enabling the British colonial administration to discipline what they alleged was an unruly Chinese population (Smart 2006). These instances, together with the INGOs' failures in post-tsunami Aceh, provide sobering lessons for the Philippines, whose informal settlements have had a tradition of adapting to their environment.

The other conclusion from the discussion, however, is that there is reason to be hopeful for CBDRRM, although this optimism lies less in what formal participatory models and techniques can accomplish than in how communities, in their own ways, have responded to crises. The informal dwellers of Barangay Banaba evolved in response to floods and adapted exogenous participatory expertise and development measures to their own needs. So did the firefighting squads in Singapore, in working with the fire department and political parties. Community responses and adaptation are often messy, gradual, and partial, jousting for influence with the cultures of disaster. The rumors about housing reconstruction and external assistance that circulated widely in Aceh, the Philippines, and Singapore are not merely irrational or obstructive nuisances. Rather, they highlight people's worldviews and needs, as part of cultures of disaster that have developed from historical experiences and socioenvironmental constraints. Arguably, it is in the realm of rumors and other resistant local vantage points—such as continuing to live in hazardous housing or coastal areas—where participation needs to change and become more self-reflexive. CBDRRM ought to be more empathetic and to accommodate local perspectives, no matter how unhelpful from a scientific point of view, as the point of departure.

A modest response to the fraught issue of participation is thus to be reflexive about the limits of an organized approach, like CBDRRM, working from the outside in. The corollary of this response is to build broad cross-class and institutional alliances beyond the community that have the capacity to achieve social change (Williams 2004). This option is pertinent to countries like the Philippines where people's organizations and other local groups in the informal settlements have largely remained aloof from one another as well as from regional and national movements (Berner 1997). The reification of the local limits the extent of change and is a weakness. In making a qualified argument for participatory development, Nana Akua Anyidoho (2010) observes that the shared experience and enterprise that a CBDRRM or LRRD project provides help to forge the sense of community. Such a community encompasses not only the locals but also the external collaborators. Participation is about making room for diverse and uneasy partners to work together.

Note

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Loh Kah Seng is a historian whose research investigates the transnational and social history of Southeast Asia after the Second World War. His published works include: *Squatters into Citizens: The 1961 Bukit Ho Swee Fire and the Making of Modern Singapore* (NUS Press and ASAA 2013); *Oral History in Southeast Asia: Memories and Fragments* (coedited, Palgrave Macmillan 2013); *Controversial History Education in Asian Contexts* (coedited, Routledge 2013); *The University Socialist Club and the Contest for Malaya: Tangled Strands of Modernity* (coauthored, Amsterdam University Press and NUS Press 2012); *The Makers and Keepers of Singapore History* (coedited, Ethos Books and Singapore Heritage Society 2010); and *Making and Unmaking the Asylum: Leprosy and Modernity in Singapore and Malaysia* (SIRD 2009). <lkshis@gmail.com>