Expanding horizons

Through the Australian Awards Scholarships, I was able to finish my Masters of Environmental Management and Development at the Australia National University (ANU) in Canberra from June 2011 to 2013. I specifically chose the program because of its strong climate change adaptation lessons, which is related to policy as well as courses on the science of natural hazards.

I was previously with various international NGOs before I went to work with the UN. After graduating from college, I became a journalist for a national broadsheet for three years. After this, I've worked for Children International, Save the Children, and Oxfam. It was during my work at Save the Children as Emergency Educator and as Project Officer for Institutional Development of Disaster Risk Reduction and Climate Change Adaptation Programs in Oxfam that I began to immerse myself in disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation (DRR-CCA).

In 2011, I became part of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) training team and it was just after my contract with them ended that I was granted the scholarship.

My first few months in Australia went smoothly and were exciting at the same time. I found a helpful Filipino community so I never really felt lonely and there was no culture shock. I actually felt at home. It's a good thing that PAHRODF has already established a network for us. We were, so to speak, the 'special' batch where activities were piloted and tested on.

My mother and I had plans of having her visit me in Australia. Sadly, I was six months into the program when she had a heart attack and passed away. I went back to the Philippines in December of 2011 to mourn. It was one of the lowest points of my life.

Still, I saw my mom's death as a way for me to take a needed break. After the Christmas vacation, I went back to the university and focused all my energies on studying. It was a welcome reprieve from grieving.

Back in Australia, I enjoyed the community, the travels, and the experiences of interacting with other foreign students. ANU is definitely very conducive for studying!

Australia Awards

Catalysts of Innovation

Gil Francis G. Arevalo
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In August of 2013, a string of disasters – both manmade and natural – struck the Philippines. In Zamboanga, an armed conflict erupted in September. After a month, a 7.2 magnitude earthquake shook Bohol province. And then in November, Typhoon Yolanda (or Haiyan) swept Leyte in Eastern Visayas.

The humanitarian community later labeled it as the 'series of unfortunate events' for 2013. I was barely three months home from Australia when those things happened.

During my stay, I was able to visit other parts of the country – Sydney, Melbourne, Tasmania, Brisbane, and even New Zealand – not only to travel and go sightseeing, but also to attend conferences, do fieldwork, and meet fellow scholars.

Implementing lessons learned

Coming back to the Philippines, I brought with me my learnings from Australia. My initial plan for my REAP was quite big. I had in mind to integrate DRR-CCA at the community level with its entry point in community preparedness. My first step though was to look for a job.

It was during this time when the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA) opened the new position for a Communicating with Communities (CWC)/Accountability with Affection Populations (AAP) Officer. I saw it as an open door for what I wanted to implement.

I'd have to say, the timing was impeccable although the actual work was not easy. It took me about a year to implement my REAP. And I'd like to believe it is still an evolving project.

Personally, the pressure was for me to be innovative since there are already existing mechanisms or systems in place in terms of DRR-CCA. The challenge is to make it more inclusive and more creative.

Currently, disaster and relief work has mostly been one-way. There's not much feedback on what the communities really need or want. So the UN OCHA position I found myself in, aims to fill that gap. The CWC/AAP working groups are coordinating to get feedback such as what messages are needed by the people on the ground and how to best relay information on community preparedness to them.

Before Typhoon Yolanda or Haiyan turned one year, we were already conducting contingency planning on a regional scale, with a specific component on community preparedness – the entry point of my REAP.

We could not almost believe that barely a year after the destruction of Yolanda, a typhoon with similar strength would hit almost the same areas destroyed in 2013. I said we could not forgive

ourselves if the same things happened again. The humanitarian circle shared the same sentiment.

Thus, when Typhoon Ruby (or Hagupit) came in December of 2014, we fully used the lessons we learned on preparedness response from previous experiences and were able to actually save lives and have minimum casualty.

Collaborating to maximize resources

I realized that through my work at OCHA, I was merging my organization's mission and tasks to the goals of my REAP. It was being institutionalised in my organization and is in the process of being integrated in other organizations as well.

We now have Communities of Practices (CoP) where best practices in preparedness are being documented in various agencies and institutions. We have the UN, international NGOs, faith-based groups, civil society groups, the media, and even telecom companies coming together to assist communities.

Humanitarian agencies also created the Communicating with Disaster Affected Communities (CDAC) Network. Basically, it wants to provide information for affected communities so they can prepare early and evacuate, if needed. It is necessary that the information and the communication practices be contextualized and localized and that the agencies work as efficiently as possible.

One project which has branched out from the initial idea of my REAP is the Common Services Project (CSP) where various groups come together to use common resources and channels of communication during and after disasters. As a result of Typhoon Yolanda, one CSP formed in the Philippines was with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Plan International, and World Vision. After Typhoon Yolanda, we saw how everyone worked together and the affected communities were thankful.

The direction I see now is that this can be replicated though contextualized efforts to prepare for more natural hazards and, to some extent, for armed conflicts in some areas as well.

Personally, I think our goal should be to become catalysts of innovations. Most of the time, we don't need to reinvent the wheel. We just have to work on partnerships and collaborations to maximize resources so we can better move towards synergy.

Currently, I'm based in Makati but I think I will be moving around – wherever the need is - that is wherever there is disaster, not that I'm hoping for it.

Gil Francis Arevalo finished his Masters of Environmental Management and Development at the Australia National University (ANU) in 2012. His REAP was all about Integration of DRR and CCA at the local level.