

Discussion Brief

Supporting Women Environmental Defenders for Transformative Disaster Risk Reduction in the Philippines

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Key messages

- ▶ Women environmental defenders are critical yet overlooked actors of transformative disaster risk reduction (DRR)
- ▶ In the Philippines, gender and social norms and inequalities make women, Indigenous peoples and rural communities more vulnerable to disasters
- ▶ Marginalized groups developed knowledge and strategies to defy their own vulnerability, for instance, mobilizing against environmental destruction, or building networks for more inclusive DRR
- ▶ Some of these strategies go beyond addressing local and immediate threats, but aim to redress structural inequalities which constitute the root causes of disasters. Through education, capacity building, advocacy and collaboration among marginalized groups, women environmental defenders are enabling a transformative approach to DRR
- ▶ This brief provides recommendations to decision-makers, the development community, researchers and DRR stakeholders to support the work of environmental defenders towards transformative DRR

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Introduction

The geography of the Philippines makes the country particularly vulnerable to disasters such as typhoons, floods, landslides, earthquakes and volcanic eruption. Climate change is increasing the frequency and intensity of disasters. Moreover, the country's natural resources are essential not only for the national economy but also to local communities, especially Indigenous peoples, women and those in situation of poverty, making such resources essential for their food security and livelihoods. Ensuring a sustainable use of these resources is not only crucial for the economic and social sustainability of local communities, but also contributes to disaster risk reduction (DRR) by mitigating the effects of climate change from local to global levels. However, the economic development through resource extraction, monocultures and infrastructure development threatens ecosystems, and can increase disaster risks.

In this context, people who rely on their environment are particularly vulnerable to anthropogenic environmental changes and disasters, but they are also the first line defenders of their environment, and contributors to DRR. The UN Environment Programme (UNEP) considers **environmental defenders** to be “anyone (including groups of people and women human rights defenders) who is defending environmental rights, including constitutional rights to a clean and healthy environment, when the exercise of those rights is being threatened” and further recognize that “many environmental defenders engage in their activities through sheer necessity; a number of them do not even see or regard themselves as environmental or human rights defenders” (UNEP 2018, 2). “Environmental defenders” is therefore a generic term encompassing many realities, from isolated individuals and communities to more established organizations and movements. This brief highlights the work of Filipino organizations working on environmental, Indigenous, land and women’s rights, who, even if they do not identify themselves as environmental defenders, contribute to advance socio-environmental justice.

Women environmental defenders are critical yet overlooked actors of DRR. Their mobilizations against environmentally harmful practices not only prevent hazards, but also constitute an empowering process. The variety of initiatives led by women environmental defenders at multiple scales call for structural change towards greater environmental and social justice. Beyond their direct contributions to traditional DRR practices, women environmental defenders pave the way for transformative DRR, whereby the root causes of disasters are identified and addressed.

This brief presents the key findings of a study conducted by the Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI). It is informed by interviews conducted with 24 organizations working to advance socio-environmental justice in the Philippines. This research is an output of the Building Resilience through inclusive and climate adaptive Disaster Risk Reduction in Asia-Pacific programme (BRDR).

BRDR is led by the Asian Disaster Preparedness Center (ADPC) and jointly implemented with SEI, the Raoul Wallenberg Institute (RWI) and the Swedish Civil Contingencies Agency (MSB), with the support of the Swedish International Development and Cooperation Agency (Sida). The aim of this programme is to improve regional cooperation in DRR and climate resilience by sharing best practices and tested approaches among countries in the region. The programme puts gender equality and rights-based approaches at the forefront of improving DRR and encourages South-South cooperation in Asia.



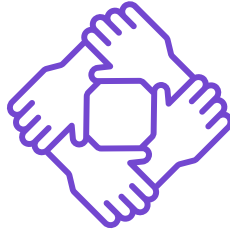
Women environmental defenders' contribution to DRR

Gender and social norms assign different roles and responsibilities to social groups, each with their strengths and pitfalls in the context of disasters and DRR. Women, Indigenous peoples, rural communities and the poor face similar structural challenges, such as limited access to education and formal employment opportunities, barriers to secure land tenure, and lack of representation in decision-making. These inequalities shape their vulnerability to disasters, as their needs and rights risk being overlooked in DRR policies due to their lack of meaningful participation in decision-making, while their lack of resources worsen their exposure to hazards and limit their capacity to adapt and be resilient.

Yet, women, Indigenous peoples and rural communities contribute to the resilience of society as a whole through their traditional gender and social roles. Despite the Philippines being one of the most gender-equal countries in the world, women are still considered primary care givers, making them essential respondents in the aftermath of disasters. Indigenous peoples and those whose livelihoods are dependent on natural resources developed an empirical knowledge of how to use resources sustainably along with practices to mitigate disasters and adapt to environmental changes. However, the important contributions of these social groups to DRR efforts continues to be overlooked and their vulnerability to disaster risks persist. To address these gaps, some organizations working with Indigenous women, such as Tebtebba or the Samdhana Institute, play an important role in documenting marginalized groups' contribution to DRR. This not only increases the visibility and recognition of traditional DRR practices, but also serves to advocate for evidence-based DRR and natural resource management policies.

The Philippines holds many examples of how marginalized groups organized themselves to defy their vulnerability. Across several decades of activism, women environmental defenders have been noticeably **mobilizing when their environment and communities have been threatened.** In the 1980-90s, women's leadership in community-based mobilizations has been pivotal, with for instance their success in stopping the Chico River dam project, and in closing open-mining sites in Ucab, Itogon. More recently, women environmental defenders also played an important role in the resistance against the Oceana Gold mining activities in Nueva Vizcaya. Such projects were presenting risks of displacement for their communities, but would also have gravely affected local ecosystems, therefore increasing their exposure to hazards. Women environmental defenders' mobilization can thus be considered as instrumental for DRR.

Women and marginalized groups are also increasingly building their capacities on DRR and leading inclusive DRR activities. The Women in Emergency Network (WENet) is constituted of various grassroots organizations engaging with marginalized women across the Philippines, and builds the capacities of its members to engage in the DRR and humanitarian response field. This network allows for coordinated and localized responses in the context of disasters, while they also engage with DRR stakeholders to improve their capacities to address gender issues in emergency contexts.



Enablers of transformative DRR

Aside from contributions to the traditional DRR sphere, women environmental defenders also adopted strategies that aim to transform the structural causes of vulnerability and disasters. This section presents the enablers of a transformative approach to DRR.

The **strong participation of civil society in public sphere** in the Philippines is a key enabler for transformative DRR. Social justice movements have been active since the colonial era, and this history of grassroots political mobilizations still lives on, particularly among women and Indigenous peoples. Their advocacy aims to address the structural drivers of gender inequality, discriminations against Indigenous peoples and environmental destruction, all of which being factors of vulnerability against disasters.

Moreover, **organizations representing the interests of marginalized groups actively cooperate on intersectional issues**. For example, the National Federation of Peasant Women (Amihan) joined forces with Indigenous women on land issues. Similarly, Liyang Network whose focus is on Indigenous peoples involved non-Indigenous peasants in their work on land tenure rights. As marginalized groups are better able to identify the structural causes of discriminations, environmental destruction and vulnerability, their mobilizations directly contribute to transformative DRR.

By bridging marginalized communities with the strengths of well-connected NGOs and CSOs, grassroots women environmental defenders are better supported, and advocacy efforts are informed by evidence from the ground. Indeed, despite being relatively secluded, the struggles of grassroots women environmental defenders do not remain isolated from more established organizations and networks. Some organizations such as the International Indigenous Peoples Movement for Self-Determination & Liberation (IPMSLD), the Samdhana Institute and Tebtebba highlighted the strength of intercommunity exchanges as a strategy for women environmental defenders to build solidary and upscale their best practices. The support provided by such organization is important to strengthen collective identities which can encourage women environmental defenders to be more involved in the socio-environmental justice movements that contribute to transformative DRR.

The groundwork led by civil society is crucial to improve education and the capacities of marginalized groups, therefore empowering them to challenge their own vulnerability. For example, the Center for Environmental Concerns (CEC) helps prevent land disputes by educating grassroots communities about their rights and building their capacities to hold the government and businesses accountable when development initiatives threaten their resources. IPMSDL identified potential activities to foster women leadership, such as trainings on public speaking, on how to manage an organization and collaborate with other organizations, but also on how to organize in times of crisis. The Legal Rights and Natural Resources Center (LRC) provide paralegal and capacity training to enable community partners to assert their rights, also creating platforms for their participation in congressional hearings. Such activities led by civil society organizations redress inequalities in terms of access to education and information, while enabling marginalized groups to demand the structural changes required to address their vulnerability to disasters.



How to support women environmental defenders for transformative DRR in the Philippines?

Women environmental defenders in the Philippines are contributing to a transformative approach to DRR, as they denounce environmental destruction and work on addressing the root causes of vulnerability to disasters. Thanks to strong links between marginalized communities, and between them and more institutionalized NGOs and CSOs, women environmental defenders in the Philippines are powerful actors mobilizing against practices that threaten natural resources and perpetuate discriminations and marginalization. As key contributors of transformative DRR, women environmental defenders need the support of decision-makers, the development community, researchers and DRR stakeholders.

The following recommendations aim to guide these stakeholders to acknowledge, develop and upscale the efforts women environmental defenders are already leading in the Philippines. Taken together, these recommendations would enable a transformative approach to DRR, which places socio-environmental justice at the core of policies and practices, therefore limiting disaster risk.



Recommendations

- ▶ **Ensure compliance against international human rights frameworks and national legislations to ensure women, Indigenous peoples and marginalized groups can fully enjoy their human rights.** This entails fast-tracking processes for the recognition of Indigenous peoples tenure rights and addressing the legal loopholes in land classification that threaten Indigenous customary land rights. It also includes a review of existing policies to address the formal and informal barriers that women, Indigenous people and peasants may face to exercise their rights. This step is essential to address the marginalization of these groups which makes them vulnerable to disasters.
- ▶ **Ensure the accountability of State and non-State actors with national human rights and environmental regulations when planning and implementing infrastructure development and climate mitigation initiatives.** This includes transparent free, prior and informed consent processes which allow for the meaningful participation of the communities that might be impacted by development initiatives. States, development stakeholders and businesses have an obligation to assess the environmental and social impacts of their activities and to take the appropriate steps to mitigate negative impacts while ensuring the benefits are equitably shared among social groups. In cases of environmental conflicts where local communities oppose development projects, the free exercise of their civil and political rights, as well as their security, should always be supported.
- ▶ **Expand educational opportunities for marginalized groups** about the environmental and human rights they are entitled to **and build their capacities** to use the mechanisms in place to exercise these rights. This strategy is already key in the Philippines' civil society, and intensifying these efforts would allow women environmental defenders to protect themselves when these rights are threatened. In addition, educated and empowered women environmental defenders can guide State and non-State actors toward equitable and sustainable development and DRR efforts.
- ▶ **Continue facilitating a multi-stakeholder and proactive approach to DRR at all levels,** by mandating the representation of marginalized social groups, including women, Indigenous peoples, and peasants, along with DRR experts and decision-makers. This is already one of the Philippines' key strengths, but more efforts can be done for a better recognition of empirical knowledge of the environment, and of lived experiences of vulnerability and disaster, which can enable a more holistic and efficient approach to DRR.
- ▶ **Document the best practices of women environmental defenders** who contribute to environmental protection and DRR, as well as their **successful mobilizations** in the context of environmental conflicts. This type of research can be used to advocate for a better recognition and financial support of their work, and allow for a better understanding of how mobilizations to protect environmental and human rights can be empowering and transformative.
- ▶ **Continue supporting and collaborating with grassroots women environmental defenders to ensure grounded and transformative DRR.** Grassroots defenders can be isolated, and the support provided by more established networks and organizations are essential to allow their voices to be heard. Legal practitioners can provide guidance and support to translate local demands into more adequate policies and practices. Providing spaces for intercommunity exchanges also strengthen solidarity between marginalized groups and can leverage their local actions towards transformative change at multiple scales.