Forum on Urban Disasters, DRR and Safe and Secure Settlements
July 9, 2013, 8:30-11:30 a.m.
Bulacan Tandang Sora
College of Social Work and Community Development
University of the Philippines Diliman
Sponsored by the CSWCD DRRM Cluster

Rationale

The massive flooding in parts of Metro Manila triggered by the onset of the South-West Monsoon season (Habagat) has once again brought the informal settler families (ISFs) living along waterways and waterways to the attention of government. Almost predictably, the government’s response is to again blame the urban poor for illegally inhabiting so-called ‘danger areas’ and obstructing the flow of water in rivers and tributaries, and to call for the wholesale relocation of informal communities as a key approach to flood control and urban Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR).

It is estimated that there are close to 556,000 informal settler families in Metro Manila, of which 102,000 families reside in government-declared ‘danger zones’. The government targets to urgently relocate some 20,000 families living on or along eight priority waterways within 2013. It plans to provide 18,000 pesos as rental subsidy to encourage these informal settlers to agree to relocate to resettlement areas. As can be expected, this expensive government proposal (amounting to 374.4 million pesos) has drawn a lot of criticism from the mass media, civil society organizations, and even the urban poor sector itself. Experience has taught the urban poor that relocation in distant and poorly planned resettlement sites – with not enough jobs or livelihood opportunities, serious lack of social services and facilities, and being cut off from kinship and social ties – has only increased their vulnerability to even bigger disaster risks.

In a situation where about 1/3 of the urban population earns incomes below the poverty threshold, many are forced to build their dwellings on contested public spaces even if these are undesirable or unsafe. High population densities, sharp income inequality, lack of alternative sites for safe habitation, weak enforcement of zoning laws, and other complex issues of urban governance and land use present a unique challenge to urban DRR. Addressing the problem of perennial flooding (other urban disaster risks), on one hand, and providing safe and secure settlements to the urban poor, on the other, demand no less than restructuring existing urban spaces and land uses. Government policies on urban development and land use must recognize the need to allocate land for urban poor housing. Poor communities have the basic right to participate in shaping these government policies and programs. Many urban infrastructure projects have had serious impacts on the risks that the urban poor are forced to bear.

It is in this context that the CSWCD, through the DRRM Cluster, is sponsoring a public forum entitled “Ligtas at May Kasigurang Paninirahan: P18,000... Sapat nga ba sa ligtas na pabahay at paninirahan?” on July 9, 2013 at 8.30-11.30 am. The forum aims to engage the various stakeholders in participative discourse on informal settlements, urban disasters and disaster risk reduction. The forum intends to thresh out the core issues, discuss the various approaches offered by concerned stakeholders, and draw out long-term solutions and possible actions.

As an institution anchored on people’s participation and empowerment, solidarity with marginalized groups and inclusive, gender-responsive sustainable development, we believe that addressing the urgent concern for safe and secure settlements is a strategic moral and economic imperative of our time. We argue that instead of simplistic solutions, effective urban disaster risk reduction and management needs to be community-based, rights-driven and informed by scientific evidence, whereby local communities become critically aware of their rights, capacities and vulnerabilities, assets and needs, options and limits. This approach must be localized and implemented at the community level with national and local government agencies, academe and NGOs playing supportive and enabling roles.