

# Older Adults' Participation in Resilience Building to Address Climate Change-Induced Disasters: Perspective and Experiences From The Philippines

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## I. Climate Change and Vulnerability of older adults

The intersection of climate change and the vulnerability of communities is evident in the compounded physical, economic, and social impacts and losses incurred from extreme weather events and disasters. Its consequences are intensely felt in countries and territories still grappling with other insecurities such as extreme poverty, conflict, and development challenges.

The Philippines is one of the most vulnerable countries to climate change-induced disasters, mainly due to its geographical location coupled with limited adaptive capacity driven by poor governance, lack of solid infrastructure, and inefficient allocation of economic resources (De Leon & Pittock, 2017). Super typhoon Haiyan (local name “Yolanda”) in 2013 may be the deadliest natural disaster in Philippine history, with authorities estimating at least 10,000 people dead on one island alone (Inquirer, 2013). The typhoon revealed the combined strengths and weaknesses in responding to and recovering from a natural calamity, including complex challenges like disaster displacement (Robles 2021). Despite the widespread recognition that climate change presents an unprecedented public health challenge locally and globally, there remains a lack of targeted policies and programs to protect older Filipino adults displaced by natural hazard-induced disasters.

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have the central, transformative process to “leave no one behind” (UN Sustainable Development Group, 2023). This unequivocal commitment of all UN Member States, including the Philippines, not only aims to eradicate poverty in all its forms but also addresses ending discrimination and exclusion of vulnerable and marginalized populations. In response to this commitment, the Human Rights Council created a resolution to take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. Climate change-induced disasters and community-wide emergencies negatively affected older adults disproportionately due to their pre-existing chronic diseases and disabilities. For instance, compared to the general population, most victims who died from disasters were 60 years and above — 39% in super typhoon Haiyan, 70% in Hurricane Katrina, and 64% in the 2011 earthquake in Japan (HelpAge International, 2013).

Beyond this, the disproportionate impact of climate change on older adults manifests in several ways. First, disaster displacement and depletion of community resources (e.g., destruction of farmland due to extreme flooding or landslides) drove many Filipinos to become migrant/overseas workers, leaving surrogate parental roles to the grandparents. Second, climate change threatens food security, where older adults and other vulnerable groups are at the receiving end. The failure in harvest inevitably results in fewer resources to support the older adults in the families. Third, the impact of climate

change exposes and aggravates the other existing conditions of older adults, e.g., socio-economic, physical, and mental vulnerabilities confronting biases, prejudices, and discrimination related to their identity. Older adults with disabilities are another most vulnerable sector whose vulnerabilities are worsened by the effects of climate change.

## II. Building resilience through elderly participation in disaster research

Resilience building is fundamental to mitigate the impact of climate change-induced disasters and promote sustainable development. However, there needs to be more evidence focusing on resilience among older disaster survivors and their involvement as partners in initiating disaster preparedness activities. Given the population aging and increasing vulnerability of older adults, they need to have meaningful participation in influencing policy and programs related to climate change-induced disasters through participatory action research (PAR). This approach promotes the inclusion of older adults in all phases, including identifying the problems that matter to them and their community, selecting priority research, data collection and analysis, and disseminating results to support both personal and social change (Brown et al., 2017). Engaging older adults in disaster research can be a powerful tool for building resilience in this population. PAR can provide them with valuable information, resources, and a sense of purpose and empowerment while improving disaster planning and response efforts. In the end, resilient older adults may inspire others and serve as invaluable resources to guide and strengthen their families and communities during disasters.

## III. Emerging Initiatives and capacity-building opportunities for Filipino older adults

Older adults are often marginalized during disasters and emergencies, consequentially having limited advocates for their cause. Nonetheless, a few institutions and organizations have a critical role in protecting them and upholding older adults' rights in relation to climate change.

In the Philippines, the Coalition of Services of the Elderly (COSE) serves as the lead non-governmental organization working with and for older people, covering poverty, exclusion, and invisibility, especially for the most disadvantaged. COSE implemented an inclusive community-based Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) program for all involved sectors, particularly older adults, from planning to implementing DRR activities. The joint response program with HelpAge International during Typhoon Haiyan brought significant results not just in responding to the immediate needs of older adults but in mainstreaming the value of recognizing older adults' agency in making meaningful participation in the mitigation and prevention of climate-induced disasters.

Based on a recent [study on humanitarian action for displaced older adults](#), the following points are good practices drawn from the activities of COSE that can be adapted and considered for other groups of older adults:

1. **Strengthening Older People Organizations (OPOs).** COSE supports the OPOs in developing community-based programs for the elderly, especially in-home care assistance programs, mobile healthcare services, and age-friendly and diversified livelihood. OPOs are also capacitated in advocating for their rights and privileges, including their right to participate in developing and implementing programs related to disaster risk reduction and management

and climate change adaptation and mitigation. OPO strengthening also addresses older persons' need for access to information through community awareness raising and information, education, and communication (IEC) campaign activities regarding their rights and entitlements, including information on access to services and tips on what to do before, during, and after disasters.

2. **Older adults as sources of local knowledge.** Older adults are resources that the community shall continuously tap into in developing and implementing community programs related to climate change. They possess indigenous knowledge on changes in the climate/early warning, e.g., signs of coming long rainy days or long drought; this knowledge is constructive for community actions/programs to prepare and mitigate their impacts. In COSE's recent project at a local fishing town frequented by annual water level rise, the Barangay Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office (BDRRMO) acknowledged the contribution of older adults in developing the local hazard map and community DRRM plan. More than their involvement in creating a well-contextualized community DRR plan, this builds confidence among older adults, who exercise their agency to participate and improve their community.
3. **Climate change is an intergenerational concern.** Climate change does not discriminate by age. People at the tail end of the population curve experience significant consequences from climate disasters. Thus, addressing the climate crises and aging are intergenerational concerns. COSE is capacitating not just the older adults but those involved in the community. By taking an intergenerational approach, they considered how disaster response is a family and community issue wherein older adults are also an integral part. Thus age-friendly local livelihood was considered — acknowledging the limitations and competencies of older adults to contribute to their community's livelihood, health, and environment.

#### IV. Recommendations

*Climate change is a concern for older adults.* As much as they are vulnerable to the ramifications of climate-induced and natural-hazard-induced disasters, they have capacities that can provide meaningful contributions in responding to and mitigating disasters. Links and intersections between climate change and the global aging population must be highlighted and translated into concrete actions and policies, and local initiatives should be supported. We encourage:

- Supporting the formation of OPOs, as they are a critical entry point for older adults' visibility and representation in policies and service provisions.
- Enhancing data gathering templates to include disaggregated data on sex, age, and disability. Most often, local government units' data only categorized older persons as people 60 years old and above. Regarding age cohorts, it is better to have 60-69, 70-79, and 80+, for each has differentiated capacity levels and vulnerabilities.
- Acknowledging older adults' community contribution by giving them more opportunities to make *meaningful participation*, including representation of older person's sector in different levels of DRRM/Climate Change Councils, will ensure meaningful participation.

“Nothing about us without us” is a slogan used to amplify the importance of the participation of all sectors of society, primarily the vulnerable and marginalized, including older adults, in disaster research of which the results feed into programs related to climate change adaptation and mitigation at local, national and global levels. Seeing beyond the limitations of older adults, are their strengths rooted in their collective voices and accumulated memories and experiences. These significantly contribute to building resilient communities amidst the growing climate crises.

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