

DISASTER MANAGEMENT NEEDS WIDER AND MORE ACTIVE NGO PARTICIPATION

Managing disasters and its risks should be everybody's business. The whole of society and whole of government approach is considered as the gold standard and adopted by international bodies like the United Nations, ASEAN as well as countries around the world such as Japan, Australia, the Philippines and India. Likewise, Malaysia also adopted this approach earnestly following the 2014 East Coast Flood that led to the birth of the National Disaster Management Agency (NADMA) in 2015 as the new focal point for disaster management in this country. To ensure the successful implementation of this approach, the support and commitment from all layers of society i.e. the public, private sector, academician and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) is vital as something that we cannot do without.

Over the years, we have witnessed the frequency and complexity of disaster events in Malaysia increasing at an alarming rate and this will continue to grow as climate change exacerbates such trends. As a result, the Government's resources have been stretched to the limit and no longer sustainable. Without significant action and involvement from all, the extent and impact of economic and social damage associated with disaster will get worse. As a growing economy, Malaysia needs to protect its developmental gains at all cost or risk regression.

The significant roles that NGOs play in reducing disaster risks as well as during disaster itself are increasingly becoming apparent and can no longer be ignored. Compared to government agencies, NGOs have better grassroot presence as well as administrative and financial procedure flexibility. Once organized, the pool of volunteers from NGOs is a force that can effectively boost and improve our disaster management. In Malaysia, there are at least 28,000,00 NGOs that can involve in disaster relief and risk reduction works that can be mobilised in a systematic and organized manner to reduce the impacts of disasters.

Working closely together is not impossible as both the Government's and NGOs' disaster management objectives overlap. Basically, both are focused at saving lives and alleviating its impact on the affected communities. However, although the intentions are similar, coordination between the Government and NGOs is still inadequate. Coordination issues have resulted in duplication of relief efforts, wastage of resources and inefficient disaster management efforts. These underlying issues need to be addressed before a better coordination between both sides can be established.

Aside from this, misgivings on the NGOs' involvement in disaster management activities continues to hamper close relationship. The Government and NGOs both do not fully embrace and trust each other. In terms of disaster-related policy formulation, there are times when the Government seek contributions and inputs from the NGOs. On top of this, some segment of the society considers the NGOs active participation in disaster relief as a failure of the Government machinery to function properly. At times, the NGOs' presence is misconstrued as competing with the Government's disaster management efforts. Complaints are regularly heard of NGOs involvement causing additional complications to an already difficult disaster management and relief efforts. Efforts to coordinate NGOs in an effective manner is still quite

a way since some NGOs still harbour suspicion towards the Government whenever it attempts to coordinate their movement and actions.

Another difficult challenge is to align the NGOs' actions to complement the overall national disaster management goals and requirements. This is due to the fact that individual NGOs have their own priorities and interests which sometimes are incompatible with Government strategies and policies. Steps have been taken to foster a better overall situation.

As the national focal point in disaster administration, NADMA has endeavoured to engage, persuade, and convince our NGOs and government agencies that the weaknesses in coordination between them need to be minimized and improved. To achieve this, the government and its NGO partners must be willing to compare notes and share information more openly. Improving the flow and accessibility of information to all those involved in disaster management including the NGOs should be a priority initiative.

Due to their importance, engagements between the government and the NGOs are now a prominent feature in our disaster management strategies. So far, such engagement sessions have encouraged the government agencies and NGOs to share more information and build stronger ties. Talking to the NGOs has allowed NADMA to understand their side point of view, expectations and aspirations in disaster management. Likewise, through the engagement process, the agency has been able to communicate with the NGOs on the country's national disaster objectives and strategies.

NADMA and a number of NGOs are also working on setting up of a joint committee aiming at improving Government-NGO coordination and information sharing. One of the committee's mandate is to come up with recommendations on how to achieve better coordination between the government and NGOs. So far, 152 NGOs have registered with NADMA and will participate in a series of brain storming sessions on how to improve our disaster management.

Another initiative undertaken to improve the coordination is to allow NGO representatives to attend and contribute their inputs during disaster management related meetings at the federal, state and district levels. In the past, Government agencies were very reluctant to be in the same meeting with NGOs. Likewise, the NGOs were suspicious to participate effectively in any discussion that they believe will lead to attempts to regulate or control them. However, despite the initial apprehension, the placement of at least one NGO representative in such meetings have improved the coordination among those involved in disaster relief efforts. What has made the initiative more encouraging is the information sharing happened both ways. Not only the government agencies have provided information to the NGOs, the opposite too has occurred. As a result, individual NGOs are now more open to share their information with the government agencies as well as their NGO fraternity.

NADMA has also taken the bold step to share situational reports (SITREP) on disaster events to NGOs. These reports which contain summary of a disaster situation, area profile of

affected areas, needs of the victims, damages to infrastructure facilitates information sharing process and improve the coordination between government agencies and NGOs. Based on the feedbacks received, the SITREP is helpful not only to the government agencies but also to the NGOs when planning their actions on the ground. On top of the information from government agencies, the document also leverages on the inputs from the NGOs. Because of this cooperation and trust, better and more accurate information and coordination on disaster situation on the ground has emerged.

Despite the improved situation, strengthening the level of coordination between the government and NGOs via better information sharing, is still a still work in progress. At the moment, the number of NGOs willingly participate in the engagements with NADMA is still in the minority. Obviously, despite 152 NGOs being registered with NADMA, a bigger number of NGO participation is required to achieve effective coordination and ensure better disaster managements and responses.

To make this happen, NADMA will need to convince NGOs that have yet to register that this trust building exercise is beneficial to them and the nation. The feeling of uneasiness while working together between the government agencies and the NGOs to manage a disaster event need to be overcome so that, at the end of the day, our whole of government and whole of society approach to disaster management can be implemented successfully.

Published on NST News, 8 Mei 2023