

■ URBAN STUDIES PROGRAM

RESCALING THE CITY TO THE METRO

Recommendations for Integrated Urban Risk Governance

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INTRODUCTION: PHILIPPINE CITIES AT RISK

The Philippines continues to face the existential impacts of climate change. The latest report of the Philippine Atmospheric, Geophysical, and Astronomical Services Administration (PAGASA) (2024) projects sustained warmer temperatures, increasing rainfall trends in Luzon and Visayas, and a rise in sea level. These climate projections signal worsening risks. It also means a greater likelihood that disasters will wreak negative consequences on community life due to the frequency and intensity of climate hazards and the vulnerability of human and natural ecosystems. These are all on top of the natural hazards associated with our location in the western Pacific Ocean and the Pacific Ring of Fire, which make the Philippines a hub for typhoons, volcanic eruptions, and earthquakes.

However, not all risks are shared evenly. Rapid urbanization has triggered complex and unprecedented demographic, economic, and spatial shifts that created and reproduced new risks and challenges centered in

cities and their urban populations. As of 2024, 5 out of 10 Filipinos live in cities, and an estimated 84 percent are projected to reside in urban areas by 2050 (UN-Habitat Philippines 2023). Many of these urban residents belong to marginalized and vulnerable communities that are already at the forefront of critical issues such as poverty and unemployment, inaccessible housing, growing urban informality, and the uneven impacts of disasters due to the impacts of climate change. Climate risks reproduce the vulnerabilities and the invisibility of marginalized urban populations who face inadequate living conditions that negatively impact health outcomes, worsen poverty, and create everyday risks resulting from their proximity to hazards and socioeconomic insecurity. As much as climate change is a universal concern, the emerging risks and challenges it brings are unevenly distributed, local, and do not discriminate based on borders. In particular, these risks are transboundary and, in the cases of a cluster of cities, metropolitan in character. In Metro Cebu, urban flooding disasters are shared

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risks due to heavy rainfall, deforestation, and upland infrastructure ventures in what are essentially integrated ecosystems (Cebu City News and Information 2023). Flooding disasters in Mandaue City barangays near the Butuanon River are often associated with heavy rainfall in the mountainous barangays of Cebu City, where the Butuanon River originates and flows from upstream (Mascardo 2023; Palaubsanon and Magsumbol 2024).

This policy brief explains how Philippine cities in metropolitan areas are constrained to respond integratively and collaboratively to shared urban risks and challenges. It will also present opportunities for “joined up” metropolitan structures (Pollitt 2003 quoted in Hutchcroft and Gera 2024) to address and effectively steer local institutions in governing the inter-LGU responses to these risks and challenges. Discussion for this policy brief is informed by a review of recent literature and interviews with planning officials and civil society organizations from Metro Cebu in 2024. It ends with policy recommendations to integrate urban risk governance in Metro Cebu.

CITIES AS THE LOCI OF CLIMATE ACTION AND URBAN RISK GOVERNANCE

Responding to the challenges and vulnerabilities unique to urbanity is the foremost concern of urban risk governance. Urban risk governance “includes both the institutional structure and the policy process that guide and restrain the collective activities of a group, society, or international community to regulate, reduce, or control risk problems” (Renn et al. 2018, 1; Renn and Klinke 2014). Renn (2018) further explains that it is an approach to governance that shifts away from centralized and traditional state approaches that are hierarchically organized toward multi-actor public bodies with overlapping jurisdictions and multilevel polyarchical governance structures that link the local to regional, national, and international levels (Okada 2018). Urban risk governance is also concerned with the most optimal institutional design that enables organizational flexibility in initiating and implementing adaptation and resilience strategies that address climate uncertainties and pressures (Frey and Ramírez 2019).

The 2024 World Cities Report noted that cities are at the “forefront of reinvigorated climate action” (UN-Habitat 2024, 6) because of the opportunities to initiate local

forms of adaptation and mitigation. Locally, cities can engage in practices that are consistent with national and international frameworks of climate action and disaster risk reduction. The same report further added that centering climate action on cities does not negate the roles and functions of national and subnational authorities—highlighting the potential and need for well-oiled and complementary mechanisms for multilevel intergovernmental coordination. Both the Hyogo Framework for Action and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction also emphasize the need for multi-level and integrative approaches to respond to cross-jurisdictional challenges and risks (Frey and Ramírez 2019; Van der Heijden et al. 2018). In principle, this approach is coherent and suitable to political systems with fragmented centers of power at distinct scales of jurisdiction (i.e., local, regional, and national levels) with localities that have a certain degree of autonomy from the central government.

However, this has not always been the case in the Philippines where governance is characterized by central-local tensions, dysfunctional horizontal relations among local government units (LGUs), and overlapping jurisdictions in functions and accountabilities that stir up confusion and reproduce the contestations over critical resources needed for urban risk governance. This dilemma of scale has severely constrained opportunities for collaboration in responding to shared urban risks and challenges because local structures in metropolitan areas and the constructed politico-administrative boundaries that they demarcate, despite facing an integrated system of metropolitan hazards and risks, remain isolated in governing their responses to urban risks and broadly to climate change.

A PATCHWORK OF COMPETING JURISDICTIONS

The Local Government Code (LGC) of 1991 provided a legal framework for the devolution of several powers and basic public services to local government units (LGUs), establishing the relative autonomy of provincial, city, and municipal governments or LGUs in the Philippines. Drawn from the democratization projects of the post-EDSA People Power period, the landmark law aimed to democratize governance to the grassroots and deliver a responsive and accountable local governance framework that also guaranteed fiscal and administrative autonomy from the national central government (Atienza and Go 2023). Indeed, there was “strong faith that

decentralization was an elixir that would heal many of the ills of existing political structures” (Malesky and Hutchinson 2016, 126).

The LGC of 1991 thus created a hierarchy of LGUs that vary based on the scales of power and jurisdictional accountabilities with different capacities and degrees of autonomy. There are, for example, municipalities and component cities under the provincial government, as well as highly urbanized cities and independent cities that are independent of the provincial government (LGC [1991], art. III, sec. 29). The metropolitan Cebu area, for its part, is composed of three independent cities (Cebu, Mandaue, and Lapu-Lapu), four component cities (Carcar, Danao, Naga, and Talisay), and six municipalities (Compostela, Consolacion, Cordova, Liloan, Minglanilla, and San Fernando). It follows that the component cities and municipalities are under the supervision of the provincial government whose capitol is ironically located in Cebu City, an independent city. In the absence of a formally instituted metropolitan government or special authority, any transboundary program and initiative would have to consider the jurisdictions and governance hierarchies of Metro Cebu’s cities and municipalities including consideration of the powers of the Cebu provincial government over component cities and municipalities. In particular, Hutchcroft and Gera (2024) argued that creating an enduring metropolitan governance in Cebu must contend with two power centers that are often in conflict with one another: the provincial governor who supervises the component cities and municipalities and the Cebu City mayor who has a claim to leadership in metropolitan planning.

METROPOLITAN CHALLENGES WITHOUT METROPOLITAN GOVERNMENT

The integrated and metropolitan nature of urban risks and vulnerabilities has prompted the need for metropolitan responses to effectively and sustainably manage and mitigate these risks. Patterson and Huitema (2018) highlighted that innovative action in adaptive urban governance depends not only on the agency of cities but also on structures and overarching rules beyond the city scale. Because these challenges are shared across LGUs and require integrated management of multiscale systems, collective and multi-actor approaches in responding to these challenges make sense because they would remedy the competing jurisdictional

accountabilities and scales of power that isolate responses to an integrated system of risks. “Joined-up” forms of metropolitan coordination are designed to ensure the efficient use and seamless access of scarce resources used in mobilizing transboundary programs (Pollitt 2003). Multilevel and cross-jurisdictional approaches to urban risk governance and broadly to climate resilience require clearly defined structural configurations that can effectively steer the diversity of competing actors from across scales in risk governance (Renn et al. 2018; Charnley 2000).

However, in the Philippines, particularly in Metro Cebu, inter-local government coordination in development planning and urban risk governance has been weak, fragmented, and vulnerable to inter-LGU tensions and contestations over questions of metropolitan leadership and the legitimacy of these attempts. LGUs have legitimate claims of leadership over the planning and implementation of disaster risk reduction and management systems in their respective territories. After all, the Disaster Risk Reduction and Management (DRRM) Act of 2010 clearly outlines the scales and jurisdiction of local DRRM councils and the local DRRM offices:

Section 12. Local Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office (LDRRMO). – (a) There shall be established an LDRRMO in every province, city and municipality, and a Barangay Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Committee (BDRRMC) in every barangay which shall be responsible for setting the direction, development, implementation, and coordination of disaster risk reduction management programs within their territorial jurisdictions. (Republic Act [RA] No. 10121)

The defined territorial jurisdictions and the legitimate claims of LGUs over them do not incentivize governing beyond borders because it would mean sharing or conceding power to a special metropolitan body or to another LGU. This is especially the case when it comes to LGUs with chief executives who have competing and rival development goals. There is no incentive to share or concede power to rival LGUs. Instead, there are possible claims of jurisdictional overreach in the allocation of a LGU’s resources. There are, however, regional bodies who have legitimacy in coordinating and regulating urban risk governance at a level above LGUs such as the Regional DRRMC which are “responsible in ensuring disaster sensitive regional development plans” and “coordinate,

integrate, supervise, and evaluate the activities of the local DRRMCs” (RA No. 10121, sec. 10). However, the competing claims of the legitimacy of LGUs based on their charters and the LGC of 1991 remain. As a NEDA Region 7 official stated in an anonymous interview on 14 November 2024, “The LGUs have their own character and charter. Yes, they are part of the [regional development] plan, and they should be referring to the plan. But you cannot force them because they are LGUs.”

CONCLUSION AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS: RESCALING FROM THE CITY TO THE METRO

How then should fragmented local governments with legitimate claims of autonomy and competing jurisdictional accountabilities manage and govern responses to transboundary urban risks? This policy brief recommends the following:

1. Amend the LGC of 1991 to accommodate regional and metropolitan levels of government.

Since the LGC of 1991 institutes the framework for political decentralization and outlines the politico-administrative units at the local level, the law should be amended to recognize and establish metropolitan areas as a legitimate unit of governance that integrates the provincial government (because of component cities and municipalities), independent and component cities, and municipalities. While Section 33 of the LGC of 1991 provides for the capacity of LGUs to cooperate with one another—that is inter-local coordination—through memoranda of agreement, the problem of legitimacy and scale would remain unresolved. The metropolitan area or authority would possess a clear juridical and legal identity that integrates inter-LGU concerns.

2. Recognize and expand the role of Regional Development Councils and Regional DRRMCs in steering urban risk governance.

Given the practical concerns associated with amending the LGC of 1991, policymakers can center and reconfigure the role of Regional Development Councils (RDCs) and Regional DRRMCs in present metropolitan areas. The attempts to institute

a metropolitan or inter-LGU body should, for example, designate regulatory and oversight leadership roles to the RDCs or regional DRRMCs as the primary coordinating body to facilitate urban risk governance and mediate between competing and rival jurisdictional accountabilities. The “joining up” of public sector agencies through regional DRRMCs would enable the strategic pooling of critical resources and response mechanisms that are conducive to metropolitan adaptation and resilience strategies.

3. Rescale and reconfigure planning and DRRM frameworks.

Presently, every level of local government develops and implements its local DRRM plan in relative isolation from the local DRRM plans of other LGUs. There should be a metropolitan DRRM plan that would serve as the guiding framework for metropolitan strategies and projects to address transboundary urban risks and challenges. The framework should include the pooling of critical infrastructure and resources among LGUs. To mitigate and reduce urban risks in the long term, planning frameworks should also be reconfigured to require inter-LGU collaboration and acknowledge emerging metropolitan challenges and identities.

The inadequacy of present planning and DRRM frameworks in addressing transboundary urban risks and challenges points to a rethinking of the scales of governance and power structures that best respond to an urban future of climate uncertainties. While the institutional and legal framework of the Philippines allows for LGUs to become the primary responders and loci of risk governance to act on the needs of communities at the local scale (Marks and Pulliat 2022), the risks that localities face are shared and not evenly distributed across boundaries. The multiscale water, energy, and food systems, which are also vulnerable to climate disruptions on which urban populations depend, are not demarcated according to political boundaries. Governing urban risks and challenges, therefore, requires rescaling and restructuring power structures beyond the limitations of borders and acknowledging that building resilience in the long term demands flexibility in adapting and mitigating the disruptions of a changing climate.

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