

Advancing small island resilience and inclusive development through a convergence strategy in Carles, Philippines¹

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Summary

Various natural, socio-cultural and economic risks confront the people of Gigantes Islands in the municipality of Carles. The islands' exposure to these hazards has aggravated poverty in the locality as demonstrated in the prevalence of unsafe livelihood activities and lack of access to health facilities. The onslaught of Super typhoon Yolanda in 2013 has led to environmental and economic destruction, which prompted UP Visayas Foundation, Inc. (UPVFI) to implement the Rehabilitation for Island Sustainability and Empowerment (RISE) Gigantes

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Project, a rehabilitation initiative for the islands. The Frontline program contributed in enhancing its implementation through inclusive risk profiling.

One of the actions done to promote small island resilience was the institutionalization of convergence strategy to consolidate post-disaster and development efforts of government and non-government organizations at different levels. The formation of Island Sustainable Development Alliance, Inc. (ISDA), an umbrella organization of community-based groups involved in disaster preparedness and natural resource management, has demonstrated the beauty of convergence.

Good relationships, resource mobilization and shared responsibility among stakeholders became evident as a result of collaboration. Despite challenges on consolidating the barangay[1] development councils due to varying priorities, and conflicting interests due to survival, the strategy led to significant impacts toward addressing vulnerabilities and isolation. To sustain the initiative, capacity-building and advocacy efforts are implemented continuously on the ground to promote ownership and inclusive development.



Figure 1. Locating Gigantes Islands in the Philippines

Notes: Left: map of the Philippines showing the municipality of Carles; right: map of Gigantes Group of Islands **Sources:** Libero (2013) (left); Balgos (2013) (right)

The case study

Carles and its vulnerabilities

Carles is a second-class municipality in the province of Iloilo comprised of 33 villages. Located on the northern most tip of Panay Island, Carles is considered a coastal area with its 18 barangays consisting of islands and islets. The municipality has a population of 62,690 individuals who primarily depend on fishery, trade, agriculture and industry. Specifically, the Frontline research focused on the four barangays of the municipality, which are covered by the Gigantes Group of Islands. These barangays are Asluman and Granada on Gigante Norte and Lantangan and Gabi on Gigante Sur inhabited by 13,114 people. Gigantes is 26 kilometres away from mainland Iloilo and can be accessed via the town of Estancia through passenger boats with approximately 1.5–2 hours travel time (Figure 1).

Due to combinations of physical, socio-cultural and economic factors, Gigantes is vulnerable to many risks, which affect the welfare and development of its populace. As a small island, Gigantes is highly exposed to hydro-meteorological hazards such as typhoon, thunderstorms, halakay (strong winds), monsoon winds and drought. Furthermore, poverty is also an evident risk for its people. In fact, Gigantes has an 80 percent poverty incidence rate, one of the highest in the Visayas Region. The evident poverty in the islands also led to the proliferation of unsafe livelihood activities such as illegal fishing, which is destructive to the marine

environment, and motorcycles for hire, which cause road accidents. Furthermore, the poverty in Gigantes is worsened by their isolation, which results in other detrimental risks, including limited access to health and birthing facilities, markets and potable water. The island has a malnutrition rate of 30 percent for children between 0 and 71 months. Majority of the households reside in houses made of light materials, and 70 percent of them also live within the 40-meter no-build zone (danger zone):

When we talked about the issue of isolation before, we thought all the while that the four barangays are isolated from the mainland. It turned out that the four barangays are also isolated from each other. They seldom talk to each other. The barangays have varying trusts – some are serious with the enforcement of policies on fisheries policies, while others are not. Some are more transparent, while others are not. (Jorge Ebay, Program Manager, RISE Gigantes Project)

The people of the islands are exposed to different layers of vulnerability – sectoral exclusion, cultural inferiority, and economic deprivation, isolation from basic services and high exposure to hazards. Such a reality underscores that the everyday hazards affecting Gigantes are as significant as the large-scale risks challenging its people. If these threats are left unaddressed, achieving resilience and inclusive and sustainable development is impossible.

Convergence strategy: an approach toward resilience and inclusive development

The GNDR, through the Frontline Program, became a vehicle for communities to have a greater understanding of their vulnerabilities. It introduced the concept of small-scale risks, which affect people on a daily basis. These threats are not sudden and life changing, unlike what was experienced in Typhoon Haiyan. They are very slow onset, but their impact is long-term and as debilitating as the effect of huge disaster events like Haiyan. (Jorge Ebay, Program Manager, RISE Gigantes Project)

The results of Frontline aided UPVFI, one of Centre for Disaster Preparedness' partners, in enhancing the implementation of RISE Gigantes Project, a post-Typhoon Yolanda[2] rehabilitation intervention launched in 2014 with support from Christian Aid. Frontline provided them with a more critical lens on looking at vulnerabilities to further understand the concept of everyday hazards. Through the inclusive risk profiling process, issues on tourism, illegal fishing and regulation of transport sector were also considered as priorities toward small island resilience. To facilitate collective action among stakeholders in addressing the abovementioned issues, the convergence strategy was implemented in August 2015 involving diverse humanitarian development actors. The strategy was formally supported by the local government of Carles through the issuance of an Executive Order (EO 58 series of 2015) recognizing convergence as an approach for small island resilience with Gigantes as a model. In fact, the Provincial Government of Iloilo also played a significant role. Gov. Arthur Defensor was the one who initially pushed for the concept of convergence. He saw the need for different stakeholders in Gigantes to come together and talk about common issues and concerns to prevent overlaps and clarify responsibilities.

UPVFI's strong dedication to research and extension projects since its establishment in 1979 became instrumental in gaining the trust of the government to embrace the initiative. Specifically, the convergence approach intended to develop a clear division of responsibilities among stakeholders; reducing duplication and addressing gaps in coverage and quality; and gauging the extent to which needs are being met collectively. Furthermore, at the community level, this strategy was also realized through organizing the ISDA, an umbrella organization of 12 community-based groups in Gigantes. ISDA was formed to establish a platform for dialogue and closer relationships between communities critical in achieving resilience and inclusive development.

The convergence approach enabled collaboration among actors from various levels who are present in Gigantes. It provided an enabling environment to consolidate not only the initiatives toward rehabilitation but also engagements that aim to promote development in the islands. The approach adheres to the principles of “Build back Better” as it envisions a unified and stronger Gigantes. Besides UPVFI as the lead implementer, various community-based groups, civil society organizations, donors, and local and regional government agencies have supported the convergence strategy and become active allies in resilience building. These organizations have contributed technical, financial and material support to put forward the welfare of the islands. Figure 2 shows the different actors involved in the convergence strategy.

Convergence strategy

Paving the path to resilience: activities driven by the convergence strategy

Through the leadership of UPVFI, the convergence among stakeholders became evident in various activities implemented under the RISE Gigantes project (Table I). The diverse activities carried out in the different components of the project created an avenue for collective action and unity to materialize. Participatory risk and capacity needs assessments were conducted to gain an understanding of the communities' vulnerabilities and existing strengths that could be tapped for promoting safety and resilience. The biggest component of the project was capacity building and organizing activities; some of these included alternative food development training for women and strengthening of Barangay Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Committee (BDRRMC), BDCs and volunteer groups. The provision of livelihood assistance to disaster survivors also became a priority intervention. UPVFI believed that enhancing capacities should go hand-in-hand with increasing local capacities for barangay governance. Isolation of the islands from mainland Iloilo was also a concern that the project tried to address by looking at the myriad social, cultural, economic and political factors.

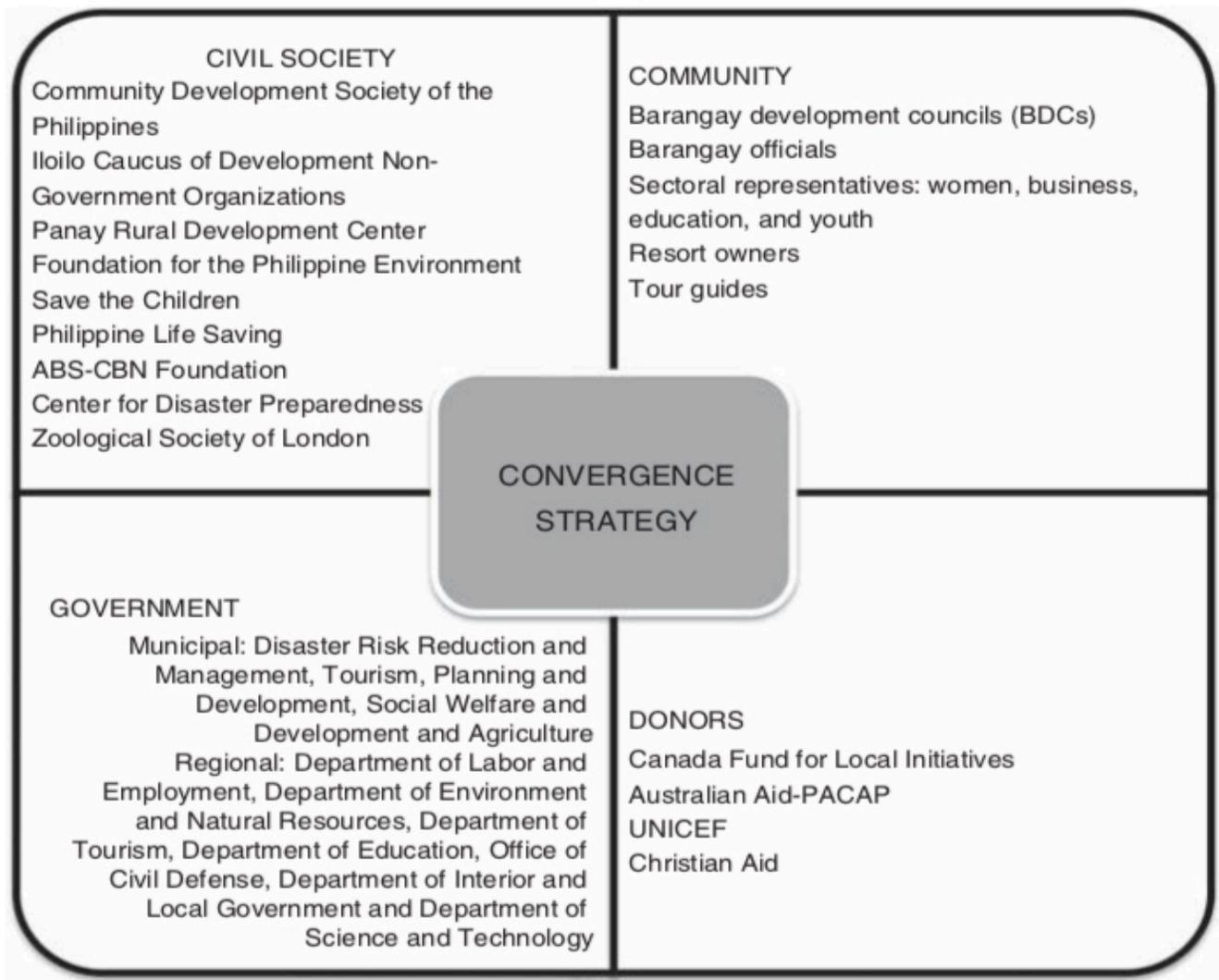


Figure 2. Various actors of the convergence strategy

Timeline of key events and activities which led to resilience building in the islands

2013 Super typhoon Yolanda struck the Gigantes islands, which resulted in massive damages to houses, public infrastructures, boats, livelihoods and properties

2014 Implementation of recovery and rehabilitation projects from non-government and government organizations started in Gigantes RISE Gigantes Project was launched 2015– Participatory risk and capacity needs assessments were carried out

2016 Inclusive risk profiling through Frontline program was conducted Capacity building and organizing efforts were initiated in the islands to promote disaster risk reduction, health and sustainable livelihood Convergence strategy was implemented and institutionalized through an executive order from the LGU of Carles ISDA was formed Natural resource management, biodiversity conservation and eco-tourism were promoted Community education and awareness campaign strategies were undertaken

2017 ISDA expanded its reach beyond barangay officials and encouraged the involvement of various sectoral groups like small-scale fishers, shell divers and major tourism stakeholders like resort operators, transport groups (both land and sea) and site guides ISDA convenes monthly and receives support from the four barangays and partners to sustain its operations and to fund island-wide development and advocacy campaigns RISE Project team became a recipient of Gawad Pangulo Award for Excellence in Public Service, a recognition from the University of the Philippines Office of the Vice President for Public Affairs

Furthermore, mangrove reforestation was also done as part of the natural resource management agenda. This became a priority since many mangrove areas in the islands have already been cleared to accommodate the needs of the increasing population. Putting up a water system in the area was undertaken so that people could have access to water and perform their daily activities. Moreover, UPVFI invested in advocacy and community education as part of its commitment to document and disseminate the good practices and lessons learned of Gigantes to various stakeholders in the Philippines and beyond.

To have a long-term and more sustainable solution on the threats confronting the islands, mainstreaming disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation into local development plans and programs was also carried out. UPVFI assisted the four barangays in crafting their annual investment program and they regard this as one of their most significant accomplishments.

The four communities comprising Gigantes were actively involved in the activities under each component as leaders, participants and beneficiaries. The project activities do not only target those who have directly participated but the entire population of the islands. A participatory and inclusive approach was employed in the conceptualization, design, planning and actual project implementation. The various CSO partners of UPVFI engaged in the project provided technical assistance and financial support, which helped in meeting the set targets.

One Gigantes, one island: the gains and challenges of the convergence strategy

ISDA is guided by their motto – Isda for Gigantes, Four Barangays, One Gigante (Isda para sa Gigantes, Apat na Barangay, Isang Gigante). It is like having one voice, one beat, one music. The members thought that by doing that, they could, you know, gain better leverage in terms of advocacy and seeking support from the outside. They realized that if they are united, they could have a bigger voice. (Jorge Ebay, Program Manager, RISE Gigantes Project)

The convergence approach, as seen in the various activities conducted among stakeholders, resulted in significant outcomes that are fundamental in vulnerability reduction and resilience building. It enabled regional government offices, local government unit, civil society, private sector and communities to establish a forum for discussing common and relevant risks and threats affecting Gigantes. Having a common knowledge on issues confronting the communities provided a vehicle for the different actors to clearly demarcate their responsibilities. Division of labour was done with ease because they gained better understanding of project goals and objectives. Such understanding has also contributed in enhancing governance mechanisms by promoting the inclusion of vulnerable sectors and groups in local governance processes. Necessary skills and resources were tapped for effective and efficient implementation of the targets. The presence of actors from different backgrounds and disciplines also facilitated support system and mutual influence, which are both crucial for collective action to succeed.

Furthermore, as a result of convergence, local capacities were strengthened as evidenced by the experience of ISDA. From solely focusing on recovery and disaster preparedness since its birth, ISDA is now actively engaged in natural resource management, biodiversity conservation and eco-tourism promotion. The active involvement of locals comprising ISDA in promoting these initiatives is paramount in addressing the underlying causes of vulnerability such as poverty and inequality. As part of the effort to enhance the work of ISDA, the organization has expanded its reach to encourage the participation of various sectoral groups such as small-scale fisher folks and tourism stakeholders like resort operators, transport groups (both land and sea) and site guides. Targeting a wider group would allow harmonized efforts on eco-tourism management. ISDA also works to enhance tourism management systems to guarantee that its benefits are shared fairly in Gigantes and the islands remain protected and preserved. The solid organizing and close mentoring work of UPVFI, in partnership with groups from the civil society and local government, played a key role in achieving the gains of the convergence strategy by breaking the culture of isolation and fostering collaboration.

Challenges also confront the convergence approach. One of the challenges identified was the consolidation of BDCs. As a result of the varying levels of trusts, priorities and cultures of BDCs from the four barangays, implementation of initiatives to strengthen them became challenging. Another issue that surfaced relates to close coordination with the municipal local government, government agencies, and other development partners. Due to the diversity of these actors, adjustments had to be made to ensure regular communication and harmony in working together. Furthermore, addressing broader development concerns such as resource management, eco-tourism development and sustainable livelihoods also posed limitations.

Meanwhile, one of the greatest challenges that confront ISDA relates to organizing different groups involved in tourism. The four barangays, in partnership with the LGU and relevant partners, have just started formulating the island tourism framework and the tourism management systems have been overtaken by the continuous entry of tourists since 2015. Actors who dominate benefits from tourism for the past years, especially the mainland-based tour and boat operators, may not be receptive to the agenda of ISDA. Conflict of interest with

these actors including some LGU officials poses a serious challenge in putting forward small island resilience and development.

Breaking down barriers to convergence: strategies to address the challenges

UPVFI has played a primary role in addressing the challenges that confronted the convergence strategy. As the organizer of ISDA, it led efforts to liaise with different partners and mobilize technical and financial resources. This aided the four communities in formulating plans and programs related to small island resilience and development. With the help of EO 58, the commitment from convergence partners to augment resources was secured and institutionalized. Expertise from the University of the Philippines Visayas was also tapped by UPVFI to assist the four communities in achieving resilience. GIS experts helped in risk mapping activities; food technologists trained women in alternative livelihoods; health advocates taught them techniques on food handling and food preparation. Sound financial management was also part of the technical support provided to them.

The continuous conduct of capacity building initiatives for local communities is also a priority of UPVFI with the aim of nurturing community governance, participation and empowerment. The university manifested its commitment to public service and inclusive development by granting its faculty and staff working in the islands official time and travel privileges.

To facilitate harmony and unity among stakeholders, pride campaign activities were organized to highlight the distinct heritage of the islands and address the issue of cultural marginalization as a result of their isolation from the mainland. Community-wide religious celebrations also served as an opportunity to bring forward advocacy on environmental protection and risk reduction. Along with its partners, UPVFI tapped the education and youth sectors to document the islands' history and culture and foster a sense of identity and make them feel proud of their heritage. Emphasis on biodiversity conservation and protection of endemic resources was made in the documentation to highlight its contribution to sustainable development and resilience.

As ISDA continued its journey in realizing full convergence, the organization employed mechanisms to ensure its active operation. ISDA holds monthly meetings and assists in consolidating stakeholders for small island resilience. In terms of resources, it depends on the four barangays and partners such as UPVFI, Foundation for the Philippine Environment, Philippine Life Saving and Iloilo Provincial Government, among others. Apart from sustaining its operation, ISDA uses the funds to support island-wide development and advocacy campaigns. The existing support that ISDA receives from active leaders became instrumental in producing desirable results in the following domains: natural resource protection and biodiversity conservation; eco-tourism development; community disaster resilience; promotion of healthy communities; and sustainable livelihoods.

Conclusions and recommendations

The experience of Gigantes Group of Islands in embracing a convergence approach is a concrete testimony that collective action among stakeholders from various levels is crucial in putting forward the agenda of small island resilience and development. The contribution of each group – local government unit, civil society and communities – was instrumental in realizing the set goals. Convergence played an instrumental role for dialogues to develop and for good relationships to be fostered in the islands. The stakeholders had a better understanding of the objectives they have to fulfil and the shared responsibilities they have to commit to. Expertise and resources have also been mobilized and this facilitated better project implementation. Furthermore, convergence also helped in enhancing governance mechanisms, which is key to sustainability.

The support of local leaders at various levels was generated, which helped in facilitating the inclusion of key sectors and groups in decision making, planning and other local governance processes.

The impacts of the convergence approach in Gigantes could be replicated to other small islands in the Philippines, which have the same vulnerabilities and commitment in harnessing capacities to transform their at-risk state. Documentation of good practices and lessons learned of Gigantes is done by UPVFI and other partners to share the inspiring experience of the locals and influence others to replicate the same initiative. To continuously pave the path toward resilience and development, recommendations were identified and these include integration of DRR concerns in broader development agenda, developing further understanding on the multi-dimensionality of isolation, strengthening support of different sectors and groups for convergence to thrive, greater resource allocation for managing fishery resources, enhancing local capacities for weather and climate forecasting, strengthening small island self-sufficiency, and close mentoring and capacity building for ISDA to prosper in executing efforts on environmental protection, tourism promotion and resilience building.

Reflecting on action

Through the aid of the RISE Gigantes Project and Frontline program, different activities were carried out that created an avenue to address the vulnerabilities of the islands while nurturing collective action at the same time. The inclusive risk profiling done contributed to better strategizing and enhanced project implementation.

Among the activities carried out were:

- (1) participatory risk and capacity needs assessments to understand communities' vulnerabilities and existing strengths;
- (2) capacity building and organizing activities (e.g. alternative food development training for women and strengthening of BDRRMC), barangay development councils and volunteer groups;
- (3) mangrove reforestation was also done as part of the natural resource management agenda;
- (4) advocacy and community education;
- (5) putting up a water system in the area; and
- (6) mainstreaming disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation into local development plans and programs.

The activities were successfully and effectively implemented since a participatory and inclusive approach was employed in the conceptualization, design and planning processes. The locals of Gigantes were involved as leaders, participants and beneficiaries. The various CSOs and government offices engaged in the project provided technical assistance and financial support, which helped in meeting the set targets.

The future

A real transformatory change will be realized if the convergence strategy will be institutionalized and implemented fully across scales, especially at the community level. Recognizing the important role of ISDA as a lead development actor in Gigantes is also necessary to achieve such a change. ISDA has to sustain its active engagement in the following domains:

- . (1) natural resource protection and biodiversity conservation;

- . (2) eco-tourism development;
- . (3) community disaster resilience;
- . (4) promotion of healthy communities; and
- . (5) sustainable livelihoods.

Furthermore, addressing the isolation of people living in the islands, not only in terms of geographical location, but also in other aspects – economic, political and social – is critical in achieving transformatory change. Challenging the prevailing political system, which is top-down in nature, has to be continuously done for such change to be realized. The most vulnerable groups such as women, children and youth, older persons and persons with disabilities need an enabling environment to participate and let their voices be heard. This is vital for these groups to claim their rights from relevant duty bearers, especially the local government. Participatory and collective process in local governance should be promoted in the islands to encourage the active and meaningful participation of the vulnerable groups toward inclusive and long-term development.

Given that ISDA is still a young organization, efforts to support its operation and sustainability are necessary. UPVFI, as its organizer, should continue in liaising with different groups and networks to mobilize technical and financial resources. Continuous capacity-building activities and awareness raising strategies need to be carried for organizational strengthening of the ISDA.

Apart from UPVFI, actors from various sectors at all levels should continue to work together to enrich the gains of the convergence strategy. Individuals from the civil society, government and most especially communities have to actively take part in the different activities that aim not only to reduce risks, but also to achieve environmental protection, sustainable tourism and inclusive development.

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