Typhoon Haiyan – Responding to the storm of the century

“At 6:37am the water started to come in. It was around our feet. By 6:42am it had already gone over our heads. We had to go to the roof” - Aida Bantiles

So speaks Aida Bantiles a resident of Palo, Leyte of how she and some of her family survived Typhoon Haiyan (known locally as Yolanda). Although Aida, her son and sister survived Haiyan, eleven members of her immediate family did not. Evacuated to a modest two story municipal hall prior to the approaching storm she openly admits to not expecting to live once she realized that the storm surge had engulfed the evacuation centre and she would have to venture out onto the roof. Many thousands did not survive. The bodies of those who died are spread over a wide area. Now skeletal, families have difficulty in identifying their lost loved ones. Four months after the storm many bodies remain unattended and unclaimed.

Typhoon Haiyan was an immensely destructive storm: A combination of extremely powerful natural forces and the effects of man made climate change in an increasingly vulnerable area. It was a catastrophe for The Philippines, which is no stranger to powerful typhoons. Yet, questions remain as to
why responders were taken by surprise by the severity of the storm. What other factors influenced both the domestic and international response and how can such a disaster be prevented in the future?

Aida Bantiles and her son Airos holding a photograph of the 11 family members who died in Typhoon Haiyan.

Background

Prior to hitting The Philippines it was widely reported that Typhoon Haiyan was strengthening to become one of the strongest storms recorded in world history. Haiyan had estimated maximum sustained winds of 195 mph with gusts above 220 mph, which put the storm in extraordinarily rare territory. Since 1969, only three storms have sustained winds close to this magnitude - Hurricane Camille in 1969, Super Typhoon Tip in 1979, and Hurricane Allen in 1980.

When Typhoon Haiyan did eventually make landfall it caused catastrophic damage in much of The Philippines, but particularly in Leyte and Samar provinces. There was widespread devastation over a large area with many of the human casualties coming from the storm surge in Leyte. The low-lying areas and the coastal communities were hardest hit, with some areas completely washed away.
Flooding extended for 1km (0.62mi) inland on the east coast of the province. Much of the physical infrastructure was affected. “Many schools were ruined, and the schools that weren’t ruined by the storm were used as evacuation centres.” Hospitals and municipal buildings were damaged. Many businesses and homes, especially in the hardest hit areas such as Tacloban, were destroyed. Agriculture was decimated with more than 33 million coconut trees in seven provinces damaged and 15 million trees totally destroyed. Arsenio Balisacan, the Economic Planning Secretary, has said the cost of rebuilding in the swathe of the Philippines devastated by typhoon Haiyan could reach US$5.8bn.

Immediate government response

Condemnations of slow government action in the typhoon relief effort were quick to arise. The ruling Aquino administration was criticized for the apparent lack of preparation and coordination among government agencies in the aid operation. Faced with numerous challenges, survivors struggled without basic necessities and some remote barangays in Leyte and Samar did not receive any assistance until long after the critical time period had passed. For many critics, the state fell short of fulfilling its most fundamental responsibilities. Subsequently, the state bore the brunt of local and international criticism.

Aquino’s central argument was that the national government did the best that it could, but the sheer strength of the typhoon was just too overwhelming. Yet the country is no stranger to natural calamities, so the government should have undertaken more decisive measures ahead of Haiyan's landfall, knowing how powerful, unpredictable, and disastrous it could get. Local officials who headed the evacuation efforts were reluctant to physically force people from their homes for fear it could trigger violence. That they failed to implement mandatory evacuation among the most vulnerable areas can be explained by the absence of a compulsory evacuation law in the face of impending natural disasters. In Tacloban, the only area where detailed records of evacuation prior to the storm were recorded, only 15,300 people out of the city's more than 220,000 residents left their houses for city shelters. The fact that the evacuation centres for those fleeing the storm were too close to the coast, constructed of poor building materials and not able to withstand the ferocity of such a storm was also a critical factor.

Both prior and post Haiyan, Manila was dependent on a certain amount of international goodwill from
international aid donors, for there was significant underinvestment not only in its armed forces (often the first responders for any national emergency) but also in its disaster preparedness operations. This explains in part the startling lack of foresight from government agencies as the storm approached.

Despite some progress in putting disaster preparedness and disaster risk reduction on the national agenda it did not translate to many local governments. Local governments' capacity to assess disaster risks and vulnerabilities are still extremely limited, and were prior to Haiyan even more so. The IIRR (International Institute for Rural Reconstruction) argue that: “A comprehensive risk assessment in all communities especially in areas where people are exposed to hazards on a daily basis is lacking.”

Most damningly however was the fact that communication with national authorities when telephone cables and electricity lines were struck down was not maintained. The National Disaster Risk Reduction Management Council (NDRRMC) reported recently that officials were sent into the disaster zone with no satellite phones, leaving them unable to communicate with officials in the capital once regular phone lines and mobile networks were downed. In a recent parliamentary debate it was revealed that the agency not only lacked satellite phones, but also emergency tents and generators. Not to equip senior officials in the NDRRMC (the very agency whose job it is to respond to national emergencies) with basic equipment needed to respond to a catastrophe such as Haiyan was a critical error and unfathomable, considering the intensity of the storm, its predicted path and the probable consequences.

A lack of preparedness – failure of crisis communication

A host of factors combine to mean that those living on the Leyte coast are particularly vulnerable to tsunamis, typhoons and storm surges. The wide expanse of Pacific Ocean is where typhoons develop and Leyte and Samar are often the first landforms that these typhoons hit. On average The Philippines receive about 8-9 typhoons annually and studies show that storm intensity in the region is increasing with seven of the ten most destructive typhoons occurring within the last six years. Low lying, densely populated and poorly defended coastal areas such as the large areas of the Leyte coast are particularly susceptible. Thus storm surges too are an increasing threat to those communities on the coast.

The fact that no major tsunami activity has been reported off the Leyte coast over the last 100 or so
years should not make policy makers indifferent to the threat that tsunamis pose. The Japanese use a system of ocean buoys that sit on the ocean floor and detect any tsunami movement. An alert is then issued to the relevant authorities and is automatically transferred via mobile phone networks and loudspeakers. In the Philippines no early warning system exists. In the Philippines prior to the typhoon and the resultant storm surge the government relied almost exclusively on television bulletins to warn of the danger of the incoming storm surge. The simple reality was that this was, above all else, a spectacular failure of crisis communication.

Studies have shown that the critical processes for effective crisis communication are identified as who (source) says what (message) via what medium (channel) to whom (receiver) with what kind of ultimate aim (effect). In the critical days preceding Haiyan none of these factors were given due importance. Warnings, when they came, were piecemeal and fragmented, coming through a variety of media outlets, by a variety of individuals who often did not fully understand the natural processes at work and did not themselves take as seriously as they should the warnings that they were giving. Most crucially, residents reported that they did not understand what a storm surge was and did not believe that they were under as grave a threat as they were. This explains in part the almost benign reaction to these warnings.

Evacuation during a major threat, be it natural or man made, is adjudged to be one the most important measures to mitigate against human loss of life and such locations that are threatened should invest in early warning systems and be clear on evacuation practices. This lack of dependable disaster preparedness certainly cost thousands of lives during Typhoon Haiyan. An early warning tsunami system could and should have been utilized to inform local residents of not only the approaching typhoon but also the impending storm surges. It is hoped that Typhoon Haiyan was a watershed moment. Perhaps it was the beginning of the realization that super typhoons are becoming more and more frequent and the problems that they pose are becoming more and more pertinent to ever increasing numbers. If this is the case, disaster preparedness will be undertaken with greater urgency with all aspects being fully funded and utilized prior to a major event. If not the adage, “those who do not remember the past are condemned to repeat it” will unfortunately ring true.
NGO involvement

The size of Typhoon Haiyan and the scale of the relief effort also gave NGO's enormous challenges. The role of an NGO in a crisis is to provide material relief to affected persons and, if necessary, rescue operations and medical relief. This is often followed by a longer period of reconstruction of the physical infrastructure. Most major NGOs have disaster prevention plans as well as response plans. Although NGOs had the same information concerning the severity of the approaching storm as the Government, many failed to act decisively prior to Haiyan’s landfall and became bogged down under the weight of the logistical problems of the disaster thereafter.

After landfall when increasingly desperate stories started to trickle out of Tacloban and the surrounding areas, the relief effort was hindered by clogged supply routes, a lack of co-ordination of the major relief donors and an absence of hard information regarding which towns and areas had been the worst hit. Much international aid reached the affected areas reasonably early yet was not distributed evenly or quickly enough amongst the worst hit communities. The fact was that in some instances disaster relief strategies were poorly planned and badly implemented.

Ten days after the storm had hit, The Philippine Red Cross, perhaps the biggest aid donor had their relief operations severely hindered by security concerns, bad weather, and their failure to utilize updated post storm satellite maps. Some humanitarian aid convoys withdrew from entering the affected area altogether. The Red Cross is a signatory to the international charter on emergency information exchange so information such as GIS mapping and post disaster satellite photography should have been available to them. The fact that it wasn't, or wasn't utilized, is a startlingly damning indictment of their post disaster operations.

Many of the problems faced by NGOs were not exclusive to the Red Cross. Very few NGOs had any idea of what other NGOs were doing in the area. Many very badly hit areas outside of Tacloban received disproportionate amounts of aid to their needs. In the initial days after the storm, practically every organization fought to be seen as representing the affected people of the disaster. Yet 3 months after Haiyan, the focus on Tacloban and the surrounding areas is fading fast out of sight. Many NGOs
have withdrawn personnel and even the major organizations are using only a skeleton staff. Many organizations seem to be content to allow the Philippine national government and the Leyte local government to continue unsupervised with long term reconstruction and rehabilitation projects in the area. Many observers also point out that major donors should make central government more accountable for their inaction, lack of preparedness prior to the typhoon and transparency for spending allocated disaster relief funds after the typhoon. It seems incompatible with the basic needs of the people or the founding principles of many of the said organizations that they are so keen to withdraw from an area which so evidently continues to need long term assistance.

**Politics in The Philippines**

A disaster zone provides some of an unscrupulous nature to manipulate events for their own personal gain. Typhoon Haiyan was no different. The accusation of misappropriated funds was made in the months after the disaster as many, using the confusion of the typhoon as cover, filed false damage assessment reports and contracted firms and businesses to help reconstruction of shattered communities, often at inflated prices. Some barangays only received aid due to political affiliations whilst others received none. A local politician Lucy Torres, lamented in The Philippine Enquirer that some people had complained to her saying they were denied relief goods and turned away because “*hindi tayo magkapayong*” (in English - we do not share the umbrella).

The political divisions in The Philippines became more apparent in the days directly after the disaster. Tacloban's mayor Alfred Romualdez is the son of Ferdinand Marcos who ruled the Philippines in the 1980s. The current president Benigno Aquino III's father was assassinated under Marcos's rule in 1983. When the current President attempted to remove the incumbent mayor from his post it was judged as an unwise and profoundly unpopular move with local residents. The slow response to the typhoon from the ruling administration and a series of baffling policy decisions and public statements concerning the tragedy have been met with widespread derision from local people affected by Haiyan.

Even those projects funded centrally and with a view to lessening the impact of future disasters came under increased scrutiny. Tacloban's mayor initiated a re-zoning scheme, whereupon local residents
were encouraged to buy a stake in a basic housing project located in a safe area and not rebuild their homes in an area that is within 40 metres of the sea. Yet local critics point out the relative high cost of such a stake and ask, perhaps not unfairly, why the 70,000 peso scheme is so expensive, especially in regard to the cost of basic housing before the disaster. For Guillermo Ramirez, an elderly local resident of Tacloban whose house was destroyed by the storm surge and is being encouraged to leave, his response is simple. “We've been here 50 years. We're staying” he says. Such a view locks the mayor and his administration in an informal battle with many of the settlers of the coastal barangays. With feeling already running high, it is difficult to see how the mayor will successfully enforce such a rezoning scheme.

A 40 metre from the seashore building restriction zone has been implemented in Leyte.

One of the more baffling public statements came from the President concerning the casualty figures of the disaster. To date there are 6,201 confirmed human casualties. In the days directly after the disaster, the President told CNN the initial death toll projection of 10,000 was “too much”. He estimated without relying on credible information that the final accounting would more likely “be around 2,000 to 2,500”. The local official who estimated that 10,000 people may have died during super-typhoon Haiyan was fired. Elmer Soria, the chief superintendent for the central province Leyte, was “relieved from his post” after publicizing the estimate, according to the Philippines News Agency. Soria was admonished because “a police official should base his statements from correct figures.”

Many suspect that the true casualty figure of Typhoon Haiyan is being kept artificially low. Red Cross
chairman Richard Gordon estimated some time ago that the true figure of the disaster was expected to exceed the much quoted figure of 10,000 casualties. Mass graves far exceed the number of reported fatalities. In some cases newly found skeletal remains do not join any list of confirmed fatalities. The destruction of Leyte was so complete and the nature of the storm surge was such that not only bodies were washed away but in many cases records of the affected victims. Without these records it becomes impossible to declare an individual missing or dead. Failure to correctly log, photograph or attend to the dead by authorities is widely noted. Failure to count them properly, less so.

When a local Mayor (name withheld) of (name withheld) in Palawan, issued an internet appeal for her municipality, offers of help, financial assistance and disaster expertise flooded in. On a Facebook page she talked of 'bodies in the street' and a video she posted (now removed) insinuated that her municipality, like Tacloban, had been hit by a tidal surge. Experts flocked to the area only to find both of these claims were wildly untrue. Assessment reports greatly exaggerated the damage, as domestic and international aid kept coming in. Eventually those very same experts who were exasperated by the Mayor’s exaggerations left. Although she vowed to help 'her people', many in the area were given nothing. An appeal to her from the Mayor in a neighboring township for aid assistance was refused.

Politics often influences disaster relief on both the international stage as well as the domestic one. The governments of two of The Philippines' closest neighbors, China and Taiwan both received criticism for meager donations after Haiyan's devastation. Political disputes concerning overlapping claims and fishing rights in the South China Sea seem to have influenced the decision to respond frugally to the disaster. In the instances of both nations personal donations from the public soon outstripped that of their governments.

Conclusion

Developing countries such as The Philippines are too often on the frontline of major disasters such as Typhoon Haiyan. Their focus is often on stockpiling supplies before an imminent event or securing international relief in the immediate aftermath. Long term thinking about risk reduction, through better land use or addressing the clear links between poverty and vulnerability to disasters is pushed into the background. Weak government and poor understanding of the natural forces at work coupled with lack of resources and complicated levels of bureaucracy often make vast numbers of their populations
(particularly poorer sections of society) vulnerable to increasingly turbulent natural hazards. For Aida Bantiles, that her government was so woefully underprepared for a storm of Haiyan's intensity underscores the need for greater community resilience. She says “It is not enough to simply rely on the government to give you information and to provide for you after a disaster like this. They won't do it. They can't do it. We have to look after ourselves.” Without a coordinated approach involving local residents, local government, central government and overseas N.G.O.s however whatever is done will not be enough. With clear links between man made global warming and storm intensity being established, it is a race against time whether or not nations such as The Philippines will learn from the mistakes of Typhoon Haiyan or be buried by them.

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