



How Can Humanitarian Organizations Improve Government-Led Disaster Recovery Efforts?

Caroline Compton, Australian National University

In late 2013, Typhoon Haiyan hit the Philippines, leaving at least 6,300 dead and over 1,000 missing. Four million people were displaced and over a million houses were destroyed. The typhoon was so strong that it exceeded the most commonly used scale of measurement. The response of the international community was substantial, as over \$1 billion in aid arrived and thousands of local and international humanitarian professionals were mobilized in the recovery effort. Nevertheless, four years later many of the country's inhabitants still lack basic amenities.

Why is there such a large disparity between resources allocated and outcomes experienced by the victims? My research helps answer this question by examining how international humanitarian aid is employed on the ground. One crucial question is: how can aid be used more effectively, such that cases like the Philippines happen less frequently?

By identifying the challenges in the distribution of humanitarian aid, my research illuminates ways for humanitarian actors to meet disaster recovery goals and overcome the challenges local governments face in delivering help to disaster survivors. Although I use the Haiyan recovery plan as an exemplary case, the lessons about recovery planning and implementation can be generalized to other cases.

The Typhoon Haiyan Recovery Plan

The Visayas region of the Philippines took a devastating hit from the late 2013 storm. Because of its geography, the Philippines is extremely vulnerable to the severe weather and rising sea levels caused by climate change. With this in mind, the national government focused its recovery plan on long-term *climate adaptive disaster risk reduction* – offering strategies local governments can use to minimize the loss of human life in the wake of natural disasters.

The cornerstone of the recovery strategy was the relocation of inhabitants to shelters away from dangerous areas. According to the plan, households were supposed to be relocated depending on the relative safety of the land on which they were living. Land was categorized into “dangerous”, “unsafe”, and “safe” zones and human habitation was supposed to be relocated away from unsuitable land. Across the areas affected by the hurricane, the government planned – and presumably still plans on – building 205,128 houses to replace those lost by the households relocated from the dangerous and unsafe shoreline areas.

Some observers describe Haiyan as a largely effective humanitarian operation because it achieved a relatively high level of coordination between government and humanitarian agencies. Nonetheless, four years after the typhoon, nearly 150,000 of the Tacloban City residents, those hardest hit, have not received adequate shelter.

The plan devised by the national and city governments to relocate residents has taken too long to implement. And as they await more permanent solutions, many residents have not even received transitional assistance to tide them over.

What Went Wrong?

Initially, all residents of Tacloban City were given access to emergency shelters, but because off-site shelters were inadequate, many quickly returned to the dangerous shoreline area. In an effort to discourage such returns, the local government asked the humanitarian community to cease providing any assistance in shoreline zones – and the humanitarian groups complied.

Further complications followed. Although a permanent relocation site for storm-affected residents was supposed to be completed this year, as of May 2018, the site is not connected to the municipal water system, lacks other essential amenities, and is devoid of economic opportunities for residents who might want to relocate. Understandably, many shoreline residents are reluctant to move until these issues are resolved. So more than four years after the typhoon, many people remain in substandard, vulnerable shelters they have patched together themselves. My research finds two primary causes for this failure.

- The national disaster recovery plan mistakenly prioritized long-term recovery outcomes for Tacloban City over their immediate needs in the wake of the typhoon's destruction.
- The international humanitarian community mistakenly complied with the inadequate government plan, and thus did not deliver much needed transitional shelter assistance to shoreline residents.

Recommendations for Future Responses

The immediate and transitional needs of disaster victims must be given as much importance as the long-term recovery needs. To be effective, future recovery efforts in the Philippines and elsewhere should ensure that safe transitional housing is available, no matter what measures are planned for long-term recovery. As the Typhoon Haiyan example shows, if offsite, transitional shelters are insufficient, people are likely to return to damaged areas, compounding problems of assistance and adaptation. Humanitarian groups will end up caught in a dilemma: Do they adhere to government plans that are not working for affected residents, or do they fill gaps in relief and risk appearing “political” or at odds with the responsible governments?

Although humanitarian actors must coordinate with government authorities, they must also create meaningful channels through which they can challenge government decisions that deny basic human rights to disaster victims. If international humanitarian actors are unwilling or unable to challenge state restrictions, they need to think more creatively about how they engage with civil society. Local partners can raise issues with the government in ways that might not be open to international actors. They can directly advocate improvements and approach legislators to mandate necessary relief efforts. Some promising steps were taken along these lines in Tacloban City, where the legislature gave a local aid group permission to build transitional housing for shoreline residents. The lesson is clear: With support from the international humanitarian community, local organizations can develop new forms of aid delivery that respond to needs not met by existing government plans.

Brief prepared as Yale Fox international Fellow 2017-2018, Yale University.

Read more in Caroline Compton, "An Unheeded Present and the Impossible Future: The Temporality and Logic of Emergency, Humanitarianism and Climate Adaptation after Typhoon Haiyan" *Critical Asian Studies* 50, no. 1 (2018): 136-154.