



What is appropriate and relevant assistance after a disaster? Accounting for culture(s) in the response to Typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Typhoon Haiyan, known locally as Yolanda, was one of the strongest typhoons to hit the Philippines in recent history, killing over 6000 people when it made landfall in November 2013. The international humanitarian response was fast and expansive, with post-response evaluations noting it as largely successful. This study, however, reveals a disconnect between international humanitarian and affected-community understandings of effectiveness, and roots the division in an under-acknowledged difference of cultures between the international humanitarian system and the people receiving assistance. Challenging official humanitarian framings of appropriateness and relevance, this study posits the need for a more localised, contextualised and culturally-sensitive approach to understanding post-disaster needs and vulnerabilities.

1. Introduction

On 8 November 2013 the Philippines experienced one of the strongest typhoons to make landfall on record. Known locally as Yolanda and internationally as Haiyan, the typhoon ravaged a substantial part of the Visayas region, killing over 6000 people, displacing 4.1 million and affecting a total of 14.1 million [57]. The Government of the Philippines (GoP) called for international assistance, the United Nations cluster system was activated,¹ and organisations from across the world offered aid and support, working together with national and local counterparts. Subsequent evaluations have noted the response broadly as ‘timely and relevant’ [40] with the efficient deployment of pre-positioned relief goods such as food and shelter kits down the supply chain, and their clearance at sites in-country [2]. It was also described as ‘effective ... with various opportunities for learning at the global level’ [62]. Several aid workers noted that they ‘were struck by the frequent expressions of gratitude they encountered’ from affected communities over the course of their time in the Philippines [4]. However, despite praise for the timeliness and scale of support, and criticisms for some of the technical and coordination difficulties, there was an aspect of assistance appraisal that did not receive so much attention: namely, the appropriateness and relevance of the aid in

relation to individual and community non-subsistence needs and priorities. More specifically, interviews undertaken as part of field research for this study revealed a disconnect between international humanitarian understandings of what would be the most appropriate (and therefore the primary) support to aid recovery, and affected-Filipino understandings of effectiveness. Interrogation of this disconnect will form the substance of this article, but first let me begin with an illustrative story.

Just one month after Yolanda hit, the GoP's Department of Social Welfare and Development (DWSD) and the Department of Education (DepEd) gathered local teachers, volunteers and government workers together for a day of pampering in the province of Leyte. These groups of people – simultaneously victims and humanitarian responders – were treated to free haircuts, given free cosmetics, and entertained by famous Filipino artists, including Aiza Seguerra. According to Government officials, this was inspired by DepEd Secretary, Brother Armin Luistro's encounter with a teacher from Tacloban whom he met just a few days after the typhoon made landfall (Interview, 2016). Luistro observed that she was wearing lipstick and, taken by surprise, asked her why. Her response, he recalled, was ‘*Gusto ko Brother, kapag nakita ako ng mga students ko sa pagsimula ng klase, maayos ang itsura ko. Gusto kong isipin nila na nakabangon na ako para sila rin,*

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¹ The UN cluster system is a coordinating apparatus for humanitarian organisations – UN and non-UN – designed to more effectively manage ‘the main sectors’ of humanitarian health, e.g. shelter, health, livelihoods and logistics [56]. This system coordinated the thrust of the international response to the typhoon.

ma-inspire na bumangon (Brother, I want to look good when my students will see me. I want them to think that I have recovered so that they will be inspired to also move on)' [19]. Local DepEd staff interviewed as part of this research and also treated to the experience recalled that 'it was very effective; it was a month after Yolanda, people didn't have these things'; and a local NGO worker later explained to me that its importance in boosting a community sense of recovery was in the sense of dignity that wearing cosmetics brought, particularly for teachers, as lipstick is strongly associated with female teachers in the Philippines, almost as a part of the uniform.

That the teaching professionals recalled their pampering session as 'effective' humanitarian assistance in the aftermath of the typhoon suggests an experience of needs, vulnerability and recovery among these women that is worth examining. It hints at an understanding that links post-disaster recovery experience not only to a sense of dignity in terms of appearance and 'feeling human' again, but also to a status-identity connected to social and community structures (i.e. a status and identity as teachers that can inspire students by presenting some return to normalcy).

The definitional debates around the term 'dignity' are beyond the remit of this paper. Suffice to say that it is generally – and not unproblematically – understood as universal, a right of humankind [73], and an important attribute of 'political life' that separates it from 'bare', or simply biological human existence [24]. The concept should be understood in multiple ways relating to the values and histories of particular societies. In other words, dignity is a culturally embedded value and idea. Thus, as anecdotes and appraisals of humanitarian aid invoking dignity and community status came to the fore of this and other interviews, the 'cultural' aspects of the experience of Filipinos affected by this typhoon – both aid workers and citizens – took precedence. Questions arose over the extent to which different cultural values and norms were accounted for in the response to the typhoon, and whether that recognition informed programming. Where there was a clash in understandings of what humanitarian objectives should have been – due to differing values and perspectives between some international humanitarian organisations and parts of Filipino society – why did certain understandings of effectiveness 'win out' over others? Local needs and priorities are certainly prominent in development and assistance frameworks, particularly in the 'appropriateness' and 'relevance' criteria for evaluations [12]. Nevertheless, a central focus of the field research, and therefore the subject of this paper, has been to explore whether there is a disconnect in local and international understandings of these concepts as they determine action – such as assessing need and measuring vulnerability – and what the implications of that disconnect are.

Importantly, the aim of this paper is not to romanticise 'the local' and 'the international', nor is it to reduce and essentialise humanitarian responses to local=Filipino, international=foreign. Actors and movements recognised as local or international in a particular disaster response context – whether that be, for example, a town council, a national branch of an international aid agency, or the United Nations – are heterogeneous networks intertwined with other local and international actors and movements of varying scales ([13,50]: Part Two). Rather, the aim of this paper in using the broad descriptors of 'local' and 'international' is, firstly, as an analytical tool. In using those terms, it seeks to partly disentangle the key elements of the response so as to provide a frame for teasing out and analysing differing understandings of effectiveness held by grass-roots aid actors embedded in the disaster context, the typhoon-affected population, and external aid actors of the dominant international humanitarian system. The second aim is to analyse *why* there is a disconnect in those understandings. Thus, such a broad framing affords the opportunity to challenge the apparent universalism of dominant understandings of humanitarian need and vulnerability, and it highlights the necessity of reassessing ideas of what constitutes effective and relevant aid, *and for whom*.

The paper will begin with a note on the methodology of the study

and an explanation of the key concepts and ideas. It will move on to contextualise disaster experiences and responses in the Philippines and will place the international response to Typhoon Yolanda within that context. This will be followed by a critique of dominant humanitarian aid targeting practices and the entrenched technocratic view of vulnerability as a determinant of that targeting. Finally, the article will end with some thoughts on re-approaching 'appropriateness' and 'relevance' with a more nuanced consideration of the various cultures of humanitarianism at play in a given disaster.

2. Research methodology and concepts

2.1. Research methodology

Field research for this study was undertaken in the Philippines between late January and late February 2015, in Manila (the capital city and location of many humanitarian organisations' headquarters), Tacloban (in the Eastern Visayas region, one of the worst affected areas) and Ormoc (a city also in the Eastern Visayas and badly hit by the typhoon). Interviews included four village community group discussions as well as two focus-group discussions with INGO aid workers in-country, and forty-five individual/small group interviews with foreign aid workers based in London, foreign aid workers based in the Philippines, national and local Filipino aid workers, local and national officials, academics based at the University of the Philippines, and a range of individuals affected by the typhoon.

2.2. A note on concepts

2.2.1. Culture: a frame

'Culture' is a particularly contested term as there is no single, universally accepted definition, and the analysis of culture, to quote [27]: 5), is an interpretive science 'in search of meaning' [27–29]. [48]:133 provide a useful framing of the concept for this paper, though it is by no means absolute:

[C]ulture is learned, shared, and transmitted from one generation to the next, and it can be seen in a group's values, norms, practices, systems of meaning, ways of life, and other social regularities. Factors such as familial roles, communication patterns, beliefs relating to personal control, individualism, collectivism, and spirituality and other individual, behavioural and social characteristics are not inherently "cultural" but may help define a culture for a given group if they have a special meaning, value, identity or symbolism to the group's members.

This framing is useful as it identifies aspects of a group that may be analysed in 'search of meaning', as noted by Geertz. A similar identification of 'cultural' factors is deployed in this paper's analysis of different humanitarian responses to the typhoon in order to identify characteristics of different humanitarian meaning and value systems. Of course, it must be noted that codifying such individual, behavioural and social characteristics can risk essentialisation and presenting the cultures of different groups as static or opposing (such as in the local versus international dichotomy) – this paper seeks to avoid such oversimplifications. Nonetheless, challenging the universalism of dominant understandings of humanitarian effectiveness requires a closer look at how different groups frame effectiveness differently due to viewing disasters through their own particular systems of meaning.

2.2.2. Culture in humanitarian context

The concept of 'culture' is gaining increasing traction in humanitarian studies and action [39], as a crisis-affected group's norms, values and meaning systems are recognised as being 'a significant factor in creating higher levels of vulnerability' for some members of that group, while established power systems can unequally distribute risk (quote: [5,21,41,42]). Culture is also noted (in health research in particular) as

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