

Disaster in the Philippines one year on: Local perceptions of Typhoon Haiyan, the relief response and subsequent economic recovery

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Some of the central islands of the Philippines were hit in November 2013 by a major typhoon, internationally named Haiyan. It killed over six thousand people, and displaced many more.

Locally, however, it does not appear to have been 'the strongest recorded tropical cyclone to hit landfall in human history' as portrayed by international agencies. The University of Santo Tomas, founded in Manila in 1611, holds Jesuit records of numerous comparable typhoons and storm surges over the centuries. Nor were 'as many as fourteen million people affected'; most of the Philippine landmass and its extensive coastline remained unscathed, as were most of the population – save in the sense that most Filipinos were moved to sympathise. The Philippines' strong economic growth performance of around seven percent hardly missed a beat. Filipinos do not even use the name Haiyan – this storm came at the end of their typhoon season and was named Yolanda, at the end of the Tagalog alphabet.

The author spent three months in different parts of the Philippines – on the main islands of Luzon and Mindanao as well as in the Visayas (the central island belt where the November typhoon surged through) immediately after Typhoon Haiyan wreaked its devastation. He was able to observe local coping strategies but also to compare the perceptions of Filipinos and national institutions as to the relief efforts, whether local or foreign/international, and to observe the strengths and weaknesses of the resilience strategies, ranging from institutionalised disaster preparedness to sloganized building back better/building back smarter. This difference in perception leads on to question the tendency of some agencies towards exaggeration (unlike the case of the recent West African Ebola outbreak where suppression was initially preferred, MSF perhaps excepted).

One year later, the author is returning to the Philippines in November 2014 for another extended stay and this paper to be delivered in 2015 will give a broader overview of the three titular elements, will attempt a final assessment of outcomes (with certain caveats), and will try to explain the sometimes radically different local and international perceptions of the same event.