

# Transculturation of perspectives and practices: Negotiation among international and local humanitarian actors

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## Abstract

*The declaration of the National State of Calamity following the impacts of Supertyphoon Haiyan that hit Central Visayas, the Philippines in 2013 resulted to the involvement of the international community in the relief and recovery phase. That said, the declaration brought about an influx of assistance from the international community not only in terms of relief goods, but also of direct services by the so-called “expats” from different aid agencies worldwide. In this light, the paper examines how and to what extent the perspectives and practices on humanitarian action were negotiated among international and local disaster management professionals in the post-Haiyan Tacloban. How has the migration and mobility of international actors facilitated and/or hindered effective response and recovery programs of the disaster? How the perspective and practices of international actors were enriched as a result of interaction with their local counterparts? The experiences from Haiyan intends to deepen the discourse of transculturation in the post-disaster context. The data and findings in the paper were drawn from field notes, professional engagement, conversations, and semi-structured interviews of the author with local and international humanitarian actors.*

Keywords: transculturation, negotiation, disaster, Haiyan, Philippines

## 1. Introduction

In 8 November 2013, Supertyphoon Haiyan (local name: *Yolanda*) entered the Philippine Area of Responsibility (PAR) and affected communities in Central Visayas. Narratives from various local and international organisations refer to it as one of the strongest typhoons in contemporary history. The official government data reports that a little over 6,000 people were killed by the disaster. While there were claims too that almost 10,000 lives have been killed. Aside from the number of people who died, the disaster destroyed thousands of houses, public and private properties; affected peoples' livelihood sources and means; disturbed the social life and the political order in areas hit by it; and, brought significant damages and losses in the economy of the areas affected.

In the Philippines, as mandated by the Republic Act (RA) 10121 or the Philippines Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Act of 2010, each local government unit<sup>2</sup> is mandated to institutionalise a Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Office (DRRMO) with corresponding fulltime personnel, comprehensive plan<sup>3</sup>, and an annual budget<sup>4</sup>. The law was ratified in 2010 after the country's capital and the surrounding provinces suffered from a deluge due to two strong typhoons (Ketsana and Parma) that entered the PAR in just a week. The law replaced the three-decade old legal framework that governed the country's disaster management system, which was emergency response focused. In the same manner, the

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<sup>2</sup> All levels: provincial, city, municipal, and community

<sup>3</sup> The Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Plan (DRRMP) covers programs, projects, and activities aligned to the four (4) thematic areas of DRRM: prevention/mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery/rehabilitation.

<sup>4</sup> Five (5) per cent of the local government unit's annual Internal Revenue Allotment (IRA).

law provided a legal basis for governments at all level to be proactive in dealing with natural hazards and its potential impacts. A year before the RA 10121 was passed, the Climate Change Act was signed with a vision to build capacities of the government and communities to adapt and mitigate the risk of climate change. While the lessons from the previous disaster events that struck the Philippines has increased the institutional capacity of both national and local governments in disaster risk reduction and climate change adaptation, the strength and the magnitude of the impact of Supertyphoon Haiyan overwhelmed the capacity of the said social institutions and the communities to effectively respond to the disaster.

An individual nation's capacity to respond to disasters depend on several factors such the effectiveness and efficiency of its own disaster management system. However, in many occasions, large-scale disaster events uncover the weaknesses of an individual nation's disaster management capacity and the need for the involvement of the international community in the response, recovery, and rehabilitation phase. This is evident in the recent disaster events such as Haiti earthquake in 2010, the Indian Ocean tsunami in 2004, and the Nepal earthquake in 2015. In some cases too, even the disaster management capacity of an individual nation is very high and relatively advanced, the international community still comes into the picture to provide assistance and augment the initiatives of the individual nation. This is evident in the Great Hanshin Earthquake in 1995 and the Great East Japan Earthquake in 2011, both happened in Japan.

Supertyphoon Haiyan is no exception. While the Government of the Philippines anticipated its landfall, pre-positioned relief goods and other critical resources in key areas, and responded at the onset of the hazard event, it is no doubt that action of the government was insufficient. In international disaster management, the international actors will only be involved in the national scene when the individual nation's capacity to respond has been overwhelmed. In the case of Supertyphoon Haiyan, as the magnitude of its impact became apparent as minutes, hours, and days after the landfall pass by, the Government of the Philippines declared a National State of Calamity. The declaration called upon and gave a signal to the international community to intervene in the response, recovery, and rehabilitation phase. That said, the declaration brought about an influx of assistance from the international community not only in terms of relief goods, but also of direct services by the so-called "expats" from different aid agencies worldwide.

In this light, the paper attempts to examine the transculturation of perspectives and practices between international and local humanitarian actors. More specifically, the paper attempts to look into the process of transculturation of perspectives and practices on disaster management between international and local humanitarian actors. In the same way, it intends to reflect on how has the migration and mobility of international actors facilitated and/or hindered effective response and recovery programs of the disaster? Two modes of entry by international humanitarian actors were evident during the emergency and early recovery phase of the disaster: the international organizations that have been operating in the Philippines sent their experts to the country; and, international agencies without work base in the country prior to the disaster had set up local offices in the Philippines employing both international and local humanitarian professionals. In analysing the transculturation and its process, the paper considered three things: (1) the organisational structure employed during the response and early recovery phase; (2) mode of interculturalization and negotiation of practices and perspectives; and, (3) issues and challenges. Having been involved in the recovery and rehabilitation phase in the areas affected by Supertyphoon Haiyan, the data and findings in the paper were drawn from field notes, professional engagement, conversations, and semi-structured interviews of the author with local and international humanitarian actors. The organisations studied for the paper are: Mode 1 – Plan International and Save the Children Philippines; Mode 2 – UNESCO Jakarta and Islamic Relief Worldwide.

## **2. Transculturation: Concept and practice**

Transculturation is being used to describe the process of extended contact among various actors and cultures. There are different contexts and levels where this process may take place. In this paper, the concept will be theorised in a post-disaster context. More specifically, the paper looks into the relationships between international and local humanitarian actors in relation to the migration, mobility, and negotiation of perspectives and practices on disaster management.

The Philippines is not new to the involvement of the international community in a post-disaster context. A strong reference of the country's lived experience on this was when Mt. Pinatubo erupted in 1991. While the country had experienced cataclysmic volcanic eruptions in the past, the government then had no significant basis to refer to in responding and managing such a catastrophe. The impacts of the eruption was exacerbated when typhoon *Reming* struck Central Luzon few months after the disaster. As a result, upland (the indigenous peoples) and lowland dwellers became environmental refugees.

History suggests that migration, whether permanent or temporary, has always been a central response and survival strategy of human beings to adapt to both short- and long-term environmental change (Hugo 1996; Paul 2005; Oliver-Smith 2009: 116). Oliver-Smith (2009: 116) argues that disasters have great potential to uproot large number of people, forcing them to migrate as individuals and families or permanently displacing them and/or relocating them as communities. He further argues that, temporary migrations are becoming permanent government's response to disasters and other threats (Oliver-Smith 2009: 116). The approach holds true in the immediate aftermath of the eruption as massive displacement of environmental refugees became a cornerstone program of the Government of the Philippines then.

Being inexperienced in massive resettlement initiative, the government then tapped the expertise of external actors to lend their expertise, knowledge and skills on resettlement as well as in disaster management. However, as argued by Bankoff (2004), one of the leading scholars in disaster risk reduction, in the rehabilitation initiatives, there was insufficient attention and recognition given by external agencies and relief workers on people's actions and understanding, which is greatly influenced by their cultural interpretation (2004: 91). He further contends that outsiders deem people's interpretations and behaviors on disasters as inappropriate or illogical (Bankoff 2004: 91). The lack of knowledge and familiarity of the external actors on the "culture" of the survivors had led to another disaster for the affected communities as most of the development interventions were not context and culture-specific. Bankoff (2004) argues that external actors need to understand the "cultures of disasters" of a particular affected community to ensure that the design of any development intervention fits well to the community.

Aside from the Philippines, many countries that are prone to disasters and that have experienced large scale disaster events have experienced transculturation and its processes. Transculturation in post disaster context is highly practiced in which significant lessons can be gleaned that are potent resources for scholars and development professionals to theorise. Nevertheless, the transculturation in the post disaster context is rarely studied and researched. That said, resources on this is scarce. This paper intends that the experiences of various local and international organisations in Super typhoon Haiyan will contribute and deepen the discourse of transculturation in the post-disaster context.

## **3. Transculturation in Haiyan: Preliminary findings from the field**

The declaration made by then President Benigno Aquino III of the National State of Calamity following the impacts of Super typhoon Haiyan that hit Central Visayas, the Philippines facilitated the involvement of the international community in the relief, response, and recovery phases of the disaster. This has

resulted to the influx both of relief goods and direct services by the so-called *expats* from different aid agencies worldwide. That said, not only the disaster overwhelmed the survivors, but the response and assistance from the international community as well. In relation to the provision of direct services by the *expats*, the international organizations that have been operating in the Philippines sent their experts to the country to lead and provide technical guidance on the humanitarian operations of their respective organisations. In complete contrast, the international agencies without work base in the country prior to the disaster had set up local offices employing both international and local humanitarian professionals.

This section presents the preliminary findings on the transculturation of perspective and practices on humanitarian response and disaster management between the international and local humanitarian actors during the response and early recovery phase of Supertyphoon Haiyan. The author chose two (2) organisations in each mode described above. The selection made by the author was based on the familiarity on the programs of each organisation as a result of the author’s engagement in the selected institutions. The organisations examined include: Mode 1: Plan International and Save the Children Philippines; Mode 2: UNESCO – Jakarta and Islamic Relief Worldwide (IRW). In studying the transculturation in the post disaster context, the author specifically looked into three areas: organisational structure employed during the Supertyphoon Haiyan response, the mechanism for sharing of perspectives and practices, and the issues as well as challenges encountered during the negotiation process.

### 3.1 Mode 1: Organisations with presence in the Philippines prior to Supertyphoon Haiyan

Plan International (Plan) and Save the Children Philippines (Save) are two of the many international development organisations that have long been working and addressing development issues in the Philippines. Although both organisations are capitlising on children’s rights as the main thrust and reason for being, the former has expanded its scope of work to cover other sectors too that are not particularly child focused. Both organisations are working nationwide in the fields of disaster risk reduction, urban resiliency, education, positive discipline, health and nutrition among others. Although both organisations’ operation are nationwide in scope, they had no presence in areas hit by Supertyphoon Haiyan, particularly in Tacloban, which is considered to be the hardest hit area. Program offices were then set up by Plan and Save in Tacloban that serve as the hub for their operations in the Eastern Visayas region.

With the magnitude and scale of damage brough about by Supertyphoon Haiyan, international humanitarian actors of both organisations flocked to the Philippines at the onset of the response up to the early stage of the recovery and rehabilitation phase. In the Tacloban Office alone, each organisation employed more than 200 humanitarian actors, international and local combined. **Table 1** presents the findings of the transculturation and its process for the organisations considered under Mode 1.

**Table 1:** *Plan International and Save the Children*

Anaylsis areas	Plan International	Save the Children
Organisational structure	Expats took over the field operation	Expats took over the field operation
	An expats still heads the rehabilitation program	Field leadership was turned over to locales, but with presence of expats to give technical assistance/guidance
	Each expat has a local counterpart who is a Plan International staff	No expat anymore in the field office, but locales from its national office took the role of expats in providing technical assistance
	Attends Cluster meetings of government organised by the UN	Attends Cluster meetings of government organised by the UN

	agencies and local government units	agencies and local government units
Mode of interculturalisation and negotiation of practices and perspectives	<u>Expat to local staff</u> Provision of technical knowledge, skills, capacity building Facilitation of meetings Participation in meetings and other activities  <u>Local staff to expat</u> Provision of knoweldge on the local context Coordination with government agencies, local government units, and communities Informal introduction of local culture to the expat (i.e. eating at a local restaurant, drinking sessions, night outs)	
Issues and challenges	<u>Expat to local staff</u> Language barrier Context and experiences drawn from experiences elsewhere not be easily appreciated by the local staff Application of theories to the field  <u>Local staff to expat</u> Language barrier “Know it all” syndrome Lack of knowledge of the local context  <u>Expats to expats</u> White versus Asians conflict	

Looking into the organisational structure, during the response, recovery and rehabilitation phase, the international actors or *expats* took over the field operation for both Plan and Save. This entails that the direction, programming, design, and the entire humanitarian intervention of two organisations were under the auspices of the *expats*. In the case of Save, a year after the response initiative, locales took over the leadership of field operation. The number of *expats* decreased too to as a result of response and recovery priorities as well as end of their contracts. Currently, there are no more *expats* in the Save Tacloban field office, but locales from its National Office took the role of *expats* in providing technical assistance. In complete contrast, up until now, the operation of Plan is still headed by an *expat* based in Tacloban.

In addition to the organisational structure, while Plan has a local counterpart for each *expat*, Save used the “technical assistance approach”, which means an *expat* can help and guide different teams and programs in the operation. Also, the role of *expats* are critical particularly in the cluster meetings organised by the United Nations (UN) agencies and government organisations. Government officials, most often than not, listen more to *expats* (particularly the Caucasians) rather than the locales. That said, Plan and Save were represented by *expats* in the interagency meetings.

In relation to the mode of interculturalisation of perspectives and practices on humanitarian response and disaster management, there are two levels of migration and negotiation that became apparent: Level 1: from *expat* to local staff; Level 2: from local staff to the *expat*. For the Level 1, the interculturalisation was apparent in the provision of technical knowledge, skills, capacity building; facilitation of meetings; and, participation in meetings and other activities. On the other hand, for Level 2, it was evident on the provision of knowledge on the local context; coordination with government agencies, local government units, and communities; and, informal introduction of local culture to the *expat* (i.e. eating at a local restaurant, drinking sessions, night outs).

### 3.2 Mode 2: Organisations without presence in the Philippines prior to Supertyphoon Haiyan

For the Mode 2, UNESCO-Jakarta and the Islamic Relief Worldwide were considered in the paper. Both organisations' presence in the Philippines were triggered and heightend by impacts of Supertyphoon Haiyan. In the case of UNESCO-Jakarta, while the UNESCO National Commission in the Philippines under the Department of Foeign Affairs is present, UNESCO Jakarta, as a regional office, has no clout over it. In the same way, IRW set up an office in Cebu headed by an *expat* and employing locales. While both are clustered in Mode 2, the scope of work of the both organisations are poles apart. UNESCO-Jakarta's work centered on education, research, and capacity development for students and teachers. In complete contrast, being a humanitiation organisation, IRW employed a full spectrum humanitarian intervention, from response to rehabilitation. As of writing, IRW has fomally set up a Country Office in the Philippines, but now headed by a local. On the other hand, UNESCO-Jakarta did not set up an office in Philippines. Hired a Filipino staff instead, based in Jakarta, to to oversee the projects in the Philippines. **Table 2** presents the findings of the transculturation and its process for the organisations considered under Mode 2.

**Table 2: UNESCO-Jakarta and Islamic Relief Worldwide**

	UNESCO-Jakarta	Islamic Relief Worldwide
Organisational structure	<p>Presence of UNESCO National Commission in the Philippines under the Department of Foeign Affairs. However, the UNESCO Jakarta, as a regional office, has no clout over it.</p> <p>Initially partnered with a local NGO. Colloborated with the Government of the Philippines eventually</p> <p>Did not set up an office in Philippines. Hired a Filipino staff instead, based in Jakarta, to to oversee the projects in the Philippines.</p>	<p>Set up an office in Cebu headed by an expat and employing locales</p>
Mode of Sharing of practices and perspectives	<p>Provison of comments on outputs submitted</p> <p>Joined some field visits</p>	<p><u>Expat to local staff</u> Facilitation of meetings Participation in meetings and other activities</p> <p><u>Local staff to expat</u> Provision of knoweldge on the local context Coordination with government agencies, local government units, and communities Informal introduction of local culture to the expat (i.e. eating at a local restaurant, drinking sessions, night outs)</p>
Issues and challenges	<p><u>Expat to local staff</u> Language barrier Context and experiences drawn from experiences elsewhere not be easily appreciated by the local staff</p>	

	Application of theories to the field  <u>Local staff to expat</u> Language barrier “Know it all” syndrome Lack of knowledge of the local context
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Given the difference on the nature of work of both organisations, the mode of intercultural perspectives and practices on humanitarian response and disaster management are diverse too. UNESCO-Jakarta centered on provision of comments on outputs submitted as well as joining some field visits. On the other hand, similar to Mode 1 organisations, there are two levels of intercultural: For the Level 1, the intercultural and negotiation were apparent in the provision of technical knowledge, skills, capacity building; facilitation of meetings; and, participation in meetings and other activities. On the other hand, for Level 2, it is evident on the provision of knowledge on the local context; coordination with government agencies, local government units, and communities; and, informal introduction of local culture to the expat (i.e. eating at a local restaurant, drinking sessions, night outs)

#### 4. Transculturation: Issues and challenges

Merging two different cultures always poses a challenge. In many cases, it does not work, while in humanitarian causes and context such as post disaster scenarios, it has to work. Based on the experiences of the organisations studied in the paper, transculturation posed significant challenges at various levels and actors. The issues and challenges on transculturation, as evident in the case of Super typhoon Haiyan is seen at various levels: *expat* to local staff, local staff to *expat*, and among *expats* themselves. On the level of *expats* to local staff, the concerns include language barrier, the context and experiences drawn from experiences elsewhere that were tried to be localised were not easily appreciated and understood by the local staff, and the application of humanitarian theories to the field. On the other hand, the concerns on transculturation between local staff to *expats* include language barrier, the “*know it all*” syndrome by the *expats*, and the lack of knowledge of the local context leading to poor appreciation of the local situations and development aggression as pointed out by Bankoff (2004). Finally, there are also issues between the levels of *expats*, particularly on the Caucasians in relation to Asians and/or African. The former are deemed to be “more experienced” and the local authorities believed more on them than their other counterparts.

#### 5. Conclusion

The paper intended to look into the process of transculturation of perspectives and practices on disaster management between international and local humanitarian actors during the immediate aftermath of Super typhoon Haiyan. In the same way, it attempted to reflect on how has the migration and mobility of international actors facilitated and/or hindered effective response and recovery programs of the disaster? Based on the findings of the study drawn from the experiences of various organisations considered in the development of the paper, the following could be gleaned about transculturation in a post disaster context. First, transculturation in the post disaster context is highly practiced by various development organisations. However, it is rarely studied and there is a dearth of literature on it that scholars and development professionals can refer to. Second, transculturation, as seen in the experience of the organisations considered in the paper is formalised through the organisational set up. Also, while transculturation may take place in any disaster event, it is more evident in a large scale disaster events where the involvement of the international community is indispensable such as Super typhoon Haiyan. Third, in critically analysing transculturation in the post disaster context, the process and modes of transculturation is important to carefully studied. As evident in the case of studied disaster event, the

transculturation took place in both formal and informal means. This points to the fact that there is no one-size fits all approach for transculturation. In the same manner, transculturation is not a one-way process, but rather a two-way process involving the international and local actor. Lastly, transculturation in the post disaster context is cumbersome and could often lead to: conflict among actors, ineffective and inefficient delivery and implementation of programs, and the failure of the humanitarian intervention, if not properly managed. In complete contrast, a good and productive enabling environment for international and local humanitarian actors to learn, work together, melt, merge, and marry each others perspectives and practices can be translated into better programing and services to the areas and people affected by large scale disaster events.

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