

A Report of Community Service Learning in Psychosocial and Disaster Risk Reduction on Suyac Island in Central Philippines

Suyac is a small island of 1.8 hectares with about 800 residents and 137 households. The islanders rely on fishing and marine products processing as their major source of income. Typhoon Haiyan and typhoon Kajiki (Basyang) in late February 2014 together have damaged over 100 houses and 90 outriggers used for fishing on the island. Furthermore, a significant portion of the mangrove population, which acted as a bio-shield mitigating the strong winds and storm surges, was also spoiled. The preliminary needs assessment revealed emerging needs for the rebuilding/repairing of houses and fishing boats, public education, mangrove assessment and rehabilitation, livelihood-related training, and psychosocial issues among mothers.

In order to better serve the broad spectrum of needs of the community, the team further divided themselves into three subgroups based on the potential needs of the community and delegates' expertise. In particular, the three teams focused on post-disaster psychosocial issues and disaster risk reduction, natural environment, and child education, respectively. With their disaster and humanitarian response background, Jonas and Peter formed the psychosocial and disaster risk reduction (PDRR) team together with two psychology students and one psychiatric nurse.

A preliminary needs assessment revealed the prevalence of general psychosocial distress, especially among female adults who were both victims and caregivers during and after the calamity brought about by the two typhoons. In order to deepen the understanding on the prevalence and the extent of psychosocial problems and to obtain information for intervention development, the group designed and carried out a 2-day psychosocial assessment based on semi-structured in-depth interviews. Interviewees were recruited by multi-staged cluster sampling. The interviews focused on four major aspects of disaster-associated psychosocial issues, namely the challenges experienced during and after typhoon Haiyan, the coping strategies and sources of resilience, the disaster preparedness attitude, as well as the future outlook and aspirations.

The qualitative interviews indicated that the interviewees were traumatized to varying extents. The fear associated with Haiyan continues to be present even more than eight months after of the incident, and occasional flash-back of memories is common. Having suffered from the consequences of underestimating Haiyan's impact, villagers appear excessively stressed by news of future typhoons, storms that

would have been considered as “mild and common” in the past. The greatest source of psychological resilience was their family and neighbours, religion, and external aid including supports from the government and international NGOs. Some of the interviewees’ future plans changed significantly after the calamity—education is perceived to be more important than before because it provides opportunities for a livelihood outside the disaster-prone and vulnerable island. Overall, community-based psychological intervention and proper disaster preparedness education are needed to relief their traumata, reduce unnecessary distress when facing mild storms, and enhance community resilience. Livelihood and education support are also critical to post-disaster recovery.

In designing the sampling plan of their psychosocial assessment, Jonas and Peter realized that there was no proper mapping of the island, and local villagers only owned a low resolution satellite image dating back to 2009. Although Suyac is a small community, a map containing appropriate information is crucial to the design and implementation of an evacuation plan upon disaster, post-disaster relief operation such as food distribution, disaster risk prediction, and community-based research for the sake of both local villagers and incoming personnel. The PDRR team therefore decided to draft a map for the community. With limited internet access, they obtained the outline of the village from most-updated satellite imagery and started drawing a map from scratches. Employing a participatory approach, they engaged local key informants—also acting as host families—to map out community infrastructure, ownership, family size, location of each household, building materials used, and the extent of damage experienced during typhoon Haiyan (classified qualitatively into four different levels: intact, low, medium, high). They numbered all the 137 households on the map, linking each number to household information recorded in an electronic database. With enormous effort from the host families, the team finished the map within a span of 2 days. The created “Post-Haiyan Disaster Risk Map” was highly appreciated by the government of Sagay City, and the team handed over one of two copies to Mayor Alfrdo Maranon III for future use, and one to the ISL programme coordinator Mr. Allen V. Del Carmen for follow-up investigation.



Delegates and local villagers sketching the map at night



Final draft of the map

DISASTER RISK MAP.

Sagay Mayor Alfredo Maranon III and City Tourism Officer Helen Cutillar receives the Post-Yolanda Suyac Island Disaster Risk Map draft from Jonas Lossau, a German student in Scotland currently connected with the Chinese University of Hong Kong.

The map indicates the levels of vulnerability to disasters of all 38 homes in the island, which was among the worst-hit areas of the province at the height of Typhoons Yolanda and Basyang. It was made by Lossau's team after conducting a household survey as part of the activities of participants of the International Service-Learning engagement in the island on July 2-9. Forty-five Asian and Filipino students and participated in the Sagay community service.

KPNGANIBAN & AVDC Photos

Disaster risk mapping featured in local newspaper "Visayan Daily Star" on 16th July 2014

Meanwhile, in recognition of the deep-rooted fear and anxiety among local female adults, the team held two art therapy sessions. Their aim was to guide participants to perceive and vent their emotions through slow body movements along with light music. A total of 12 villagers joined the therapy sessions over two consecutive days.

The participants shared about their intense fear and anxiety experienced during Haiyan, the frustration when facing heavily damaged houses and hampered livelihood, as well as tension in daily life. They were especially emotional when touching upon memories of the time when Haiyan struck, but all participants reported that they felt less stressful after participating in the sessions. Due to the time limitation, this intervention reached only a very small portion of the needy in the 800-people community. To expand the reach of the intervention, sustain its potential benefit, and empower the local community, the team supported active participants in establishing a female mutual-support group named “Super Mama”. The formed group will promote mental wellbeing and hold regular art therapy sessions on Suyac Island. Soon after the establishment of “Super Mama”, the team provided simple training on the psychological basis of art therapy, proper design and structure, and ways to handle participants’ emotion.

Apart from specific work accomplished by each subgroup, the larger team contributed to the re-construction of the houses of 3 families who lost their shelter during the Haiyan calamity. A coastal cleanup event was also held to promote environmental protection and proper solid waste management, as well as to introduce to the community a sense of ownership over their natural environment. Over 40 villagers joined the delegates to clean the west coast of Suyac Island, and over 100kg of non-biodegradable rubbish was collected. In addition, Jonas and Peter also assisted in an organizational management workshop which aimed to help the “Fisher Folks”, a local fishermen association, to enhance their organizational structure and strategic plan. The workshop helped the Fisher Folks lay the foundation of a more sustainable and disaster-resilient livelihood in the future.



House construction in action [(From left to right) Jonas, Sam (a delegate from Silliman University in the

Philippines), Joseph (father of the house owner), and Peter.]



Photo taken after the coastal cleanup event

The experience in the ISL programme was remarkable for both Jonas and Peter. They believe that the team's work on Suyac was smooth and successful not only because of their expertise and experience, but also due to service-learners' deep immersion into the community. This was largely favoured by the prevalent openness, hospitality, and sense of ownership of the island among local villagers. Only with the immense contribution of the local community were the achievements possible.