

---

# Typhoon Haiyan: The Disaster-Relief-Recovery Cycle Must Be Broken



By , INSEAD Professor of Technology and Operations Management

**It's past time for the international humanitarian community to get serious about disaster mitigation and preparedness.**

Scanning the newspaper headlines this week, I'm glad to see that relief efforts finally seem to be gaining some ground in the Philippines following Typhoon Haiyan, which has reportedly taken thousands of lives and displaced up to four million people. For Haiyan survivors, this moment may mark the beginning of the end of their nightmare. But for the international humanitarian community, it perhaps should be seen as merely the start of the countdown to the next disaster.

## **Developing Nations at Greater Risk**

Whether or not you acknowledge climate change as a contributing factor, it's undeniable that natural disasters are occurring more frequently and with rising financial and human costs. From the world's richest country to some of the world's poorest, hardly any corner of the globe has been spared in recent years. But of course we know that in developing nations such as the

Philippines, there is less in the way of sturdy infrastructure and effective governance to protect the population when disaster strikes.

There isn't a country in the world that would have survived Haiyan, one of the most powerful storms ever recorded, unscathed. But even among developing countries, the Philippines appeared to be singularly ill-prepared. Even the nation's history with such storms – about 20 tropical cyclones pass through the Philippines each year – seemed to work against rather than boost preparedness. Leading up to 8 November, there seems to have been widespread denial of the fact that *this* storm was different from all the others, despite days of dire warnings. Lack of trust in local law enforcement to protect homes and businesses from looters apparently led many to ignore evacuation orders and remain in the storm's path.

### **The Struggle Ahead**

With US\$1 billion in aid already pledged, the sheer size of the Haiyan recovery effort will produce no shortage of difficulty, if history is a reliable guide. (I should point out that aid pledges have a way of failing to materialise.) Hundreds or even thousands of humanitarian organisations may eventually pour into the country (at one point, there were at least 10,000 NGOs on the ground in Haiti), no doubt replicating efforts and creating chaos as they jostle for resources such as trucks and helicopters. Bottlenecks at typhoon-devastated airports will block goods from getting to the neediest. President Aquino has already admitted the nation's disaster relief systems were knocked out by the storm, with the outcome being “a breakdown in power, a breakdown in communications, a breakdown in nearly everything.”

(This is why one should always donate cash to relief efforts, never goods. Post-disaster chaos often causes entire crates of potentially useful items to be blocked at the border for months, impeding resource flow, or tossed on the side of the road to become breeding grounds for vermin. Give money to good charities. Their aid workers will purchase what is needed.)

### **The Way Forward**

If there is one lesson to be learned from Haiti and now the Philippines, it's that we can't expect poor and, arguably, partly corrupt governments to put in place safeguards that would soften the blows inflicted by natural disasters. Though working with such governments is an inescapable fact of life for humanitarian organisations, I believe the way forward is to boost resilience

at the local level, working closely with those at highest risk.

For the international community, this would involve a drastic shift from a reactive cycle of disaster-relief-recovery (each stage more costly than necessary) to a proactive focus on preparedness. I would like to see humanitarian organisations working directly with community groups to teach local populations how to react better and prepare better. Even the NGOs themselves need training, which could be provided by prominent organisations with expertise in this area, such as the U.N. World Food Programme.

Risk mapping is an invaluable tool whose full potential is only just starting to be tapped. With it, NGOs and governments can simulate disaster scenarios and, while lives are not yet hanging in the balance, ask themselves the questions that make or break every major relief effort: Suppose a perfect storm hits here? What if the airport is damaged? How are we going to get supplies to the people who need them? Can we make sure goods and vehicles are ready and waiting in case of disaster?

### **Public-Private Preparedness**

These proactive measures lack the obvious urgency of relief efforts, and will consequently be more difficult for organisations to find funds for. Moreover, political will tends to flag when it comes to preparedness – it simply doesn't make for as striking a photo opportunity. But I believe corporations can make a positive intervention on both fronts, providing money as well as political pressure. Some companies can lend expertise as well, e.g. DHL has a team that specialises in de-bottlenecking airports. The private sector should be eager to participate, as companies stand to lose much from the chaos that follows a badly-prepared-for disaster.

The international media has been quick to compare the current situation in the Philippines to the 2011 Japan earthquake, where the government and populace maintained social order in the face of potential calamity. But a more apt model for the Philippines may be Guam, another developing nation in the path of Typhoon Alley, often praised for its climate-proof concrete dwellings. We cannot relieve the plight of poor nations overnight, but we can urge their people to – and empower them to – protect themselves, with full awareness that future disasters of this magnitude are more than just probable; they are already on the horizon.

*Luk Van Wassenhove is a Professor of Technology and Operations Management and The Henry Ford Chaired Professor of Manufacturing at INSEAD.*

Follow us on twitter [@INSEADKnowledge](https://twitter.com/INSEADKnowledge) or Facebook <https://www.facebook.com/Knowledge.insead>.

**Find article at**

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/economics-finance/typhoon-haiyan-disaster-relief-recovery-cycle-must-be-broken>