

Post-disaster resettlement in the Philippines: a risky strategy

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Experience in the Philippines following Typhoon Haiyan suggests that resettlement as a strategy for mitigating disaster-induced displacement can create significant protection risks.

In 2013, super Typhoon Haiyan hit the Philippines, displacing four million people. In the disaster's wake, the government announced that, given the country's exposure to typhoons, it would enforce 'no build zones' (NBZs) within 40 metres of the high water mark in all typhoon-affected areas. Those previously living in these areas would be prohibited from returning and rebuilding, and the government would implement a relocation and resettlement programme for them. The policy was in part targeted at overcrowded, informal settlements that had sprung up along the shoreline in urban areas like Tacloban City.

Due to insufficient advance planning and slow implementation, however, the NBZ policy and relocation programme has only served to prolong displacement and potentially increase the vulnerability of hundreds of thousands of primarily poor, landless households.

The majority of those displaced by the storm previously lived in huts and other forms of non-permanent housing adjacent to the sea (or in some cases, on stilts over it) that were obliterated by the typhoon's winds and storm surge. Having lost family members or neighbours in the storm, many want to be

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relocated to safer areas. However, while the NBZ policy was well-intentioned as a measure to protect vulnerable populations exposed to future typhoons and storm surges, it ran into legal obstacles and did not conform to human rights standards. It did not appear to be based on any law or regulation, and the 40-metre line seemed arbitrary, especially in the absence of any hazard risk mapping. In some places, the typhoon's storm surge travelled a kilometre inland, rendering the 40-metre delineation meaningless. The government has since revised the policy – in part due to advocacy by the Philippine Commission on Human Rights, humanitarian agencies and others – which now requires local authorities in affected municipalities to delineate high, moderate and low hazard risk zones based on hazard risk mapping and to include restrictions on the types of structures that can be built in these areas.

Another, more intractable, challenge is the enormous scale of the resettlement programme especially since many local government authorities charged with implementing resettlement lack the requisite human, technical and financial capacity. As proposed, this programme will involve the construction of 205,000 permanent homes across 116 municipalities and will affect approximately one million people. The primary challenge has been finding available, affordable land for resettlement, and it is not clear whether the selected sites will ultimately prove suitable for residential construction. At the handful of sites that have been approved for resettlement, bureaucratic delays, insufficient funding and limited political will threaten to slow and undermine the projects' success. The slow pace of identification of permanent resettlement sites has also impinged on the delivery of much-needed livelihood assistance which is generally tied to geographic location.

Making matters worse, in many municipalities in which the NBZ policy has been enforced, humanitarian actors were prohibited from providing assistance to displaced families who did return to these areas. Given the

poor conditions in evacuation centres and the lack of transitional shelter sites, it is understandable that many of the displaced chose to return to their former communities and reconstruct their homes despite the prohibition on rebuilding. The lack of humanitarian assistance has left many returnees more vulnerable to the next storm.

Moreover, where resettlement projects are moving forward, the primary approach has been to construct shelters on vacant, often remote plots of land regardless of the lack of access to utilities, social services and livelihoods. Displaced families selected for resettlement are concerned that the remote location of the sites will limit their access to jobs and schools, and dislocate them from urban centres and community life. Relocation is also taking place in the absence of public transportation systems or subsidies for private transport that would allow resettled families to work or access jobs, schools, hospitals or other social services. On the positive side, several resettlement projects have promised security of land tenure. Other municipalities have rejected this approach as they fear that beneficiaries will sell their new homes and move elsewhere.

UN agencies and other international and local humanitarian organisations engaged in the typhoon response ran into difficulties navigating the NBZ policy and resettlement programme especially where municipalities were prohibiting them from providing assistance to those who had returned to NBZs. Undoubtedly, the main cause of confusion was the government's lack of clarity regarding implementation of the NBZ policy and relocation programme. Ultimately, the UN humanitarian country team (HCT) developed guidance regarding the provision of assistance to people residing in NBZs and to help shelter agencies decide whether or not to become involved in the relocation and resettlement process, given the inherent risks. Given that those affected by the NBZ policy were among the most vulnerable, a stronger, more unified approach by the HCT was needed from the outset.

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The post-Haiyan resettlement programme will require long-term monitoring. Meanwhile, both governments and shelter agencies must think beyond physically relocating people to empty plots of land in remote areas; an alternative, for example, could be the use of 'in-filling' in urban areas. In Tacloban City, several organisations are implementing more flexible shelter solutions, such as identifying plots or structures in the existing urban landscape to accommodate displaced families through the construction of multi-storey housing, instituting landlord-tenant arrangements, and the like.

Resettlement is a long process that in most post-disaster scenarios will outlast the presence of humanitarian actors. Where people are being prevented from returning pending resettlement, people will not only be displaced for longer periods but also face increased protection risks. In the case of Typhoon Haiyan, the remaining one million people or so who are either still displaced or are living in makeshift shelters in 'unsafe areas' are testimony to this.

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