

Government employees are also human beings

Four months after Typhoon Yolanda, government workers feel neglected and public services are still in disarray. From administrative personnel to teachers and health workers, public sector employees are facing high expectations amid precarious working conditions and lack of government support. They have to cope with their own loss and deprivation even as they are expected to deliver quality public services and rebuild the communities they serve.

On November 8, 2013, Super Typhoon Haiyan, also known as Yolanda in the Philippines, made its landfall in the Philippines. It is one of the most powerful typhoons ever recorded -- and one of the deadliest. At least 6,201 individuals were reported dead, 28,626 were injured, and 1,785 are still missing based on the latest official count released on January 29 by the government. At least 16 million people are believed to have been affected by the super typhoon, more than a quarter of which have been displaced.

Four months after Yolanda, the public sector is still suffering in Visayas. Things are in no way normal, and improvement is hard to find. The streets and offices are still filled with debris, homes have not been rebuilt, and under the rubbles are bodies still being discovered.

From administrative personnel to teachers and health workers, public sector employees are facing high expectations amid precarious working conditions and lack of government support. They have to cope with their own loss and deprivation even as they are expected to rebuild public services and respond to the needs of the communities they serve.



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Buildings destroyed

Yolanda ravaged Visayas with heavy rains and strong winds with a speed that went up to as high as 315 kilometers per hour (195 mph) -- said to be approximately the speed of a single-propeller aircraft. It also brought about storm surges that engulfed entire towns and flattened buildings and other infrastructure.

More than 3,000 public schools were damaged by the super typhoon according to the Department of Education (DepEd). San Jose National High School and San Joaquin Central School lost several of their classrooms to Yolanda.



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Even the sturdy buildings of the National Maritime Polytechnic (NMP), the only maritime training center for Filipinos that is publicly operated, were no match to its strength. The NMP's dormitories, administration buildings and training facilities were all heavily damaged by Yolanda. It will take at least 200 million pesos to fix the damages to their facilities alone.



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Classes resume but nothing is normal

On January 6, public schools were re-opened again and classes resumed. Makeshift learning spaces were built for students in some schools. The resumption of classes is seen to help bring a sense of normalcy to 'Yolanda'-hit areas.



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However, many schools still need to be cleaned and repaired. Loose ceilings, rooms filled with debris, protruding nails, broken chairs, and lack of functional latrines and potable water are just some of the hazards that pose serious threats to the health and safety of both teachers and students. Lack of instructional materials also hinders learning.



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“It does not look like a school, it’s full of debris. You can see debris everywhere,” says Vincente Ho Oquino II, teacher at San Jose National High School and interim president of the Eastern Visayas Teachers Association (EVITA).



“We are having a difficult time teaching our students now. We don’t have sufficient classrooms, we don’t have books and materials. We cannot give the students activities. They don’t have the resources, they don’t have access to internet, they don’t have books. This is really challenging for us as teachers.”



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Teachers given make-up kits, no cash assistance from DepEd

A total of 14,000 teaching and non-teaching personnel in Eastern Visayas were affected by super typhoon Yolanda.

Schools have already resumed operations during the first week of January but teachers have yet to receive the cash assistance promised them by the DepEd. "I expected that our government and DepEd in particular would assist our personnel. As of now I haven't experienced any assistance," says Ernesto Jr. Pido Liwanag, teacher and member of the faculty organization.

Weeks after the typhoon, the DepEd and the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) distributed make-up kits to teachers in a bid to make them "feel good" and boost their morale. Loradel Esquierdo, a secondary school teacher and member of PSLINK is unhappy with the DepEd's efforts.

"If DepEd is really serious about helping us recover after Yolanda, they should assist us in getting back on our feet through financial and livelihood assistance," says Esquierdo. "The government should also improve our pay and working conditions. That is the only way they can boost our morale at this time."



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Public buildings used as housing

Public schools are commonly used as evacuation centers during disasters owing to the absence of real evacuation facilities in the country. This practice most often than not leads to disruption of classes and vandalism or destruction of school properties.

Nearly four months after the typhoon, school buildings continue to house displaced families.

Classes have resumed in Rizal Central School even if it is still being used as an evacuation center.



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Families have to live together in small, poorly ventilated classrooms in Rizal Central School. In this classroom alone, 9 families or 35 individuals are cramped together as they have nowhere else to go.



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Some government employees are also staying in their respective agencies because they lost their homes. At the Fiber Industry Development Authority office, one of the workers who is a lone breadwinner and whose home was destroyed stays in the office with her children. A number of employees are also temporarily living in the NMP like Rhea Hilda Peru.

“Up to 20 employees had to stay here in NMP after Yolanda” says Rhea. “Now there are just 10 of us still here. It is good that the management has allowed us to stay here.”



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Power lacking at government offices

The Department of Science and Technology-Information and Communications Technology (DOST-ICTO) is located near the port area. The workers try to get things back to normal but without power, they cannot do much.

“We cannot work. We come in here early and we go home early,” says Jaime Cadindoy, former president of the telecommunication office employees association and member of PSLINK.

“We have to work even if there is a calamity. As government workers, we have obligations to fulfill.”



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No equipment, no supplies

At the National Police Commission (NAPOLCOM) the personnel have just moved to a new office early February. "Our previous office was heavily damaged. We cannot work here because we have no equipment, we have no supplies," says Alicia Pardinias, president of the National Police Commission Region Eight Employees Association (NAREEMA).

Joel Campo, president of the National Maritime Polytechnic Services Association (NMPSA) and national executive board member of PSLINK says their office has resumed administrative operations but due to the damage to their equipment and dormitory facilities, conduct of trainings has been seriously hampered.

"We are slowly reviving our operations here. We need to because a lot of people depend on NMP being the only public maritime training institution in the country. It will be hard for us though to compete with the private training centers since a lot of our equipment was severely damaged by the typhoon."



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Union office, documents not spared

Even the employee's union facilities were not spared from the typhoon's wrath.

The union office of NMPSA was totally destroyed by the typhoon. It is located in the dormitory where the students of the National Maritime Polytechnic used to live.



“Most of our files were here. Our documents got totally soaked in water, and some of it cannot be recovered anymore,” says Joel.



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Public sector workers in double jeopardy

During disasters, expectations from government workers run high as people rely on public services to recover and rebuild their lives. In Tacloban however, government employees find it difficult to do their jobs as they are also in dire need of assistance themselves.

Some have had their houses and cars totally destroyed like Rowena M. Estoque, head teacher at San Jose National High School and an affiliate of PSLINK. A tiny section of what used to be their floor is all that remains of her home.



A week after Yolanda, Rowena and her family decided to flee to Manila. They did not receive any food or relief in Tacloban. “We did not receive any help from the government then,” says Rowena. “To this day we have not received a single penny.”



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Alicia had her house destroyed by the strong storm surge brought by Yolanda. She and her niece barely escaped the house and survived.



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“Nobody cares for us”

A lesser known incident as a result of Yolanda -- but which has turned into a disaster itself -- was the oil spill in Estancia, Iloilo. It has forced the evacuation of thousands of residents and contaminated the coast and mangroves posing serious health and environmental hazards to the communities affected.



Jeremias Gabion works as an instructor in Northern Iloilo Polytechnic State College and is the faculty association president. He served as one of the volunteers when their university was turned into an evacuation center. Like the rest of his co-teachers, he has not received any assistance because he is a public sector employee. He laments the lack of support for public servants like him.

“Nobody cares for us. We didn’t receive anything from the aid agencies. Even the DSWD has not given us anything. They said we are government workers, we are already paid monthly salaries, so we don’t need any help. They gave everybody else assistance, but they never gave us anything. That is really unfair because we are all victims. Disasters don’t choose their victims. We also lost our homes, our properties. We all suffered from the typhoon and the oil spill so why aren’t they giving us any assistance?”



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Acts of bravery

The Eastern Visayas Regional Medical Center (EVRMC) is the only regional teaching and training hospital in the area and is managed by the Department of Health (DOH). It is strategically located in the middle of Leyte and Samar and is most accessible to the Region VIII population. Because of its proximity to the shoreline, the hospital was severely flooded, its buildings sustained varying degrees of damage, and most of its medical equipment broke down. The hospital also lost power and water when the typhoon hit Tacloban.

“Most striking was the damage that was brought to our lifelines, specifically our water source and our electrical power,” recounts Dr. Aileen Riel Espina, Chief of Clinic at the EVRMC. “Our desalination plant, which is our water source, was totally damaged. And our two generator sets, which would have been our source of electricity, were also drowned. So after the storm the hospital had no power, no electricity, no water, had very limited food supply, and most of our drugs, medicines and other medical supplies were washed out because our supply section was located very near to the sea.”



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Despite the challenges, the hospital did not have any casualties. Dr. Aileen attributes this to the dedication of all their employees.

“All our patients, all 331 of them, were able to survive, and our personnel who were on duty numbering around 70 were also unharmed. The hospital continued operations, despite its meager resources, and we were able to cater to thousands of patients in the following days. What made the hospital resilient in the face of all these was the dedication of our staff. They did not abandon ship. They continued their duties, even if it was already 48 hours, 72 hours for some, and some even went on duty for four straight days.”



One of the hospital personnel reported for work even with the destruction of her house and the lack of transportation. “We have our resident physician an OBGYN,” Aileen says. “She lost her house. She walked all the way to Ormoc City which is 110 kilometers away so that she could bring her son and her husband to safety. Then she reported back for duty.”

“We have lots of stories of doctors, nurses, personnel, who reported for work because our services were needed for the restoration of power in the hospital. We have a lot of tales of bravery, a lot of tales of heroism among our staff, and indeed I can say that the hospital was resilient because of the staff.”



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Public servants among the dead

In a mass graveyard in front of the church in Barangay San Joaquin, Palo, Leyte, a man stands beside a temporary grave marker made of cardboard. Written on it are the names of all the relatives he had lost due to the typhoon.



His name is Pedro Lacandazo. He had lost 22 family members when the “tsunami-like” storm surges brought by Yolanda swept through Palo, Leyte. Among them were his wife and five children. Three worked as school teachers.

On the cross marking the grave lay a pile of paper. “Students continue to come here and leave messages of gratitude to their teachers,” Pedro says. “Please tell our story to the world so that they would know what really happened.”



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Emotional trauma lingers on

Located just south of Tacloban City, Palo, Leyte is one of the worst hit areas by Yolanda with at least 800 people confirmed dead.

Barangay Chairman Papoose Lantajo, Jr. of San Joaquin, Palo, Leyte breaks into tears while recounting how residents continued to die days after Yolanda struck because all of their rescue equipment at the village council had been swept away by the storm surges brought by the typhoon.



“After the waves came, there were so many people who were still alive there. But no rescue came. I sometimes hear them at night, they were shouting for help. But we couldn’t do anything. We were using only one rope. We were hungry. We had no sleep. Choppers were just flying above us, taking pictures. We didn’t have flashlights, we didn’t have anything. Debris were so many. We heard people crying, babies crying. We rescued more than 20 people. We could have saved more lives.”



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First to respond, last to be served

Dr. Aileen Riel Espina, Chief of Clinic at the EVRMC and former president of the employees association, describes the pressures on government workers as first responders.

“We were expected to be the responders, we were expected to do our job, continue working. You know, for me it was so difficult. I had to evacuate my children to Manila, and I could just have taken the easy way out and just stayed in Manila. But I had this sense of duty that I had to come back. I had to leave my children.”

She is dismayed at how government workers are treated during times of crisis.

“Some of us have not been able to fix our homes yet because we are in the hospital almost 24/7 already, and it is very sad because everybody is talking about the people who are living there, but nobody seems to realize that the government employees especially the health workers, also need to be helped, because we too are victims of disasters. It may seem to appear that we are okay, because we are still working, but in reality, in truth and in fact, we have also lost a lot.”



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“We are also human beings”

Nilo Gravoso who teaches at Cirilo National High School stands atop a field of debris where his home once stood. His home was totally washed out during the super typhoon. He has reported back to work when classes in public schools resumed last January but he continues to struggle to provide for the needs of his own family.



Because of the meager pay he receives as a public school teacher he had taken out loans to support his tricycle business. But Yolanda has destroyed not only his home but also his other sources of extra income.

“People expect us to do our jobs properly but we are also human beings. How can we deliver good services if we are struggling to survive ourselves? How can we focus if we are bothered by so many other things and concerned with the security of our own family? We can’t give our 100% in our work because we also need help. My salary as a teacher was already not enough to support my family before Yolanda and now everything we had was taken away from us. The government needs to help its workers recover too so we can perform our jobs effectively.”



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Special role in the community

Eric John B. Estoque feels that government workers seem to have been left out in the rebuilding process.

Eric is a public school teacher who also moonlights as a medical technologist in a hospital at night to augment his income. Both the school and the hospital he works in were severely damaged by the typhoon with all their equipment destroyed. Eric doesn't see the assistance to the schools as adequate.



“As teachers we have a special role in the community,” he says. “We are the ones who mold the character of the students, and we are the ones in charge of giving them a good future. Though there is support coming from international and local NGOs, it is not enough for us to rebuild again, so that we can perform our duty and special role in the community.”



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Roofless, but not hopeless

Four months after Yolanda, the devastation it left behind is still very much visible everywhere. A lot of cleaning up needs to be done and the disaster is certainly far from over.

Amid the rubbles though are signs saying “Tindog” or “Bangon” (rise up or stand up). People are starting to repair and rebuild their homes. Children are playing and laughing on the streets again. Students are attending classes in schools. And workers are back on their jobs making a living for their families and reinvigorating the local economy.



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‘Build back better’ impossible without quality public services

‘Build back better’ has become the latest mantra nowadays. Instead of merely helping Yolanda-hit communities recover and rebuild, President Benigno Aquino III vowed that the government would also make sure that the new structures to be built will be more resilient to disasters.

Joel, PSLINK executive board member, believes that government workers play a critical role in rebuilding communities affected by disasters. He calls on the current administration to prioritize building quality public services.

“The government can only ‘build back better’ by investing in quality public services. And quality public services can only be achieved if the government will provide us enough support and ensure decent work for all its employees. We want to serve our people. We believe Tacloban will rise again.”



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