

# The Filipino Aid Workers of Typhoon Yolanda

A Commemorative Feature







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## Introduction

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Four years since Typhoon Yolanda (internationally known as Typhoon Haiyan) made landfall on Philippine shores, much has been said about the massive material and emotional devastation it caused thousands of people in the Central Philippines. With over 6,000 reported casualties, the survivors can hardly be called lucky. To this day, many have yet to fully recover, living in transitional shelters and poorly furnished resettlement areas with limited access to basic services such as clean water and stable electricity.

Typhoon Yolanda brought with it a maelstrom of multilayered experiences to unravel, at times painful lessons to learn, and challenging questions to answer. Yolanda unmasked the complex social and economic issues of disaster vulnerabilities—valuable work that continues to this day.

Four years later, this feature pays tribute to Filipino humanitarian workers who were among the first responders and integral actors in rebuilding the communities devastated by Typhoon Yolanda. Together with hundreds of expatriates flown in by international aid agencies, these local aid workers were on the ground from the very beginning. Witnesses to the worst of the

aftermath, they were at the very forefront of disaster intervention, delivering the most needed assistance to thousands displaced by the typhoon.

In the Typhoon Yolanda response, global humanitarian organizations gave unprecedented attention to the information and communication needs of affected communities. They recruited Filipino humanitarian workers to do technology and communications work for international aid agencies, speaking to affected communities in their own language, piloting new innovations in the field, and taking on tremendous emotional labor. We highlight the stories of eight such local tech and communications workers here.

These eight Filipino aid workers were among the ones hired to manage community feedback projects and geospatial mapping initiatives to support the response and recovery programs of foreign aid agencies, as well as local and national government. Their work was crucial in leveraging the potential of digital technologies to enhance community engagement in the context of disaster management and recovery.

They come from different international humanitarian organizations and diverse professional backgrounds.



Some are survivors of Yolanda themselves, their disaster recovery work intertwining with personal journeys of recovery, damaged homes and lost livelihood. Others never would have imagined entering humanitarian work, but eventually found their calling in this path.

What they did have in common was bearing witness to the efforts of survivors to cope with and recover from Yolanda's devastation. They listened to stories of trauma, lost loved ones, and faced uncertain futures. Their presence brought a glimmer of hope to communities that were entirely wiped out or displaced.

The questions we ask them are meant to unpack their unique stories as Filipino aid workers serving disaster-affected communities. They define what it means to do "meaningful work," recount their most memorable experiences in the field, and unburden their frustrations, dreams, and professional aspirations. They reflect on the current and future state of humanitarian work, the opportunities that digital technologies present to them and to their organizations, and the potential of fully utilized digital technologies to make a real difference.

This feature is part of our broader endeavor to bring to light on key learnings on how engagement with

local communities can advance the humanitarian accountability agenda. It is our hope that sharing these stories will contribute to the inclusion and participation of affected communities in the full development of humanitarian projects.

More than just personal portraits, these stories attempt to create and fuel conversations around how the sector can support and empower local humanitarian workers. It is an invitation, an open space to reflect on the ways we can improve the conditions in aid work by understanding digital technologies in the humanitarian sector through their contexts of production, and through the eyes of aid workers themselves.

We invite you to let this diversity of voices be heard. What do you see? What do you hear? And more importantly, how will you respond? These stories—and these questions—rest in your hands, as does this book.

Listen, read, and reflect. Turn the page, and let's begin.

## About Our Research: Digital Humanitarian Projects in the Yolanda Response

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Following the declaration of State of Calamity due to the immense destruction brought by Typhoon Yolanda, the United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator declared a Level 3 system-wide humanitarian response. The country received tremendous assistance from the international community and humanitarian agencies. Many of the cash and non-cash donations and pledges were granted through international humanitarian organizations and some local NGOs. The UN immediately released US\$500 million, with foreign governments, private corporations, and various NGO fundraising initiatives pledging more in the coming weeks and months. The rapid deployment of 450 international staff accompanied the large-scale recruitment of local first responders in order to quickly fill aid agency teams that could address affected communities' basic needs for food, shelter, and livelihood.

International humanitarian organizations' response to Typhoon Yolanda is notable for its high investment on accountability initiatives, emphasizing the importance of communication and engagement with affected communities to attain operational success.

International aid agencies employed different channels of communication with affected communities. These ranged from house and community visits by agency staff to community consultations, suggestion and complaint boxes, help desks, and SMS hotlines. Information and communication technology became a handy tool for INGOs, not only for the dissemination of information, but also for gathering and analyzing feedback and complaints from communities about how aid was disbursed to them. "Closing the feedback loop" and #commisaid (communication is aid) became the

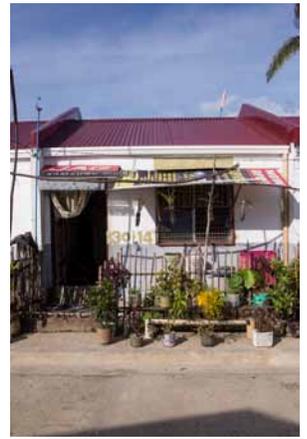
emerging buzzwords and evidence of an accountability and participation agenda in the Yolanda response.

Apart from communication technologies, international humanitarian organizations also utilized geospatial mapping software in their response and recovery programs. In the absence of community data maps, specialists in geospatial mapping located crucial spaces suitable for housing projects.

Filipino humanitarian workers were in the best position to translate and execute these initiatives, due to their proximity to local communities and understanding of political and social contexts.

Some of them were team leaders on programs revolving around humanitarian accountability, involving a great deal of interagency coordination. They handled the design and execution of activities and advocacies aimed at communicating with communities (CwC) and accountability to affected people (AAP). Others were specialists, experts with technical knowledge of computer programming or geographic information systems (GIS). Some were high-level specialists who provided technical input in programming, or more junior computer programmers who ran the day-to-day operations of digital platforms. Finally, feedback officers, encoders and surveyors helped collect, encode and organize information and complaints from communities.

Researchers in the British Council-funded Newton Tech4Dev Network met with these "techie aid workers" during their fieldwork and learned from their specific struggles and experiences. In the next pages, you'll get to know more about the stories of Filipino techie aid workers.





# John Vergel Briones

## **Tell us a bit about your background and how you got into humanitarian work.**

I am a nurse by profession. I worked in my hometown's provincial hospital without pay for a year. No one can survive on thankless volunteerism, so I started taking on online work for foreign clients. By late 2012 to 2013, I had quit my hospital job and was working as a full-time web content writer and social media manager for several US-based companies.

Typhoon Yolanda hit in 2013. While I am one of the lucky ones to survive without a scratch, basic services were inaccessible in the typhoon's wake. We had no water, electricity, nor internet. I lost my livelihood. My relationship and reputation with my clients was ruined. It would take me a while to rebuild my business to what it was before, so I applied for a nursing job in Saudi Arabia, but my work visa got delayed. So I decided to apply to one of the many NGOs offering short-term employment in the city. Thankfully, my skillset allowed me the opportunity to work as a Communications with Communities (CwC) Assistant for the International Organization for Migration.

I became the Regional Coordinator for the Common Services Project, which promoted humanitarian transparency and accountability in Yolanda-affected areas. I led a team that gathered community feedback, promoted two-way communication between NGOs and the affected populace, and tried to shape the overall humanitarian response based on what the communities were saying. I was hooked. I loved the social aspect of this type of work and the influence an organization can have in improving people's lives.

## **What were your unexpected challenges in championing the priorities of affected communities?**

When communities repeatedly said they needed a different kind of aid or that they needed a fairer criteria in beneficiary selection, we listened and escalated these concerns to the relevant agencies. But we received either of two answers: "We can't change our implementation because we are in the final stretch of our activities," and/or "This is how our donors want it done." Sometimes I wonder, if agencies remain inflexible because of donor mandates, aid provided by donors may not be maximized or even utilized by communities. It becomes a lose-lose situation for everyone. The voice of the accountability team is the voice of the people, but sometimes I felt like no one was listening.

## **What do you think is your main achievement as a humanitarian worker?**

When it comes to humanitarian accountability, I like to think my biggest achievement is educating our communities that NGOs are not faceless, blameless institutions.

I take pride in empowering communities by showing them the standards to which NGOs should be held accountable; enabling them to become critical of humanitarian efforts and to speak out against inefficiency and unfairness.

# Janeen Kim Cayetano

## **What is your favorite experience as a humanitarian worker?**

I became a humanitarian worker by accident. I was working as a student assistant to my professor, who asked me if I wanted to be part of a Yolanda-related project in Tacloban. Without hesitation, I immediately agreed. I found my niche in conducting community action plans, helping local communities map out damaged social services and resources, determining hazards and risk areas, and planning the relocation of households and resources to better, safer areas.

## **How was your experience introducing geospatial mapping to affected communities?**

Geospatial mapping can be a powerful tool for local communities to collaborate with humanitarian organizations and improve how they provide help and support. Communities are already familiar with paper maps. They have deep

local spatial knowledge and can draw basic community maps using just points, lines and polygons. Our goal is to enhance that knowledge of mapping to geospatial mapping.

In one of our projects, we skipped paper maps and jumped into creating digital maps. Majority of adults and youth already use smartphones and apps. Catholic Relief Services introduced an easy-to-use, customized mobile app for community members to plot key infrastructures, evacuation centers, hazards, and risks. These maps are now the primary information basis for local governments to design inclusive evacuation routes/centers, effective early warning systems, and preposition relief goods.

Participatory mapping at the community level is a collective expression, an opportunity to think spatially about their environment and literally put their community on the map. It creates a sense of belonging and ownership of the

process, leading to empowerment and sustainable development.

## **You have been responding to the GIS needs of programs in Africa and other countries. If given the chance, would you consider being internationally deployed to do humanitarian work?**

Yes of course! It would be an honor to be deployed internationally to help other countries especially during emergency response. First, working in cultures different than the Philippines can be fascinating and rewarding, not only did I get to see the world but I also get the opportunity to make a difference. Second, this can help me to expose myself to and learn about different scenarios. But I also have to consider that being deployed to do humanitarian work in other countries means being away from my family and of course, the risk of being deployed in a place you're not familiar with.



# David Garcia

**You recently finished your MSc degree in University College London. How was your experience studying abroad?**

The MSc in Geospatial Analysis gave me a chance to investigate and articulate in better ways the different challenges and opportunities provided by geospatial mapping when it comes to management of risk and disaster vulnerabilities. The program equipped us with theoretical and practical tools that can improve how I effectively and efficiently work. They taught us tools in programming and data science. Also, it was a pleasure to study in the department where the first PhD dissertation on Geographic Information Systems (GIS) was submitted.

The experience in London was also very heartwarming because I finally met key individuals who helped us remotely during the Yolanda response. Days before the arrival of the typhoon, individuals from the Humanitarian OpenStreetMap Team (HOT) organized global mapathons (crowdsourced mapping) for areas that were to be hit by the typhoon. Hundreds of volunteers were mapping the Philippines to help prepare geospatial information for disaster response, recovery, and reconstruction. It was very pleasant to meet such individuals, and to contribute to their new project called Missing Maps, which is about mapping vulnerable communities through crowdsourcing.

**Can you tell us a bit about your page called Mapmaker? Why did you create the page?**

I wanted to share interesting things about geography with as many people as possible. I think it's because of two things: first, an open philosophy about geography and what geographers should do; and second, a personal belief that mapping is about making an argument. On the first point, I think that the "spatialists" (geographers, planners, mapmakers, geographic information scientists, etc.) should reach out to the general public and show the value of looking and acting upon the world in way that is more sensitive to spatial realities. My second point is about how to do that – by persuading people. Mapping is not just about the art, science, design, or communication; it's about making a point.

One of the arguments that I've been repeating in Mapmaker (and in other channels) was that mapping shows us that there are no completely safe areas in the Philippines; there are only places of varying risks and vulnerabilities. I've observed that huge swaths of relocation sites have been built in remote locations because the coastline is "unsafe". But the decisions behind such relocation project often miss the fact that by merely moving communities from one place to another, then risks and vulnerabilities are merely shifted geographically. If you visit the relocation sites, then you will observe that there is a lack of water, power, and

A man with dark hair, glasses, and a mustache is looking intently at a laptop screen. He is wearing a dark blue button-down shirt. The background is a warm, dimly lit cafe or office space with shelves of books and framed pictures. The lighting is soft and focused on the man and his work.

opportunities. That situation can merely increase risks and vulnerability and not reduce them. I've seen so much suffering and failures in the relocation sites, and I'd like the maps to convince people and politicians to think, decide, and act in a better way with respect to disasters.

**What is meaningful work for you?**

I found meaningful work in making maps with the communities that were severely affected by the disaster. Usually, mapping initiatives are done in a top-down manner. Geospatial analysts collect satellite imagery, run models, design digital maps, and post the maps in a web portal. These initiatives often fail to take local knowledge and needs into account while also making it harder for communities to access information due to limited access to internet and electricity.

From my experience and my studies, I learned to make maps not just in a technical way but in a manner that is more sensitive to the communities' struggles. With their specific experiences in mind, I can help improve local government's exercises on post disaster planning by connecting the "top-down" and "bottom-up" approaches in designing maps that facilitate good decisions-making. More importantly, I hope that we left the communities with usable, trustable, and durable maps that they can call their own.



M/V EVA JOCELYN





# Aivon Guanco

## **Was this your dream job?**

I grew up immersed in community service, volunteering in church, being part of a community, and organizing community events. My interest in community work grew when I became SK Chairman of my community for six years. When I got involved with World Vision as a volunteer in college, I realized there was more to community work. I volunteered for a year until I found a work opportunity with a local organization supported by World Vision.

I really love engaging with communities. I always think, what can I bring to people? What can I share? Getting to know people in a community—their stories, their context, and their capacities—is something that is beautiful. I feel that I am listened to and I wanted to give back the same.

**What are the most important skills you've gained as a local humanitarian worker, managing humanitarian accountability projects?**

Communication, coordination, and partnerships have expanded my horizons, my creativity and flexibility. Managing community feedback and complaints is a key skill that I learned from two major emergency responses, Typhoon Yolanda and the Nepal earthquake. It is more than a system or an approach. It requires patience, composure, and courage.

## **How was your first experience at an international humanitarian event and learning from aid experts from different countries?**

My first international training on communicating with disaster-affected communities was in Bangkok.

On the first day, I felt overwhelmed and insecure, as participants from other countries seemed very experienced and outspoken. I wrote to my mentor/coach telling her how overwhelmed I was. I felt that I was not meant for this group. My mentor said, "What you feel is normal. Give yourself time to warm up to the discussion."

She advised me to sit with other participants during breakfast, lunch and dinner to immerse myself. She was right. I learned from their experience, their personal stories, their own context. Talking to my co-participants opened the gateway for understanding, appreciation, and friendship. I am blessed to know people from other countries who appreciated what Filipinos can do.

Learning from expats happened every day after Yolanda. Reporting to bosses of several nationalities tested my flexibility and communication skills. I enjoyed the exchange of ideas, their outspokenness, directness, and openness to transfer skills, mentor, and guide. Not everyone has good stories about expats, but I consider myself truly blessed to have learned from the humanitarian workers I worked with.

# Angelo Melencio

## **How did you start advocating for accountability in the humanitarian sector?**

Most of my emergency response experience before Typhoon Yolanda is in monitoring, evaluation, and accountability. So during the Typhoon Yolanda response, they expected me to help in the monitoring and evaluation of programs and setting up accountability mechanisms. I saw that I could greatly help in the aspect of establishing feedback mechanisms for accountability. At first, it seems like an advocacy for me for people to see the importance and prioritize accountability to affected populations. For instance, whenever I am deployed in humanitarian response, I insist to establish help desks where people can approach if they have questions or complaints. And then eventually there were developments. From help desk, we then have feedback survey, and then eventually SMS hotlines, and a team dedicated to handle accountability work.

## **How does the introduction of digital technologies affect the future of humanitarian work?**

Technology ultimately helped us become better humanitarians. Poimapper, the app we use for rapid needs assessment, has been very helpful because we are able to collect, consolidate, analyze, and report data faster and more accurately especially in a post-disaster context where everything seems fast-paced and help is urgent. Then you have the Frontline SMS that helps us manage community feedback. I felt that the tools were useful in bringing making community participation more extensive and meaningful. But we should be wary to if we come to point where we eventually realize

that we are overwhelmed with all the digital technologies – and we go back to realizing that what is important is that we get the job effectively and timely with less complexity. The challenge is to ensure that these solutions are community-led for them to be usable, scaleable, and eventually, sustainable.

## **What was the highlight of your experience working in a humanitarian accountability project?**

The highlight of my career as a Consortium Manager was hearing people in affected communities speak out about their issues, helping their voices reach government and the humanitarian community, then witnessing them take action to address these concerns. These people taught me that community empowerment is not just possible in a humanitarian context; it is the only way for a community to truly recover.







# Jerby Santo

## **Tell us a bit about your background and why you entered humanitarian work.**

I worked in radio, advertising/marketing, print and new media. On the side, I do cultural work developing grassroots music around this region. I was in Cambodia doing social media and digital marketing when Yolanda happened. My parents endured the storm by themselves and our house was partially destroyed. I felt I had to come home and help rebuild Tacloban and Leyte. So I helped spearhead fundraisers for response and recovery projects. Then an opportunity arose to work in an INGO, managing a technology initiative during the Yolanda response.

## **What were the unexpected challenges you experienced in doing techie aid work?**

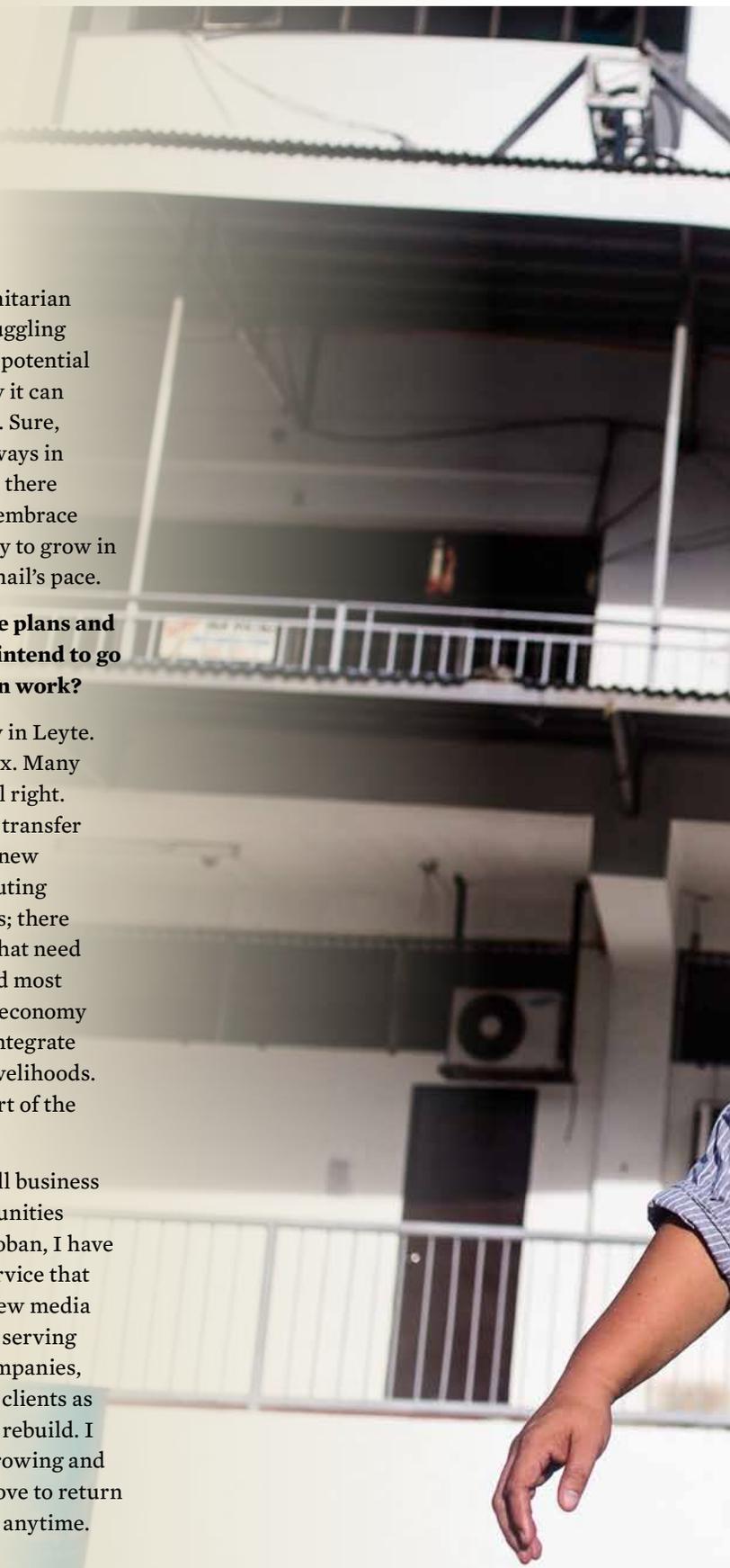
When we were introduced to the initiative, everyone of us in the team was like, “Wow this is a good project but only up to February?” There was a feeling of exasperation because the project would not last long. Sometimes when I see innovations that have short shelf life, I ask, why did we have to start this initiative in the first place? The exiting strategy was a challenge: how to turn it over and to make sure that it would still benefit the local community.

I think the humanitarian community is still struggling to understand the full potential of technology and how it can be integrated with aid. Sure, there have been headways in this regard, but unless there is a vigorous effort to embrace technology, its capacity to grow in this field will be at a snail's pace.

## **What are your future plans and aspirations? Do you intend to go back to humanitarian work?**

I feel like I should stay in Leyte. We still have a lot to fix. Many people think we are all right. But people have yet to transfer to permanent houses; new communities are sprouting in disaster-prone areas; there are Yolanda orphans that need to be taken care of; and most importantly, the local economy needs to be able to reintegrate those who lost their livelihoods. I am hoping to be a part of the reconstruction.

Now I have a small business in underserved communities around Leyte. In Tacloban, I have a hybrid marketing service that does traditional and new media promotions. I am only serving two medium-sized companies, but I hope to get more clients as Tacloban continues to rebuild. I hope I can continue growing and serve more areas. I'd love to return to humanitarian work anytime.





# Arnold Salvador

**You've been doing humanitarian and development work for almost 10 years. What made you decide to pursue this career path?**

I've known World Vision since I was seven years old because I was one of their sponsored children in our barangay. It is just a small village with 80 households. I was raised in a community where most of us were at the receiving end of development programs on poverty alleviation. Then when I was in high school, I volunteered to become a youth leader. Then I took Education in college. Luckily I received a scholarship. So I was studying while volunteering for World Vision. So you see, this kind of work already marked in my heart. I committed myself to it. At first it was a challenge because I needed to support my siblings who were studying at that time and you don't get big a salary in development work especially when you're just starting. But I could not see myself doing other jobs except helping impoverished communities through development and humanitarian work. I could relate to them because in some ways I've been through what they are experiencing.

**Can you recall a memorable experience with someone from community you helped? Why is this person memorable to you?**

I think her name is Maria. She is from North Cebu. We were in their barangay to assist in the unconditional cash transfer program. It was a big barangay. There were a lot of people because there was an ongoing distribution. I was there to manage the help desk. In the middle of the crowd, Maria suddenly appeared and said to me, "I need to talk to you. These people lining up for

the help desk, we have the same problem. We were excluded because the barangay [village] failed to take us into account when they were listing beneficiaries. I hope you can include us in the beneficiary list." She's memorable because I could feel how persistent and enthusiastic she was during that time. At first, you won't notice her because it was really crowded. Then there she was, going out of her comfort zone and mustering the courage to speak not only for herself but also for her neighbors who were also excluded from help. I listened to her and asked what we could do to resolve the issue. She told us she's willing to help the barangay reevaluate the beneficiary list. So she went to meet the barangay council and assisted them in validating the beneficiary list. So you see, Maria did not just stop there and even offered herself to help. We should acknowledge that these people are not there to ask for support but they themselves have a lot of potential to be part of the solution.

**Can you share to us the most important lesson you learned through the years of your community work?**

Put people at the core of what you're doing. Sometimes there are a lot of things that would distract you but I always go back to the reason why I'm doing this work – it is the communities we work with. Listen to them because they are the only reason why we are here in the first place. They give meaning to what I am doing.





# Mikko Tamura

## **How was your experience working in a UN agency?**

Working in a UN agency, especially in a disaster/post disaster response, allowed me to grow beyond the limits of my capabilities. It allowed me to know what I wanted and to what extent I was willing to do to finish the job. The experience paved way to where I am now and provided a clear direction for me and my career. Of course it was difficult, there were overtimes, work from home, work on weekends, and even work on holidays; and I would admit that it was the most memorable point of my career not because it was difficult but it was a life changer. It was at that moment I worked with the UN I knew I can help people, I had a purpose, a higher calling—to serve those who cannot be served.

## **What is the most significant impact of geospatial maps in helping disaster response and recovery?**

Maps have always been there to support us in making better decisions. This can be seen in how we plan our vacations or travels. Maps show us where would be the best resort to stay along a beach or which route would be the fastest to get to a destination. And in this current time and age, having access to that information can be a game changer for your trip. This is similar to the DRRM context, maps are there to allow humanitarian groups to better decide. Such decisions will depend on the effectiveness of how groups assist the most vulnerable. For instance, logistic maps provide information on entry points, road blocks and prepositioning of assets in order to plan their next move in responding. In the case of

recovery, maps are important in visually representing our plans for rehabilitation. This can be observed when groups coordinate and strategize in rebuilding back better affected communities by disasters. Through risk maps as well we are able to identify areas with high risk to specific hazards, or we may understand vulnerabilities that a community face.

## **What can you advice to young people who intend to work in the humanitarian sector?**

Working in the humanitarian sector is very difficult. It requires a certain level of dedication and motivation so that you can keep up with the strict deadlines, being away from your family, or not getting too attached since you will be leaving soon enough to be assigned somewhere else. You need to be ready to cope in such circumstances. For me there is minimal room for mistakes in the humanitarian sector, since lives are in your hands. Your actions may affect either their survival or development. Always ask and be open to constructive criticism and suggestions. But I tell you, go for it because it is a valuable working experience. You will be able to work with people with goals of a better deprived communities. Go for it because you are able to meet new people from different backgrounds, different countries, and different cultures. Go for it because you get to travel. You get to see the world differently—not as tourists but as humanitarians. You get to delve into the community and the see the reality in their lives. Go for it because you know that somehow you are the change that the world needs right now.





## About this project

This report is based on a project on disaster management and digital media by the Newton Tech4Dev Network. This project is led by Jonathan Corpus Ong (University of Massachusetts Amherst) and Pamela Combinido (De La Salle University).

The Newton Tech4Dev Network is a global consortium of scholars that aims to advance research on digital technologies in low- and middle-income countries. Funded by the British Council, the network supports international collaborations and is co-hosted by the University of Leicester in the United Kingdom and De La Salle University in the Philippines.

Visit our website [newtontechfordev.com](http://newtontechfordev.com) for more details about our projects.

*Text: Jonathan Corpus Ong and Pamela Combinido*

*Photography: Geric Cruz*

*Publication design: Karl Castro*

The Newton Tech4Dev Network is generously supported by:

