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# Coordination and Information Management in the Haiyan Response: observations from the field

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**Abstract**

The response to the Level 3 disaster of Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines involved a large number of organizations providing assistance and support. Coordination structures between a large variety of international and national organizations, the government and the military were established at the national, provincial and local levels. These coordination efforts were accompanied by a significant information management effort, including the needs assessment of the affected population and monitoring and evaluation regarding the response and assistance provided. This paper presents preliminary findings from a research field trip conducted in the aftermath of the Typhoon response by the authors. Interviews were conducted with a broad range of decision makers in various functions in the disaster response organizations and with varying responsibilities. These interviews were complemented with in-field observations and secondary data collection. Preliminary findings show a decreasing complexity and rigidity of coordination structures from the headquarters to the (deep) field, and a corresponding decreasing sophistication of information management. While information management at the headquarters seemed to be targeted in large part towards international advocacy and policy, information management in the field focused on very concrete response actions.

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## 1. Introduction

Only a few days after Typhoon Haiyan made landfall in the Philippines on November 8 2013 the IASC Principals declared the disaster a Level 3 Emergency. According to UN OCHA situation report number 34 (as of January 28 2014) over 14 million people were directly affected and 6201 people lost their lives, whereby the devastation is spread across six Philippine islands and 44 provinces. In the response to this disaster, the government of the Philippines accepted the offer for assistance of the international community resulting in well over 100 responding NGOs and IOs assisting in the on-site emergency operations [1], in addition 22 nations offered military assistance. The sheer number and diversity of all these organizations engaged in a collective effort requires considerable coordination [2]. One essential condition for successful coordination is the availability of relevant data. This includes for example timely and accurate data on the (prioritized) needs of the affected community and data regarding the responding community, such as the location, ability, and capacity to respond. Due to the scale of the disaster following Typhoon Haiyan, a large amount of data related to these topics was collected. The question remains however whether the increase in data collection, as well as with respect to the needs (for example assessments) as to the response (for example the 3W ("Who-does-What", Where) has led to improved coordination.

In order to properly address this question an improved and more comprehensive overview of the current availability and use of this data is needed, as well as the motivation of decision makers to collect this data. For this purpose, researchers and practitioners from Tilburg University and Cordaid (The Netherlands), the University of Agder (Norway), and Harvard Humanitarian Initiative (USA) joined forces in the Disaster Resilience Lab to conduct a field research trip in the wake of the response to the Typhoon. In this paper we outline the approach and present preliminary findings, whereby we focus on the interplay between coordination and information management.

## 2. Research Approach

The starting point of our field research approach was the ACAPS report on decision makers' needs in sudden onset disasters [3]. Based on the report's suggested taxonomy, we subsequently conducted interviews in the field with decision makers at different hierarchical levels and with different functions, mostly with a formal responsibility in information management such as Information Management Officers (IMOs). The interviewed decision makers represent mainly UN organizations, and organizations that were active within one of the clusters. In total, 35 in-field interviews were conducted in a ten day period; initially in Manila where most of the Headquarters were based, and subsequently into the field operations starting in Cebu, via Tacloban and ultimately in Guiuan. The interviews were semi-structured, in which we followed a process to identify (1) the information needs of the decision makers, (2) the decisions they need to make and (3) the tools and processes they use. In addition to the interviews, observations are used to verify and complement the results from the interviews and additional material was obtained during and sometimes after the interview.

## 3. Preliminary findings

During the field research we were able to reflect on the various coordination mechanisms at different inter organizational levels (e.g. between NGO and IO), intra organizational levels (between headquarters and field level) and geographical level (national versus provincial versus local level).

At the national level in Manila OCHA, together with the government ministries of the Philippines designed a humanitarian coordination structure based on the UN cluster system. Within these national clusters coordination can be challenging as meetings have an 'open' character and a variety of participants are able to voice their views. Furthermore the cluster staff and meeting participants change regularly and usually many organizations are present at these meetings. For example, no less than 56 different organizations were participating in the shelter cluster. In addition to the numeric complexity, the thematic focus of the clusters seemed to create additional challenges in achieving an integrated approach. For example, issues related to schools were discussed both in the shelter (as temporarily housing) and the education cluster.

At the provincial level, the national humanitarian architecture could not always be directly applied. The province of Cebu implemented the UN cluster approach for their disaster risk reduction program already in 2008, and implemented several further adaptations. For example the chamber of commerce and local companies play a large role in one of the clusters. The response taskforce Paglig-on that was operationalized after the typhoon followed this "provincial" cluster structure and deviated therefore from the national cluster system. OCHA in Cebu seemed to have adapted to this by taking on a more advisory role, clarifying leadership roles in clusters and by co-locating in government buildings. In Tacloban, on the other hand, OCHA rolled out the UN cluster system as is and was located separate from the local government.

In addition, NGOs had their own coordination mechanisms in parallel. For example NASSA of the Philippines had received support from a selection of their Caritas International member organizations such as Cordaid or Caritas Germany. Therefore, these Caritas member organizations held their own coordination meetings amongst themselves. Additionally they leveraged the very well organized Catholic church system in the Philippines to reach out in an easy way to the local communities, for example by using dioceses and parishes to conduct surveys among the affected population. They also worked via the cluster system by seconding a representative from each supporting Caritas organization to a cluster, but this obviously implied an additional coordination effort.

Lastly, for NGOs, IOs and local governments the intra-organizational coordination was found to be particularly difficult between the people in the field and headquarters, due to geographical distance, bandwidth constraints and different information needs. This also led to considerable information requests from headquarters to which the field had to comply.

## 4. Conclusions

Through our observations and interviews in the capital city of Manila and in field offices, we were able to identify several gaps between the international humanitarian coordination system and local coordination mechanisms. These gaps also played out in the information management and information flows, where for example certain NGOs preferred to put their scarce time in managing their own more granular data rather than to provide data to the headquarters in Manila. Conversely, data from local actors in the field that did not meet the imposed data standards could not be included in the reporting mechanisms of the international humanitarian system.

Our findings further show a decreasing complexity and rigidity of coordination structures from the headquarters to the (deep) field. Coordination was perceived as heavy, political and outward-oriented in the headquarters, and light-weigt, no non-sense and inward focused in the (deep) field. Similarly, information management at the headquarters seemed to be targeted in large part towards international advocacy and policy shaping of the international humanitarian community, while information management in the field focused on very concrete response actions.

## Acknowledgements

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