

A Decade After Typhoon Haiyan: a Missed Opportunity for Just Transition in Disaster-Stricken Philippines

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The city of Tacloban in the Philippines has bounced back after Super Typhoon Haiyan struck in 2013, but has it really built back better? Large-scale natural disasters offer the chance to imagine and build better sustainable urban systems but the follow-through didn't happen in this case.

Over a decade ago on 8 November 2013 Super Typhoon Haiyan, locally known as Yolanda, battered through the islands and provinces of central Philippines. At the time that it made landfall, Haiyan, a Category 5 typhoon, was the strongest typhoon to reach shore, with one minute-sustained winds [clocked at 315 km/h](#) (195 mi/h). The [impact of Haiyan was devastating](#), with official government data recording at least 6,300 people dead, one thousand more left missing and tens of thousands injured. The 'ground zero' of Haiyan is Tacloban City, Leyte, the regional urban center of the Eastern Visayas region. According to the data from the National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC), the city accounted for [at least 2,600 casualties](#), a number that is hotly contested on the ground with several residents claiming that the total casualties [exceeds the official figures](#).

In the wake of the disaster, Tacloban City became the face of urban resilience campaigns in the Philippines and a laboratory for building back better. The city was a veritable 'international' city within the first two years after the disaster, with international agencies, non-government organizations and even 'voluntourists' parachuting into the city to render technical assistance or volunteer to build houses for those who lost their homes. A decade after this disaster, people ask, what has happened to the city? Have they recovered? Have they 'built back better'? I argue in this short article that the city has bounced back, but has missed out on an opportunity for more equitable, just transition. The city has embraced business as usual in the urban development strategies, rather than building the foundations for a more sustainable transition.

'Building Back Better?'

In the immediate aftermath of Haiyan, the discourse of 'building back better' circulated in policy spaces. What has building back better meant for post-disaster recovery in Tacloban City? There are two key factors that policy makers focused on: the relocation of households living in coastal communities away from 'no build zones,' and the construction of hard infrastructure projects designed to mitigate the risks from coastal hazards such as storm surges and even tsunamis.

In terms of relocation, the city government embarked on an [ambitious relocation strategy](#) that targeted at least 14,000 families living along 'no-build zones' and transferred them to resettlement sites located at the northern villages of the city. Meanwhile, the national government, through the Department of Public Works and Highways started the construction of the [Leyte tide embankment](#)

[project](#), a 27-kilometer long 4-meter high embankment designed to protect the coastal areas of Tacloban, Palo and Tanauan, the three areas that were hardest hit by Haiyan.

A decade after, the relocation program can largely be considered a success. The [program was initially stalled](#) by several issues such as lack of water, delay of papers issued to beneficiaries and the economic displacement of the beneficiaries. However, in a study that I co-authored, we found out that the majority of the residents we surveyed in these sites were [mostly satisfied with the housing project](#). Despite the lingering problems of water supply to the resettlement sites, the northern resettlement sites are teeming with activity.

The construction of the Leyte tide embankment has been a long process and even at the time of writing, portions of the embankment are still being constructed. Nonetheless, the embankment was partly successful in mitigating the risks posed by the latest Category 5 typhoon to hit the province, Typhoon Rai (locally known as Odette) which made landfall in December 2021. Another hard infrastructure project, ostensibly for storm surge protection, the Tacloban causeway project has been given the [green light by relevant government agencies](#) notwithstanding protests from environmental groups claiming that it will cause damage to Cancabato Bay which surrounds the city.

Despite the relative success of these projects, they are manifestations of a business-as-usual approach in post-disaster reconstruction in the Philippines, focusing on hard infrastructure interventions centered on adaptation to risks. These projects are bereft of an imaginative, as well as a just, approach towards sustainable, low-carbon futures. Thus, a decade after Haiyan, we missed an opportunity to course correct.

Imagining the post-disaster future

Several scholars have argued that more than just being resilient to the risks posed by climate change, cities need to embark on sustainability transitions to alter the functioning of their socio-economic systems away from fossil fuel dependence. Sustainability transitions “are long-term, multi-dimensional and [fundamental transformation processes](#) through which established socio-technical systems shift to more sustainable modes of production and consumption”. Cities across the world have started embarking on these experiments in order to meet the objective of hitting ‘net-zero’ in carbon emissions. But more than undertaking sustainability transitions, it is equally important that these transitions are just and equitable to all affected parties.

The recovery process after Haiyan envisioned piecemeal strategies of transitions, without fully grasping the need for wholesale transformation of the socioeconomic systems of Tacloban City. The Tacloban Recovery and Rehabilitation Plan, a guide for post-disaster reconstruction for the city that was developed with the aid of international experts, listed several ‘green’ projects that they envisioned as sustainability projects such as mangrove belts and vegetated buffer zones. The plan also signaled the need for a ‘multi-modal’ transportation system for different areas of the city such as the incorporation of a bus rapid transport system as well as integration of cyclists and pedestrians in this system. Lastly, solar power was signaled as a [potential energy source](#) in the aftermath of the disaster.

Yet despite these intentions, these plans never materialized; as years went by and the farther removed we have become from Haiyan, we remain locked in to a fossil-fuel dependent economy and way of living. Today, one just needs to walk around the city in the afternoon to see the rush hour traffic jams that bog the urban landscape every day.

Hope (Hope)

A decade after Yolanda, traffic and activity is bustling again, but Tacloban is on a trajectory similar to other cities in the Philippines. The city has missed the opportunity to implement imaginative and innovative solutions, falling back to the tried-and-tested methods of relocation and putting up seawalls.

Despite these constraints, there are spaces of hope for a better recovery strategy, one that is equitable and at the same time, sustainable. One non-government organization, the Institute for Climate and Sustainable Cities has pursued the goal of just transition, implementing projects that [promote renewable energy use](#) in island communities affected by Typhoon Haiyan. At the same time, a loose coalition of concerned individuals and civil society organizations under the banner of the Save Kankabatok [1] Advocacy group have challenged the proposed Tacloban causeway project through [petitions and lobbying](#). Against all odds, civil society organizations remain the last remaining bulwark to bring about a just, sustainable and resilient future for communities affected by Typhoon Haiyan.

Yet despite these efforts from civil society organizations, they can only do so much. Sustainable transition needs to be integrated in national and local policy plans in order to bring about the widest benefits to society. Only when just, sustainable transition is realized can we now say that Tacloban, and the Philippines, has truly risen from the rubbles of Haiyan.

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Footnotes

[1] Kankabatok is the pre-Spanish colonization name of Cancabato.