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Tacloban: A Case Study in Natural Disaster Recovery

My five weeks in Tacloban, Philippines were some of the toughest I've ever experienced. I struggled with the task at hand in a variety of ways, but in the end it became one of the most rewarding accomplishments I've ever achieved. The research I carried out, the friends I made, and the memories I'll take home with me all contributed to the experience I had.

Before leaving for Tacloban, I had done what I thought to be the necessary legwork to immerse myself in a completely new culture. Having never even been to Asia, I checked out books from the library on the Philippines, perused websites, watched plenty of Youtube videos from a Filipino blogger, and emailed fairly regularly with my guide for the trip. However, I remained unprepared for one large aspect of foreign culture: the food. All my fears about fitting into a brand new culture became apparent just hours after I stepped off the plane, when I was presented with a chicken intestine to eat. As a picky eater, that chicken intestine embodied not only a food choice that I probably couldn't eat without throwing up, but also a housing situation I wasn't comfortable with, a city where I couldn't walk around after dark, and an entire people who spoke a different dialect than me.

Over the next few weeks, however, I found that a few common aspects of life were able to unify me with the city of Tacloban more than chicken entrails could divide us. Going to church, playing basketball with my host family, and seeing a parade all helped me to realize that

I shared much more in common with the people around me than I thought, and the differences we had mattered much less than I believed.

However, blending into the culture was not the most trying aspect of my experience. My research, predictably, required more than a fair amount of work as well. It took less than a week before I had to restructure my entire research question. Thankfully, I had been prepared for this event by almost every person I had talked to about doing a summer research project. Still, changing what I had been planning on researching for three months was no easy task.

Originally, I had planned to look at the changes that had taken place in the construction of individual homes since Typhoon Haiyan. Imagine my surprise when, after a few days of surveying, I found that almost no one had made any changes to the way homes were built since then. In fact, all but the richest portions of the population were not building new homes at all, and were instead relying on the government or international aid organizations to provide homes for them.

So, I took this information and restructured the project. Instead of looking at the changes on a home-by-home basis, I would attempt to look at the changes to large scale building practices, specifically the long-term plan for the city to rebuild, NGO roles in that process, and local community input. I did many interviews with government officials, NGO leaders, local community leaders, and local community members, and found quite a few interesting ideas to study further. However, the most interesting component was the role of the government in the rebuilding process, and its ability to make decisions unchecked, even if those decisions did not benefit its constituents.

I soon learned that the city government had formed a plan to evict approximately 15,000 of its poorest constituents from land near the ocean and city center to land three miles north, which was near neither the ocean nor the city. As fishermen, these people had no alternative source of livelihood, and being placed far away from the city, had no reliable source of education, food, or water. The local people were not consulted in this process. As I spoke to many local people, I saw that some were completely unaware of eviction plan to begin over the coming months, and almost all who were aware were vehemently against it. Although they would be moving to a safer area, the plan actually hurt them more than it helped them.

I also spoke to many NGO leaders. The majority of NGOs had orders from international headquarters to follow the directions given by the local government. So, even if the NGO leadership saw problems with the plan, they were powerless to do anything but build homes in unwanted areas for local people. Because of their large financial backings, the NGOs were the driving force behind the home construction processes in these areas. However, there were not many more amenities provided for those who were forced to move.

Seeing these processes at work prompted quite a few thoughts. The first was that it shouldn't be possible for a government that doesn't respond to its constituents to stay in power. I would later learn that the mayor's workers stand on the street on election day and give money to voters to vote for him.

I also wondered if it wasn't a basic right for people to have control of their built environment. To have their physical surroundings thrown into disarray in this fashion seemed simply unfair. Due to a sudden and rigid policy change, fishermen wouldn't be able to fish, mothers wouldn't be able to buy food at the market, and children wouldn't be able to continue their education.

I sat in my hotel room, wondering about the solution to these deep and complex social problems. I realized that my job in this situation was to identify the problems and their sources, not to solve the issue of ensuring good governance. I finished my research by conducting more interviews while constantly questioning and challenging the situation I was observing. Being in Tacloban gave me great perspective on the problems faced in so many developing countries and their specific applications in post-disaster areas. By carrying out this summer research, I was able to better understand complex development problems and the way that individuals deal with their effects.