



## Through the eyes of local actors

How self-recovery was supported after  
Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines



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*An introductory companion to the World  
Habitat Peer Exchange report: "Soaring High.  
Self-recovery through the eyes of local actors"*

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## Judita's story

Judita is a widow and mother of twelve who lives with her son. She emotionally recounts how, the night Typhoon Yolanda arrived, the storm picked up force at around 3am, was strongest at 5am, and lasted until 8am. Judita and the rest of the community took refuge in the local school building the evening before. When the roof of the classroom began to be ripped off by the strong wind, they all formed a long human chain and moved from classroom to classroom holding tightly onto each other for safety. Many were injured by the flying glass and debris, but fortunately all wounds were superficial.

When Judita walked back to her house after leaving the school, it was no longer there. She found the bamboo wreckage blown across the street. She temporarily moved into a makeshift shelter constructed by her son and neighbours. It had no walls until an agency came and distributed tarpaulins.

When a national Philippine NGO, in partnership with CARE Philippines, began a shelter self-recovery programme in March 2014, the community decided to adopt a *bayanihan* approach to reconstruction – helping one another to build their homes. As a senior citizen, Judita was prioritised by her *bayanihan* group, and her house was built first. The group built the timber frame and roof with the help of Judita's son. For the rest, she hired a carpenter using her own money.

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*The concept of bayanihan can be found across south east Asia, particularly in the Philippines. The roots go back through generations, and today is understood to mean a spirit of cooperation within a community. In practice neighbours support each other and those most in need. "It is your neighbour who is the first to help you."*

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While talking to Judita and her neighbours, they pointed out that they do not think the community would have been able to organise themselves so well without the support of CARE and the local partners. However, the programme could never have worked so well in this village without their strong community spirit and culture of *bayanihan*. They believe that "the spirit of being united came back with the typhoon response".

*Judita, Barangay Catoogan – from Stories of Recovery, CARE International UK*

## Recovering from Haiyan

There are so many stories similar to Judita's. Indeed, there are probably 15,859 such stories. This was the number of houses built through the CARE Philippines self-recovery project in 2014. No two houses are the same, each one personalised to the needs, priorities and resources of the family – so no two stories would be the same either; but nonetheless they would all tell a tale of resilience and fortitude and a model of 'Filipino spirit'.

Typhoon Haiyan (Judita refers to it as Yolanda, its local name) ripped a swathe of destruction through the Visayas region on 3 November 2013. The strongest typhoon ever to make landfall, Haiyan displaced more than 4 million people, and destroyed or damaged 1.1 million homes. In Judita's rural community the majority of houses, built of bamboo, timber and thatch, were completely destroyed. The destruction was not confined to poor rural communities: the nearby city of Tacloban was particularly affected, with significant loss of life, because of the unexpectedly high storm surge. The city's poorest families, living in dense coastal communities in very substandard housing, didn't count the number of damaged houses: they described it as a washout, with just a floor slab remaining and debris scattered far and wide.

Shelter, or the provision of housing, was seen as a high priority as well as water, sanitation and the recovery of livelihoods. Coastal towns were particularly affected with calamitous devastation to coconut plantations and the fishing industry. It is estimated that as many as 33 million coconut trees were destroyed or damaged, affecting one million farmers.

CARE Philippines works through a network of partners across the whole country. They were quick to recognise that the Philippine people were the first to respond and the most important partners in their own recovery. What has now come to be known as 'self-recovery' was apparent from the first days after the storm.

People are rarely passive in these situations, and as the first humanitarian assessment teams were visiting the flattened villages, they did so to the background sound of chainsaws and hammers – evidence of the *bayanihan* spirit and the early response to recover. It was also apparent, despite a generous international outpouring of relief funds, that the extent of the destruction was so huge that it would overwhelm the available budget. So, recognising and supporting self-recovery allowed available funds to stretch to their maximum.

## What is self-recovery, and how was it supported?

"Self-recovery is what we do anyway." – a staff member from a local organisation.

Self-recovery is a term that has now become common-place within the humanitarian shelter world. The majority of families rebuild their homes with little, if any, support from the humanitarian community – indeed in many major disasters, less than 20% of the need is met. It is an inevitable process – and not just in the Philippines: it can happen in most poor, disaster-prone countries. Moreover, supporting this process is seen as a powerful force for recovery, that respects people's choice and priorities.

Judita and her family received a small amount of cash, as little as £43, and some building materials: metal roofing sheets, tools, nails and strapping to make strong timber connections. Training was conducted with local carpenters as well as the home-owners in 'build back safer' techniques, quickly shortened to BBS messages. These were simple and covered affordable techniques to make their homes stronger and safer. Mixed-gender 'roving teams' were another important element: with typically three members from the community, carpenters and social mobilisers. They encouraged and supported all the families as they rebuilt their homes and their lives.

The combination of the traditional spirit of *bayanihan*, sound build back safer techniques and the financial, material and technical support of CARE Philippines resulted in the rebuilding of almost sixteen thousand homes. Every family was responsible for the design and construction, and so each house is different, it tells a different story, and each one is tailored to the needs and tastes of the family. There are some delightful houses as a consequence, many with intricate woven bamboo screens, terraces and planting – all pointing to an evident pride in their new home.

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## The World Habitat Awards

Our World Habitat Awards recognise and champion innovative, outstanding and sometimes revolutionary housing ideas, projects and programmes. The Awards provide a unique window on the world, allowing us to see and share how people have solved problems and overcome the challenges facing the modern world.

The focus of the Awards is not only the identification of good housing practice; we also work closely with the winners each year to help share their good practice in order to transfer it to where it is needed most.

When we visited Tacloban in 2017, we were struck by the resilience and strength of the people we met. In many ways people in the Philippines are used to typhoons, but nothing could have prepared them for the immense destruction of Super-Typhoon Haiyan. Just three years after the typhoon, it was inspiring to see how the communities had bounced back so quickly with the help of CARE and local partner organisations. Communities showed resourcefulness and remarkable levels of collaboration to rebuild their homes more quickly and more effectively than would have been possible with traditional disaster-relief approaches.

World Habitat believes that 'self-recovery' is an approach that could reach a much greater scale across the globe. In a world threatened by the climate emergency, and destined to experience more frequent and more intense 'natural' disasters, it may be the brightest hope to help communities weather the storm.



For more on the CARE Philippines response see:

Report *Stories of Recovery* (CARE 2016)

Report *CARE Philippines: Typhoon Haiyan shelter recovery project evaluation* (2015)

And on self-recovery see:

State of Humanitarian Shelter and Settlements, Chapter 4.

<https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/The%20State%20of%20Humanitarian%20Shelter%20and%20Settlements%202018.pdf>



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