

Typhoon Bopha: communicating to save lives

Introduction

On 4 December 2012, Typhoon Bopha (local name: Pablo) made landfall in Davao Oriental, located on the eastern coast of Mindanao Island, Philippines. Its passage across the country took five days and with multiple landfalls, it left extensive damage and devastation in its wake. Three months later, with over 6 million people affected by the disaster, there are close to one million who are still living in damaged homes and makeshift shelters.

“In my six-year service with the Red Cross I never imagined I would ever witness something like this,” says 35-year old Xylene Berlin, a staff member of the Philippine Red Cross Compostela Valley branch.



A member of the PRC team talks to community members perched on a hillside above Andap, Mindanao. Credit: IFRC/Caroline Austin

Response by the Philippine Red Cross

From the onset of the disaster, the Philippine Red Cross, with support of its partners, has been providing relief and recovery assistance to affected communities including: search and rescue efforts, first aid, and the provision of food, clean water, hygiene kits, and shelter-repair kits. The extent of destruction has left vast needs in communities across the island of Mindanao. It also disrupted standard methods for giving and receiving information, increasing the challenges for both communities and Red Cross staff as well as volunteers.

Maximizing trusted sources of information

The Philippine Red Cross uses the most-trusted channels of communication to ensure that their messages are received and understood by communities – community-based staff and volunteers.

“Our staff and volunteers are our greatest strength,” explains Gwendolyn Pang, Secretary General of the Philippine Red Cross. “They have sacrificed a lot, day and night, to deliver humanitarian assistance to people in need, sometimes in very challenging circumstances.”

During disaster operations, including Typhoon Bopha, the Red Cross mobilizes community-based staff and volunteers who specialize in health, water and sanitation, and shelter, to provide vital assistance to those affected. These teams also bring a critical component to response: communication with communities, also known as beneficiary communications.



Before a relief distribution in Batiano, Baganga municipality, Red Cross staff provide information about the assistance and answers questions from the beneficiaries. Credit: ICRC/Sarah Velasco



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Accessing remote areas

Conducting face-to-face messaging with affected communities, the work of the Red Cross staff and volunteers is particularly significant when widespread damage to electricity networks makes communication difficult.

During the Typhoon Bopha response, information reached remote areas of the worst-hit municipalities of Mindanao because of this direct contact between Red Cross field teams and typhoon survivors.

Yet the impact of their work stretches farther than those who the staff and volunteers meet directly. Red Cross teams communicate with community leaders, who not only reinforce the accuracy of information, but also provide a vital link to disseminating information among the wider community, and serve as a key resource for critical feedback.

The power of language

In addition to the work of Red Cross community-based staff and volunteers, 'block coordinators' - community members living within the tent city who are responsible for a number of families - are given news and information on Red Cross activities in local languages.

This allows the Philippine Red Cross to provide critical information to affected populations through a unique and trusted-communications network.

Checklists are used by the block coordinators to ensure that individuals have the most up-to-date and necessary information. Other forms of communication channels are employed as access to electricity improves, in order to maintain contact with beneficiaries and gather crucial feedback on programming from communities.

"We need to know where we can find clean water and get information on landslides,"
Community members from Andap, Mindanao



A member of ICRC's emergency response team speaks with community members in preparation for a distribution of food and relief goods in Barangay Campawan, Baganga Municipality. Credit: ICRC/Cynthia Lee



Gibertz Luas holds the card of her father, Pablo Villafane, a 61-year old male, indicating he is eligible for relief from the Philippine Red Cross. The biggest concern for Pablo and his family is their source of livelihood in the coming months. Typhoon Pablo destroyed all the banana trees on their farm. Credit: Karl Anthony Ebol / IFRC

Delivering reliable information

Operating 24 hours a day, the Philippine Red Cross Operations Centre provides critical information nationwide to Red Cross staff, volunteers and partners before, during, and after a disaster.

Communication primarily takes place through the use of SMS or phone calls (landline) to key focal points within the Philippine Red Cross field operations. Back-up generators allow teams to reliably receive critical information between headquarters and the field if there are power interruptions.

This is complemented by information from the media and other secondary sources - confirmed through the Red Cross' extensive network of contacts on the ground. The information is analyzed and fed into the resulting humanitarian operation on an ongoing basis. All the information is then used to directly communicate to communities.

With severe flooding in the regions of Mindanao following Typhoon Bopha, the Red Cross Operations Centre analyzed information from the weather agency (PAGASA – Project Noah), National Disaster Risk Reduction and Management Committee, television, as well as Red Cross branches and chapters, to provide consistently updated and instantaneous reports on rainfall and flooding. The information was shared with the Red Cross tent cities and larger community, helping to alleviate fears in a time of shock and high insecurity.

Why dialogue matters

Since the onset of the disaster, together with the Philippine Red Cross, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) has been providing aid to cover the needs for food, water, health care, essential household items, and emergency shelter material for up to 300,000 people. For the Red Cross, getting feedback from beneficiaries is essential for the success of these activities.

Input shared by communities is collected during initial assessments and later integrated throughout the implementation phase—for example, while carrying out relief distributions and at health facilities set-up or supported by the Red Cross.

“Working directly with the people provides with us an open channel for communication wherever we go,” says Albert Madrazo, a veteran ICRC communication staff member. “We can inform them about the different ways that the Red Cross can help while they can ask us questions and get information that they may need on the road to recovery. Importantly, they tell us about their experiences, which help us adjust our response as the situation evolves.”



This area in the town of Andap was once occupied, but flooding washed everything away. It resulted in over 400 casualties and left more than 300 people missing. Andap is said to be the most devastated area of Compostela Valley in Mindanao. The Philippine Red Cross continues to actively respond to needs in the community. Credit: Karl Anthony Ehol / IFRC

Benefits of communication

The value of communication with communities during an emergency is beneficial not only for those affected, but for the Red Cross Red Crescent Movement as well. The face-to-face communication of community-based staff and volunteers places the Movement in a unique position to assess needs in communities, and to share critical information including the relief and recovery operations, and it also provides a mechanism for important feedback to improve programmes.

“The communication support provided by Red Cross staff and volunteers is invaluable during times of emergency,” states Gwendolyn Pang, Secretary General of Philippine Red Cross.



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