

Risk and Coping: Understanding Community Responses to Calls for Disaster Evacuation in Central Philippines

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Abstract : In archipelagic countries like the Philippines, many communities thrive along coastal areas. The sea is the community members' main source of livelihood and the site of many cultural activities. For these communities, the sea is their life and livelihood. Nevertheless, the sea also poses a hazard during the rainy season when typhoons frequent their communities. Coastal communities often encounter threats from storm surges and flooding that are common when there are typhoons. During such periods, disaster evacuation programs are implemented. However, in many instances, evacuation has been the bane of local government officials implementing such programs in their communities as resistance from community members is often encountered. Such resistance is often viewed by program implementers as due to the fact that people were hard headed and ignorant of the potential impacts of living in hazard prone areas. This paper argues that it is not for these reasons that people refused to evacuate. Drawing from data collected from fieldwork done in three sites in Central Philippines affected by super typhoon Haiyan, this study aimed to provide a contextualized understanding of peoples' refusal to heed disaster evacuation warnings. This study utilized the multi-sited ethnography approach with in-depth episodic interviews, focus group discussions, participatory risk mapping and key informant interviews in gathering data on peoples' experiences and insights specifically on evacuation during typhoon Haiyan. This study showed that people have priorities and considerations vital in their social lives that they are protecting in their refusal to leave their homes for pre-emptive evacuation. It is not that they are not aware of the risks when they face the hazard. It is more that they had faith in the local knowledge and strategies that they have developed since the time of their ancestors as a result of living and engaging with hazards in their areas for as long as they could remember. The study also revealed that risk in encounters with hazards was gendered. Furthermore, previous engagement with local government officials and the manner in which the pre-emptive evacuation programs were implemented had cast doubt on the value of such programs in saving their lives. Life in the designated evacuation areas can be as dangerous if not more compared with living in their coastal homes. There seems to be the impression that in the evacuation program of the government, people were being moved from hazard zones to death zones. Thus, this paper ends with several recommendations that may contribute to building more responsive evacuation programs that aim to build people's resilience while taking into consideration the local moral world in communities in identified hazard zones.

Keywords : coastal communities, disaster evacuation, disaster risk perception, social and cultural responses to hazards

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