Aid Watch

Asia's decade of disaster has spurred a sharper focus on how aid is used

By Sunshine Lichauco de Leon and Karen Emmons

WHEN AID STARTED arriving after Typhoon Haiyan, there was gratitude but also frustration among harried bureaucrats in Manila. An outpouring of global goodwill deluged the Philippines with every form of aid, from cash to emergency supplies and heavy equipment. The first pledge was from Indonesia, recalls Richard E. Moya, chief information officer and undersecretary at the Department of Budget and Management. "They asked us what name to put on the check, and we were not sure. I was thankful but frustrated that help was here, and realized we were not yet prepared to accept that help."

As one of the world's most disaster-plagued countries, the Philippines has worked hard to bolster the resilience of its far-flung communities and to streamline relief efforts. Haiyan, locally called Yolanda, would have taken many more lives without these preparations. Nevertheless, the devastation it wrought demanded new efforts to demonstrate that aid was reaching those who needed it most.

Moya was part of a team tasked with developing an online system to track foreign aid channeled through government agencies and to make this data publicly available. The result is the Foreign Aid Transparency Hub (FAiTH), the country's first attempt at full public disclosure of aid channeled through the various arms of its national government.

The FAiTH website tracks all cash and non-cash foreign aid pledged to the Government of the Philippines, tallies how much has been received, and breaks down amounts by donor countries. Users can download details of individual donations. As of 11 April 2014, the total amount of foreign aid pledged was $579,814,960, of which $69,304,478 was pledged as cash and $510,510,483 as non-cash.

By enhancing public access to this type of information, FAiTH "augurs well in promoting transparency as the Philippines begins post-Haiyan reconstruction," says James Nugent, director general at the Asian Development Bank's (ADB's) Southeast Asia Department.

The aim is to shore up public confidence in the government's ability to make best use of the aid it receives. But with multiple branches of government involved in collating aid from multiple donors, it's not a simple exercise. "This is chaos being structured," says Moya. The description could apply to most post-disaster scenarios, where the world's generosity often outstrips the ability of the affected country to handle an avalanche of aid from innumerable sources.

FAiTH is a reflection of the pressure to be accountable and transparent when the post-disaster aid avalanche hits—pressure that has been placed on governments since the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami.

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Expanding rights education has made governments increasingly accountable to the people for whom the aid is intended. Moreover, the popularity of social networking and mobile technologies is making it easier to express grievances.

In Indonesia in late 2004, which then had very limited legal guidance for the receipt of international assistance from aid organizations during disasters, "everyone just tripped up and did what they wanted," recalls Oliver Lacey-Hall, head of the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) regional office for Asia and the Pacific. "A lot of governments turned around and went, 'Wow. We were not prepared for this. And we need to make sure we are prepared.'"

Even Japan, one of the better disaster responders, says Lacey-Hall, realized after the 2011 earthquake and tsunami that it had not sufficiently considered the challenge of managing multiple offers of humanitarian assistance from other countries.

Now Lacey-Hall sees governments legislating accountability. New laws being enacted cover "everything from how to conduct yourselves to how our domestic aid system works during disasters and how you can plug into that," he explains.

Indonesia's 2009 implementing regulations for its 2007 law on national disaster management, for example, provide predictability about whether and how it will ask for assistance, and if so what it expects to get. Japan is revising its guidance, while Myanmar is developing a framework. Cambodia and Viet Nam are working with the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies (IFRC) on regulations clarifying how international assistance can best support domestic disaster response.

A key catalyst for all this was the 2004 tsunami, which killed more than 130,000 people in Indonesia alone.

With much of Aceh Province and Nias Island devastated, the Government of Indonesia set up the Agency for the Rehabilitation and Reconstruction (BRR) of Aceh and Nias in April 2005, with a 4-year mandate to manage the coordination of all recovery projects.

Its director, Kuntoro Mangkusubroto, would become a "recovery czar"—a daunting role given that nearly 500 relief organizations were operating in Aceh alone by the time the recovery phase had gained momentum.

A traffic cop was needed, and Kuntoro was given the job. He built a "control room" by linking project approvals to BRR's Recovery Aceh-Nias Database (RAND). A short concept note was required explaining the proposed project, its transparency and integrity controls, as well as consultative processes undertaken with local communities, says Kevin Evans, an adviser who headed the BRR's anticorruption unit.

The concept note was posted online through the RAND for people to view. "It was a tool that allowed us to identify where things were happening and not yet happening sufficiently," explains Evans, who says it helped to bring order to the reconstruction efforts in the field.

The RAND had its setbacks, with the system breaking down frequently. Some organizations had no electricity or internet access. The initial ambitions of "doing everything" were scaled back and it took 2 years to "grow the application," recalls Evans. It eventually evolved into a useful accountability tool. When the BRR was accused of fudging the number of houses that had been built, a Housing Geospatial Database was added. Every finished house was photographed and uploaded with GPS coordinates, identifying donor and recipients. That ended the sniping and "provided us credibility," says Evans. "The BRR did an amazing job," says OCHA's Lacey-Hall. "They oversaw the rebuilding of Aceh in 4 years and they did it well."

Other parts of the region have taken note. In its report on the Indian Ocean tsunami response, *The Tsunami Legacy*, the United Nations Development Programme outlined some breakthrough practices that were introduced in the aftermath of the 2004 tsunami.

In Sri Lanka, a housing program let Tamil communities design and build 1,000 houses for themselves with funding from the Government of India. Homeowners formed community development councils that supported each other throughout the reconstruction, providing information and guidance, raising concerns, resolving conflicts, overseeing infrastructure projects, and managing funds. In the Maldives, Sri Lanka, and Thailand, extensive consultations were organized to hear from people affected by the tsunami.

PHOTO: CORBIS

Volunteers unload supplies as Haiyan relief efforts get underway.

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—Richard E. Moya, chief information officer at the Department of Budget and Management, Government of the Philippines

In Pakistan, after floods in 2010, the IFRC launched a weekly 1-hour nationally broadcast talkback radio show with specialists answering questions from people affected by the disaster, such as how to apply for shelter or livelihoods programs. In the Philippines, the Red Cross has used Facebook, Twitter, Google +, Instagram, and SMS to hear from Haiyan-affected people.

"People do have a voice, technology is the equalizer," says Will Rogers, the global beneficiary communications coordinator at IFRC. The use of the technology, he believes, is helping drive the paradigm shift taking place in aid accountability. "Hopefully, a mix of traditional and new technologies will allow communities to drive their own recovery."

The push for affected people to be engaged in their own recovery unites these programs with national efforts, such as FAiTH, and with global initiatives geared at improving aid effectiveness.

Three international systems are attempting to create standardized real-time tracking of who is doing what and where on aid. These are the Financial Tracking System that OCHA operates for reporting in the immediate aftermath of a disaster, the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI) set up in the United Kingdom for development assistance in general and for the longer-term reporting when relief shifts to reconstruction, and the European Disaster Response Information System.

The hitch is that these systems rely on data voluntarily inputted, and few organizations, if any, are completely forthcoming.

Vijaya Ramachandran, a senior fellow at the Center for Global Development in Washington, DC, contends that governments need to enforce reporting standards. She finds the United Kingdom government leading the way by requiring all large international nongovernment organizations (NGOs) to report to IATI.

Better reporting of aid activities, Ramachandran believes, would help prevent such avoidable mistakes as children in Aceh who were—after the tsunami—vaccinated against the same virus three times by three organizations working in the same area.

"I think if NGOs, governments, and bilateral aid agencies were required to report information on a publicly available website in a standardized format, you won't eliminate that kind of behavior but you would reduce it," she says.

The Philippines is not making grand claims about FAiTH's game-changing attributes. Rather, it sees FAiTH as a first step toward enhancing aid transparency and accountability in its disaster-blighted backyard.

FAiTH is a work in progress. Much of the aid delivered to the Philippines outside national government channels isn't tracked by the system, and it can't show how much non-cash aid has been received in total, as opposed to pledged.

But there are plans for a FAiTH 2.0 with more data on how government agencies have used the aid as well as a social networking component allowing citizens to comment via Facebook and Twitter.

"Citizens can confirm or debunk those statements," explains Moya. "For example, if an agency said 10,000 people were hired to clean up a certain area and someone says there are only 200 people living in that area, they can comment and that will be part of the public record."

Approvals are underway for a single multicurrency treasury account to make it easier for foreign governments, institutions, and individuals to deposit donations, while improving transparency. Data from this account will end up at FAiTH, where the data entry process will be upgraded to enable government agencies to update the website themselves when they receive pledges.

"We are learning and taking steps to improve FAiTH in as many ways as possible," says Moya. "The intention is that the last peso must be accounted for." ■