

Actions, Reflections and Lessons Learned: Psychosocial Response and Mental Health Care Services of XU for Sendong Survivors in Cagayan de Oro in 2011 to 2012

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Abstract

This paper outlines the psychosocial response and mental health care services of Xavier University- Ateneo de Cagayan to the survivors of typhoon Sendong.

The devastation that typhoon Sendong brought to Cagayan de Oro is a tragic first to Cagayanons. This paper outlines the observed effects of Sendong on mental health of the surviving community.

The XU's psychosocial response to Sendong is multi-faceted: this is guided by a two-pronged thrust: namely psychoeducation and psychosocial processing. This psychosocial response moved through three stages: 1. capacity building, 2. psychosocial processing in the field, and 3. community rehabilitation. These efforts are sustained by structure through team formation, and support, both technical and operational, received from XU administration, Ateneo de Manila University-Psychology Department, International Organization for Migration (IOM) and DSWD Multi-sectoral Relief Response Operations Center, and Department of Health (DOH).

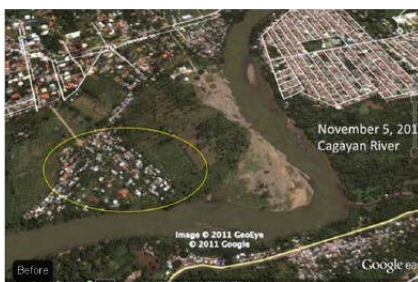
This paper also brings to the fore the advocacy of the Psychology Department of Xavier University to increase awareness of psychosocial reactions to disaster and psychosocial needs of disaster survivors.

KEYWORDS: Psychosocial response, mental health care services, Tropical Storm Sendong

The Tropical Storm Sendong: In Retrospect

By late afternoon of December 16, 2011, the rains were heavy and the winds, strong. By the late evening, the city was in total darkness. Early the next morning, December 17, the city woke up to see the damage brought about by Sendong. This flood took more than 2,000 lives. The total number of families affected was 113,651 and 721,844 individuals. In all, 23 barangays were flooded; totally damaged houses reached to 13,337, and more than PPh2 billion in infrastructural damage (<http://www.ndrrmc.gov.ph>).

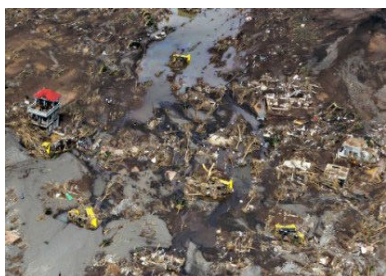
The present generation in Cagayan de Oro has never seen anything like it before. The city's historical records show though, that there was a big flood in 1916, that caused the Cagayan River to overflow when the rains poured continuously for three straight days (Montalavan, 2012).



November 5, 2010



December 20, 2011



Aerial view shows what's left of the once populous Sitio Kala Kala in Barangay Macasandig, Cagayan de Oro City. ERWIN, MA, SCARINAS, INTERAKSYON.COM WAYWARD HOUSE



A house rests on a wall by the roadside in Cagayan de Oro City, a mute witness to the power and fury unleashed by Tropical Storm "Sendong." CAI PANLILIO/Inquirer Mindanao

Psychosocial Impact

Christmas after Sendong

As Christmas day approached in 2011, there was a sense of heaviness, grief and shock shared by most people in the city. The spirit of Christmas was not evident and for many, it was difficult to celebrate Christmas with the usual fun and frolic. Majority of the Cagayanons had these sentiments, especially those who were directly affected. At the evacuation center of this city's Central School on Velez Street, ambulant vendor Junie Legaspi, 32, described the disaster as "grabe ka pait nga pinaskuhan (the bitterest Christmas gift)."

Despite their miserable situation, some victims were still able to express their gratitude. A laundry woman from Baranggay Carmen said, "Bisan pa'g nawala ang tanan tungod sa baha, nagapasalamat gihapon ko kay kumpleto mi pamilya karong Pasko. (Even if we lost everything we had to the flood, I am still thankful because our family is still complete this Christmas.) "Pamilya ang pinaka importante nga pinaskohan sa ako. (My family is the most important Christmas gift for me)," she added.

It was painful to listen to many survivors who lost not only their homes, but also their hope in the future. "Mag-unsang na mi ani, wala nang pag-laum." Even others lost trust in themselves: "Dili na nako kaya mag pahimo pa ug laing balay, ako ra man tong gi-loan sa housing." I don't have the capacity to build another house; I built the one I lost through a housing loan.

The loss of tangible possessions was accompanied by psychological losses such as: sense of control, sense of responsibility, sense of the future, sense of individuality and identity. Along with these emotions came feelings of expressed shame.

In the immediate aftermath, as survivors were housed in evacuation centers, they expressed their gratitude for being safe, warm, and clothed. However, from the way the survivors talked, it was evident that they strongly felt uncertainty, vulnerability, fear, hopelessness, and deep sadness. To say that their lives had been disrupted, is an understatement. The Sendong survivors definitely knew that their lives are forever changed.

Children

Among children in the evacuation centers, there were evidences of generalized fear; some had recurring nightmares; others manifested depression, withdrawal, aggressiveness and acting out, disorganization and agitated behavior. Many of them expressed intrusive thoughts and sensations.

About a month after Sendong destroyed their homes, school children were observed beginning to enjoy themselves at the playground of Consolacion Elementary School in the city. The kids had fun in the swing and played all sorts of games. Their behavior showed they were beginning to put behind them the devastation they had been through.

Women Survivors Refugees

Coring, one of the survivors, was already apt to work side by side with the camp managers in the refugee center. She was assigned to do sanitation maintenance in specific sections of the camp. She



Psychosocial processing: XU faculty and staff

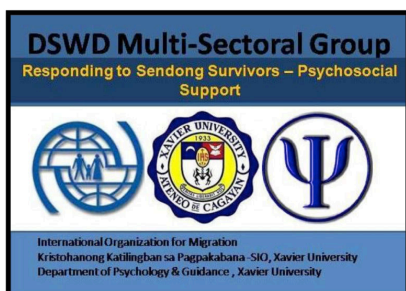
volunteered for this work as she tried to cope with the loss of her daughter in the flood; at the same time, Coring took care of her husband who is visually-impaired. Even in the face of destruction, tremendous loss of property and life, women took on the role of family caregivers and re-builders.

The “tinoo-han” (belief that one can only visit a wake once in any given day was set aside in the aftermath of the flood. Many families lost a member; some families lost more than one member: grandparents, father and/or mother, sons or daughters. Other families lost neighbors, colleagues, classmates, or close friends. The sudden passing away of precious people just did not make sense to anyone.

Xavier University's Psychosocial Response

Since Cagayan de Oro is part of Mindanao, a region that is not considered a typhoon path, there was little preparation for flood, if at all. So the aftermath of Sendong left the city in chaos and confusion. The reported extent of damage included 23 barangays, 113,651 families consisting of 721,844 individuals. From the viewpoint of counsellors, the psychosocial demand of the survivors was extensive. The counsellor's courage to deal with the extent of the psychosocial work was drawn from the Gospel of John 6: 1-15 on Jesus' feeding of the five thousand.

⁵ When Jesus looked up and saw a great crowd coming toward him, he said to Philip, "Where shall we buy bread for these people to eat?" ⁶ He asked this only to test him, for he already had in mind what he was going to do. ⁷ Philip answered him, "It would take more than half a year's wages to buy enough bread for each one to have a bite!" ⁸ Another of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, spoke up, ⁹ "Here is a boy with five small barley loaves and two small fish, but how far will they go among so many?" ¹⁰ Jesus said, "Have the people sit down." There was plenty of grass in that place, and they sat down (about five thousand men were there). ¹¹ Jesus then took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed to those who were seated as much as they wanted. He did the same with the fish. ¹² When they all had enough to eat, he said to his disciples, "Gather the pieces that are left over. Let nothing be wasted." ¹³ So they gathered them and filled twelve baskets with the pieces of the five barley loaves left over by those who had eaten.



Psychosocial Training: Brief Crisis Counseling Orientation and Debriefing

The Psychology Department of Xavier University organized a post-crisis counseling training to address the crisis. Psychologists from Ateneo de Manila University



Some members of XU Psych Dept
Psychosocial Team

Standing from left: Isabelle Veloso, Mae Contreras, Dennis Pastoril, Gail Conway, Yayette delaPena, Maita Ignacio, Nerissa Buot, and Janet Ibale. Seated from left: Rachele Wapaño, Roger Lee, Richie Eduave, Voltaire Marquez, and Carla Barros.



VP on Research and Social Outreach, Dr Hilly R Quiaoit, expressed that DSWD Secretary Dinky Soliman appreciated XU's efforts on psychosocial debriefing in the evacuation centers.

Edna Franco, then VP of AdMU, Dr Boboy Alianan whose earnest support and input were invaluable, Dr Gina Hechanova, the present Chair of Psychology Department; Dr Melissa Macapagal, Dr Lianne Alampay, Dr Joy Calleja, Dr Mira Ofreneo, Dr Karina Fernandez, Dr Marissa Adviento, Dr Gilda Lopez, Mr Gary Faustino, Ms Judith de Guzman, Ms. Anne Topacio, and Dr Lota Teh.

(ADMU), came in haste, to Cagayan de Oro to offer training for local psychosocial counsellors. The ADMU professional counsellors shared their expertise and implemented their tested psychosocial intervention. They provided drawing books and all sorts of materials for children. Using their insights from their own Ondoy typhoon experience in 2009, these experts assisted the survivors in coping with their traumas, gradually leading them to make sense of their pains and suffering.

Five teams from AdMU conducted psychosocial debriefing sessions and brief crisis counselling orientation-trainings on December 22, 23, 27, 28, January 2, 3, 20, 21, and February 1. In sum, there were about 450 participants from different sectors in Cagayan de Oro who in turn worked as volunteers in their own schools, barangays, and agencies.

Xavier University expressed its grateful appreciation to Dr

Taking care of our own: XU Faculty and Staff Colloquium

One of the lessons learned from the Ondoy typhoon experience is “not to proceed as if nothing happened.” A number of XU faculty and staff were affected by Sendong. In all, there were 227 XU employees and their families who were affected by the flood.

XU President, Fr Bobby Yap recognized that in the face of trauma, there is need for time, space, and ritual for emotional closure. About 715 teachers and staff, from different levels and XU campuses were gathered in a colloquium on January 6, 2012.

Everyone in Cagayan de Oro was affected by typhoon Sendong. Everyone had a story to tell. In the small group sharing and psychosocial processing, teachers were given the chance to listen to



Xavier Ecoville, which is envisioned to be “God-centered, economically and ecologically progressive, inhabited by residents who care for each other.”

one another’s perspectives during the debriefing and counselling sessions. In doing so, everyone came to better understand, cognitively and emotionally, the tragic experience that had befallen on everyone’s life. This was the chance to inform the general XU population of their physical, emotional, cognitive reactions to the traumatic event they went through. Dr Imelda Batar, Chair of the Psychiatric Department of Medical City,

Ortigas Avenue, Quezon city, explained during the Xavier University Faculty convocation the importance of understanding and dealing with stress reactions after one undergoes disaster.

On February 9, 2012, XU was able to determine that exactly 2,048 students were directly affected by typhoon Sendong. There was a felt need to prepare teachers in dealing with their students when classes shall have resumed after the Christmas break. Faculty members were given a crash course of sorts on “basic attending skills,” how to listen attentively, how to respond with empathy.

Psychoeducational materials were distributed for information-dissemination.

Materials on handling stress after disaster, psychological first aid, for parents on dealing with children's reactions, and on supporting survivors. Most of these materials were shared without cost to the XU community by the AdMU Psych Department.

The colloquium ended with a celebration of the Holy Mass organized by the XU Office of the Mission and Ministry, assisted by other units such as Guidance and Counseling Office and Psychology Department among others.

Psychosocial Community Service

Immediately after the faculty and staff colloquium, the Psychology Department was invited by the representatives of the Department of Social Welfare and Development (DSWD) Multi-sectoral Sendong Operations Center to mobilize psychosocial debriefing teams to evacuation centers and relocation sites.

At that time, there was a need for a system and structure in effectively and efficiently mobilizing the debriefing teams. Drawing from lessons in the Ondoy experience in Manila in 2009, and from the valuable advice of Dr Alianan, structure was set up in haste. An administration team was created to take care of logistics; a training team was formed for continuous competency-building; and psychosocial debriefing teams were created to serve as the action teams. Thus, fifteen psychosocial processing teams were formed. DOH Cagayan de Oro, through the able leadership of Dr Benzon Go, supported the formation and mobilization of debriefing teams.

From December 22, 2011 to March 19, 2012, 66 evacuation centers were served, including government agencies like Department of Agrarian Reform (DAR) and the City Health Office. Community health navigators, the military sector, children, women, and the elderly, a few private groups (businessmen), some schools as well as religious groups (nuns, priests, seminarians, CWL) attended to about 4,100 survivors. This was made possible only by the generosity and kindness of friends and partners.

To serve the psychosocial needs of displaced individuals and families, XU Psychology Department partnered with the International Migration of the Philippines (IOM).

Lyra Versoza trained more responders to address the grassroots community. The module on “Pagdadala” was used many times over by various groups: the military rescue workers, XU Ecoville camp managers, and by some government agencies.

It was good that Xavier University, through its President, Fr Bobby Yap, recognized the value of the psychosocial efforts on the road to recovery. XU supported the Psychology Department’s initiative and effort with adequate funding from the Noah fund. This support was essential in carrying out effectively and efficiently all psychosocial interventions during this time.

Focused Psychosocial Community Service in Summer 2012

Even after the academic year ended in March 2012, still the psychosocial effort was sustained. Debriefing/psychosocial processing activities were continued. The Psychology Department was invited to be part of the Health Cluster of XU Ecoville.

In summer 2012, the Department’s psychosocial efforts were focused on XU Ecoville. Psychosocial service was, at this time, more focused and systematic.

Faculty members of the Psychology Department adapted and implemented their Psychosocial projects for Ecoville: Jason Manaois worked for the Psychosocial Care for XU

EcovilleCamp Management; Janet Ibale worked with practicum students in assessing psychological needs of clients and creating psychological intervention modules; Carla Barros, worked with practicumers in doing assessment. Maita Ignacio and other faculty members, Yayetta de la Pena, Voltaire Marquez, Maria Celeste Sagarbarria, Jhoana Marie Mocorro, staff Dennis Pastoril, were engaged in the implementation of a mental health and psychosocial support program called “Pagkab-ot sa Kalinaw Pinaagi sa Himsug nga Pangisip: Achieving Peace through a Healthy Mind.” The thrust of the program was to promote mental health and prevent the occurrence of mental health disorders through psycho-education, aligning XU’s

psychosocial efforts in XU Ecoville with the Inter-Agency Standard Committee of the United Nations' (IASC) principles on mental health and psychosocial support. Other faculty, Nerissa Buot, Gail Conway, June Baunillo, continued their work at Calaanan while Mae Pilayre continued her efforts at Mt. Carmel.

By March 2012, the engagement with XU Ecoville was far from complete. Another phase of psychosocial service unfolded and was focused on “well-being” which emphasized individual and community resilience. At this time, there was some degree of understanding the dynamics of trauma in recovery. This specific psychosocial service springs from *pagtoo* (faith in God), *paglaum* (hope), *pagkamalig-on* (inner strength) and *pakipagtambayayong* (community feeling). From this understanding, the strategies that were adapted were faith-sharing, community-building, and future-planning.

Recommendations and Lessons Learned in Psychosocial Care after Sendong

From the experience with Sendong, lessons were hard earned. First, is that in order for psychosocial efforts to be efficient and effective, there has to be a sound structure. Second, competency building is a foundation for effective psychosocial efforts. Psychologists in the area had to go through training in Disaster, Crisis, and Trauma Psychology.

There is a recognition that psychosocial care is an essential part to disaster relief and should be an integral part of disaster planning and preparedness. While disaster intervention involves relief distribution and medical care, psychosocial counseling and efforts may have to be integrated into any program of disaster response.

It is important to establish network with relevant groups, such as DSWD multi-sectoral group, DOH, other educational institutions, and international humanitarian organizations. It is important also to forge an alliance with the authorities in order to be allowed to provide psychological support in a structured way.

Psycho-education provides to community health workers relevant background, and training on how to do psychosocial work. There is a need for training of government and community workers involved in disaster relief work.

Information coming from a comprehensive database must also be accurate, since decisions on psychosocial efforts based on those data. Reliable, credible information from the ground is key for effective and correct response.

In retrospect, the saving grace was that people from different sectors worked in solidarity, without thought for honor or personal gain: faithful to the mission to be “men and women for others.”