Welcome once again to How Aid Works. I’m Zayne D’Crus from Australian Red Cross. Now the Philippines has gained a reputation for being one of the most disaster-prone places on earth. In fact it has been hit by three super-typhoons in the last three years. Starting with Typhoon Haiyan which killed more than 7,000 people back in 2013.

Not surprisingly, the Philippines has become really, really good at dealing with disasters. So much so that Australia and many other countries in the region have a lot to learn from them. Joining me today is Catherine Gearing who has been working with Philippine Red Cross throughout each one of the super-typhoons. Catherine, welcome to ‘How Aid Works’.

“Pre-emptive evacuations are vital in saving lives. If you can get people to safe places, this is going to make a huge difference to the number of deaths.”
Catherine Gearing
Hey Zayne, how’s it going?

Zayne D’Crus
Thanks so much for joining us today. Now you were on the ground when Typhoon Haiyan hit back in 2013. In fact you were one of the first Australian aid workers to get to Tacloban City. Can you tell us a little bit about what you saw when you got there?

Catherine Gearing
I’d been working in this area for a number of years so I knew the city quite well, but when we arrived—first of all, the vehicle we were in couldn’t get into the city so we got to a point where the car stopped and there was just chaos all over the road. There were cars that were flipped upside down. There were huge trees that blocked the roads. There was absolute mayhem on the streets. Everything was totally blocked in so we ended up getting out and then walking into the city. And as we were walking there were people everywhere.

We were having to climb over a huge amount of debris to get in. There was a kind of layer of mud and black over everything that we were seeing and I remember as we were walking in I was talking to people and just seeing the amount of shock of the people that I was seeing on the roads, coming in. People were really very scared. And at one point I kept thinking oh it can’t be that bad it can’t be— it must be just this section of the road but as I kept going it just kept getting worse and worse and the debris was just more destructive and then at one point you kind of come up over a rise, and you can oversee looking kind of down in to the bay, and into the city and that’s when like…just felt like I was kind of – the air kind of disappeared and I kind of was grasping for air thinking, “What has happened?”

And at that point I could see where a number of ships had been literally lifted out of the water as the waves had come in picked up out of the harbour and brought in to the middle of the city. And just—absolutely devastated everything that was underneath these ships. All these people’s lives had been lost as these ships had just crushed everything below as it had kind of been dragged across, you know the city, into the city of Tacloban. So at this point it became really difficult to walk on the roads so we were really climbing.

So we were walking along the edge of the harbour but that’s where there was a lot of dead animals that were in the water and it was really, really filthy water. We walked into Tacloban along the water’s edge.

But my fear the whole time walking in was I knew staff at the Red Cross chapter and we hadn’t had news about— of the staff. And that was my fear of the, you know, the people that you know and you’ve built relationships with and what’s happened to them. and the relief of when I arrived at the chapter, hugging the staff that I’d worked with for the last three years and this huge relief that they were safe and their families were safe. You know that was a massive relief when we eventually arrived at the chapter.

And then the next few days we were you know, the city continually was— stayed in that kind of state of destruction for the next couple of weeks and there wasn’t a lot of clear—up of the city. People generally had started to kind of clear around their houses but the streets in general in the city was still very much, you know not cleared for the coming weeks. But my— you know once I’d assessed that the staff was safe and we arrived into the city then it was about how do we get aid on the ground. The airport, the ports, the roads, what was clear. How could we get goods in. And what were the safest routes.
Zayne D’Crus
Now a little over a year ago you and I were back in Tacloban and the city didn’t look anything like what you were describing except for the fact that there was a giant ship right in the middle of it. Can you talk a little bit about the city’s recover? And how it managed to rebuild so quickly?

Catherine Gearing
Actually there was a few initiatives that were quite clever in the initial days. One of the best that I saw was actually doing cash grants for people who could come and help clean up their city. Get people out in to the streets helping to clean up. Obviously there was also things like pay-loaders and clear – you know, construction equipment that needed to come in and used to clear those roads. But a lot of it was also you know manpower and people being involved and that enabled the communities to make some money and contribute towards their community’s recovery program, people started to clean up the city and started to look at ways that they could get the city functional again which was vital for again getting that aid in, get access in safe spaces to put relief goods, and then enabling those relief goods to be distributed as quickly as possible.

Zayne D’Crus
So typhoons themselves are nothing really new. I mean the Philippines get hit by something like 20 typhoons every year. Do you think Haiyan changed the game in any way?

Catherine Gearing
Definitely. I think when – not just these areas that were affected, the whole country, and even looking at how the government now responds to emergencies and even within the Red Cross movement, I think we’re all –especially Philippine Red Cross, we’re all a lot more aware of how we could work better and improve the ways that we do things.

Some of the examples I think I’ve seen of that is that the communities we work with, there’s a lot more of a serious understanding about warnings, so that when weather warnings are issued I think people are listening and taking more serious note. When you see the kind of destruction that that typhoon brought. I think families now are thinking "How can I ensure my children and my families are safe?” So people were taking those warnings a lot more seriously. The government are also a lot more proactive in pre-emptive evacuations. We saw that in Typhoon Hagupit which happened a year after Haiyan.

Zayne D’Crus
I actually did want to talk about Typhoon Hagupit so Hagupit happened almost a year after Haiyan struck, and from what I’ve heard, it resulted in one of the biggest evaluations since World War 2. Can you talk a little bit about whether that played a part in saving lives and the fact that the death toll was so much lower this time?

Catherine Gearing
Yes, the pre-emptive evacuations are very much vital in saving lives. If you can get people to safe places, this is going to make a huge difference to the number of deaths in a disaster and especially when you’ve got areas that are low lying. The water can be extremely disruptive as well as the wind that you get in these typhoons. You need to ensure that the communities where people are being evacuated to, you know families are being put into safer structures that would withstand those winds.
So I think one of the big things that we need to learn in this sector – and this isn’t just for the Philippines but I think is a learning that we need to learn internationally – is about really – ensuring that we have positive reinforcement of when we do these evacuations, if they’re not as disruptive as we think they’re going to be, let’s celebrate the success of this pre-emptive evacuation and say to these communities: ‘Yes you’ve done a really great thing’ but sometimes when we do these pre-emptive evacuations, families might think ‘Well that was a waste of time’ or ‘Why do we bother doing that, we didn’t need to?’ and then people can become more complacent.

So I think it is important to always ensure that when these disasters are coming and we do evaluations, we need to celebrate the successes of those and congratulate communities and people for doing the right thing and give positive reinforcement and say: ‘Yeah, look we’re ready, we can respond to this, we’re going to do a good job and we know what to do when the big one comes.’

Zayne D’Crus
Thank you. One of the other things I’ve noticed, and especially lately when Typhoon Koppu went through the Philippines which was another super typhoon, was just how good Philippine Red Cross had become in information management. Can you talk to you a little bit about how Red Cross, collects, stores, shares information during a disaster?

Catherine Gearing
So information is vital too: how are we going to remove our relief goods? How can we respond quickly and ensure that we’re able to help save lives? The Red Cross has really made a big focus on having chapters being able to access information that they need. And that information comes from the Red Cross in the Philippines having over 100 chapters throughout the country that are all manned by staff and volunteers. The majority of them only have one or two staff and they often are covering huge areas. So that’s where we have, you know, an amazing volunteer force that are there to help capture information from all areas within the country.

So that information is then channelled into the chapter and the chapter then report. We then can access information from these different areas. They are always now looking more at having stock in place, ready to respond. Ensuring that you know there’s volunteers ready to go for search-and-rescue and often when we’re doing those search-and-rescue missions we’re also ensuring that those volunteers are collecting data about who’s been affected, what roads are accessible, what health facilities are functional. So they’re collecting all this information. Is there electricity in the area? Is there water in the area? That information at the regional level then all gets fed into the operation centre at a national level and they then have - the mechanisms have been set up to really capture all of that to get the picture throughout the country.

Zayne D’Crus
I’ve seen people using mobile phones to share this information very quickly, including surveys.

Catherine Gearing
So this is another area where we have been using mobile phone devices which again enables – you’ve got instead of having paper and a thousand people writing things on paper that then all need to be put into a computer system, there’s now mobile phone devices where you can click through the data and automatically that then goes into a national system and you can then collate that data immediately into a system whereby you can see the numbers straight away.
Zayne D’Crus

*And that data is also now being used on social media for example to help people understand how the disaster is affecting them closer to home and what they can do about it.*

Catherine Gearing

Yes, I guess that’s another area that I’ve seen leaps and bounds in the last few years is in, you know information management and especially utilising that in social media. Social media can often be obviously instant and it can be timely to say how is this impacting my community and where I live. What do I need to be doing right now? And you can give those messages so people need to prepare, respond and do what they need to do whether that’s evacuate or be ready to evacuate.

Zayne D’Crus

*I’m picking up a very strong ‘localisation’ trend here. So localised information; localised volunteer response; localised strategies. Have the Philippines really been trying to implement some more kind of local first response measures?*

Catherine Gearing

Yes so they’ve got a system in the Philippines whereby they’re training up volunteers per Barangay. So this is the community-based level volunteer force and what these volunteer teams – there’s a structure of 44 volunteers per Barangay and these are broken down to have volunteers that are nurses, focused on health needs. Volunteers that are trained in search and rescue. Volunteers that are trained in information dissemination. So you’ve got volunteer teams that are made up of a multi-sectoral team to meet different needs within that community so that not one volunteer is trying to do ten jobs but you’ve got ten volunteers and they’ve each got different tasks that they have to do in their community; to capture information, share it and also to meet the needs of the community.

Zayne D’Crus

*One of the tools that you’ve been using in your work is called the Vulnerability and Capacity Assessment. What does this look like and what kind of information does it give you about a community?*

Catherine Gearing

So what we’re trying to do when we do the vulnerability and capacity assessment which we call the VCA, is we’re trying to get the communities to sit down and develop very user-friendly, very easy, straightforward information collection.

We find that when you get a group of people together there’s often a lot of knowledge within that group but sometimes putting it down and thinking about it and assessing it is a step. So what we might do is we’ll get people to do a map of their community and actually look at within their community, where are the most vulnerable areas? Where are the areas that are the safest to go? And how are you going to ensure that you’re going to relocate people from the vulnerable to the safest areas and that might also include how big is that safe area? Is everybody on this coastline going to be able to fit into those facilities or are you going to need to consider alternative facilities that are safe to go to? So that’s one step.

Another step is to think about what are the different times of year that we’re going to likely get disasters. And that needs to be considering some of the climate change thinking that’s going on and you know assessing how is the climate change going to affect the different stages of the year and how different say times of agricultural production.
Zayne D’Crus
So it’s really about getting people to identify the particular risks that are- I guess unique to where they live and to how they live?

Catherine Gearing
Exactly. So one is identifying the risks, the other one is identifying their strengths. So we want to build on their strengths and then minimise their risks. So you’re doing this mapping and then at the end of that assessment what you’re getting the community to do is to identify plans of action.

So we now know- I mean the community now knows, what are our risks what are our strengths? How do we minimise the risks? What steps do we have to take to ensure that we’re ready for whatever might occur?

Zayne D’Crus
So Catherine one of your interests during the last few years of working with the Philippine Red Cross is about inclusive programming: that’s disability inclusive, gender inclusive, thinking about child protection. Why do those things matter in an emergency response and how did they change the way you do an emergency response?

Catherine Gearing
So I think one of things when we talk about inclusion especially when we’re talking about disability inclusion, for me what I often think about is, we aren’t just think about how to make things better for persons with a disability. What we’re actually talking about with inclusion but disability inclusion is, this has got to be better for everybody. If it is inclusive for someone with a disability I mean an example might be you know if you’re stalking about a ramp at a facility, that’s going to be better for someone who’s disabled or who’s elderly or potentially a young child or a pregnant mother.

So there’s a lot of the work that we do with inclusion it’s not just thinking about one group but it’s thinking more broadly and the same sort of things like early warning systems where somebody might have a hearing impairment, in an emergency other people’s hearing might be affected. They might also have difficult hearing. Or it might be somebody elderly who has difficulty hearing. People might have acute injuries as a result of a major earthquake so having systems and processes in place whereby you might have designed something specifically for somebody with a disability will actually be a huge benefit for those injuries following an emergency.

Zayne D’Crus
So do you think that designing systems for people with a disability for example will also help people who have been injured during the emergency itself?

Catherine Gearing
Exactly. So it might be that by having those systems in place – an example would be the ramp you know it’s going to be useful for injuries following an emergency because people need to access a health clinic and they might have had an injury, they might have broken a limb and they might have had an injury, so being able to access those areas will be beneficial for them. So there are ways in which if we make services inclusive it means that they’re going to be better for everybody. It’s a better program and a better support for everybody in the community.
Zayne D’Crus
Thank you. Let’s go big-picture and then come back. So right at the moment our region is in the midst of an El Nino climate event so we’re seeing more intensive cyclones, droughts in some areas, intensive rainfall in other areas, what do you think that Australia and other countries in our region can learn from the Philippines?

Catherine Gearing
I think one of things definitely that is important when we’re looking at these types of events is ensuring that these people are prepared for a range of different hazards. They should not just be thinking about one hazard or one particular disaster like a flood but we should be able – when we talk about the word ‘resilience’, were often talking about people being able to adapt to the context that they’re living in and that might mean adapting in the livelihoods we do so now, being reliant on one form of agriculture may not be the smartest way to ensure that we’re adapting to the climate that people live in so looking at alternative sources of income.

Zayne D’Crus
So for example, like after Typhoon Haiyan and all of the coconut trees were destroyed.

Catherine Gearing
Exactly. And those coconut trees, before new coconuts are produced, are likely to take another 10 to 20 years so ensuring that people have alternative sources of income is really, really important. So what we’ve been looking at is providing training to new kids who are finished in school and looking at what types of alternative skills they might need. That could be in electrical engineering and/or mobile phone fixing, training that we’ve been doing – it might be that whilst the parents in the family are doing agriculture maybe the younger family members who have just graduated from high school are looking at alternative incomes to support their, and supplement their family income.

Zayne D’Crus
Thanks very much Catherine, so looking at how far the Philippines have come, what do you think is the next big challenge for the country in terms of disaster management?

Catherine Gearing
I think one of the biggest challenges in the Philippines is definitely looking now at the urban risks. Especially having seen the impact of Nepal earthquake. The Philippines, especially metro Manila, is also in a highly vulnerable location for earthquakes and there’s the risk of having ‘the big one’ what we refer to in Manila as ‘the big one’ which is a mega earthquake in metro Manila.

So I think when we think about major earthquakes in metro Manila I think what we need to be prepared for is a whole realm of effects- there would be significant fire damage that would not necessarily enable people to access all areas of the city because buildings would be devastated, there would be roads that would be non-passable and you’re going to get fire throughout the city so we’ve been working to try and enhance community’s response to fire especially in some of the urban little narrow streets that you get in metro Manila so looking at, instead of a reliance on fire trucks looking at local solutions around having water available on smaller wheeled...

Zayne D’Crus
Little like two wheelers or something?
Catherine Gearing
Yes, they’re little trailers that – there’s a water tanker on the back and people can use them in narrower streets so these water trailers would then be able to be used for fires in smaller laneways within metro Manila. So that’s one of the things: I think the other thing is understanding how maybe access to resources if the airport was affected. What are the other routes that goods could be retrieved at – what would be the impact on the health facilities?

I know Philippine Red Cross has been working really hard to set up and establish field hospitals, a significant-sized field hospital because we know that if there’s going to be a major earthquake the health facilities and the major hospitals in Metro Manila are highly likely to be severely undress resourced to what would be needed.

Zayne D’Crus
So what we are talking about – and this is really interesting to me – is that we’re not just resourcing national or even citywide emergency services. What you’re trying to do is get small communities to find practical ways to protect themselves.

Catherine Gearing
That’s really what we want to be doing. That’s where we feel that in an emergency, the first responders are generally going to be within your community and within your network. The agencies that work nationwide aren’t always going to be there to respond immediately. There’s going to be needs throughout the city. You need to be able to do that initial rescue, initial saving of lives at a local level. And the stronger you can get that community set up to be resilient to those disasters means the quicker the communities will be able to respond and recover.

Zayne D’Crus
Now just one last question. You’ve been in the Philippines for a number of years now and you’re actually finishing up very soon. What’s kept you in the country for so long and what do you reckon you’ll miss?

Catherine Gearing
I think the thing that I’ve really loved about working in the Philippines especially in the areas of disaster management, is the strength of the volunteer force that the Philippine Red Cross has. It is the backbone of the organisation and it’s the backbone of our movement and I think the volunteers that I’ve seen in the Philippines really come from all walks of life.

You can – we’ve got people who you know haven’t necessarily had the chance to go through and education and have the chance to fulfil everything that they’ve wanted to, you know personally. But when you see them as a volunteer, you see volunteers come out and give everything they have, it’s really amazing to see the way that we are able to support communities, that we are able to make a difference. That we are able to change lives. And the volunteer force is the reason behind that.

And I see the impact that our programming has on families, you know it’s really astounding to be able to think that we’re making people’s lives. Even after a disaster I see the impact that our work has; and we’re making people’s lives better than what they were pre-disaster. We’ve given them more skills, more knowledge to really improve their situation. So when you get to meet the people in those households and those families and see the impact that we have, it makes it all worthwhile.
Zayne D’Crus
Thanks so much for joining us Catherine Gearing.

Catherine Gearing
Thanks Zayne.