



REBECCA WOLSKIK

Health Workers with Grassroots Responses to Crisis

Natural crises such as disasters and disease outbreaks demand a response. Some of the local organizations that Inter Pares supports are ideally placed to provide effective and sustainable solutions.

Iday's Story: Solidarity in the Face of Typhoon Haiyan

We have learned so much from the decades of organizing that only Inter Pares had the vision and courage to support. The organizers we have are priceless!

DR. JUNICE MELGAR, DIRECTOR OF LIKHAAN

On November 8th, 2013, the worst typhoon in the history of the Philippines struck its eastern coast. Punishing winds pummelled homes, uprooted trees and devastated infrastructure. Entire areas were flattened. Waves as high as two storeys belted the islands of Eastern and Western Samar, as well as Leyte. In the days that followed, the world was awestruck by images of the aftermath. The typhoon affected 11 million people and left over 6,000 dead.

For Iday Simbajon, a community health worker living in Metro Manila, the situation was personal. Her mother, one son and other relatives lived in the heart of the affected area. As soon as she could and against the advice of friends, Iday made her way to find them. Her family home had been destroyed, but thankfully, her family **PAGE 2 ▶**



LIKHAAN

Iday Simbajon

Iday's Story: Solidarity in the Face of Typhoon Haiyan

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Community health workers bring knowledge of the local context, specialized clinical skills, decades of organizing experience, a critical feminist perspective and incredible motivation.

members were all alive and well, living in a makeshift cardboard hut as temporary shelter.

Two of her colleagues working in Eastern Samar were not so lucky. Tessie Azura perished from a stroke in the aftermath of the storm. And Ernie Gariando, caught in the storm after assisting his elderly parents escape to an evacuation site, was deeply affected by post-traumatic stress.

Iday, Ernie and Tessie were community health workers with Likhaan, a women's health organization supported by Inter Pares since its inception in 1995. In response to the typhoon, Likhaan deployed a team of its most skilled workers to affected areas. These

community health workers brought knowledge of the local context, specialized clinical skills, decades of organizing experience, a critical feminist perspective and incredible motivation.

Likhaan's domestic response was both novel and complementary when compared with more common international humanitarian relief practices.

When disaster strikes in places like the Philippines, international aid often floods in to assist those in need. The complexities of such operations are immense: coordination, protection of the vulnerable, consultation with all levels of authority and the local population, and building in plans for long-term sustainability. The Likhaan team was knowledgeable of all of these issues. In consultation with local authorities, the health workers determined which 23 *barangays* (communities) most needed their help, and set to work.


The Likhaan team offered counselling to battle the grief they encountered. They trained communities in negotiating with local authorities to ensure basic needs were met, over both the short and long term. They assisted in the establishment of community gardens, which improved food security while deeply nourishing the spirit. Likhaan responded to the reproductive health needs of women by offering family planning services and supplies. The health workers mobilized hundreds in rebuilding



PHOTOS: LIKHAAN

From top to bottom:
Temporary housing structures after Typhoon Haiyan;
Organizing session by community health workers;
Gardening initiative instigated by Likhaan.

their own communities. But what was most profoundly appreciated was the sisterhood and solidarity of the health workers. It was a remarkably effective response in the face of disaster, constructed upon Likhaan's decades of skill, knowledge, wisdom and experience in organizing with the urban poor in Metro Manila.

At Inter Pares, we are honoured to have supported Likhaan's community health workers over the long term. And Iday, with her skill, heart and leadership, accepted another placement in Eastern Samar, profoundly gratified that she was able to use her capacities for rebuilding, for hope and for inspiration after such incredible loss. 

A Holistic Approach to a Dangerous Disease

The health conditions in conflict-affected areas of Burma are among the worst in the world. Health services are extremely limited, leaving the people vulnerable to dangerous diseases that have been eradicated in many other places. One of these diseases is lymphatic filariasis.

Commonly known as elephantiasis, lymphatic filariasis causes painful deformities and severe disability, which in turn lead to social stigma, loss of income and increased medical expenses. Transmitted by mosquitoes and highly endemic, this dangerous disease recurs cyclically in an area once it has taken hold. Fortunately, the transmission cycle can be broken through an annual mass treatment to an entire endemic population for five or six consecutive years.

While there are virtually no government health services available in most of rural Burma, the Back Pack Health Worker Team provides primary health care to a quarter of

a million people. Inter Pares has supported the team since it was founded in 1998.

Some Back Pack health workers started seeing possible symptoms of lymphatic filariasis in their communities in Karen State in 2007. Soon after, they began antigen testing in three areas. The disease was found to be prevalent in all three, with an astonishing average rate of over 70%. Team members received immediate treatment training and began conducting mass treatments every year from 2008 to 2013.

Although many villagers were initially resistant to take the medication, this soon changed due to the team's approach to health care. Run by teams of trained community members, their holistic primary

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PHOTOS: BACK PACK HEALTHWORKER TEAM

The Back Pack Health Worker Team provides workshops to villagers, school children, new mothers and health workers of different specialities and levels.



**We work with our allies to connect
common struggles and find local solutions
here and around the world.**
globalize equality

A Holistic Approach to a Dangerous Disease

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health care approach includes medical care, community health education, preventative health care, and maternal and child health services. The Back Pack Health Worker Team aims to equip people with the skills and knowledge necessary to manage and address their own health problems. This approach is essential in the context of long-term conflict, and for now it is the only effective approach to providing health care in rural Burma.

Through community meetings, focus groups, posters and pamphlets, health worker teams in Karen State taught their communities about the disease, medication side

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effects and the strategy for eradication. A follow-up survey in 2011 found that prevalence of lymphatic filariasis had already dropped from 70% to 42%

In contrast to this comprehensive action, in 2013 the national Ministry of Health began a limited elimination project to fight the disease nearby in southern Burma. There were many difficulties with this project, in part because there was little to no comprehensive education program to accompany



Back Pack health workers transport a patient for treatment.

the treatment. In late 2013, when the Director of Back Pack met with leaders in the national and Karen State health ministries, the officials acknowledged the multiple problems the Ministry's program had encountered, and asked for guidance from the team.

Further data on the impact of the team's project is currently being analyzed. Given its success, it is expected the program will be extended to other parts of Burma where the team works. This experience has proven again that a community-based and holistic health campaign can be extremely efficient and can lead to truly sustainable results. 

INTER PARES

221 Laurier Avenue East
Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1N 6P1
Tel: 613-563-4801 • Toll free: 1-866-563-4801
Fax: 613-594-4704
info@interpares.ca • www.interpares.ca

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With the support of thousands of Canadians, Inter Pares works in Canada and around the world with social change organizations who share the analysis that poverty and injustice are caused by inequalities within and among nations, and who are working to promote peace, and social and economic justice in their communities and societies.

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