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Local aid workers in the digital humanitarian project: between "second class citizens" and "entrepreneurial survivors"

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the experiences of Filipino workers recruited for technology and communications work by international aid agencies involved in the Typhoon Haiyan response. Filipino workers, many of whom were personally coping with the social and economic impact of this disaster, were hired on short-term contracts to test and implement various digital humanitarian innovations such as feedback and hazard mapping technological platforms. These workers were doubly marginalized: first, as tech workers whose work was viewed by aid officers on the ground as less substantial than that of food or shelter programs; and second, as local voices often drowned out by national and international colleagues. Moving beyond the usual figure of the cosmopolitan and adventure-seeking Western humanitarian acting on distant suffering, this paper draws attention to local aid workers' aspirations for personal and professional mobility as they seize novel opportunities opened up by the digital humanitarian agenda. It outlines how the digital humanitarian project's ambition to facilitate the inclusion of disaster-affected communities is fundamentally undermined by labor arrangements that doubly marginalize local aid workers.

Introduction

Within days of Typhoon Haiyan's landfall on November 8, 2013, causing massive destruction and loss of life in the central Philippines, the United Nations Emergency Relief Coordinator formally declared a system-wide Level 3 response, the highest level of humanitarian crisis. The United Nations (UN) immediately released US$500 million in emergency funds, with foreign governments, private corporations, and various NGO fundraising initiatives pledging more donations to come.[1] The rapid deployment of 450 international staff and large-scale recruitment of local first responders quickly created aid agency teams to address affected communities' basic needs for food, shelter, and livelihood.

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[1]Carden and Clements 2015.

The response to Haiyan included unique and unprecedented attention to the affected communities' communication and information needs. International aid agencies launched community feedback platforms, hazard mapping, and information campaigns using the hashtags "#commisaid" and "#infoisaid" on social media.[2] As a middle-income country, with a high level of English proficiency among both local staff and aid beneficiaries, not to mention the widespread use of mobile phones, the Philippines was an ideal location to gather evidence and provide insight into how digital tools enhance community engagement with, and accountability to, disaster-affected populations.[3] These initiatives leveraged the skills and knowledge of a highly employable local labor force, which was enrolled in capacity-building programs that sought to empower local communities and build long-term "resilience" in this disaster-prone environment.

While policymakers at the global level championed a broad agenda, most of the "techie aid work"[4] was located at the local level. Local staff based in the disaster zones of Tacloban City, Cebu, and Roxas City were themselves survivors of the calamity. Confronted with widespread damage to their property and loss of their livelihoods, many local residents seized the rare employment opportunities offered by global aid agencies, in the hopes of meeting their urgent short-term needs and long-term aspirations for personal and professional mobility. Local tech workers were hired for communications and accountability teams as project managers, computer programmers, and geographic information systems (GISs) experts, as well as data encoders and surveyors.

This paper analyzes the rise of project-based rather than long-term career aid work and the explosion of precarious digital work characterized by short-term dispersed labor (i.e. outsourced) arrangements. It examines local peoples' employment by humanitarian agencies, and how their experiences reflect aspirations for personal and professional mobility while they cope with life changes brought about by disaster. It also critiques how emerging labor arrangements for tech workers in the aid sector map onto existing structural hierarchies and inequalities that impede the resourcefulness and creativity of local aid workers, developing subjectivities as "entrepreneurial survivors" coping with disaster in (self-)exploitative work. We argue that digital humanitarian workers are doubly marginalized: first, as providers of short-term digital labor viewed as peripheral to traditional aid programs, and second, as local workers testing and implementing innovation projects designed by global aid leaders, whose main beneficiaries may ultimately be global policymakers and donors.

Drawing on interviews with and our observations of twenty local tech workers in senior and junior roles, we present workers' voices and discuss their interpretations of meaningful work within precarious labor arrangements at a time of disaster. We argue that the ambition of digital humanitarian projects to facilitate the inclusion and participation of disaster-

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[2]UNOCHA 2014.

[3]Jacobs 2015.

[4]We use the shorthand term "techie aid work" to refer to technological and communications-related labor in aid agencies that contribute to donor-funded innovations, often under the umbrella of Communications with Communities (CwC) and Accountability to Affected People (AAP) approaches. These sectoral initiatives emphasize the use of new digital technologies for two-way communication, offering opportunities for aid agencies to seek communities' feedback and deliver more efficient aid programs that are also appropriate to local preferences and cultures. The typical structure of techie aid work teams includes a leader at the global (HQ) level in London or New York, responsible for supervising a project funded by a government foreign aid grant. They then employ a local manager and staff in the disaster zone for the duration of the project, usually six months to a year, with opportunities for extension.

affected communities is fundamentally undermined by the labor arrangements that relegate local tech workers to a status of second class citizens in disaster relief organizations. If indeed the recent agenda of global policymakers is to make humanitarian operations "as local as possible and international as necessary,"[5] then it is crucial to identify what prevents local workers from representing the crisis-affected communities to which they belong, and thus begin a discussion on structural reforms and organizational support systems that might help eradicate these obstacles and enable these voices to be heard.

In the next section we briefly review the sociology and anthropology of aid literature to explore the specific positionality of local aid workers and review the opportunities, responsibilities, and challenges they face. This is followed by a discussion of specific features of technological work in aid agencies and a reflection on how workers in the global South face particular challenges generated by contemporary labor arrangements under neoliberalism. Our methodology section details the data collection process and introduces the demographic background of our respondents, after which we provide a narrative of local workers' entry to "Aidland," where they obtain unexpected professional opportunities, but are also positioned as "second class citizens." In our conclusion, we invite further discussions on the various ways the humanitarian aid sector can better support local aid workers, arguing against their current treatment as workers seemingly used and discarded as quickly as the technology they are hired to test.

The local humanitarian

In spite of dramatic changes in the humanitarian sector, including an increasingly diversifying workforce, the humanitarian archetype remains the same. It is an "always-already worldly, generically cosmopolitan, globally mobile figure operating from a position of relative strength and anonymous power vis a vis ('local,' 'helpless') aid recipients."[6] Thus, discussions of Western aid workers' attraction to adrenaline-pumping "edge work"[7] in crisis contexts does not neatly apply to local workers, particularly those in the global South who live in dangerous proximity to risk day to day.

Nevertheless, anthropological research on local aid workers reveals how their roles display aspects of aid work characterized as mobile, flexible, and intense. While local workers are no doubt adept in the "mental mobility" of "negotiat[ing] unfamiliar cultures and living conditions,"[8] especially in work that involves translation and community consultation, they have limited professional mobility within the global organization. The humanitarian researcher Hugo Slim describes how, "despite being specialists who understand the history, culture, and fast-moving politics of a place" local aid workers face a "very effective glass ceiling" that limits professional advancement and ability to influence policy.[9] The pay gap between local aid workers and expatriate colleagues creates frustration and demoralization in the ranks, as does the assignment of low-status, low-resource roles to local workers.[10] In response, they develop tactics of resistance to avoid having to

[5]Agenda for Humanity 2016.
[6]Malkki 2015, 24.
[7]Roth 2015a.
[8]Roth 2015b, 55.
[9]Slim 1995, 121, 111.
[10]Roth 2015b.

occupy "the savage slot" in aid organizations.[11] They conceal some of their skills and knowledge from expatriates, do the minimal amount of work required, and pursue personal rather than professional advancement in order to "cross the boundary from unemployed villager to a salaried job" or to achieve the status of local "interstitial elite"[12] with no desire to break the glass ceiling of the global organization.

The 2016 World Humanitarian Summit put forward an aid localization agenda that includes a commitment to develop interventions that directly affect communities and empower local NGOs with the capacity to deliver aid more effectively.[13] Supporting long-standing initiatives in humanitarian accountability, the agenda invites affected communities to participate in the development of aid projects and delivery procedures that meaningfully reflect local needs and cultural preferences.[14] While this vision is noble, it is important to track how the aid localization agenda is actually operationalized and applied. In what follows we offer a case study of the positionality of local tech workers in global aid organizations, showing how power inequalities between expatriate and local staff, as well as between program and tech teams, have significantly affected aid delivery and at times undermined the lofty goal of accountability.

Now hiring: entrepreneurial workers for digital projects

Digital communications technologies are increasingly ubiquitous in the aid sector. With the potential to correct inefficiencies and increase accountability to local communities, digital technologies facilitate two-way communication between agencies and affected people, creating opportunities to reverse the top-down structure of humanitarianism and its system of neocolonial governance that perpetuates dependencies.[15] In recent years, partnerships between humanitarian agencies and tech labs have grown more common, as tech experts promise innovations ranging from feedback mechanisms via mobile phones and fundraising via social media to aid delivery via drones. Technovangelists such as Patrick Meier enthuse that efficiencies brought by humanitarian technologies could be used to sway member states to donate more aid money, alluding to the high donor appeal of Silicon Valley and "Aidland" partnerships.[16]

However, these initiatives have met resistance from development veterans such as Barb Wigley, who lament an obsession with trendy tools over established processes of cultural immersion.[17] Humanitarian leaders such as Yves Daccord, Director-General of the International Committee of the Red Cross, caution aid workers against replacing physical, face-to-face proximity to communities with technologically mediated solutions.[18] These concerns illustrate a growing split between policymakers seeking to develop digital humanitarian innovations and critical, traditionalist aid workers who take pride in the core values of cultural immersion and proximity that underpin what they argue is accountable aid work.

[11]Peters 2016, 497.
[12]Swidler and Watkins 2009 in Peters 2016, 499.
[13]Agenda for Humanity 2016.
[14]Madianou et al. 2016.
[15]Madianou et al. 2015, 3024.
[16]Meier 2015, 180.
[17]Wigley 2015.
[18]U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations 2017.

Digital humanitarian projects follow features of project-based aid work. The market-ization of the sector pits agencies against each other in competing for funding, with the unlikely effect of turning aid beneficiaries into "the means to an end."[19] In the face of these developments, the intense marketization of the sector requires aid workers to cul-tivate an "entrepreneurial self,"[20] developing and marketing "innovative" ideas, and creating and managing their own personal brands for career advancement. Beyond simply accepting clearly assigned responsibilities and relying on a linear career pro-gression, project-based aid workers need to build their recognition in the field to succeed, demanding high commitment with no assurance of a fallback within their organization.

Project-based aid work shares this "new spirit of capitalism"[21] with the digital and crea-tive industries. Individualization and flexibility in digital work blur the boundaries between the professional and the personal, its unrelenting demand on workers to be "always on" with digital devices facilitating the "presence bleed" of work into home life.[22] While digital work enables upward mobility and improved welfare, it is also respon-sible for a broader shift toward casual outsourced work that weakens the labor market pos-ition of employees overall.[23] Studies of digital work in the global South, such as with Amazon Turk employees, social media content moderators, and click farm workers, have shown that global labor hierarchies result in "race-to-the-bottom" work arrange-ments that deal indignities to low-paid, highly anxious project-based workers doing repeti-tive and numbing work for clients in the global North.[24]

The Philippines occupies a coveted position in the global economy of outsourcing and digital labor as the world's call center hub.[25] Official government rhetoric celebrates the contributions of outsourcing to the national economy as a stabilizing force amidst global economic recession and regional competition. The government likewise cultivates the image that Filipinos are "world-class workers," in the process essentializing and emphasizing Filipino qualities of being professional, resourceful, well-spoken in English, and respectful to authority.[26]

Filipinos aspire to work in digital hubs that promise upward social mobility and mem-bership in a professional and consumer class.[27] Nevertheless, digital workers endure job conditions marked by inequality, stress, and low worker solidarity. While some call center agents make more than double the country's daily minimum wage (PhP 521 or about US$10),[28] they continue to earn much less than their American counterparts.[29] Filipinos are the lowest paid global workers for outsourced digital outputs, labor unions in creative and digital industries are rare,[30] and a weak tradition of worker solidarity

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[19]Krause 2014, 40.
[20]Roth 2015b, 62.
[21]Boltanski and Chiapello 2005.
[22]Gregg 2011.
[23]Qiu et al. 2014.
[24]Graham et al. 2017.
[25]Bajaj 2011.
[26]See Grogran 2016.
[27]David 2015, 381.
[28]Department of Labor and Employment 2017.
[29]IBON International 2013.
[30]Graham et al. 2017.

follows Filipino cultural expectations of workers, who are seen to owe debts of obligation to their patron-employers.[31]

Methodology

This paper primarily draws from semi-structured interviews with twenty Tacloban local techie aid workers conducted between April and November 2016, as well as previous field-work by the authors.[32] Our objective in these interviews, each of which was between 90 and 120 minutes, was to understand the broader context of our respondents' techie aid work, their personal and professional backgrounds, their personal motivations for entering aid work, and the challenges and opportunities they had experienced. We also asked for their most memorable accounts of engaging with foreign aid workers and in disaster-affected communities. This meant listening to often very personal stories of survival and massive destruction wrought by Typhoon Haiyan. After all, our respondents were Haiyan survivors themselves – survivors who refused to see themselves as victims and were eager to share their persistence and creativity in pursuing new careers and ambitions in the wake of disaster.

Table 1 presents an overview of the types of our respondents' techie aid work skills and their previous careers. Communications officers are project managers and officers of initiatives aimed at CwC and providing AAP. Specialists are workers with technical knowledge, such as computer programmers and geographers familiar with GIS. Clerical workers are encoders, surveyors, and call center operators who collect, translate, and organize feedback from communities.

As Table 1 shows, these aid workers had various professional backgrounds. Communications officers responsible for overall project management, analysis, and donor reporting had previously worked as nurses, digital freelancers, or development workers. Specialists with technical and computational expertise in platform development, such as GIS experts and coders, included a university-based geographer who saw this as a lucrative opportunity to do engaged research, while others had done freelance digital and development work. The clerical workers responsible for operating feedback hotlines and surveying communities with their digital apps had lower-middle-class backgrounds, including college students who had dropped out, call center operators, and casual workers who found part-time employment in graphic design or website development. Agencies only contract clerical workers for specific days to conduct surveys or encode data, paying them the equivalent of US$8.00–10.00 a day, which went a long way towards paying for house repairs or saving up for college tuition fees.

Most of our interviewees were young, reflecting a broader trend in online freelance work in the Philippines and globally, where young people are increasingly familiar with work that requires "maximum flexibility" and "self-governance" for productivity.[33] Of our twelve male interviewees, five were gay. Female and gay male workers are perceived by their colleagues as possessing skills of emotional labor[34] when interacting with disaster-affected people, who often communicate appeals for aid in pitiful ways.

[31]Rutten 2007.
[32]See Madianou et al. 2015 and Ong et al. 2015.
[33]Bröcking 2016.
[34]For a deeper discussion of sexuality in the context of aid work, see Ong 2017.

Table 1. Interviewee backgrounds and characteristics (N = 20).

	Categories of respondents	
Techie aid work	Communications officers (project manager and project officer)	8
	Specialists (GISs specialist, computer programmers, coders)	4
	Clerical workers (encoders, call center operators, surveyors)	8
Prior jobs	Digital freelancers	2
	University lecturers	1
	Development workers	3
	Nurse	3
	Balikbayan (returning overseas worker)	1
	Call center agent	2
	Unemployed	5
Age	20–35	16
	36–45	4
	51–60	1
Sex	Male	12
	Female	8

Survivors entering aid work

Local workers have a relatively low organizational status and often report to expatriate bosses. Local cultural norms of obligation inform the employee–employer relationship, where employees are expected to express their gratitude for simply having a job. This affects the delivery of tech projects as workers are less likely to challenge their bosses or colleagues in more prestigious departments.

Studies of international aid workers find boundary crossing to be a form of personal risk-taking that an "entrepreneurial self" uses to pursue their personal passions from a stable middle-class position.[35] In contrast, urgent material needs propelled most of the aid workers we interviewed into the field. Often, the huge gap between local workers' prior work experiences and their roles as aid workers causes them to be very thankful for the opportunity to earn an income that meets their basic needs. Unlike international staff, local aid workers view their hiring by a prestigious global agency as a risk that the *company* took, rather than something *they* as workers have taken.

Seventeen out of twenty people we interviewed worked outside of the aid sector prior to their post-Haiyan assignment. For instance, nursing graduate Joel had been a social media community manager designing and maintaining Facebook pages for American clients. He had settled into this role after leaving a stressful nursing career for a brief call center stint, which he also found stressful and monotonous. When Typhoon Haiyan hit his hometown of Roxas City, it also wiped out his source of income. A month-long power outage and three months without Internet access cut him off from his clients, who were oblivious to the fact that he was at ground zero of the strongest typhoon ever recorded. By the time Joel logged on to the jobs portal that linked him to overseas clients, his page was full of negative reviews. Struggling to rebuild his livelihood amidst the devastation, he explained:

> One by one, my nurse friends were joining humanitarian agencies to help in their medical response units. They knew I was desperately looking for a job and so persuaded me to apply as a medic. After the first interview, I found out they had other openings in communications, which is really my passion. And so I said, "I can do that instead and here, I'll send you

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[35]Roth 2015b.

my portfolio." Even though my degree was in nursing, I think it was because of my experience and portfolio that I was hired.

Demonstrating entrepreneurial traits as a seasoned freelancer, Joel told us how he sent follow-up emails after his interview, with links to websites and articles he had created for his various clients in the United States. He recognized that while he did not have the "right" qualifications as stated in the job advertisement, i.e. a university degree in either communications or journalism, he had "passion" as well as experience interacting with foreign clients. He expressed gratitude that the agency "took a chance" on him and offered him a fixed-term contract job as a communications manager.

Global trends show that aid agencies are flexible in hiring local staff in the context of an emergency response. Organizations with finite grant funding need to advertise and fill positions quickly, so mismatches between required technical skills and applicants' actual skills are common.[36] Joel's sense of gratitude for his job speaks a lot about his positionality as a disaster survivor who is part of an aspirational, if precarious, middle class that was formally excluded from government and humanitarian relief distributions. Unlike in disasters such as Hurricane Katrina, where (mostly white) middle-class Americans with damaged houses had opportunities to access government relief,[37] Filipino middle-class citizens like Joel had no social safety net to rely on as humanitarian aid was limited strictly to the neediest. Like other local aid workers, Joel displayed traits of an "entrepreneurial survivor": a strong sense of individual responsibility, hustle, and passion necessary to compete with other workers for opportunities opened up unexpectedly by disaster.

Compared with communications officers, clerical tech workers lived in more precarious socio-economic situations even prior to the typhoon. Respondents spoke of how Haiyan ripped the roofs from their houses and wiped out their family's sources of income, with no insurance to cover damaged and lost fishing boats and *trisikads* (non-motorized tricycles). Prices of basic goods skyrocketed in the disaster zone; the "Haiyan price" or "Yolanda price" forced them to quickly find alternative livelihoods in order to meet their basic needs. Several clerical workers were young people who stopped going to school after Haiyan in order to supplement their family incomes. For instance, Alyssa, a twenty-four-year-old coder, reported that, "as the eldest in the family, I had to help my family when we lost our fishing boats. There was no question for me to quit school first so I could earn an allowance as an encoder." Clerical workers such as Alyssa were very grateful for temporary job opportunities provided by agencies, enabling them to earn a daily volunteer allowance.

Not all local aid workers endured dramatic boundary crossings across fields and life situations. Some communications officers, particularly at the project manager level, had experience working for global aid agencies after a prior disaster – the Bohol Earthquake of October 2013.[38] These aid workers viewed their jobs in the wake of Haiyan as a promotion and opportunity for professional advancement.

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[36]Roth 2015b, 65.
[37]Seidenberg 2006.
[38]This earthquake, centered on the Philippines island of Bohol in the Central Visayas, occurred on October 12, 2013, three weeks before Typhoon Haiyan. It killed more than 200 people and injured approximately 1000 more.

For specialists, particularly highly skilled geographers, the disaster was a rare opportunity to actually use digital mapping skills that they valued but had no chance to apply in their former jobs. Mark, a twenty-seven-year-old GIS specialist, had been employed in the business process outsourcing (BPO) industry prior to Haiyan, after exhausting all possible employment opportunities for geographers in the Philippines. He felt intense competition in this limited market and his credentials fall short of those of his peers. After Haiyan, he was hired to join a team of mappers working for the UN. He said:

> Before Haiyan, geographers either go to a few private companies or teach in universities. Then Haiyan happened and created a boom in the mapping industry. We were able to level-up our services. There were even people who left jobs in government because the money is just bigger [in the Haiyan response].

Among the techie aid workers we met, the high-level specialists had most in common with the expatriates discussed in aid worker literature, where the "entrepreneurial self" experiments with short-term projects leading to personal development and creative expression, yet with minimal direct community engagement. Specialists saw employment in aid agencies as an opportunity to gain recognition for globally marketable skills, potentially advancing their professional careers and personal brands. However, specialists' practices of recognition-seeking with their many digital innovations raised the eyebrows of traditionalist career aid workers officers, who tend to value grounded development work, as we will discuss below.

Implementing digital humanitarian projects

Whether officer, clerk, or specialist, almost all the aid workers we interviewed were employed on short-term projects funded by grants won by humanitarians based in agency headquarters in London or New York. These projects were designed to test innovations on the ground, help improve the quality of current programs, and develop "best practices" for the future. Examples of this include EngageSpark, an interactive feedback platform that allows agencies to broadcast information and receive community feedback via short message service (SMS) and voice calls with no cost to affected people and the Community Response Map, which has similar features to EngageSpark but with the added functionality of visualizing feedback on a map.[39] These initiatives follow the general template of the project-based log frame as elaborated by Monika Krause, where agencies focus on short-term results with donors as the main audience for their work.[40] As mentioned above, humanitarian policymakers who participated in the post-Haiyan intervention viewed the Philippines as a place to test technological innovations in accountability, given local English proficiency, access to technology, and the presence of a skilled labor force.

Communications officers at the managerial level had to quickly learn to prioritize pleasing donors, by satisfying frequent demands for reports and site visits.[41] Because they were piloting new innovations, techie aid workers were pressed to develop systems

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[39]For more details about these two initiatives, see https://www.engagespark.com/about/ and https://communityresponsemap.org.
[40]Krause 2014.
[41]For a more focused analysis of the donor-driven nature of humanitarian accountability in the Haiyan response, see: Madianou et al. 2016.

and workflows without formal training from their employers. As accountability manager Charisse noted:

> We won a grant to test feedback hotlines where people can call in and ask for help on various issues. At first, it was just me with the cellphone receiving all these texts and calls. I had to figure out how to hire operators and encoders who would answer, record, and translate messages that we could then collect for the donor report we submit each month.

While Charisse recounted having developed the feedback templates from scratch to us with a sense of pride, she felt that the short lead time for implementing projects and the urgency of affected communities' requests took time away from strategic planning. Though local project managers enjoyed the support of their bosses at the HQ level, most expatriate managers focused on boosting morale rather than advising on operational decisions, given their lack of familiarity with the local context. The "entrepreneurial" element in project managers' roles meant creating systems from the ground up, which they accomplished with little training or relevant experience. This gave them a sense of accomplishment, but made their jobs intense and stressful.

Some of the specialists we interviewed, particularly computer programmers, were very critical of their projects, especially those with short life spans that seemed to yield no long-term community benefits. Michael, a computer programmer, was recruited to help an aid agency seize donor funding opportunities for a hazard mapping project. He was asked to set up a digital platform that plotted affected people's feedback on a map. While the project was given six months to spend all its funding, it was beset by bugs and only was fully operational for two months. Ultimately, it was not turned over to local government officials or the affected community, and fell out of use. Michael and his team spent sleepless nights coding so that the platform could be launched before the donors' deadline. Though he appreciated the high paycheck and was proud of his contribution to the recovery of his hometown, he felt torn about how inefficient and detached the innovation was from local needs:

> Come to think of it, addressing a community's most pressing concerns for food or water does not require mapping software. We could have just used Excel, why did we need a new platform?

While Michael and other local aid workers were quite reflexive, sometimes even expressing guilt about the limitations of their own projects, they were very careful to keep their misgivings from their expatriate bosses. As project-based employees, they had to maintain a positive image of productivity and resourcefulness, ensuring their job security throughout a precarious period. As Michael explained, "You don't bite the hand that feeds you. You just make use of each other [*gamitan*] to keep your job at the end of the day." This suggests how local workers had a sense of deference toward their foreign bosses, occasionally withholding thoughtful criticism to fulfill a sense of obligation. This reflects wider Filipino societal norms of being "obliged to be grateful."[42] The quote also illustrates local workers' strategic approach to managing this hierarchical relationship from the perspective of instrumentality; holding back criticism and not "rocking the boat" enabled workers to carry on with their jobs, receive their paychecks, and address their material needs.

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[42]Ong et al. 2015.

This sense of obligation extended to the wage gap between local staff and expatriates. Unlike other research findings that mention the wage gap as a common sore point that undermined the aid localization agenda by perpetuating racial and national inequalities,[43] in this case we found both deference to and criticism of expatriates. According to Angel, a project manager, "Expats need to be given an incentive to come here so of course they deserve higher pay. Yes, it's the Pinoys[44] who do the bulk of the work, but that's really how it is." This wage gap is vast, with expatriates reportedly earning between US$4000 and US$5000 per month, compared to local project managers' monthly wages of US$1000–1200. Project managers and specialists were optimistic that their resourcefulness and hard work would pay off with professional career growth opportunities and higher future salaries. While some whom we interviewed hoped to become expatriates themselves and earn lucrative salaries on international assignments, others hoped to land long-term positions in aid agencies' local offices. They criticized the pressures and inefficiencies in short-term project-based aid work and hoped that local staff would be awarded longer-term contracts. They viewed staff on long-term contracts and assignments as accessing the support and skills training necessary to do meaningful work for local communities.

Hierarchies of program vs. tech

Techie aid work after Haiyan focused on communications and accountability, with the general aim of engaging affected communities and gathering feedback to improve the delivery of projects from traditional program units, usually organized around shelter, food, livelihood, and sanitation. Program units were typically led by career Filipino aid workers who had been reassigned or promoted within and across agencies, in contrast to tech workers, who were boundary crossers from diverse fields. Program managers also tended to have more stable jobs, with longer-term or even permanent contracts. Local techie aid workers felt that their peers in program units perceived tech projects as peripheral, mere "add-ons" to the core projects they ran. Techie aid workers described a disconnection between the enthusiasm of their bosses in the headquarters advocating for digital innovations and the disinterest of national and local colleagues, who tended to be more purist and traditional in their approach to aid. Clara, a thirty-one-year-old project manager of a communications team, felt frustrated after colleagues dismissed her initiative to change a sanitation program based on critical feedback she had gathered from the platform she managed:

> I was putting in longer hours just to make sure our project can go a long way. But then, I go to these [program] officers and I tell them this is what the people actually want from you. The sanitation program manager replied with a professional equivalent of "*kay.*"

Accountability officer Justine, aged twenty-seven, explained the challenge of actually finding things to change in the agency while managing the sensitivities of senior program officers:

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[43]Carr et al. 2010; Denksus 2017.
[44]"Pinoy" is a common demonym for citizens of the Philippines and members of the Flipino diaspora. It is an abbreviation of "Filipino" combined with the Tagalog diminutive "y."

> These program people appear to be supportive, when in fact they really hated us. We forward them the complaints of communities about their projects and then they talk behind our backs. It seems that we become the bad guys just for letting them know about complaints.

As the "bearer of bad news," Justine worried that program managers would "shoot the messenger"; as a communications officer on a short-term contract, she was anxious about the renewal of her contract. In the interest of job security, she sometimes "sweetened" the presentation of critical feedback on projects, a compromise that follows Filipino relational norms of *pakikisama* (getting along with others/group solidarity).

It is understandable that technological solutions around accountability that gathered feedback from communities were viewed with some defensiveness from program teams. Receiving complaints about work-in-progress is stressful, particularly in an emergency context in which emotions run high and appeals for aid from communities are often persistent and pitiful. Program teams already saddled with pressure to follow strict project log frames and donor expectations are pressured by innovative accountability processes that may demand not just minor tweaks but even radical changes. Although program managers have authority from their command of larger resources (not to mention job security), they nevertheless can be pressured to react to feedback collected by accountability officers, as negative feedback from communities could tarnish their personal reputations within the agency. In light of this tension, accountability project officers have to balance fulfilling relational norms of *pakikisama* with their more powerful program officer colleagues and following through on their job responsibility to be accountable to affected communities by communicating complaints. In the post-Haiyan response, the defensiveness and skepticism of project managers to radical and meaningful change had profound and harmful consequences to disaster-affected communities; some programs whose distribution procedures were dissonant with local cultural norms actually harmed community solidarity.[45]

Technology specialists such as GIS mappers were particularly frustrated by this dynamic. As highly skilled workers lauded by their expatriate bosses, they were unprepared to be demoralized by local colleagues who viewed their contributions as mere "desk work" lacking proper community immersion. To compensate, mappers often sought recognition beyond their offices by sending frequent communications to headquarters or addressing international colleagues and the wider public on social media. We observed a competitive cycle where veteran aid workers, asserting their development and fieldwork experience and dismissing the innovation agenda of techie colleagues, prompted specialists to overcompensate and brashly seek recognition for their projects. This made for an unproductive and uncooperative relationship between the two factions, as GIS specialist Therese, aged thirty-three, explained:

> Doing disaster work, we were able to receive six-figure salaries way higher than our normal jobs in academia. But getting people to buy into hazard mapping is still a challenge. So we have to push harder. That's why I also work hard to promote this work by giving talks and posting digital maps on Facebook. It's important the public is educated.

As Therese's story illustrates, cultivating a personal brand is an element of the "entrepreneurial self." For specialists, seeking recognition from diverse sources, including external

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[45]Ong et al. 2015.

audiences, was important to convey technical expertise, derive positive status, and help advance professional mobility.

In contrast, clerical workers were often just grateful to draw a semi-regular paycheck that could pay for needed house repairs and daily expenses. Lower-income individuals gained pleasure from job perks such as local travel, highlighting leisure aspirations in their construction of self. They publicized work-related travel to aspirational spaces such as beach resorts for training or meetings by posting selfies on social media. In fact, for some of our interviewees, Haiyan provided a means to travel to nearby islands for the first time.

Enduring the local, desiring the global

In spite of being doubly marginalized as both local and tech workers, several respondents managed to achieve varying degrees of professional mobility within their agencies. Clerical workers were more limited: some went back to school to finish their college degrees after having saved up their volunteer pay, while others took on other casual positions such as department store clerks. In contrast, some communications officers and specialists moved on to lucrative private sector tech jobs, while others secured permanent positions in local and global NGOs.

Several diligent communications managers achieved career breakthroughs, including international assignments for the Nepal earthquake[46] and the Nigeria conflict,[47] as well as scholarships for master's programs in the United Kingdom and Switzerland. As pioneers in accountability projects in disaster response, they used their professional experiences, affiliations with widely recognized global agency brands, and positionality as leaders from a developing country to attain professional mobility. Their mental mobility, honed by diverse interactions with expatriate bosses and local community members after Haiyan, boosted their self-confidence in navigating cosmopolitan settings such as job talks and conferences. Following broader trajectories of Filipino economic migrants seeking a better life overseas, these resourceful individuals developed export-quality personal and professional narratives that hinged on being innovators in the humanitarian sector and embodiments of the "capacity-building" goal of development itself.

Local aid workers jokingly referred to exceptional peers who gained international employment as "success stories" and "global divas," inspiring them to make their own dreams of global success come true. However, the recognition and professional mobility accorded to these lucky few provided justification for some workers in local offices to maintain and endure their precarious work arrangements. Exceptional success stories recast suffering on the job as potentially "good for the CV," reinforcing the idea that a job in a global agency is a "blessing."

Instead of finding ways to collectively campaign for the improvement of their precarious contractual arrangements, techie aid workers instead enjoyed the collegiality of an interagency communications and accountability group that met regularly during the height of the Haiyan response. Respondents fondly remembered this working group as a space to share problems and concerns specific to their roles, as well as a support group for mentoring

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[46]The 7.8 magnitude earthquake that hit Nepal on April 25, 2015 killed around 8700 people. See Mercycorps.org 2016.
[47]A long-running civil conflict in different parts of Nigeria since 1980s has triggered the response of international organizations. See Anyadike 2017.

and counseling. Today, some of the techie aid workers who remain in the sector still keep in touch and reach out to their "global diva" peers for humor, consolation, and inspiration.

Conclusion: worker justice in Aidland

As "entrepreneurial survivors," local techie aid workers stand at the intersection of several complex contradictory dynamics. They must serve communities while helping themselves; usher in innovation premised on critiquing existing systems; and leverage local insights to catch global funding waves. These contradictions exemplify the fusion of the professional and personal in aid work,[48] requiring local techie aid workers to wrestle with paradoxes on a daily basis.[49] Their stories demonstrate opportunities for mobility in the mass hiring of local populations by global aid agencies, fulfilling development aims of building capacities in order to help the local economy by expanding the workforce.[50]

In the Philippines, there is no shortage of "entrepreneurial" workers familiar with flexibility, precarious labor arrangements, and technological proficiency. Unlike international aid workers who are motivated to swap stressful and extractive labor relations in high-paying corporate jobs for a meaningful, adventurous, and less competitive career, local aid workers who themselves have survived disaster uniformly enjoyed a status upgrade, expressing gratitude for their newfound – if temporary – economic opportunities. Entry to aid work is motivated not (solely) by the pursuit of a passion project or an abstract ideal, as with international aid workers, but by an opportunity to meet basic material needs and seize the promise of global mobility.

Many local techie aid workers are idealistic, hoping to effect meaningful change and meet their communities' needs through digital communications and accountability projects. But their passionate voices are constrained, because holding onto their jobs is their key priority. They must carefully navigate the political minefield of pleasing donors and bosses without upsetting more traditional-minded colleagues who mistrust the newfangled systems, trendy buzzwords, and limited lifespans that characterize tech innovation projects. Highly reflexive and critical techie aid officers spoke of self-censoring their most radical ideas for changing and improving programs out of fear of jeopardizing their short-term contracts or breaking with cultural norms of smooth interpersonal relations and gratefulness. Specialists tend to overcompensate by seeking recognition, asserting their technical authority to impress veterans in the sector and anyone else who might be receptive to solutions they propose. Overall, the double marginalization of workers as both local *and* techie leads to lower morale, increased individualism and competitiveness, and adversarial relationships with colleagues that constrain the potentials of digital humanitarian projects to better represent the voices of local residents and communities.

The relentlessly optimistic Filipino aid workers we interviewed deployed a variety of coping mechanisms in response to their situations, but were too cautious and pragmatic to organize collectively and seek change. Beyond the inter-agency committees and support groups we saw in the Haiyan response, we are encouraged to see global spaces of reflexivity such as "The Secret Aid Worker" blog on *The Guardian*'s Global Development Page,

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[48]Fechter 2016.
[49]Roth 2015b.
[50]Carnahan et al. 2006.

which helps open up conversations on difficult realities in Aidland.[51] Under the cloak of anonymity, blog authors share unspeakable narratives, such as the sectoral obsession with buzzwords and the unequal standards and benefits of local staff and expatriates.[52] But these spaces are far from enough. The sector needs to support more local voices to participate and circulate in such spaces to represent the diversity of aid worker identities and break the taboo of discussing power hierarchies in the sector – dynamics that touch on race, gender, and sexuality.[53]

To be sure, the aid localization agenda has opened up an opportunity for reform. But beyond funding inequalities between global and local NGOs, power inequalities in humanitarian labor must not be ignored. The aid sector needs to reflect critically on how to resolve the crippling disconnects between global policymakers' appetite for humanitarian technologies and the dismissive skepticism of development and humanitarian purists. We invite discussion on ways to enable local aid workers to confidently author projects from local perspectives, empowering them to transcend being passive recipients of "capacity-building" projects and recognizing them as more than laborers to be used and discarded as quickly as the technology they are hired to test.

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[51]Secret Aid Worker 2016.
[52]Secret Aid Worker 2015.
[53]See: Edge Effect Collaborations 2017.

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