

Why Context, Holism, and Scale Matter in Super Typhoon Yolanda Research

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As human geographers whose research explores the intersecting dimensions of power, injustice, and inequalities in climate adaptation interventions, our experience in Yolanda research highlights the importance of three things: context, holism, and scale.

First, social and historical contexts influence the distribution of resources and power within and between societies and shape the institutions in which responses to climate change are made. Scholar Jesse Ribot claims that "vulnerability does not fall from the sky." Our experience in Yolanda research stresses the important role that grounded inequality, unequal access to resources, and lack of representation play in shaping peoples' vulnerability to climate change. We have learned the importance of looking into the why—that is, the social and political-economic drivers of vulnerability—in addition to the what to do.

Second, holism views systems as entities with interacting parts, rather than as sets or assemblages of their components, and thereby directs attention to processes of interactions among these parts. In a similar way, focusing on climate change to the exclusion of, and in isolation from, other social, political, cultural, and economic processes that shape landscapes and livelihoods is problematic. The recovery process in Tacloban took place against the backdrop of preexisting social inequities, different political interests, and power relations that provided opportunities for some groups to benefit at the expense of others. Our research experience on Yolanda particularly emphasizes the importance of examining and foregrounding the issues of politics, power, justice, and equity in building community resilience.

Finally, scale takes us from an individual level of human–environment interaction to the community, regional, national, and global domains, in both spatial and temporal dimensions. The diverse implications of climate change emerge not just at the global scale but also at the level of agency in affected regions, countries, and communities. Failing to account for the multi-scalar drivers and implications of climate change can lead to blind spots in adaptation planning. Our experience in Yolanda research indicates that scale matters and that linking the local, subnational, national, and global scales can potentially yield deep and thorough understanding of the impacts of climate change and conceptualization of potential solutions.

In conclusion, we reiterate the importance of context, holism, and scale in doing Super Typhoon Yolanda-related research. Context-specific, holistic, and multi-scalar approaches defy traditional, simple, linear, and easy solutions, and yet are now more important than ever to address a wicked problem like climate change.