



What can we learn from communities about early warning? Lessons from last-mile communities in the Northern Philippines

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"Old folks have peculiar ways to tell whether a storm is coming...the wind when restless accompanied by a howling sea that is louder than usual... you can also feel the breeze gives you a different feeling...we know it's time to secure our boats and homes." (Fisher from Cabalitian, November 24, 2023.)



Long before an SMS alert or Facebook post arrives, communities are already observing, interpreting, and responding to their environment.

During typhoons, technology can fail. That's why communities maintain redundant sources of information—including radio, relatives, neighbours, and their own environmental observations.

Last-mile communities are guided by the following:

- (i) Social networks and trusted people
- (ii) local observations/local ecological knowledge;
- (iii) lived experiences of past disasters; and
- (iv) official warnings (PAGASA, NDRRMC sms, barangay sirens, radio, TV, social media posts)

Sample narratives from fieldwork:

"We observe the behavior of insects and small animals. If the house lizard continues to produce unusual sounds which is done in repeated recurring patterns throughout the day, we know a strong typhoon is coming." (Indigenous leader from Mapita, December 4, 2023.)

"Our forefathers taught us to read the signs in nature. When the ants start to surface from the ground as though looking for shelter as a group, that means they are preparing as a storm is not far away." (Farmer from Mapita, December 4, 2023.)

"We get cues from the sea and the sky. When the birds fly in groups as though restless and when the waves get unusually bigger than their typical rhythm, that is a sign of a bagyo (typhoon)." (Fisher from Cabalitian, November 24, 2023)

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Typhoon Mangkhut Asia / Southeast Asia

Philippines death toll rises to 64 after Typhoon Mangkhut causes flooding and landslides

A further 40 miners, who were staying inside a bunkhouse that was buried under a landslide, are also feared dead

"We've been through typhoons before, such as Yolanda, so we know how important it is to prepare. Before Mangkhut, we made sure to look on our crops first. If we know that they are going to be destroyed by flood. waters, we'll harvest them immediately. We also buy food in advance, reinforce our roof, and trim any branches that could destroy our house's roofings." (Farmer from Mapita, December 4, 2023)

What turns an early warning into action?

An early warning becomes actionable when people...

- (i) Believe the risk is real;
- (ii) Trust the messenger;
- (iii) Receive support from family and local leaders; and
- (iv) Feel capable of acting

Ways to build more inclusive and effective early warning systems

- (i) Integrate local/indigenous knowledge;
- (ii) Co-design warnings with communities;
- (iii) Build trust;
- (iv) Make warnings specific and actionable;
- (v) Strengthen community networks

An effective EWS is not only people-centred—it is community-informed and community-enabled.



The effectiveness of early warning systems lies not only in better technology, but also in better partnerships with the communities they are meant to serve.