

## Account of our journey to Culion Island December 5-9, 2013

The next day after our arrival in Manila we traveled to Culion Island with a team from SLB (Simbahang Lingkod ng Bayan which means Church in Service of the Nation) and some members of the Disaster Response and Management Team of Ateneo de Manila University (DReaM Team). Culion is a municipality with 41 islands and belongs to the province of Palawan. The typhoon Haiyan/Yolanda made its 6th and last landfall in the Palawan Province and the northern islands experienced quite severe damages without having been in the focus of international media and emergency relief.

As Culion has no airport we flew to Coron on Busuanga Island. One of the airport buildings is still badly damaged and on the one-hour way to the harbour we passed woodlands with many broken trees. At the pier the boat of Kawil Tours was already waiting for us. Kawil Tours is a small social enterprise for eco-tourism in Culion which was established two years ago by a group of graduates of Ateneo de Manila and young locals with the help and support of Fr. Javy (Fr. Xavier Alpasa SJ, Director of SLB who has lots of experience in setting up social enterprises and had been parish priest in Culion at that time).



*Arrival at the airport of Coron*

After an almost two hour boat trip we arrived at the main island of Culion. The first thing people told us was: "You are lucky! Tonight is the first time after the typhoon that the electricity came back!" Usually on the main island of Culion electricity is provided 12 hours per day as the power plant is operating from 12:00 noon to 12:00 midnight. It is owned by a private company and according to local opinion its erratic or non-existing operating hours after the typhoon are more due to the moods of the owners than to any other real reason. The next morning it becomes clear why the electricity came back. At 6:30 a.m. the sound of a helicopter is alerting everybody and small fishing boats with people from the nearby islands are coming. The governor of Palawan has arrived for a political rally combined with music and the distribution of relief goods to the fishermen from the small islands around. Everything seems to serve the objective of publicity and when the governor leaves Culion with him goes the electricity again. Later a group of women from Binudac would tell us that they had to wait the whole day in the line up for the relief goods and had to spend the night in Culion because it had become too late to be able to find transportation to Binudac which is a small village on the other side of the main island.



*Culion one day after the typhoon had hit*

Culion had been one of the main destinations of the Relief Operations that SLB had started together with different partners directly after the typhoon. Through the parish and with the help of the LGU (local government unit), the navy and many volunteers SLB had managed to distribute to the different islands of Culion 4,496 family packs (each pack contains a bucket with 10 kg of rice, packages of noodles, an assortment of canned goods and a hygiene kit), 25 boxes of drinking water, 8 tents, 8 tarpaulin, 20 tarps, 5 boxes of candles, 46 boxes of

biscuits, 25 sacks of rice, 70 boxes of Manna rice, 6 boxes of noodles, 235 packs of bihon (noodle dish) and 33 boxes of Solar LED light.

Fr. Errol, a young Jesuit and assistant priest of the parish in Culion, had been responsible for the logistics and he told us many stories about how difficult it had been to make sure that the goods actually arrived in Culion. One transport had come with a military airplane via Coron and Fr. Errol had literally to protect the goods meant for Culion during the whole night until they could be loaded on a boat in order to prevent that people from Coron would take them for themselves. Other goods had been transported by boat from Manila which is an 18 hour trip. Friends of



*Relief goods for Culion*

SLB and Ateneo de Manila had helped by offering their boats or yachts. From the main island of Culion the goods had been transported by the typical local fishing boats to the smaller islands. The emergency relief through SLB had been a team effort of joined forces. When we arrived in Manila the relief operation was already closing down and Pablo Funes from Entreculturas went with the last big deployment to the Samar-Leyte area. Ateneo de Manila was an important storage facility and logistics centre of the relief operations. In charge of transportation was mainly the military. Altogether SLB had organized 53 deployments to different affected areas in the Philippines and distributed among other goods 17,954 family packs, 4,762 boxes of water and 1,310 sacks of clothes.

For SLB starts now the second phase of rehabilitation and Culion has been chosen as the target area of a comprehensive rehabilitation program. One of the main reasons for this choice is the presence of the Jesuits in Culion. They are in charge of the parish and the school. Jesuits came to Culion in 1906 when the island became a leper colony. Right now there are three Jesuits living in Culion: Fr. Jody is the parish priest, Fr. Errol is the assistant parish priest and the treasurer of the school, Fr. Bogs is the president of the school. Loyola College of Culion provides primary and secondary schooling, as well as two Bachelor's degrees: a Bachelor of Arts degree in Literature and a Bachelor of Science degree in Entrepreneurial Tourism, offered through Ateneo de Naga University. Another component of the eco-tourism project is the Maya Hotel which was meant to be the training hotel for the tourism students at Loyola College. But as it seems it hasn't worked out quite well because of the low numbers of tourists coming to Culion and the students are doing their internships mainly in Coron.

Part of our group stays at the Maya Hotel and the other part at the guest house of the Jesuit Residence. The first morning of our trip we are walking with Fr. Javy to Loyola College passing already some destroyed houses. At Loyola College Fr. Bogs shows us the roof of the library that was totally damaged by the typhoon. The force and power of the typhoon must have been incredible as it was capable to bend solid steel constructions. Also the telegraph pole of Culion fell down which had been a hundred years old and during the time of the Leper Colony the only means for communication with the outside. Cut trunks of trees at the side of the streets are still silent witnesses of the destruction. Otherwise the life in Culion seems to be back at its peaceful rhythm of a small island where people know each other, where Fr. Javy is being greeted cheerfully on the street by everybody and where the crime rate is zero according to an info banner in the town hall. There we have a first meeting with the LGU (local government unit) in order to discuss the priorities for rehabilitation.



*Fr. Bogs shows us the destroyed roof of Loyola College*



*The old telegraph pole didn't survive the typhoon*

Culion is subdivided in 14 barangay (villages) and according to the official numbers provided by the LGU 5,692 families or 22,280 individuals were affected by the typhoon. 117 people suffered from injuries and 5 died. 4,812 houses were partially or totally damaged and 485 boats were destroyed. There is a need for SLB to verify some of the data on the ground because of some doubts of its trustworthiness. For example the Loyola College was listed as totally damaged and in Binudac we were told that the captain (village headman) had registered his three intact boats as damaged. There is also some confusion about the total number of affected people because the 2010 census counted a total population of 19,543 people in Culion. It may be possible that the indigenous population (IP) who is living on some of the islands quite isolated and according their traditional way of live with their own languages and customs had not been included in the census but in the list of the LGU.

During the relief operations the LGU has worked really well together with SLB and the parish. It is obvious that Fr. Jody as a parish priest is very well respected and has a good standing with the LGU. The LGU is happy about the further involvement of SLB and the parish in the rehabilitation phase but they seem to be quite hesitant to accept the responsibility for the implementation and the accountability of the rehabilitation programs. Fr. Javy explained later to us that the weakness of the LGU is a general problem in the Philippines. The core identity and main task of SLB is Good Governance. The involvement in disaster work came later, as Fr. Javy said: "Why is SLB into disaster work? After some soul-searching we decided some years ago to go this way because disaster work will lead to good citizenship." For SLB community building and capacity development on the LGU level is always an important, inherent and essential part of any relief operation and rehabilitation program. That is part of the philosophy of SLB.

At the end of the meeting with the LGU it is decided that the three priority areas for rehabilitation work should be the most affected barangay Binudac, Galoc and Osmeña and the indigenous communities living on some of the smaller islands. During the following days we are visiting all of these suggested areas to assess the extent of the damages and the needs for rehabilitation.

### **Visit to Osmeña**

Osmeña is a small fishermen community on the main island close to Culion. The families are living directly on the waterside in small wooden houses on stilts with roofs made by metal sheets or palm leaves and narrow gangways of planks to connect the houses. Those light structures had nothing to resist the destructive force of the typhoon. Before the typhoon the people had been poor and now many of them have lost everything. But they still seem happy and resilient. Many of them have already

started to rebuild their houses. One family told us that it took them only one day to reconstruct their home. In Osmeña 338 houses have been totally destroyed, 799 houses are partially damaged and 66 boats are gone. The main challenge in Osmeña is to convince the people that it would be safer to relocate to another site. The place is not safe and any next disaster will probably again cause damages. On average there are 20 typhoons every year in the Philippines. The issue of relocation will be an important and complex consideration in the rehabilitation program. In this aspect SLB will rely on the expertise in geohazard maps and site assessments of Fr. Pedro Walpole SJ and his institute ESSC (Institute of Environmental Science for Social Change) which is also part of Ateneo de Manila.



*Damages in Osmeña*



*A man in Osmeña is repairing his house*

For the community of Osmeña Fr. Jody and the LGU have already one concrete place in mind as a relocation site. But it is a long drive on a gravel road far away from the centre of the main island. It is on top of a hill with a spectacular view over the whole bay. Fr. Jody is telling us that they had already plans to use it to develop the tourism in Culion further by building there a wedding chapel and a reception hall with catering. The idea would be to settle the community in small pouches along the hill with direct access to the sea and a docking station for the boats. Not only fishing would then provide an income for the people but they would find jobs at the restaurant and reception hall for the tourists. We are not quite sure whether they really believe in this project or whether it's only a wonderful dream. It would need a major effort to develop the site. Fr. Jody emphasizes that this would only work with committed investors and would be a long-term project for the next 10 to 15 years. Meanwhile the community of Osmeña would need a temporary safe place for housing. A second choice for a relocation site would be a piece of land close to the cemetery of Culion.



*Possible relocation site with view of Culion*

### **The history of Culion**

Later in the afternoon we are visiting the museum in Culion with a permanent exhibition on the heart touching history of the island as the world's largest leper colony. From that time Culion has the reputation as "Paradise Lost", "Island of the Living Dead" or "Island of no Return" because the patients

had to stay there the rest of their lives. Culion had then even its own currency because people feared that by using the same money the disease could spread from the island to other areas. The infected people lived in complete segregation. Jesuits and Sisters of St. Paul came with the first patients in 1906. Children of leprosy patients were separated from their parents directly after birth and raised in dormitories run by the Sisters and Jesuits. 80% of the today population on the main island are descendents of former leprosy patients or nurses and doctors. In one ward of the hospital there are still a few former patients living whom we are



*Old photograph of the hospital ward for leprosy patients*

visiting with Fr. Javy. They are cured but still suffering from the deformations of leprosy. We are meeting Ms. Esther who is now 88 years old. She came as a young girl to Culion and spent her whole life as a patient there. From the time of being a leper colony the hospital has an important position and much influence on the island. For example the director of the hospital is still the holder of many land titles. For that reason the hospital and the ministry of health need to be part of the discussion of possible relocations sites for the different communities affected by the typhoon. The newly built ward of the hospital was also badly damaged by the typhoon and lost its roof. The typhoon hit a few days before the official opening of the new building, told us the director of the hospital. Today the main disease in Culion is tuberculosis as a typical disease caused by poverty.

### **Visit to Binudac**



*Betty and Ben Abapo, their grandson Yhanlee and Fr. Jody*

The next morning we are driving with Fr. Jody and the parish sacristan Mr. Reginald Masong to Binudac. The whole way is gravel road and it takes us more than one hour in a 4x4 to get there. Binudac is a village on the other side of the main island. Many of the houses are sitting on the beach and the destruction is massive. We are meeting Mrs. Betty Abapo who is the health worker in Binudac and her husband Mr. Ben Abapo who is a fisherman and the main lay minister of the parish in Binudac which has to small chapels. They are telling us about their experiences during the typhoon:

“The typhoon hit in the evening. The wind was really strong and it was getting very cold. We were frightened and we prayed and sang liturgical songs. When the wind died down a little bit we all ran to the school which serves as an evacuation centre. But later the wind got so strong that it also damaged the school and parts of the roof flew away and we got more frightened because even the evacuation centre was not safe. Only at 4:00 in the morning everything got quiet again and when we went back to the village we saw that the wind and the waves had destroyed so many houses on the shoreline and all those trees had fallen down and we lost many boats. Many villagers lost everything but we helped each other. Because of the cold many children and adults suffered from fever and colds. We boiled the water and used purifying tablets so that we were

able to drink it. We still had sweet potatoes and cassava (manioc) that we are growing on a field up on the hills. And we ate all those coconuts that were lying everywhere because they fell down from the trees during the typhoon. And then Fr. Jody came with relief goods so we didn't suffer from hunger."

A walk through the village shows us the dimensions of the destructions and damages. One man is fighting back tears while he shows us the concrete foundation of his house. Everything else is gone: "I don't know where to begin or how to get the material to build a new house." He is still staying with his wife and children in the house of the captain (village headman). One house was partially damaged by a huge tree and now they are using part of the cut trunk as a table. Another family has set up a tent construction within the ruins of their destroyed house. A woman is washing her laundry in the shadow of a fallen tree and another one is sewing by hand from scraps a new pillow. A man with his son has started to repair their boat. Families are sharing the left over boats and Mr. Ben is explaining how they do the fishing: "With a bigger boat you can stay three to four days out in the sea and with a small one only one day. We keep the fish alive because only then we can sell them to the middleman. If the fish arrives dead at the shore we are drying it to provide for our own meals. We don't have storage facilities and refrigerators so we depend on the middlemen to buy the fish. He sells it in Coron to a much better price."



*A broken tree offers a little bit of shade*



*Ben Abapo is explaining the way of fishing*

With Fr. Jody, Ms. Bernie Aton from SLB and the land assessor from the LGU we are meeting with the captain of Binudac. Again one of the main issues is the plans for relocation. Even before the typhoon it had been a topic in Binudac but only 10 percent of the population had been willing to consider it. Now all of the families want a safe place to live. But the captain points out that everything depends on the proximity to the shoreline. As a community of fishermen this is a non-negotiable condition for relocation. In Binudac 169 houses are totally destroyed, 252 partially damaged and 81 boats are lost. Ms. Bernie explains the disaster risk reduction training SLB is offering the community and that the involvement of the whole village is also essential for the rehabilitation program. Together with the captain we are visiting and discussing two potential relocation sites.

### **Visit to Indigenous Communities**

Because of lack of time we subdivided our group. We went with Fr. Jody to Binudac and the other half visited with Fr. Javy two small islands (Chindonan and Alulad) where indigenous communities are living. They said that they don't need help with the rebuilding of their houses (they are building their houses according their own traditions without using any nails or other material made of metal) but they would

be grateful for 15 boats and for help with repairing the damaged chapel. The parish is running a literacy program for the indigenous communities and has close links with some of them. Another suggestion was to build a sturdy evacuation centre that also functions as chapel, school or multi-purpose hall. That would be a need for quite a number of barangay because in many villages the chapels or schools that served as evacuation centre were damaged and therefore hadn't offered a really safe shelter and refuge.

### Visit to Galoc

The next day we went by boat to the island of Galoc. On the way we passed a big resort owned by a Chinese company and several pearl farms which are offering an additional income besides fishing. We also could see the mangroves that had protected the impact of the typhoon on the shorelines. When we reached Galoc Fr. Javy was visibly shocked: "There used to be three rows of houses on the waterside and wooden landing stages for the fishing boats. And now all of it is gone!"



*Galoc suffered severe destruction*



*People of Galoc are gathering to listen to Fr. Javy*

In Galoc SLB is distributing 250 solar lamps which we brought with us on the boat. The people in Galoc are telling pretty much the same stories as in Binudac. Anlyn Mirapunte lives with her husband and two children on the shoreline: "The typhoon damaged the walls and the roof of our house. The waves and the wind were so strong that the two rows of houses in front of us were destroyed and hurled at the third row where our house is standing. We feared for our lives and thought we wouldn't live to see the next morning. We were seeking refuge in the school but it also got damaged. We didn't lose a boat

because we never had a boat. My husband is working as a fisherman but we don't have our own boat. We are lending the boat from our neighbours. We want to stay here and not move to another site."



*SLB distributed 250 solar lamps in Galoc*

Another woman is waiting with her children to get one of the solar lamps: "My name is Monalisa and I have six children. The youngest was only three days old when the typhoon came. Her name is Wilma. We don't live at the shoreline but more in the interior of the island. I had to walk with the children one kilometer to reach the evacuation

centre.” In Galoc 314 houses are destroyed, 110 partially damaged and 78 boats are gone. In Galoc people are unwilling to consider relocation even though they experienced a huge loss of houses. The school is still damaged so that all grades are being taught in the same classroom. As on the islands with the indigenous communities SLB is considering to build in Galoc a very strong housing or evacuation centre that can also serve as chapel, school or multi-purpose hall. The capacity building and community development would also be very important in Galoc.



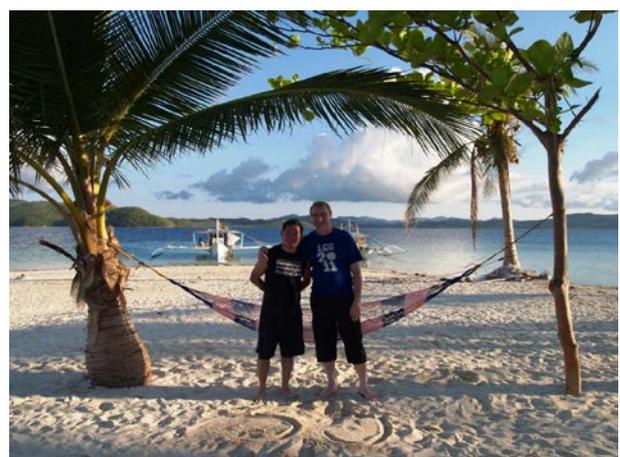
*Many boats in Galoc were damaged*



*Mrs. Monalisa waiting with her children*



*Ms. Bernie from SLB (right) with a counselor of Galoc*



*Fr. Javy and Fr. Klaus during the stop at Decalatan Island*

On the way back to the main island of Culion we are stopping at a small and beautiful island with palm trees, a beach of fine white sand and an underwater paradise of corals and fish in order to experience at first hand the potential of Culion for tourism.

The rehabilitation program in Culion is a long-term commitment of the parish, SLB and the LGU. All different components (building of boats and houses, the consideration of relocation, capacity building and community development, construction of sturdy and safe evacuation centres) are meeting the needs of the people. Actually it's not only rehabilitation but development work. The majority of the people in Culion and especially on the small islands are living under very poor conditions and so far no other NGO has taken a strong interest in helping them. We think that the parish and SLB have shown the commitment and the capacity for such a long-term involvement and from what we have seen we recommend helping and supporting them in any way possible.

*Klaus Vähröder SJ / Judith Behnen*