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Christmas Day is almost near. Many people are excited to celebrate this season of love and joy with their families. Several more are excited to start the New Year with a bang—full of hope and promise for the future. Sadly, however, this is not the case for thousands of other people. For the thousands of Filipinos who have lost a parent, child, spouse, sibling or friend during the recent storm surge, this Christmas would most likely be a painful one. The remaining survivors, just like many other victims of natural disasters, would have to welcome the New Year with grief and sorrow. They would have to rebuild their lives and deal with the pain of loss—a loss not only of shelter, clothing or other material possessions but a loss of life.

With more than 6,000 people declared dead and around 1,700 people cited as missing, I cannot imagine just how painful this time could be for the survivors. I wonder how many children would become orphans this Christmas. I wonder how many parents would have to deal with the fact that their child is gone. I wonder much time it would take 4 million displaced Filipinos to bring their lives back to normal. Typhoon Haiyan, which hit the central Philippines on November 8 this year, did more than just damage USD \$800 million worth of agriculture and infrastructure. It claimed thousands of lives and displaced millions of people. Haiyan, locally known as “Yolanda”, is indeed one of the worst typhoons to wreak havoc in a country such as the Philippines.

As soon as the news broke out, detailing the unprecedented destruction caused by the storm surge, many people started to help out. Filipinos from all across the country and from different sectors—be this the government, non-government organizations, media, civil society groups, companies, universities and private individuals—started to conduct rescue and relief operations. I, including my family members, joined the relief operations by continuously donating sacks of rice, food, clothes, and other sanitary items. My university, as well as other schools in Manila, also launched relief operations for the entire month of November. Until now, many organizations are still actively conducting post-disaster relief operations.

Of course, the international community also poured so much generosity in helping the Philippines recuperate. Numerous countries have donated millions of dollars and have provided humanitarian aid in order to help several distressed Filipinos. Up to now, international organizations like the United Nations, the Red Cross, the U.S. AID, and so many others continuously work with Philippine’s national government in order to ensure that victims of the disaster—especially those who are the poorest—can be assisted and rescued as soon as possible. Although the process is gradual, I am sure that with the continuous outpour of humanitarian support, many Filipinos will be able to rebuild their lives once again. Indeed, no disaster can outweigh the power of humanitarian solidarity during a difficult time like this. As a Filipino myself, I can definitely say that just like me, millions of other Filipinos will be forever grateful for the support, sympathy and love poured out by several people from all over the world.

Therefore, as of now, if I could do one concrete thing to make the world a better place, that would be to continuously help my fellow people who are the resilient survivors of this disaster. Although there are many problems in this world, I believe that as a young Filipino, one of my most urgent duties right now is to act responsibly for my fellow citizens, **especially the youth**. I do not want to just limit my assistance by simply donating or joining relief good operations. I refuse to be satisfied by the fact that my job of helping is “done” the moment I have donated a number of relief goods to the survivors. Right now, what my immediate dream is to be able to help specifically hundreds, if not thousands, of Filipino children to start their lives again by getting back to school immediately *and* properly. **I dream that these young survivors will be able to resume their education—carrying with them at least all the basic tools that they need in order to learn.**

Since the storm surge destroyed many homes, many of these children have lost their belongings as well—including their schoolbags. While some survivors are lucky enough to save some of their wet notebooks and dry these under the sun, thousands of children are mostly left empty handed right now. With no notebook, writing material, eraser and schoolbag, how can these children—specifically those from

impoverished families—even manage to go back to school? How can these young children, from the poorest communities, start their lives again without having the minimum materials needed to attend their classes?

As such, to address this issue, my proposed project would be to launch the “Hopebag”. **The “Hopebag” is an initiative to help the children in the most impoverished communities of central Philippines to get back to school properly by giving each one of them a bag filled with all the essential items needed for school.** My goal is that before the next school year starts in June 2014, hundreds, if not thousands, of children-survivors from poor backgrounds will be ready to reintegrate back into school because they have their schoolbags ready. The plan is to hand one student, with one schoolbag, that would last for one year. Although this is a humble proposal, I believe that the “Hopebag” does more than give away bags filled with school supplies. Taking from its name, this project not only gives out donated goods—it also gives out hope. **It gives hope by empowering children to look beyond disaster and to continuously pursue their education.** The “Hopebag” enables children to access their right to education by giving them the tools that they need to learn. As Malala Yusafzai, a young education advocate said, “Let us pick up our books and our pens. They are our most powerful weapons. One child, one teacher, one book and one pen can change the world.” **The “Hopebag” is a concrete way to help these children become active agents of change themselves.** It arms the youth with the necessary tools to learn, to grow, to hope, and to contribute to the rebuilding of their communities themselves.

According to the Philippine Department of Education, 2,500 schools have been damaged, 400 classrooms need total replacement and 12,400 schools need partial repair. The Philippine government, with the help of other organizations like UNICEF, is devising ways to help such children go back to school immediately. Ideally, the goal is that by the start of another school year in 2014, all damaged schools would have been repaired and would have already been filled with books and necessary educational materials. With the “Hopebag” project, I dream that I, along with the collaboration of other fellow youth, can help the government hasten this process of school reintegration. With proper funding and support from both the public and private sectors, I believe that the “Hopebag” project can be a magnificent way to encourage other youth to get directly involved in community building and social progress.

In 2010, when a massive earthquake struck Haiti, a team of young people from different countries came together to help distribute schoolbags to thousands of children in Haiti. Just like other humanitarians, they were able to successfully implement such a project. In the Philippines, I sincerely hope that such a youth-led project can also be delivered. I believe that the youth, if guided accordingly, is an indispensable force when it comes to rebuilding communities after disasters strike. The youth, as a collective force, contain this massive energy and creativity, that once channeled efficiently, can contribute huge effects in strengthening community resilience and promoting recovery after any disaster.

A few months from now, by June 2014, I will be going back to university as a 1<sup>st</sup> year law student. I hope that by then, just like me, thousands of children-survivors from the central Philippines will also be excited to enroll and study again. I do not want the recent disaster to further exacerbate the plight of many poor children in my country. I fervently wish that by providing them with their own schoolbags filled with supplies, these children would have an easier time reintegrating back to school for one entire school year.

As I am writing this essay down, I can actually imagine a vivid picture in my head. Imagine hundreds of children gathered in the premises of their school, waiting to receive their “Hopebag.” One child, her name being Maria, approaches silently but eagerly to receive her bag. The public school teacher beside you tells that Maria, like some of the other children in line, has lost one of her parents in the disaster. As you hand the “Hopebag” to Maria, you hope that this simple token can alleviate the pain she carries—even by a little bit. You pray that the “Hopebag”, no matter how simple it is, excites her spirit to *look beyond the past and the pains of the disaster*. Now, as Maria gets her bag and opens it, you see that her eyes slowly glisten with joy. She bristles with eagerness and enthusiasm. As she leaves, she looks at you with those innocent eyes and says, “*Salamat po*” (Thank you). At that exact moment, you know... You know and feel that indeed, there is hope.