



ASIA-PACIFIC: HOPE  
AND SOLUTIONS FROM  
LIVING AT THE EDGE  
OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS

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# THE STRUGGLE WITH BALANCING THE HIV RESPONSE AND THE IMPACTS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

## BACKGROUND

Climate change poses a fundamental threat to human health, affecting both the physical environment and aspects of natural and human systems. The Asia-Pacific region is vast and geographically diverse, spanning from the Himalayas to the tiny island states in the Pacific. Due to this diversity, the region encompasses all climate zones, resulting in a wide range of weather patterns from the monsoons in South and Southeast Asia, tropical cyclones in the Pacific, and the extreme snowy winter in Siberia.

The Asia-Pacific region faces a daunting spectrum of natural disasters and stands at the forefront of the climate crisis. Its coastal regions are particularly threatened by rising sea levels and cyclones, while its lowlands and the central dry zone are vulnerable to the impacts of floods and droughts. A person living in Asia-Pacific is six times more likely to be affected by disaster events than someone living outside the region.

Against this backdrop, it is pertinent to note that as the climate crisis intensifies, the Asia-Pacific region stands at the centre of both its worsening impacts and its most transformative potential solutions. This story series aims to capture the disproportionate impact of the climate emergency on vulnerable communities in the region and the human stories that drive communities in building and maintaining resilience in the face of the climate crisis.

## COUNTRY SNAPSHOT

### OVERVIEW

- **Population:** 111.9 M as of 2023
- **Economy:** GDP in 2024 - USD 469.5BN
- **Income Classification:** Lower Middle-Income Country
  - Poverty rate declined from 16.7% in 2018 to 15.5% in 2023
  - Sustained growth recorded at 6% in the first half of 2024
  - On track to transition from lower-middle to upper-middle-income status in 2025
- **Daily Life & Culture:** Large populations are densely concentrated in major cities scattered across the three main islands: Metro Manila in Luzon, Cebu City in Cebu, and Davao in Mindanao. Many live in coastal and agricultural areas. Services drive the economy, along with remittances from overseas workers (OFWs), agriculture, and tourism. Subsistence fishing and farming remain vital in rural communities.

### HEALTH INDICATORS

- **Tuberculosis:** 6.8% of global TB cases.
- **TB Incidence Rate:** 643 cases per 100,000 population. The Philippines is among the top 5 countries that account for 56% of the global TB burden (2023).
- **HIV:** 143,778 total reported cases as of 2024.
- **Accomplishment of 95-95-95 by 2025 UNAIDS Global Targets**
  - 63% know their HIV status
  - 67% PLHIV on ART
  - 40% PLHIV on ART, virally suppressed

According to UNAIDS, from 2010 to 2023, there was a 543% increase in new HIV infections in the Philippines.

### CLIMATE RISK INDICATORS:

- **World Risk Index Ranking:** The Philippines is ranked as the number one country with the highest disaster risk from extreme weather events.
- **Climate Change Impact:** The Philippines experiences an average of 20 typhoons every year. The impact of extreme weather events is noted to become more severe as sea levels rise at a rate of 5 to 7 millimeters per year, surpassing the global average of 2.8 to 3.6 millimeters. Flooding caused by Typhoons Nesat and Nalgae in 2011 affected over 1.5 million people.

## WHEN CLIMATE DISASTER STRIKES, THE HIV RESPONSE SUFFERS



Richard Hayag knew something had to be done. Sexual health essentials such as condoms, lubricants, and HIV test kits—“as in everything”—in the Bicol Region were hard to find. Supplies were erratic and the arrival of new stocks from the capital of Manila, some 277 kilometers away, was unpredictable. For people living with HIV (PLHIV), the stock outage was not only a matter of inconvenience, it was a matter of health and survival.

Richard and two of his other friends established Gentlemen Bicol, a community-based organization providing care and support for PLHIV. Over the last decade since it started, Gentlemen Bicol has grown into a community made up of PLHIV and volunteers who have formed partnerships with the local health office to help manage sexual health supplies and streamline the distribution of anti-retroviral therapy (ART) medication.

“When we conduct HIV screening, it is our responsibility to immediately link those whose result is reactive to counseling and treatment. From there, we continue to monitor them,” said Richard.

What began as a way to secure the gaps in the supply chain has evolved into a tightly woven chain of care that even extends to when a patient runs out of anti-retroviral therapy (ART) medication.

“Sometimes there is no supply of ART or the PLHIV cannot make the trip to their treatment hub. Those who still have stock let the others “borrow” pills which are replaced once they re-stock their supply,” Richard explained, chuckling.



The Bicol Region is made up of mainland and island provinces that directly face the Pacific Ocean. From Catanduanes, the farthest island province, a simple trip to pick up ARVs can take an entire day.

“Imagine, from your village, you need to travel three to four hours by land to reach the port. Then you take a two to three-hour boat ride to the mainland. From there, you take a jeepney or motorcycle for maybe another hour to get to a treatment hub,” Richard explained.

And that is all before the typhoons hit.

## HEALTHCARE SERVICES—AT THE MERCY CROSSHAIRS OF CLIMATE CHANGE

The World Risk Index ranks the Philippines as the number one country most vulnerable to extreme weather disturbances. The country lies directly in the path of the typhoon belt where nearly one-third of the world’s tropical cyclones are formed.

An average of 20 typhoons barrel through the Philippines every year with the Bicol Region because it is located along the eastern seaboard and hosts an active volcano that bears the wrath of compounded extreme weather disturbances that include typhoons, extreme flooding, landslides, and volcanic eruptions.

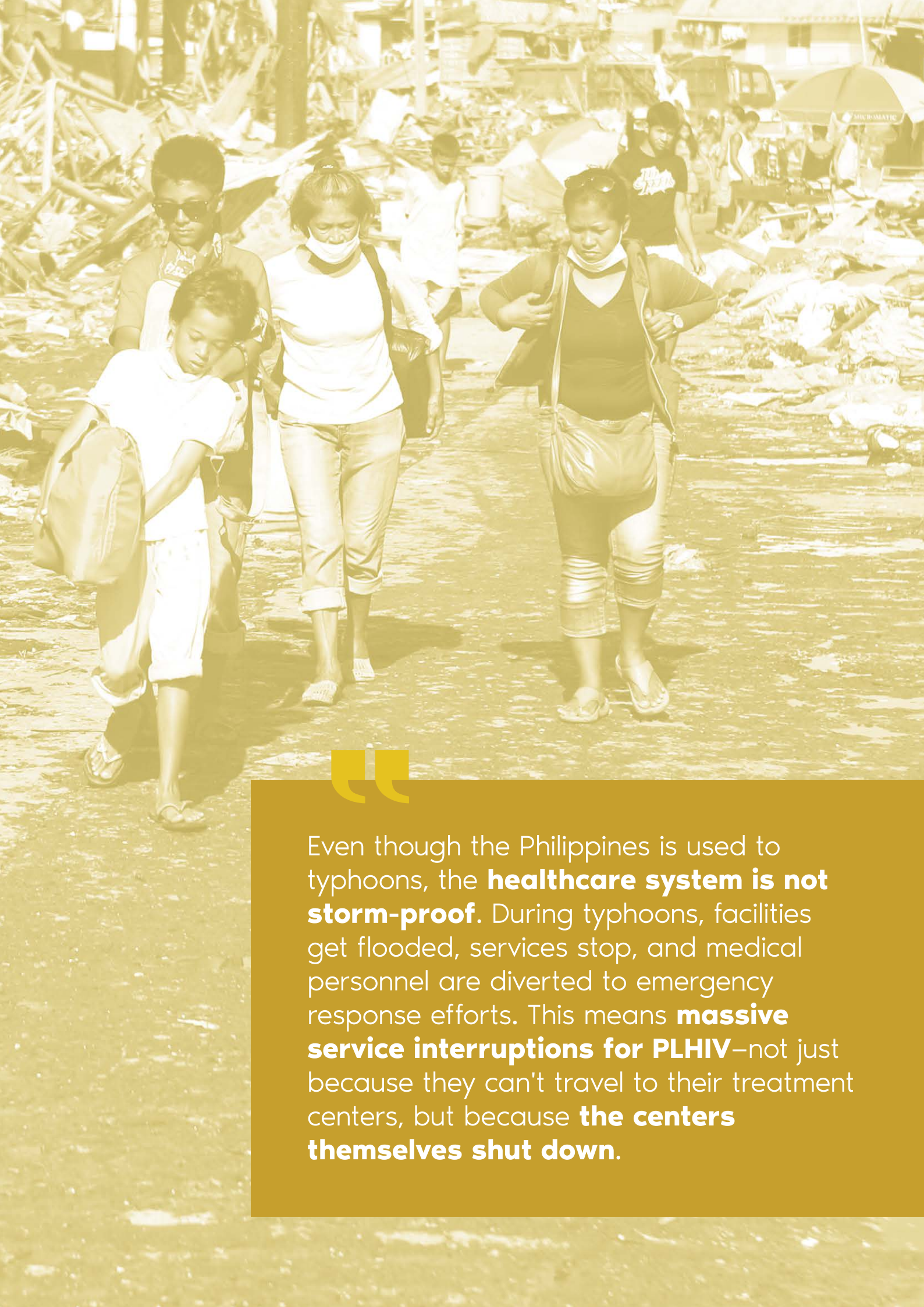
In November, an unprecedented six typhoons barreled through the country in a span of 30 days. A study by World Weather Attribution indicated that climate change caused by the burning of fossil fuels contributed to exacerbating the intensity and frequency of typhoons—further straining already fragile healthcare systems.

“Even though the Philippines is used to typhoons, our healthcare system is not storm-proof,” said Mara Quesada, Executive Director of Action for Health Initiatives (ACHIEVE).

“During typhoons, facilities get flooded, services stop, and medical personnel are diverted to emergency response efforts. This means massive service interruptions for

PLHIV—not just because they can’t travel to their treatment centers, but because the centers themselves shut down.”

Mara further explained that these climate-related disruptions intersect with existing gaps in HIV awareness and education. “We still don’t have comprehensive sexuality education in schools, and condom use remains low. Combine that with the healthcare service interruptions because of the weather and a fast-growing epidemic, and we’re facing a perfect storm of challenges.”



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In September 2024, the Health Department (DOH) reported 139,662 PLHIV. It is still a relatively small number compared to the country's population, but even as a concentrated epidemic, UNAIDS recorded an alarming 534% increase in new HIV infections in the Philippines between 2010-2023. According to the Health Department, as of December 2024, there were 50 new HIV infections reported every day.

Generally, significant progress has been made toward the UNAIDS 95-95-95 targets which aim to get 95% of PLHIV knowing their status, 95% of those diagnosed receiving ART, and 95% of those on treatment achieve viral suppression by 2030. Global indicators as of 2023 show that 86% of PLHIV were aware of their status, 77% of those diagnosed were on ART, and 72% of individuals on ART had achieved viral suppression.

The Philippines continues to fall short of the UNAIDS 95-95-95 targets with only 63% of PLHIV aware of their status, 67% of those diagnosed on ART, and a mere 40% achieving viral suppression.

Louie Ocampo, UNAIDS Country Director, emphasized that climate change magnifies these challenges by disrupting healthcare services. "If you miss your pills, your viral load increases, your immune system weakens, and you become more susceptible to opportunistic infections. Worse, irregular adherence allows the virus to mutate, leading to drug resistance," he said.

This is particularly dangerous in the Philippines, where alternative treatment regimens are not always available due to supply chain issues. "We've seen this play out in past disasters where people couldn't access their treatment. Some never return," Louie added, explaining lost to follow-up cases or discontinued treatment for PLHIV.

When PLHIV are lost to follow-up, they face a higher risk of disease progression, treatment failure, and developing HIV strains. This may have dire consequences on public health efforts, as untreated individuals with a high viral load are more likely to transmit the virus to others or worse, die.

Richard of Gentleman Bicol recalled a case where a mother from Catanduanes lost her five-year-old to HIV complications. The child had gone an entire year without treatment because the family could not afford the journey and had no local supply of ARTs. By the time they reached Gentlemen Bicol's temporary shelter, the child was severely ill and died within two days.





Climate-related disruptions **intersect with existing gaps** in HIV awareness and education. Combine that with the **healthcare service interruptions** because of the weather and a fast-growing epidemic, and we're facing **a perfect storm of challenges.**

## THE IMPACT OF FOREIGN AID WITHDRAWAL ON HIV PROGRAMS

“The total estimated need for HIV interventions in the country from 2024-2026 is ₱45.6 billion. However, only 51% of this has identified sources, leaving a ₱22.4 billion gap. Of the total identified funding, only 5% comes from international donors, but this 5% is crucial,” Louie explained.

While the Philippine government funds antiretroviral medications and medical supplies, foreign aid has been instrumental in sustaining outreach programs, peer navigator services, and other community-driven interventions that bridge the gap between healthcare providers and key populations.

The abrupt withdrawal of US funding for HIV programs under the Trump Administration through the President’s Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR), dealt a significant blow to community-based HIV interventions.

“When PEPFAR pulled out, many community-based organizations halted operations,” Louie noted. Grassroots communities braced themselves but were expecting a gradual transition. However, the sudden funding cut left many people without jobs overnight and essential services in limbo.

Community organizations play a vital role in connecting key populations to HIV services. This is particularly true for people who inject drugs (PWID) and people who use drugs (PWUD), who face significant barriers to care.

“These are hidden populations,” Louie said. “Many won’t walk into a health center for HIV testing or treatment due to stigma and fear of discrimination. But they will listen to a peer, someone they trust.”

Funding cuts have led to the closure of outreach programs that provided education, HIV testing, and treatment referrals for PWID and PWUD. “We’ve lost crucial entry points for getting these individuals into care. Without these, our HIV epidemic will only worsen,” he warned.





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## COMMUNITY SAFETY NET AND LIFELINE

For PLHIV, community support is more than just a safety net—it is a lifeline. Ferdie Granil, recalled what it was like for him when he was first diagnosed over 10 years ago. “I was diagnosed late. I was in and out of the hospital for months and acquired all sorts of opportunistic infections: TB, and pneumonia. I really thought it was the end of my life.”

Members of the community-based organization Positive Action Foundation Philippines Inc. (PAFPI) came to visit him and take care of him.

“When I had nowhere else to go, PAFPI was there. They made me feel like I was not alone,” said Ferdi who is now PAFPI’s Chairman of the Board.

This sense of belonging and solidarity was evident in a recent PAFPI-led rally and mass testing event. PLHIVs, volunteers, advocates, and allies gathered together, to get tested, to show their support for PLHIV, and to demand better healthcare access.

“There was a time when we wouldn’t see this kind of support. Understanding of HIV and perceptions of PLHIV are improving,” said Ferdi.

As climate change, funding shortfalls, and stigma continue to jeopardize HIV programs in the Philippines, grassroots movements highlight the resilience of those advocating for better access to care. No one should have to choose between surviving the ravages of a typhoon and accessing life-saving treatment.







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These stories are a part of a series titled ASIA-PACIFIC: HOPE AND SOLUTIONS FROM LIVING AT THE EDGE OF THE CLIMATE CRISIS.

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APCASO is an Asia-Pacific regional civil society network organisation that serves as a catalytic platform for advocacy and community systems strengthening for health, social justice, and human rights for key, vulnerable, and marginalised communities in Asia and the Pacific.

66/5, Tower 33, Sukhumvit 33 Road,  
Klongton Nuea, Wattana Bangkok, 10110 Thailand  
[www.apcaso.org](http://www.apcaso.org)

## CREDITS:

Writers

**Ana P. Santos**

Coordinator

**Mangala Namasivayam**

Layout

**Rei Neptomos**

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