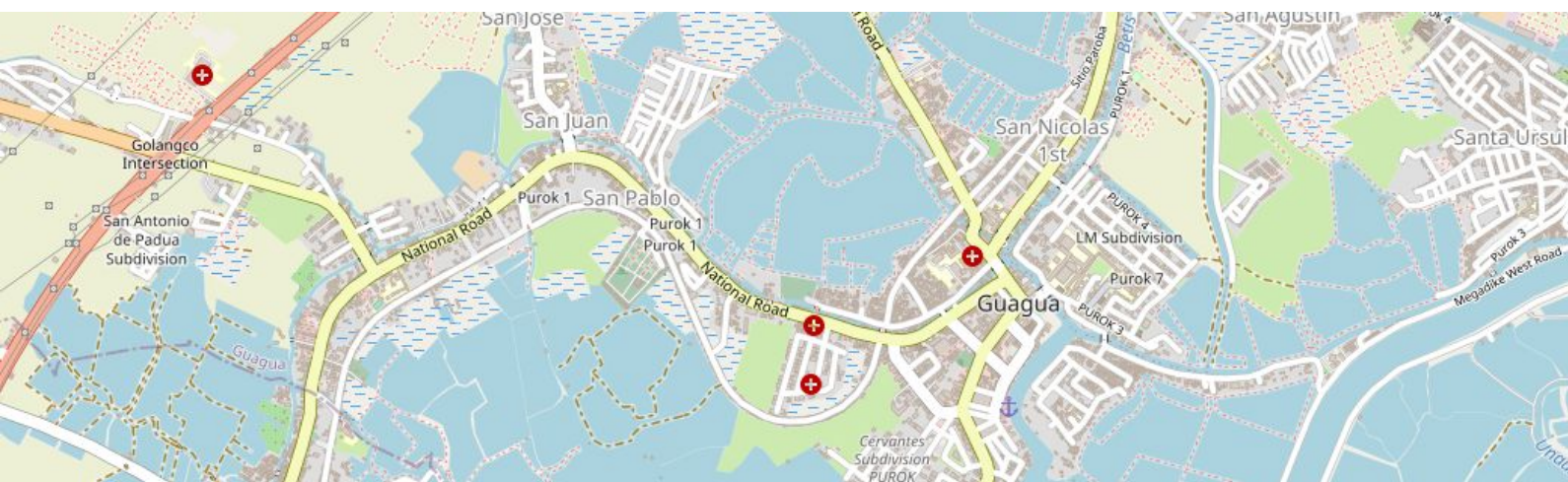


# A Call to Correct Narratives about Geospatial Work in the Philippines

*A statement by members of the OpenStreetMap Philippines community in response to the “Philippines” episode of Amazon Web Services’ documentary series Now Go Build which highlights the work of the Humanitarian OpenStreetMap Team in the Philippines.*

3 September 2020



*Downtown Guagua, Pampanga as seen in OpenStreetMap. Copyright OpenStreetMap contributors / ODbL.*

## Background

The work of the Humanitarian OpenStreetMap Team (HOT) Philippines was featured in episode 2, “Philippines”<sup>[1]</sup>, of the second season of *Now Go Build with Werner Vogels*<sup>[2]</sup>, a documentary series produced by Amazon Web Services (AWS). The episode focuses especially on efforts to map the town of Guagua, in the province of Pampanga. However, HOT Philippines and members of the OpenStreetMap (OSM) Philippines community saw that there are missing and problematic narratives in the episode.

## Issues

One of the most prominent issues the OSM Philippines (OSM-PH) community has with the episode is a lack of mention and recognition of the work by and expertise of the local mapping communities in Guagua as well as Tacloban, which was mentioned in the episode as one of the places mapped in the wake of Typhoon Yolanda (Haiyan)<sup>[3]</sup> in 2013.

OSM-PH has been working in Guagua long before HOT entered the picture. Guagua is actually one of the two towns in Pampanga that is very well-mapped in OSM prior to HOT's work in the province and this is due to the mapping efforts of the staff of the local government that have undergone training facilitated by volunteers of OSM Philippines and staff of the Environmental Science for Social Change (ESSC) in 2013<sup>[4][5]</sup>. Over the years, members of OSM-PH have built relationships with the local government. HOT builds upon that foundation but this is not recognized in the episode's narrative.

There are also signs of a lack of rigor in the preparation of the episode. For example, the Philippine flag was twice depicted as inverted where the red side is at the top instead of the blue side. (The Philippine flag is unique in that inverting it such that the red side is on top indicates a state of war which was probably not the intention of Amazon.)

Furthermore, there is a very problematic centering of white, male, and western voices and perspectives all throughout the episode's production and the relegation of Filipinos as mere workers or beneficiaries. At the end of the episode, there is a typical colonial framing of non-western spaces through the reference to edges of medieval maps as places with monsters and people (like us Filipinos) in the dark who must be civilized, enlightened, and saved. In such framing, the West (as an ideological construct) is the center. As historians of cartography and critical geographers would say, such tropes are western colonial fantasies that belong to the dustbins of history.

The *Now Go Build* episode is a reflection of the colonial geospatial patriarchy. **From a feminist perspective, the problematic discourse and gaze in the episode is so familiar: the white man goes to save a tropical and capricious island paradise.** We reject that. In addition, there is a lack of emphasis on the representation of women in the episode. In fact, in the Philippines, there is an increasing leadership and participation of women in the OSM community—from leading the trainings and building the capacity of the volunteers; contributing to the map; to organizing and promoting whole mapping campaigns. While we recognize that HOT is initiating projects catering to women and other historically-marginalised and structurally-oppressed sectors, we find it imperative to increase the ratio of women participating in HOT's leadership too.

## Ways Forward

*“Ang hindi marunong lumingon sa pinanggalingan ay hindi makararating sa paroroonan.”*

*(“Those who do not know how to look back at past paths will never reach their destination.”)*

—A popular proverb in Tagalog,  
one of the 180+ languages of the Philippines

The Philippines comes from a very painful and traumatic history of colonial violence and erasure wrought by the Spanish, Japanese, and American empires. Such acts were done by cartographers, *conquistadores*, missionaries, traders, administrators, and humanitarians alike, and until today we are dealing with their effects, legacies, and presence, even in geospatial work.

While OpenStreetMap provides avenues and opportunities to help correct such mistakes of the past, it is not enough to merely give access to the mapping platform and geospatial technologies. The structures of recognition, including storytelling, must be part of the long journey towards decolonization, equity, and justice.

**Geospatial narratives matter.** *Now Go Build* is a documentary-series on the use of cloud-based technologies by various communities to solve real-world problems. Amazon and AWS play a big role to portray reality, create dialogues, and spark social movements. In telling the story of what AWS does, it is important that various perspectives are heard from contributors and data end-users in the communities where mapping projects and initiatives are undertaken. Cartographers and interested parties documenting such activities that come from different parts of the world may act in good faith but may neither properly understand local sensitivities and practices nor reflect on-the-ground realities and histories. It is also crucial that local realities are kept in mind while supporting us instead of imposing non-Indigenous—or worse—western supremacist and patriarchal fantasies.

The humanitarian agenda in mapping is important, but it is very critical for us to proceed with geospatial work and storytelling without defaulting to white (usually male) saviorism and other vestiges of imperialism and colonialism.

It is not just the maps or mapping that matters. **Who tells the story of mapping matters as well**, as they have the power to perpetuate problematic narratives, misappropriate local experiences, amplify community voices, and make space for equitable futures.

These are important issues about geospatial labor and geospatial narratives, especially now that HOT embarks on a multi-year journey of mapping one billion people on the globe through The Audacious Project<sup>[6]</sup>. **Audacity, but for whom?** And whose audacity are we recognizing? Is it neogeography or neocolonialism? In this sense, the issues lie much deeper than the episode produced by AWS.

We call on the respective HOT officers with responsibility about the episode to reflect with us on what happened. The HOT Membership Code<sup>[7]</sup> obligates members to “work together and defer to local volunteers whenever possible”. In addition, we call on the organization to protect and respect its geospatial workers in the Philippines and organize ways to prevent the recurrence of the issues we outlined above. It is crucial that the labor for correcting mistakes is not passed onto them, since they have already warned HOT in advance about the problematic character of the episode.

Together we can do antiracist and antisexist work in the geospatial sector. All of us aspire for a bright future together, and that will happen with colonialism and patriarchy out of the center, desires, and structure of our community.

With our geospatial work and narratives, let us do no harm<sup>[8]</sup>.

## Endorsement

This statement is endorsed by the following OSM-PH community members (OSM username in parentheses):

- Arnalie Vicario\* (arnalielsewhere)
- David Garcia\* (mapmakerdavid)
- Eugene Alvin Villar (seav)
- Feye Andal\*† (feyeandal)
- Maning Sambale\* (maning)
- Mikko Tamura\* (mapbeks)

\* HOT Voting Member (see: <https://www.hotosm.org/voting-members>)

† In a personal capacity and not as a member of the staff of HOT PH

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