

## Force Evictions, Off-city Relocations & Resistance:

Ramifications of neo-liberal policies towards the Philippine urban poor

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The Philippines has one of the highest rates of urban growth in the developing world. The United Nations (UN) estimated that 23.9 million individuals belonged to the urban slum population in 2007, amounting to half of the total urban population (UPRC 2011). In Metro Manila, 556,526 families – or around one out of every four Metro Manila residents – was officially identified as an informal settler in 2010 (DILG 2011). They live in deplorable situations along riverbanks and waterways, streets, train tracks and under bridges, with inadequate access to safe water, sanitation and other infrastructure, substandard structures and congestion. This overwhelming ‘housing problem’ is felt even more in recent history, as natural disasters such as typhoons hit major cities in the country, claiming hundreds of lives and displacing thousands more with severe impacts on urban poor communities.

In a context of accelerated globalisation, urban poverty in the Philippines has worsened because of the government’s decades of adherence to neo-liberal policies, specifically privatisation, deregulation and liberalisation (IBON Foundation 2009).

### **Unemployment and the urban poor**

The Philippine economy, recently dubbed a ‘rising tiger’ by the World Bank, remains underdeveloped and unable to create sufficient jobs for its rapidly growing population. The surplus and huge army of unemployed

workers keep wages low and further drives a growing informalisation of labour, including informal wage employees and workers in private households, unpaid family workers and the informal self-employed, who receive less than the minimum wage.

In July 2011, 10.9 percent and 14.4 percent of the urban labour force were unemployed and underemployed respectively, despite a 5 percent economic growth and an adjustment in the definition of unemployment that resulted in moderated figures (UPRC 2011). The UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) in 2009 estimated a 51.8 percentage of urban, non-agricultural employment in the Philippines as informal.

The problems of massive unemployment and underemployment, depressed wages and salaries, falling income, and price hikes push poor workers and the unemployed, or the urban poor, to live in slum areas in Metro Manila and cities.

Landlessness and the lack of agricultural development in rural areas lead to greater rural-urban migration, further driving thousands into city slums.

### **State response**

Government's solution to this 'housing problem' has been limited to community mortgage programmes (CMP), off-city relocation and worse: forced evictions.

The CMP, targeting organised associations to own lots they occupy, have not reached out to the bottom segments of the urban poor. Beneficiaries of this programme do not come from the poorest of the poor, as security of housing and tenure comes secondary to their immediate needs for food, health, education and employment (Mitlin and Satterthwaite 2004). The small number of successful CMP cases becomes greatly insignificant in relation to the burgeoning number of informal settlers belonging to the poorest in urban areas over the years.

*Off-city relocation and resettlement*

The Department of Public Works and Highways (DPWH) has identified 125,000 families living in waterways in Metro Manila, and 60,000 to 70,000 on waterways around Laguna de Bay (outskirts of Metro Manila). The Department of Interior and Local Government (DILG) pegs 556,000 families to be displaced in order to give way to various government development projects including the construction of new business districts, infrastructures, and expansion of roads.

To begin with, the housing backlog alone is huge. The DILG admits in its Technical Working Group (TWG) December 2010 Report that the supply of housing units, based on the current relocation scheme, is not enough even for relocating informal settlers sitting along waterways.

This large-scale relocation framework has caught the eyes of the private sector real estate developers, seen by the government as partners in facing the 'housing problem.' Considered an untapped growing business, construction of housing for informal settlers has become profitable for private developers. An Asia Development Bank survey in 2012 revealed that the mass housing market has become part of the portfolio of private sector real estate developers, while it previously was dominated by government initiatives (Lowe 2012).

On the other hand, urban poor communities are generally adamantly opposed to being relocated. The Presidential Commission for the Urban Poor's (PCUP) own assessment of concerns of relocatees on monitored resettlement areas include (DILG 2011):

- the shortage or absence of accessible employment opportunities, posing a problem in the payment of monthly amortisation;
- non-reliable or inadequate access to potable water and electricity;
- distance from school and other facilities; and
- defects in housing structures.

The DILG Report's (2011) finding states that resettlement, mostly off-city, has been the default option but proved to be not pro-poor. "Economic and social displacement in terms of loss of livelihood, uprooting from communities, and other hardship conditions are faced by the beneficiaries

at their relocation sites,” the report states (*ibid*, p 5). Concretely, this displacement results in the inability to pay monthly amortisation and the migration back into the cities to live once again in informal settlements.

#### *Forced evictions*

In 2006, the government of the Philippines was named one of the Housing Rights Violators of 2006 by the international organisation Center of Housing Rights and Evictions (COHRE) based in Switzerland. Under the current Aquino administration, major forced evictions in Metro Manila dominated the national headlines, as demolition teams and police forces were met with resistance by the residents. These incidents include the forced demolition in San Roque, North Triangle in Quezon City on September 23, 2010; the clearing of the gutted Laperal Compound in Makati City on April 27, 2011; Corazon de Jesus in San Juan City on Jan 11, 2012; the Silverio Compound in Makati City on April 23, 2012; the Guatemala Compound in Makati City on September 24, 2012; the BIR Road in Quezon City on November 28, 2011 and October 15, 2012; and Agham Road in San Roque, North Triangle on January 27 and 28, 2014.

All of these incidents turned violent as residents stood their ground, setting up barricades to stop armed government forces from demolishing their houses. These clashes claimed the life of one resident, injured hundreds of them as well as of government forces, and resulted in the arrest of many others.

#### **Standing their ground**

For many reasons, the urban poor in the country are relatively organised in the context of securing their housing. Homeowners’ associations are a requisite in the implementation of the CMP for one. Many urban poor communities have also been organising themselves to resist evictions and defend their homes and livelihood in many ways, from legal battles to the setting up of physical – including human – barricades during actual eviction attempts.

The Urban Development and Housing Act (UDHA) of 1992 actually legitimised massive eviction of homes. While the law discourages evictions without due process, it allows for it in certain areas and situations

that include danger areas, where mostly urban poor communities reside; the implementation of government infrastructure projects; and if court orders for eviction are issued. While the UDHA lists mandatory requirements during demolition, non-compliance with the standards is not monitored. Violations are also committed without reprimand. The case of the Silverio demolition in Makati City, 2012, during which heavily armed police forces shot resisting residents, killing one young man and injuring several others, remains unprosecuted.

Highly organised residents, on the other hand, have resorted to barricading as a last resort to defend their homes and livelihood, as illustrated in the clashes in San Roque, Silverio, and Guatemala, among others. This form of protest is carried out at national level by the most militant network of mass organisations, such as the Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap (KADAMAY), an alliance of urban poor associations and individuals with corresponding regional and provincial structures.

### **Conclusions**

Forced evictions in the name of economic development cannot remain a standard practice of the government. While harping on aiming for ‘inclusive growth,’ the government implements policies that are discriminatory by nature, such as the relocation of informal settlers to far-flung locations without livelihood opportunities and services. Housing production that mainly benefits the private real estate sector as the government’s response will not solve the problem of informal settlements. With a high rate of unemployment, depressed wages, increasing informalisation of labour, soaring prices of commodities, and the privatisation of social services, security of tenure and ownership of lot and housing units are not the primary questions. Merely relocating informal settlers to far-flung areas, where they lack jobs and sources of livelihood, only perpetuates the vicious circle.

The framework for how the Philippine society views the urban poor and the ‘housing problem’ has to be changed. The overarching problem is not to provide them with housing, but to resolve unemployment, depressed wages and falling incomes, as well as high prices and landlessness in rural areas. Genuine agrarian reform and agricultural development,

leading to modern local industries, will ultimately resolve the problem of rural and urban unemployment and, subsequently, the question of 'housing problems' in the cities.

The role of people's organisations – CSOs in and/or working for the urban poor sector – becomes extremely important when it comes to sending across the message and to work towards a change in the policy framework and direction of the national government.

## References

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