

HOUSING RIGHTS AND THE URBAN POOR: THE EXPERIENCES OF SELECTED RELOCATEES IN RODRIGUEZ, RIZAL

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In the Philippines, statistics shows that 1 of 4 residents of Metro Manila are informal settlers. This paper is a preliminary effort in looking into the various housing experiences of the urban poor presently residing in a relocation area. It examined how a “bulimic behaviour” of attracting people from the rural and eventually flushing them out of the city was manifested by state agencies as gleaned from the experiences of urban informal settlers. This author engaged in focus group discussions and case studies of urban poor community members who also underwent off-city relocation. The experiences of the urban poor are deemed significant in dispelling wrong perceptions about the sector and also serve as significant backdrop in asserting their right to housing in the city.

Introduction

The urban population worldwide has increased from 40.1 percent to 45.3 percent within 2000 to 2010, and is projected to reach 50.5 percent by 2020 (UN Habitat 2003) and as high as 70 percent by 2050 (UN Habitat 2010). The greatest impact is expected to be in the so-called ‘developing’ regions including South-Eastern Asia where many large cities have been experiencing constant growth. These rapid increases in urban population may lead to a massive crisis in urban housing as people need shelter, employment and urban social services. Since urban

¹One participant died a few days after the FGD was conducted. While this could be due to old age (Imelda was 62), her neighbors believe that inaccessibility of health services in the site compounded by abject poverty caused her death.

centers are unable to meet these needs, the informal economy has been the alternative source of new employment and housing – burgeoning into environments that are hence known as informal settlements (UN Habitat 2003 and 2010). Also called ‘slums,’ these settlements are where more than half of the population in many cities live and work.

Slums and urban poverty are not merely consequences of the population explosion in the cities. In order to understand the context of the emergence of slums and the experiences of the various informal communities and informal settler-families (ISFs), it would be constructive to study these from a holistic, structural point of view.

The neoliberal economic regime that has been in place for more than 50 years affects the lives of millions all over the world (Peet and Hartwick 2009). As big capital owners and their national bourgeois-partners benefit from a capitalist scheme of profit accumulation, human labor has been pegged at very low values. Under the “new international division of labor,” developing countries became new sites for manufacturing, thus it is here that extremely cheap labor is found (Froebel, Heinrichs, & Kreye, 1980). Production was relocated and industrialization in these countries soon became fragmented leading to an export-oriented type of ‘industrialization.’ The Philippines, being one such country, is characterized by this export-oriented economy that exports raw materials and depends on the importation of key manufactured products (Villegas, 2000).

Theoretical Points: ‘Surplus humanity’ and ‘state bulimia’

The massive influx of rural population towards urban centers is a symptom of the lack of upward mobility among farmers in the countryside where landlessness is pervasive. Factors like outdated tools in production, inadequate irrigation, exorbitant land rent, usury, calamities, and militarization when there is resistance by the locals to state-led projects in their areas exacerbate the poverty of the farmers (Kimuell-Gabriel, 2013). Rural dwellers then march to the city as workers and service-providers and are absorbed into the ‘reserve army’ of labor. They travel to Manila to toil as construction workers, factory workers, house helpers, drivers, sales ladies, waitresses, security guards, vendors and anything worth a few pesos.

The ‘trickle-down’ logic of neoliberal economists is founded on the idea that labor is indeed cheap at first. After the labor pool has been dried up, wages will eventually rise (Portes, 1997). However, capitalists can immediately balk at the slightest threat to their investments, and thus are able to command how much they are going to compensate the workers for their labor power. Furthermore, the terms of employment are uncertain. They operate largely on a contractual basis, and global production and circulation of value are now under increasingly insecure under globally competitive conditions (McMichael, 1996). Workers receive very meager remuneration despite very harsh working conditions, a major reason why a lot of workers eschew the formal economy and resort to the informal sector (Portes, 1997). They rely on their friends and family ties or social capital to find alternative livelihood, putting up small businesses and fending for themselves day to day, a survival-of-the-fittest type of existence in the city. They improvise and construct dwellings in communities along foreshores and under bridges using substandard materials.

‘Surplus humanity’

This decoupling of urbanization and capital from industrialization and development is described in Mike Davis’ *Planet of Slums* wherein slums represent the only “fully franchised solution to the problem of warehousing the twenty-first century’s surplus humanity” (Davis 2004). The ballooning of the working population in urban areas bleeds in-to the creation of slums.

With the inflow of foreign capital enabling various condominiums, residential buildings and shopping malls to swiftly crop up in every prime location and major route in the city, informal settlements are seen today as obstructing the ‘development’ endeavors of big construction outfits – with the acquiescence of the local governments which eventually implement their demolition and the national government which facilitates the settlers’ relocation.

At the same time that the city attracts rural migration, the subsequent burgeoning of slums and the problems of unemployment are being dealt with superficially. Some examples of this are the infamous putting up of walls to keep informal settler families hidden from the view of visiting foreign dignitaries and investors along boulevards leading to the airport during Imelda Marcos’ time, as well as the sweeping of hundreds of homeless families off the streets and out of sight during the Pope’s state visit in January 2015.

'State bulimia'

Tadiar (1993) makes use of the term “bulimia” – an eating disorder which is manifested by induced vomiting after bouts of overeating -- to further explain this phenomenon of attracting people from the rural then eventually flushing them. Tadiar describes “Manila’s metropolitan body as the immense pool of surplus cheap labor – the sea – sur-rounding the archipelago edifice system of the upper strata.” The liquidity of petty cash and spatial practices seen in the particularity of Manila’s labor (characterized as “home-work”), is seen by the State as necessary, yet it is an “excess” and is something to be purged. This “bulimic behavior” displayed by the state adds to the contradictory steps in policies or actions regarding the tenure of urban informal settlers.

It is within this structural context of “state bulimia” and failure in policy that the ur-ban poor hang on to their creative and difficult strategies of survival in the city. Life in the city also meant living under the constant threat of eviction. Left to deal with vulnerabilities at various levels – poverty vulnerability due to meager wages and insecure working conditions, and physical vulnerability due to unsafe housing conditions – the urban poor find themselves struggling as claim-holders of basic human rights.

Research Objectives

This study aims to describe the urban poor’s view of the right to housing. It is hoped that by doing so, critical points can be identified to advance the discourse on a more grounded view, that is, from the standpoint of the urban poor not as receivers or beneficiaries of “development” but as rights holders.

The specific objectives are to:

- (1) describe the experiences of urban poor research participants pertaining to housing; and
- (2) cull out the characteristics of decent housing from the experiences and perspectives of the urban poor.

Data Gathering Method

This qualitative study focused on the experiences of 12 relocatees from two adjacent relocation sites – Kasiglahan Village and Southville –

in Rodriguez (formerly Montalban), Rizal. Focus group discussions were conducted in the two sites. The data generated were the basis for the selection of themes for the case studies. The experiences of the three participants were deemed to capture the depth and range of experiences of relocatees.

Going around the vast relocation area with over 30,000 row houses was made possible with the help of the organized members of the Montalban Relocates Alliance (MRA) and KADAMAY or Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap. The FGD participants were chosen from as many phases (zones) of the study sites as possible. It is important to note, however, that not all row houses are occupied since many settlers tend to go back to the inner city. For instance, Phase 1K2 is nearly abandoned after residents experienced roof-high floods in 2010.

Convenience and snowball sampling was used in the study. Two community leaders of MRA and KADAMAY, who were themselves participants in the FGD, were asked to invite active members from other phases. Given the objectives of the study, the participants were selected based on three criteria:

- (1) They are relocatees forcibly evicted from the inner city.
- (2) They continue to experience disaster-related vulnerability. The area is prone to high floods and earthquakes since the relocation site sits within a 500-meter radius of the West Valley fault line.
- (3) Their vulnerability is compounded by financial hardships in the site.

Since the group is relatively homogenous (all but three are women, married and engaged in paid work), the small number of participants would not only be sufficient for a FGD but also manageable in terms of quality of interactions (Freitas et al., 1998). Fictitious names were used in this report to protect the participants' identities.

Limitation of the Study

This study is a preliminary effort in capturing the complex problems of achieving adequate housing rights in relocation sites in the country. Due to the site's enormity, as well as other factors such as budget limitations (two-way fare expenses for each participant from far distances amount to Php 60) and time constraints (participants have different work

locations and schedules), the study opted for sampling by convenience. The results cannot therefore be generally applied to a larger population. However, they can suggest similar patterns.

Data Summary:

3. Experiences prior to relocating

Easier to earn money in the city

All participants, both in the past and at present, belong to the informal sector of the economy. Some of their employment were as house help, laundry woman, tricycle driver, vendor, sari-sari store owner, garbage scavenger, piece-rate worker, construction worker, factory worker and spa worker. Comparing their sources of in-come in the city and in the site, the participants agree that it is easier to earn a living in the city.

Experiences of demolition

All of them experienced demolitions due to disaster-related reasons (the Tondo fire and the Payatas dumpsite tragedy) and 'development'-related reasons (road widening, new road construction and commercial business developments). All of them decry the injustice of being subjected to demolition, with the awareness that the interests of powerful enterprises were given priority over theirs. Those from Lupang Pangako, Payatas filed cases asserting that the area was actually a relocation site and should not have been converted into a landfill. Since their dwellings were demolished by government agencies (like the Department of Public Works and Highways for road widening and road construction), they demanded that their relocation be paid in full. Some residents did receive payment but they all agreed that the amount given was not sufficient for them to survive even the first two months in the new Rodriguez site.

Life in the relocation site

Fear of being evicted from the relocation site

All of the respondents have problems in paying for their respective housing units. They raised questions regarding payment which they explained as akin to 'rent.' Because of this, they have

fears that their stay in the relocation site may be only temporary and they will be evicted again.

Financial hardship

All of them expressed the desire to move out of the relocation site where access to livelihood is the main problem. While some of them earn income by selling food, managing sari-sari stores and selling beauty products within the community, others still work in the central part of the municipality or nearby cities as laundry women. All of them have at least one family member who works in the city and contributes to the household finances. They decry criminality in their surroundings yet they also said that people steal and sell drugs for lack of opportunities to earn an income.

Lack of basic services and utilities

The participants deplore the lack of utilities and services in the relocation site. Until the water and electric connection was secured in the site, a nearby river was the main source of water of the participants during the first months after relocation. It is the practice of water and electric companies to start extending their services in relocation sites only after majority of the row houses are occupied before they

The row houses also did not have windows, doors and toilet bowls when the participants moved in. It was expected that these would be installed by the relocatees themselves.

4. Participants' views on adequate housing

Within access to decent livelihood — The major problem identified in the site is the lack of decent means of livelihood. Thus the settlers are unable to pay for their units and cannot afford basic necessities such as food and water.

With accessible basic social services and utilities — Access to schools, hospitals, affordable means of transportation, water and electricity is a major component in their visions of decent housing.¹

Safe — Phases 1D, 1K1 and 1K2 suffer from high floods during heavy rains and typhoons, and the area is along the West Valley fault line. In the participants' words, they are in 'death

zones.’ They have rallied for flood control and rip-rapping the riverbanks. Cases of crimes such as robbery, theft, drug trade and killings are also rampant in the area.

Secure — Security of tenure or not being threatened or ordered to move out is also an aspiration arising from their past experiences of demolitions.

As mentioned, three case studies were developed as the study progressed. The following are the digests of the cases:

Case Study 1 – Mila, 28 years old

Mila was born in Brgy. Corazon de Jesus, San Juan City in what is, in her own words, a ‘squatters area.’ The youngest of four siblings, she was a constant companion to her mother who was a vendor. The income they got from selling softdrinks and snacks in Greenhills Mall was enough to provide for their food and other basic needs. So despite the noise, common toilets and constant threats of diseases and fire in the squatters area where she lived, they were happy – until the city government took over the community for different projects (the San Juan arena, a police station and a school). The residents were relocated in Rodriguez.

Completing her schooling

Mila was determined to finish grade school. This meant she would wake up at 3:00 A.M. to make it to a free jeepney ride provided by the city council to bring students from the relocation site to their school in San Juan. The jeepney would take them back to their community in Rodriguez by 7:00 P.M.. When Mila reached high school, her mother rented a small room back in Corazon de Jesus (a portion of their original community which was not demolished). This way, her mother could continue working as a vendor in Greenhills.

A temporary school was built in the site by Mila’s sophomore year. Some row houses were converted into classrooms, there was a blackboard, and students only had to bring their own chairs. Mila survived a year in the makeshift school before transferring back to San Juan. She said the ‘riots got worse’ as more and more groups from different communities arrived in the relocation site. She stayed with her mother again in a small rented room but had to go back to the site because there were threats that their unit ‘will be pad-locked’ or taken back from them. To keep their unit, Mila finished her high school in the site.

Life in the relocation

As a 12 year-old, she described the relocation site as bare (*'wala lahat'*). There was no water, no electricity, no toilet, door, or windowpanes in the houses, and no school. To survive the first months, the relocatees had to create a makeshift water spring at the nearest creek they could find. The streets were not concrete and easily became muddy during the rainy season.

Now at 28, Mila has grown to love their row house saying that they worked hard for its improvement (*'katas ng Makati'* or from her work as a sales lady in Makati). She says it is better than their old house because it is concrete.

What could make it truly decent, she says, are: availability of livelihood, social services (she cited schools, hospitals), and secure access to utilities like water and electricity. She deplores the *'kanya-kanya'* (each person for her/himself) relations and favoritism she observed from officials (e.g. some are favored by the National Housing Authority). She also feels that the government should be more sensitive to people's financial capacity to pay for basic services, including amortization.

Mila sympathizes people whose houses were demolished or deliberately burned down to make way for development projects. She asked, "*Bakit' sila ganyan? Sinisira nila kabuhayan ng mga tao, ilalagay nila sa wala*". ('Why are they like that? They destroy people's livelihood then transfer them to areas where there is no source of income.')



Case Study 2 – Delia, 59 years old

Delia is from a family of sugarcane farmers in Murcia, Negros Occidental. She went to Manila in her teenage years to work as a helper. She married early and first lived in a community in Sucat, Paranaque. Her husband worked as a taxi driver while she was a collector of electricity fees in their neighborhood. She gave birth to all her five children in their house in Sucat. They later moved to another community in Zabarte, Quezon City, which was later demolished to give way to a condominium project. While others went to Bagong Silangan, Delia's family moved to Lupang Pangako, in Payatas, Quezon City. Payatas was already a dumpsite when they arrived. Her husband continued his work as a driver while she and her children earned by scavenging. Despite difficulties, she took in one of her nieces, a single mother who was pregnant and with two children.

Payatas tragedy

Delia was with four of her children, her pregnant niece and grandchildren in their house when the tragedy happened on July 10, 2000. Her youngest daughter was close beside her in a sturdy part of the house when suddenly an avalanche of garbage swallowed their house. They were the only two survivors in their family. Later they found out that the whole community had been almost buried by the garbage. According to Alma, Delia's eldest daughter who was not in Payatas that day, her mother was out her mind for days. Alma also admits instantaneously blaming her parents for her siblings's death. They relocated to the Rodriguez site a month after and, like other survivors from Payatas, their understanding was that the row house was 'just a staging area' until they would be moved back to Lupang Pangako. Lupang Pangako is a relocation site itself, and was not originally part of the landfill area. However, more than a decade after, they were still in Rodriguez.

Delia became involved in actions to demands justice for the victims and survivors of the Payatas tragedy. Later she was hired by the NHA as a fees collector from fellow residents. Within three years, she was able to pay PhP 21,000 to the NHA, still so far behind the stipulated PhP 165,000. She shares that out of the 568 families-relocatees from Payatas, there are only about ten of them left.

Safety and security

Delia developed many illnesses in the Rodriguez relocation site: tuberculosis (for which she underwent six months of medication), diabetes and hypertension. She earns income from selling *kangkong* or swamp cabbage picked from a nearby creek or working in a relative's *carinderia* in Calocan.

For Delia, an important component of decent housing is decent livelihood. While she is grateful that they were slowly able to improve their house, what they cannot fix is hunger and lack of economic opportunities in the site. Having experienced chest-high flood waters during Typhoon Ondoy in 2009, Delia thinks that there seems to be no place where they are truly safe. For her, decent housing should be safe and secure.



Case Study 3 – Hernan, 47 years old

Hernan comes from a family of farmers in Tanawan, Samar but his father decided to take a different path and tried his hand at tailoring for local customers. This small business went bankrupt in 1976. They

shifted to making rice cakes and other delicacies. As a teenager, Hernan sold assorted goods during fiestas. An opportunity was offered to his parents in 1987 to sew basketball uniforms in Manila. He was then left to look after his younger siblings.

His parents' first dwelling was inside the ceiling of the Bureau of Soils building on Maria Orosa Street in Manila where a relative was working as a security guard. They couldn't leave this space during the day and had to be cautious in going in and out of the building. They moved to Pandacan in 1988, and a year later moved again to a community along Brgy. Pinyahan near EDSA.

Hernan was 21 when he first experienced demolition to make way for the construction of the commercial complex known today as Eton Centris. Their family settled in Lupang Pangako (literally, "promised land") which was then designated for informal settlers with promises from politicians that they would no longer be illegal settlers.

Building a house

Hernan's first job in Manila was making lumpia wrappers, then he became a construction worker. He worked in a garments factory from 1989 to 1996 when the factory closed. Although he was a pattern maker in the factory and received an above-minimum wage, the first house he was able to construct for his family was from 40 big tin cans of cooking oil, a few slabs of coconut lumber, and 56 square meters of linoleum which served as the roof. His wife Tika, whom he met at the factory, wept upon seeing their first house because it was so near the road, they could hear everyone passing by.

Political awakening

Hernan became aware of the right to housing when he first heard of the community mortgage program (CMP) under the Urban Development and Housing Act (UDHA) or RA 7279 in 1993. A census soon followed and land markers ('muhon') were placed in their community. It was then that they formed their organization Samahan ng Kabahayan sa Lupang Pangako (SANGKOP). When the Clean Air Act was passed in 1995 and incinerators were prohibited, Payatas was turned into a dumpsite by the city council. They protested and asserted that Lupang Pangako was a relocation site, but they were overruled by the city government. Soon tons of garbage obstructed their view of the nearby La Mesa Dam and the House of Representatives, and the land where their children used to play was swallowed by the landfill. From the original 19 hectares, an additional 16 hectares were added to the landfill that encroached on their community.

“You cannot force a square to fit into a circle”

For Hernan, now an active leader of KADAMAY, the UDHA is defective because it merely focuses on the physical structures—row house, (dirt) roads, water, electricity— but it is silent on providing or looking into jobs and social services (schools, hospitals, transportation) for the people when they relocate to the houses. “You cannot force a square to fit into a circle,” Hernan adds as he laments the lack of livelihood in their place. He describes the relocation site as ‘a prison house for the poor’ and regards the project not as a genuine service to the poor but rather a business enterprise of rich developers in partnership with the government.

Findings and Analysis*A pattern of continuing rural to urban migration*

The data gathered support the well-established information that majority of Manila residents come from families of farmers in the countryside. Tracing their roots as *sakadas* in sugarcane farmlands and as *copra* farmers, the participants typify the *probinsyana* and *probinsyano* who are lured into the city. But with economic vulnerability rendering them unable to afford decent dwellings, they restructure their lives around whatever space is left for them to occupy—near roads, landfills and government lands.

Awakening of the ‘surplus humanity’

Unable to access adequate jobs, these rural-to-urban migrants are driven to settle in slums or relocation sites where availability and access to basic services and livelihood opportunities are sparse. Instead, they take on any livelihood which can earn them an in-come to provide for their needs. All the participants in this study did not want to relocate, but they also wanted a secure house of their own. Being members of the Montalban Relocateses Alliance (MRA), all of them are staunch activists against demolition. Within their community they are active in working for improvements in the relocation site (e.g., flood control and rip-rapping). Their lived realities in the site — no basic necessities unless they pay, no concrete streets and no schools unless they solicit from benevolent personalities, no access to hospitals unless they gas up the ambulances — all contribute to their realization of their marginalization not just from the right to housing but from access to basic services as well. As Davis has put it, the ‘slum poor’ are critical actors that will form historical traditions of

resistance. The surplus humanity expelled from formal world economy are the countervailing forces to a world imperium (Davis, 2004).

Of 'bulimic state' and demolitions

All the participants experienced demolition whether due 'development' projects (e.g. road widening, real estate construction) or disasters (e.g. communities burned down and a 'garbage avalanche'). Due to such experiences of displacement, the possession of a house and a land title is viewed as an important goal. The participants are also fearful of yet another possible displacement even from the relocation site itself. This stems from their observation that there are more and more private buyers, people who are able to put up two-storey houses, hardware and grocery stores, in the area. Although considered as a relocation site, the land is not exclusive to relocates but it is also available to other willing buyers). This could be a sign of 'gentrification' (or improvements conforming to the middle-class taste) which is often a signal for yet another displacement of the unwanted poor.

The rationale behind demolitions and the constant threat of being displaced are analyzed systemically by Frederick Engels in his *The Housing Question*:

In reality, the bourgeoisie has only one method of solving the housing question after its fashion—that is to say in solving it in such a way that the solution continually reproduces the question anew... No matter how different the reasons may be, the result is always the same; the scandalous alleys and lanes disappear... But they appear again immediately somewhere else... the same economic necessity which produced them in the first place, produces them in the next place." (Friedrich Engels in *The Housing Question*, cited in Peet and Hartwick, 2009)

Slums may be put down but, with the social, political and economic structures that have put them up still in place, they will reappear. As lands occupied by informal settlers gain premium value, their settlements are torn down and are replaced with new structures. This is shown by the experiences of the participants—San Roque and Pinyahan along EDSA proved to be profitable for putting up malls, Lupang Pangako originally designated for informal settlers turned out to be a good option for a landfill for Quezon City, San Andres Bukid had to give way to the construction of a road. The places occupied by the urban poor gain value but they will have to be driven out as collateral damages to 'development.'

“You cannot force a square to fit into a circle” and difficulties in relocating

With wages that can barely make ends meet, the research participants had a very narrow chance of successfully surviving in the resettlement area where there were no utilities and services. Yet they improvised to survive: creating make-shift water springs by the creek, collecting and selling plastic garbage and hanging on to their livelihood in the central part of the municipality or cities no matter how costly it proved to be. That they still want to move out of the relocation site is primarily due to the absence of decent means of livelihood in the site. One participant aptly puts it: “You cannot force a square to fit into a circle.” This means that the urban poor cannot be forced to live in a relocation area just because they are eyesores in the city. Their capacities and means for living should be paramount.

Historically, laws have a distinct function as instruments for achieving desired economic and political development. However, based on a study on trends in residential patterns by architects Ramos and Kun (2010), legal instrumentalism has been used as a mechanism towards modernization along the Western model of development. This is a drive towards liberal democratic directions and free-enterprise capitalism in which the legal system is disjointed from the people and is largely identified with the interests of the elite (Magallona 2012). An example of this is the observation of the relocatees’ organization that the government’s housing program for the poor is not just palliative but is even a harmful response to the housing problem. The trend was that although there is an option of an “on-site development” or “in-city relocation” under the UDHA or Urban Development and Housing Act (RA 7292), mostly off-city resettlement has been the default option which thus leads to demolition and eviction of urban poor communities. The effect, in fact, has been the legalization of demolition.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This paper presented the housing experiences of 12 relocatees in a resettlement site in Rodriguez, Rizal. It throws light on the plight of the urban poor as it deliberately aims to assert for their housing rights. It is the hope of this paper that it was able to put in-to serious question extant policies and procedures that were crafted not from the perspective of the relocatees but rather more from those of large commercial developers and housing agencies.

From the perspective of the relocatees who were participants in this study, adequate housing must include access to decent livelihood, basic social services and utilities. It must also be safe from disasters and must ensure security of tenure to the residents. It was shown in this paper that these are the components that are lacking in the relocation site and are the very things that the relocatees continue to seek. Therefore, the relocation program in general needs serious reassessment.

Future research can be conducted in other major relocation sites, both within and outside Metro Manila. It can also include hypothesis generation such as which housing projects generate good practices, if any, and for what reasons.

Researches should lead toward making adequate housing rights more robustly embedded in future housing projects. They could explore on questions like:

- o To what extent can a new and comprehensive urban development and land use program bearing all sectors' interests and welfare be set into motion?
- o What kinds of inter-agency steps can the government take to really get to the crux of addressing the challenges of rural-urban migration and provision of social services and decent livelihood?

Answers to these questions could point towards more areas to pursue in relation to human and community development.

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