

Philippines: How socialized housing fails to address poverty and climate change

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Analiza Gonzales, 51, often spends days without anything to eat. She used to be an informal settler, the term used to describe those residing in a house and/or lot without consent of owner. But she could easily provide for herself and her young daughters, thanks to her own *sari-sari* store.

Now, her husband, a bus porter, barely makes enough to sustain their family of eight. Too preoccupied with her infant grandchildren, Gonzales is unable to find work on her own. As the household's matriarch, she constantly sacrifices to feed and nurture her growing family — often at her own expense.

“Sometimes, I only feed my children,” she shared in Filipino. They ask me, ‘Have you eaten, Ma?’ and I tell them, ‘Yes, I already ate.’ But I don’t tell them that I haven’t eaten.”

Gonzales said this miserable situation started when they were forced to relocate to Barangay Hugo Perez in Trece Martires, Cavite from Barangay 143 in Pasay City in 2014.

Their old homes in Pasay were subject to administrative demolition largely due to incessant flooding and electrical fires, making the area a danger zone unfit for occupancy. The former site lies above the “foul-smelling” Estero de Tripa de Gallina canal, which previous residents recall reeking of garbage and human waste.

Nine years later, while their community is no longer at risk of flooding or climate disasters, they now grapple with the loss of liveable income and the substandard quality of their homes.

Inhumane relocation

Gonzales’ house in Trece Martires is a tiny unit barely big enough to fit a kitchen, let alone her whole family.

Amy Suzara from VIDES Philippines, a non-government organization working closely with the community, said that the relocation process was instant, non-consultative, and thoroughly lacking in risk assessment.

“It’s sad that they arrived here without employment or a source of income. They were really hungry. The toilet bowl was broken. There was no electricity or water. And their main doors could only be left open. It wasn’t safe, especially if there were young girls. Their safety was violated,” Suzara said.

Save for a nearby school that opened in 2016, Brgy. Hugo Perez lacks access to major facilities like hospitals and the barangay hall. Transportation becomes an additional cost for residents like Gonzales, who barely scrape by financially, as these facilities are only accessible by motor vehicles.

These living conditions are in direct violation of Republic Act (RA) 7279, or the Urban Development and Housing Act of 1992, according to Atty. Andre Niccolo Tayag, Commissioner of the Presidential Commission for Urban Poor.

The act mandates the provision of basic services such as potable water, power and electricity, proper sewage and waste disposal, and access to primary roads and transport in socialized housing initiatives. However, these standards were unmet when the residents first moved in — what's more, they had to shoulder the renovation costs entirely on their own.

Despite its stipulations, RA 7279 falls short, failing to prioritize climate change mitigation, adaptation, and recovery in social housing, and lacking safeguards against violations.

Lack of climate-resilient planning

As of October 2023, the Philippines' total housing needs stand at 6.5 million units, according to the Department of Human Settlements and Urban Development (DHSUD). Based on a 2022 report by the Asian Development Bank, there are around 3.7 million informal settler families in need of resettling, as many of them still live along river lines, major highways, coastal areas, dumpsites, and government or private lands.

However, according to community architect Louie Posadas with Technical Assistance Movement for People and Environment, Inc (TAMPEI Philippines), government housing initiatives are focused on simply addressing the backlog rather than coming up with clear and long-term solutions that consider climate resiliency and humane relocation. TAMPEI Philippines builds climate-resilient socialized housing projects.

“The government's main consideration must be community needs, not numbers, not just resolving the backlog,” said Posadas.

Relocation sites themselves suffer from a lack of sustainable lands. Often, agricultural zones are converted to building sites, contributing to deforestation, the loss of biodiversity and carbon sink, and altered land use patterns that affect regional climate. In some instances, relocatees have been transferred from one disaster zone to another.

Moreover, socialized housing remains costly at around P850,000 for subdivision projects and P933,320 to P1.6 million for condominium projects, plagued by issues like climate-related disasters, job insecurity, and the need for green solutions.

Pambansang Pabahay Para sa Pilipino (4PH), a flagship program of the Marcos Jr. administration, aims to build a million high-rise condominiums and traditional single-story units for informal settler families a year until 2028.

According to Posadas, using vertical expansion can be significantly better for climate change sensitivity in urban planning, especially as such projects require less land for conversion. “It's also a quicker way to address the backlog than building individual subdivision units,” he explained.

However, 4PH still leaves many “unresolved questions” to be addressed before it can be considered a worthy investment in the long term, Posadas said. While high-rise projects are suited for urban areas like Metro Manila, rural locations tell a different story.

Condominiums and other large structures will drastically change the environmental landscape of an area. The economic implications also create added difficulties — high-rise buildings established in remote locations mean higher transportation costs and harder access to basic services, considering

many residents will be displaced from their sources of income.

Climate solutions in socialized housing

Emelyn Bermudo, another community architect from TAMPEI Philippines, shared that her organization uses climate-specific 'passive design' principles in layouts, which maximize natural cooling agents like wind, lower the unit's overall temperature and minimize energy consumption and expenses. Such features also help houses produce less greenhouse gas emissions.

Complementing the passive features, active design strategies use sustainable materials like bamboo and interlocking compressed earth blocks (ICEB) alongside solar power units, effectively lowering internal temperature and electricity costs.

However, Bermudo shared that traditional materials like hollow blocks and concrete are still preferred due to ease of access in local markets.

Institutional reform

Fortunately, recent legislation has been taking climate resilience into account. The House of Representatives passed House Bill 6715, or the Sustainable Cities and Communities Act, on the third and final reading.

Some of the key provisions of the bill include slum upgrading, urban greening, spatial justice and protection from forced evictions, disaster and climate change adaptation, development of renewable energy, provision of green structures, and sustainable management of natural resources.

Senator Risa Hontiveros has also been pushing for a bill proposing solarization in socialized housing.

Currently, residential solar sets are out of reach for most Filipino families, ranging from P30,000 to P50,000. Hontiveros envisions easing the financial burden for informal settlers. Her proposed bill would allow beneficiaries of government socialized housing programs to access loans for solar power systems, which are payable over 25 to 30 years.

Access to solar energy allows housing projects to balance climate change mitigation with the needs of resettlers. Not only could this make crucial steps toward the transition to renewable energy in the country, but this could also ease the burdens brought by relocation.

For one thing, solar sets can help residents save on their monthly utility bills and cope with disruptions in power. A steadier stream of electricity could also mean opportunities to enter work-from-home setups, which can partly address the issue of job insecurity.

A house to run home to

Gonzales knows that were it up to her, she would chart her family back to Pasay in a heartbeat. Floods were catastrophic, fires were common, and the stifling heat would heighten the foul, sickening stench of the underlying canal.

But Gonzales had what she felt was a better life sustained by her sari-sari store -- unlike now, in Cavite, where she is safe from climate disasters but isolated from the means to live comfortably.

"I dream of owning a store again. Of course, I want to be able to eat every day. But now it's hard," she said.

Both the government and private sectors are indebted to people like Analiza: displaced, destitute, and robbed of climate justice. For development to be genuine, it must also treat the beneficiaries of socialized housing programs with the dignity and respect they are due.

Otherwise, Analiza and those just like her will be pushed away not just from the center of life, but in the global fight against climate change, as well — further and further down the margins, with no house to run home to.

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