

Ray of Hope for Homeless

Author: IWPR

Proposed legislation pledges to provide shelter to millions of homeless Filipinos.
Rain poured hard that Saturday afternoon in Quezon City.

Passengers in Katipunan Avenue, stuck waiting for jeepneys to Marikina City and the nearby towns of Rizal province, huddled across the entrance to a gated executive village and the Santa Clara Monastery.

With almost all jeepneys – the most common form of public transport – coming from the commercial area of Cubao already full, commuters had no choice but to wait longer than usual. Visibly bored and wet, some of them noticed – probably for the first time – the people living beneath the busy overpass.

A lanky woman “barker” – a tout tasked to call passengers onto the jeepneys – attracted many looks as she juggled her work with changing the clothes of a toddler.

“I have been living here for 13 years,” explained Myla Prando proudly. “It has been my home since I left Davao del Sur [in Davao Region].”

Home for the 25-year-old barker is the streets around Katipunan Avenue, where Myla lives with her partner Jimmy. Slightly embarrassed, Myla explained why Jimmy was not here right now. He has been in jail for more than a month after being arrested for a robbery in a nearby mall.

“I have also had my share of prison time,” said Myra, matter-of-factly. “I was locked up a couple of times for vagrancy. I spent ten days in jail the first time I was caught, 15 days the second time around.”

Myla and Jimmy are among an estimated 4.5 million homeless Filipinos. The National Statistics Office defines homeless as “households living in parks, along sidewalks and all those without any form of shelter”.

The figure is quite high given that housing or shelter ranks as one of the most fundamental of human rights.

Some 75 per cent of homeless Filipinos are believed to be squatters or illegal settlers in the main urban centres. In Quezon City alone – the largest city in the National Capital Region, NCR, that is greater Manila – 200,000 families are described as “informal settlers”.

Data gathered from the Quezon City Urban Poor Affairs Office, QC-UPAO, records showed that that 47.6 per cent or 95,188 of these poor families occupy private land. More than 84,000 others reside in areas covered by government-owned and controlled corporations.

The top five places occupied by Quezon City’s homeless are sidewalks and open spaces (where 7, 852 families live), areas under the Pasig River Rehabilitation Programme (home to 4,117 families); and

properties owned by the Metropolitan Waterworks and Sewerage System (which has 2,342 families living there).

The rest of the urban poor find shelter along creeks and rivers; transmission and old railway lines, bridges and various sites owned by electricity distributor Manila Electric Company, MERALCO, and the National Power Corporation. Others squat in and live off the city's garbage dumps.

Responding to the homeless problem, the Quezon City authorities plan to re-house more than 3,500 families in new areas by 2010. According to the QC-UPAO, nearly 2,000 were relocated over the past six years. Others families have received financial support from the city ranging from 68-113 US dollars.

According to Noel Muncal of QC-UPAO's Housing Regulation Office, most of those who have received this money arrived and settled in the area after the government passed the Urban and Development Housing Act, UDHA, in the early Nineties.

The main objective of this law is to provide legal shelter at minimal cost to the underprivileged and homeless citizens in urban areas.

Muncal insists, however, that the authorities in Quezon City have, in most cases, extended the resettlement programme to include all of those who can prove they arrived up until 2003. Yet given limited funds and the size of the problem, the resettlement process is slow.

And if some residents have been fortunate enough to be relocated, Myla's neighbour in Katipunan was not so lucky.

Jocelyn Salendrez, 26, and her family came to Manila from the island province of Masbate in 1988 to look for their father. They settled in the district of Marikina and although their area became the focus of a government resettlement programme, seven years later, in 1995, they were overlooked.

"Unfortunately, we were not included because we were not 'close' with the head of the association," she said.

"Only those who have strong connections with the group leaders were relocated. Relatively new settlers were chosen over us. It did not matter that we had been living there since 1988."

Though overlooked, the authorities still demanded they leave the area. With nowhere to live, a friend told the family to try to find a rental house outside Manila in Antipolo, a city in the province of Rizal. They found a place, but were not able to keep up with the payments and for the past two months have been living along the streets of Katipunan.

Jocelyn's only way of earning a living is selling sampaguita, the national flower, outside the monastery. Her mother hawks eggs as offerings to visiting Saint Claire of Assisi devotees. Jocelyn's husband, Efren, is a barker like Myla.

“Given the increase in [transport] fares, we all decided to stay here for the moment,” explained Jocelyn.

The family has few belongings to show off save for some cooking pots and a crib for their eight-month-old baby, Aika. The ten adult members of their extended family all sleep on cardboard boxes.

Neither Jocelyn’s family nor the other the residents around the streets of Katipunan have heard of the Community Mortgage Programme, CMP – a social housing scheme set up under the UDHA to assist groups of underprivileged and homeless citizens to own the land that they occupy or choose for relocation.

A World Bank report from 2001 on services available to the poor in the Philippines found that access to housing programmes such as the CMP is very limited. Half of the interviewees said they did not know how to apply for such programmes, and only a tenth ever applied for housing assistance.

Perhaps surprisingly, the report also found that government housing assistance is of most benefit to those who need it least. It showed that most financial support went to households classified as “rich and middle-income households”, with only 21 per cent of beneficiaries coming from the poor.

Although seven years have passed since the report came out, the current situation is very much the same, according to Deogracias Espiritu, a QC-UPAO area coordinator.

“It is shameful, but yes, some middle-class families have acquired land under the CMP,” he said.

“If you look into it, it is really unfair to the urban poor. Eventually, one [land] owner built a two-storey [house], which cost more than 500,000 Philippine Pesos (11,400 US dollars). If you can build a house of that value then you are definitely not poor.”

With cases like these, is there still hope for the homeless? Espiritu remains positive the time will come when there will be no squatters in the city, or in the rest of the country.

“It is just a matter of political will of our leaders,” he said.

And some politicians seem to be addressing the problem.

In 2007, Paranaque City 1st District Representative Eduardo C Zialcita filed a bill which sought to “provide shelter to millions of homeless Filipinos and, at the same time, address the critical problem of squatting in urban areas”.

The proposed Omnibus Housing and Urban Development Bill of 2007 – which is currently pending with the Committee on Government Reorganisation – contains essential provisions covering land and housing development, particularly with regard to finance, regulation and administration.

“We already have good laws on housing – but these need to be implemented well,” said Espiritu.

For Myla, Jocelyn, their families and neighbours, life has to go on even if they need to stay below the overpass.

“If help will come, then we’ll be grateful. If not, it is OK. We have survived in the past,” said Jocelyn.

Sweet Mary J Cawicaan is a member of the Center for Community Journalism and Development, a partner of the Philippine Human Rights Reporting Project.

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