

Leadership in urban areas

Celine d’Cruz describes how leadership from the Philippines Homeless People’s Federation is helping the urban poor cope with climatic disasters

The lack of affordable land and housing options for the poor in most cities in the Philippines means that between one third and one half of the urban population live in informal illegal settlements. These lack access to toilets, water supplies and electricity, and the danger of eviction is constant. Without secure access to land and safe housing, communities place more and more of their scant resources into just surviving. They are caught in a hopeless cycle of squatting and eviction, which leads to further impoverishment. Such communities are particularly vulnerable to disasters such as Typhoon Dorian, which struck at the end of 2006.

The Philippines Homeless People’s Federation brings together poor community organizations in cities across the Philippines, all engaged with finding solutions to problems they face with secure land, housing, income, infrastructure, health, welfare and

access to affordable credit. The Federation has a number of new leaders who are focused, confident and support the communities with elegance and sensitivity. This article describes how these leaders, and the activities they are involved with, are helping the urban poor recover from Typhoon Dorian in the Bicol Region and reduce their vulnerability to other similar disasters in the future.

MAIN POINTS

- **The author describes** how federations of the urban poor in the Philippines are helping families affected by floods rebuild their lives after Typhoon Dorian.
- **Helping poor people** save, acquire land and build homes are

key components of this work.

- **Committed local leadership** has secured community trust, established good working relations with local government and explored long-term sustainable solutions.

Mayon Volcano and Typhoon Dorian

Bicol is one of 17 regions in the Philippines. It occupies the Bicol Peninsula at the southeastern end of Luzon Island and some other islands. Mayon Volcano, in Albay Province, is a major landmark, rising 2462 metres above the gulf. It is the Philippines’ most active volcano. Its sides are layers of lava and other volcanic material. It has had 47 eruptions in recorded history; the first in 1616 and the latest in November 2006.

Typhoon Dorian followed shortly after the November 2006 eruption, leading to floods that created mayhem in surrounding settlements and took many lives. Mudslides of volcanic ash and boulders from Mayon Volcano killed hundreds and covered a large portion of the village of Padang (an outer suburb of Legazpi City) in mud up to roof level. The death toll was estimated at 1000, which is either equal to or surpasses the death toll from the major 1814 Mayon Volcano eruption.



Meeting with the Mayor of Iloilo

Photo: © Celine d'Cruz

After November 2006, the federation of the urban poor in Bicol (henceforward, “the federation”) needed to redefine its strategy. Two leaders from the Philippines Homeless People’s Federation, Jossie and Rollie, went to provide support.

Following the disaster, all foreign aid was routed through local government. At such times corruption is commonplace and there is no one to demand accountability from government. Despite this, people were not ready to trust the federation until it organized exposure visits to Manila where people met with other urban poor federation communities.

Helping people save money

Some of the communities had been saving as part of the federation before the disaster struck, but in March 2007, the federation started helping people save in all the evacuation centers. As the men slowly started returning to work on construction sites, in the handicrafts industry and elsewhere they had money to put aside. The federation helped them manage their own money by explaining that savings are like drops of water that slowly fill a bucket.

The federation had to first get permission from the Municipal Social Service Depart-

ment to enter the evacuation centers. It had to explain its objectives to the municipality and only started working with those municipalities which were interested.

The government said it did not have enough land to relocate all the families. It worked out a set of criteria for selecting affected families but many were left out. Families who could not prove they had land title were of lower priority. This also encouraged people to save as most families who were seriously affected understood that they had to work hard to secure their own safety.

In the year that followed, 1036 people saved a total of 600,000 pesos (US\$14,634). Some saved daily while others saved weekly.

Relocating families to new land

As soon as the savings groups were created, conversations began about land. This was the main preoccupation of affected families who had lost their land. The local community chose some suitable and affordable land and the federation helped them purchase this land with a loan. In government relocation packages, flood victims only get a certificate of occupancy from the municipality. Borrowing money from the federation, however, allowed people to get land in their name. With title to the land and a safe house, families felt more secure about their children’s future.

The federation has since purchased three pieces of land in three different municipalities after checking with disaster experts that the land was acceptable for relocation. The

aim was to move beyond the ‘doling out’ mentality to finding a long-term solution and a ‘self-help’ approach to coping with disasters. This is in line with a key federation principle of working with communities affected by disasters: moving them from being victims to victors. The federation understands that living free of cost comes with no security. People can be evicted or houses demolished at any time, whereas buying their own land gives people security. Under the federation there are no free houses, so people borrow

money, then pay it back into the fund allowing others to borrow. In the long-term, many more people benefit.

Floods due to typhoons regularly affect some families, but the government’s immediate response is to keep them in evacuation camps with very poor living conditions. Local schools are used and, when school starts, families have to wait until the end of the school day to occupy the buildings. This creates conditions of stress and anxiety for families who want to return home. The infrastructure



Construction site

Photo: © Philippines Homeless People’s Federation

RELOCATION PROCESS

This is the relocation process followed by families in Camalig and Ginubatan.

- Identify affordable and suitable land.
- Secure a loan to purchase the land.
- Sub-divide the land between families, including roads and infrastructure, and mark the location of each plot.
- Collect and store water from the local springs for construction.
- Provide land allocation certificates for each family.
- Start constructing housing, beginning with temporary houses and moving on to constructing permanent houses when resources are available.
- Secure loans from the Urban Poor Development Fund for those who cannot afford construction.

is also appalling and toilets overflow because they cannot cope with such high levels of use. Headmasters also complain that families vandalize the school premises. The solution is far from perfect for all concerned, but it is the only one the government has found to date.

The three pieces of land are in the municipalities of Daraga, Camalig and Ginubatan (see table on next page). In Daraga, the federation needs government permission to use this agricultural land as a relocation site. The Mayors have to collectively declare and reclassify the agricultural land and permission is needed from the Daraga Agrarian Reforms Department, the Mines and Geo-science Bu-

LAND FOR RELOCATING FAMILIES AFFECTED BY FLOODS

Municipality in which land has been purchased	Number of families to be relocated there	Land area (hectares)	Cost of land (US\$)	Repayment time	Amount of repayment per family per month (US\$)	Funding source
Daraga	72 families, each getting 100 square metres of land to grow fruit and vegetables	1.2	16,725	2 years	7	The Latin American, African and Asian Social Housing Service (SELAVIP)
Camalig	95	1.4	12,500	1 year and 6 months	7	SELAVIP
Ginubatan	191	2.5	45,127	3 years	7	SELAVIP funds are insufficient so the Urban Poor Development Fund is being explored

reau and the Philippines Volcanology Center, which needs to confirm that the land is safe for relocation. There are three landowners in Ginubatan but most of the land formalities are completed. The plot is also agricultural land, and special permission from the Ministry of Agriculture is needed to begin construction. It may be that every single tree removed during construction will need replacing.

Building leadership

Rollie and Jossie work as a team in Bicol. Jossie is one of the victims of the Payatas landslides in 2000. She lives in Quezon City in Manila, in the relocation site for the affected families of the Payatas landslides. She was born in the Bicol Region and currently spends at least ten to 15 days there a month, working with Rollie

to support the federation building process.

Rollie was a trade union leader in the transport sector in Manila from between 1975 and 1990. He lives in Montelupa - the settlement along the rail tracks in Manila where he met the Homeless People's Federation survey team in 2003. He tried to find out more about the Federation and realized it ran very differently to the trade union where leadership was authoritarian and power-hungry and misused funds. He detached himself from the trade union leaders because of this.

Rollie and Jossie have earned the trust of the local communities. It took time for the local communities to see that the federation was not a non-government organization or a funding agency but a people's organization. It was only when the community was walked through all the following steps that they

understood that the federation was different and began to trust it: 1) registration of their local organization, 2) surveys, 3) meetings, 4) savings, and 5) exposure to other city federations.

Rollie and Jossie learnt that there were three categories of affected people: those completely washed out who lost their land, left, moved to Manila City or moved in with relatives, those who half lost out, and those who were not washed out but continued to live in the danger zone. The municipality prioritized the first category even though the latter two categories of people also needed help. The government identified land for those they prioritized, but built homes without people's participation using international funding. Foolishly, they built in places that were still in the danger zone.

In the very beginning, after meeting with the communities, Rollie and Josie also met the mayor and the elected municipal councilors who make up the policy-making body of the city. Most disaster management is done by the Social Services Center under the Mayor, although some government officials understand what the federation is trying to do and have been supportive. The Mayor and the city have their resources but the community also now has its own savings. So they decided to work together to find a more lasting solution.

Leadership has not been without its challenges. Rollie and Josie described how

sometimes those with bad experiences had dissuaded others from trusting the federation. Likewise, traditional leaders sometimes forced communities to raise money for their own interests.

Learning from exposure trips

Rollie and Jossie invited the Mayor of Camalig and his team on an exposure trip to Iloilo to meet with the Mayor and the federation there, and to better understand the work of the federation at the city level. The City of Iloilo has one of the more mature federations. It has been involved with various city slum upgrading projects and has developed

a very good working relationship with the city council. The federation and the city work together with other federations and citizen groups to create a city-level strategy.

This process began following a small project providing loans for families to construct houses in a flood relocation area. Resources were only available, however, for a fraction of the families who needed loans. Selecting which families would benefit was difficult. The federation, therefore, created a multi-task team of different federations, professionals and businesses at the city level. This team will help the federations find long-term, sustainable city-level solutions, supporting all families affected by floods. Ultimately, the federation hopes that the team will help make Iloilo a city where every poor family has a secure home.

This process is forcing the federation to refine its own skills and to work with different citizen groups and articulate their interests to find city-level solutions. In doing so, the federation hopes to find answers to a problem that is too complex for it to tackle alone.

Organizing relocation

The federation has created a number of different committees to manage relocation:

- construction;
- peace and order;
- health;
- livelihoods;
- culture;
- audit and inventory;



At a group meeting

Photo: © Celine d'Cruz

- land and housing; and,
- sanitation.

Crucially, files need moving, permissions need to be obtained and large amounts of paperwork and documentation needs to be in place. Cito, a local leader, is in charge of the land and housing committee and conducts this role. He works with Jossie and Rollie who have given him the space to work without much interference. Although untrained in this area, he has learnt on the job and is now ready to mentor others.

Through this work, Cito says he has learnt patience, self control, how to negotiate with people and officials to secure permissions and how to get the work done without paying bribes. He is motivated and values the principles of the federation. He stresses that members must attend all meetings regularly because if not they will not have accurate information and may misunderstand what is going on. All families who are part of the federation relocation project therefore meet every month. Besides this, leaders like Cito who have taken on responsibility for different tasks also meet once a month to review progress.

Funds to help the poor

Discussions about a City Urban Poor Fund are underway amongst the federation leadership. The Urban Poor Development Fund already exists but an additional fund could facilitate further change. A national fund would also provide different options for ac-

cessing and dispersing funds. This national fund could be led by senior government officials, chaired by a local pastor and have federation members on the board. Consultative meetings are underway to determine what kind of institutional mechanism is needed for this to work.

Climate-related disasters occur on a regular basis and the federation is also talking about establishing a Disaster Fund. The Latin American, African and Asian Social Housing Service (SELAVIP) and more recently Misereor money has been used for this purpose but funding needs scaling up. Such a fund would be used for:

- immediate crisis intervention;
- providing businesses with small loans to help communities get back on their feet;
- providing long-term loans for buying land and for housing;
- long-term investment in collecting information such as family and settlement surveys and family photo identification in all danger zones; and,
- a satellite survey along the 'Pacific Ring of Fire' to locate all cities in the danger zone, identify communities under threat and begin thinking about long-term city solutions rather than waiting until disaster strikes. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



● **Celine d'Cruz** was one of the founding members of the Indian Society for the Promotion of Area Resources (SPARC) in 1984. She is currently one of the global coordinators of Slum/Shack Dwellers International, an umbrella organization formed by 15 national slum/shack/homeless people's federations to support each other and new emerging federations.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

● **On the Web:** visit www.achr.net/philippines1.htm for more information on the Philippines Homeless People's Federation.