

# *Urban poor communities in Malabon City in the Philippines*

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## **1. Introduction**

I went to 5 urban communities in Malabon City in the Philippines, thanks to the NGO “FDA (The Foundation for Development Alternatives). I interviewed community leaders while I visit there. In this article, I explain the current life of urban poor community, especially who are settled at riverside from my interviews and FDA’s information to find the significant keys to improve urban poor communities.

## **2. The current life of urban poor community**

Let me explain the current life of urban poor communities in Malabon.

### 2.1 Exposure to disasters

Urban poor communities basically occupy riverbanks and easements, which are considered as dangerous area.



They came from provinces to get jobs, and then they settled the riverside because the place was near the work place and it has been free to settle there. Since they could continue

to live, they invited their families and relatives. Consequently, the number of community members increased. That's the reason why they settled for a long time as urban poor community. However, there is the big problem for them to live. They could be easily exposure to the flooding. As the above picture shows, the houses in urban poor communities are very close to the river. If the typhoon came to Manila, the river got flood because of the lack of high bank. For example, in the community which name is "Sunflower Neighborhood association" was flood over the second floor. Especially, this community was located at low land, that's why they were affected so much.



Generally, people who live in riverside built their houses higher and higher, so that they could evacuate on the roof, but the another reason why they do it is just they don't have much space to accommodate new people like relatives. Therefore, their houses normally have second floor or third floor. They usually evacuate on the roof or another higher place like factory's roof which is near their community. Generally, they don't have specific place to

evacuate except their house's roof.

## 2.2 access to basic services and houses

### **Electricity**

In urban poor communities I visited, all of them have access water and electricity. However I could find there are some differences among communities. For example, the community which name is "Sunflower Neighborhood association" has water and electricity access, but almost of them get electricity illegally in that community. From the interviewing the community leader, only 34 of 200 families get electricity legally, but some of them are shifting to get illegally, because of low income. They stole electricity from utility pole. The stealers who get electricity are called "Jumper". In another community which name is Yellow bell –Reparo Neighborhood Association, There are the stealers who have their own business to provide electricity which they get illegally to the community members. But there are also people who get electricity legally. About electricity problems, I think it depends on their income that they become to get electricity legally or not.



People connect a lot of wires to the pole so that they can stole electricity.

### **Water**

Most communities can get access water legally from the company "Maynilad water services,Inc" which provide water in Malabon. But some of them don't have their own meter, so they pay to their neighbors who get water. Therefore, there are also people who have business by providing their water to communities members. On the average, families in

these communities spend 200Php to 500Php per month on water<sup>1</sup>



These are the meters for water.

### **Health care**

In malabon, there is no public hospital. However, there are medical care centers near their communities but they can't do major operations. So if people got heavy sick or injured, they have to go to outside of city. It takes around an hour to get there. So there isn't enough access for their health care. There is national health insurance that is called "Phil health" for people in the Philippines. People in urban poor communities can use it, but normally they have to pay by themselves at first, and then the government pays back. So for poor people, it is useless system, since they can't afford to pay fee.

### **Houses**

Most houses are made of wood, but sometimes I could see the houses made of concrete with air condition, because they live longer and they are not poor by having business for electricity or water.

By the way, generally in urban poor community, they built their houses very close so aisle is very narrow and dark.

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<sup>11</sup> Drafted consolidated community profiles of associations ,John J. Carroll Institute on Church and Social Issues(JJCICSI)



They commonly have cooking space and TV. They can get foods from sarisari store in the community. At sarisari store, they can get snacks and cigarette and so on. They get used TV at the price of around 1,500peso.





### 2.3 Money

#### **Income and work**

When I interviewed some community leaders, actually I focused about their money, because the poverty means directly lack of money. First of all, the common works in urban poor communities in Malabon are construction workers, factory workers, tricycle drivers, security guards, and vendors. These are basically irregular work and small wages. For example, the factory worker who lives in the community which name is "Yellow bell –Reparo Neighborhood Association" get income from 250peso to 350peso in a day. But the legal cheapest wage in the Philippines per a day is 460peso. On the other hand, the expenses in a day are usually 300peso for the family of 8. So sometimes they have deficit. But In this family's case, mother and some grown-ups children are also working irregularly as construction workers and so on, so they are a little bit affordable. In most families I saw, mothers and children who are older than 18 helps for family income but the works are irregular. From the document of FDA, Majority of the families in urban poor communities in Malabon have incomes below 10,000.<sup>2</sup>

#### **How to stock their money**

Basically mothers manage money. But, because of low and irregular income, they can't stock for a long term. They have small stock for just emergency when someone in family get sick or have accidents. Mothers hide their stock from fathers, because they spent money for drinking and smoking. They don't usually use the bank, because they think they can't have big money and they don't have to use the bank.

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<sup>2</sup> Drafted consolidated community profiles of associations ,John J. Carroll Institute on Church and Social Issues(JJCICSI)

### **The affection from “Bombay”**

From my interviews, I found the existence of money lender from India. They are called “Bombay”. They usually lent their money to urban poor community, sometimes to the people in rural area. They have their own way to lend money which is called “five six”. For example, if you lend 500peso from them, you must pay 600peso back including interest. They usually come to urban poor communities every day, and they collect small amount of money. That is like micro credit service. But they are not a company, a NGO, but a just family. So people don’t know who they are deeply. But I can say they somehow affect the people’s life in urban poor community.

### 2.4 Demolishing problem

#### **The housing project by the national government**

Now there is the plan in National government to demolish all urban poor communities in Metro Manila and to build new embankment for protecting Manila from being flood. Especially, the communities in riverside, they are prioritized to be demolished, because of the high risk for people in urban poor communities to live and the risk of flood in Metro Manila. People in urban poor communities have to transfer the place to live. Now they have three options for their life after the demolition. The first one is to live the building that government built for them. Now NGOs and local government proceed to make people in urban poor community know about the buildings well. They can live the building at the total price of 140,000peso. It is supposed to cost 550,000peso, but the national government will pay 150,000peso for them. The second option is to stay at “staging place” that is temporary housing. The third one is just transfer to the other urban communities. Actually, the number of building that government will build is not enough to accommodate all of people in urban communities. And the government has no plan to build more buildings still now, though the number of building lacks. By the way, the communities in Malabon will be demolished in this September. Therefore, people who won’t be able to live the building have to stay at temporary housing or find another community they can stay. The government intends to pay 80,000peso for the people who can’t stay the buildings to find another building, but it is not enough to rent a room of ordinary buildings, because it cost at least 1,500,000peso.

#### **People’s awareness in urban poor communities**

As I mentioned, the demolition in Malabon will be done in September, 2013, but from the interviews, I found that many people in urban poor communities don’t think it will be really happened, because the election of local government will be happened in October. There was the case that demolition was postponed, because of the election for national government in May, 2013. However this time is just for local government, so the national

government doesn't allow the local government to postpone the demolitions. And besides it, some of people mean to resist the community being demolished. I concern that some violent conflicts will happen in this September.

### **The problems about the demolition**

So now, the big problems in the urban poor community are they are not guaranteed to have their own place to stay after the demolition and many people don't really understand that will be happened. FDA contributes these problems now with local government. They provide opportunities people can understand about the demolition and transfer smoothly and safely.

### **3. What I felt in urban poor communities**

From my experiences in urban poor communities, I tried to think about what is the biggest problem now for people in urban communities in the Philippines. Actually, I asked community leaders about it every interview. From their opinion, the biggest problem for them is that their houses will be demolished, because they will lose their community and they are not guaranteed to get their own houses. Actually in my opinion, it can't be helped, since it is dangerous to live riverside and they are informal settlers. I think there is no way to protect them from disasters except demolishing their houses and transferring. But I think the demolition of their houses is just the first step to improve their life. In terms of eradicating poverty, it is the most important thing that how NGOs and government will act to improve their life after the demolition, because their life would change worse rather than better, even if the demolition would be completely done. The relocation place will be mostly outside of Metro manila, so the people will have to commute to work. It means it costs more money than before. And then, of course their works won't change better. They will still work irregularly and their wages will be still low as long as there will be no regular jobs for them. So after all, it is important to predict what will happen after the demolition and think about what NGO and government can do to poor people's life.

#### The preconception to the poor people

During visit to communities, I found very important key to understand them. It is that we have to see them without the preconception to them. For example, actually, I was very surprised that I saw most of people in urban communities have their own TVs, because I thought that poverty people must make a lot of efforts to save their money. But in reality, they are the same human with people who are not poor. I mean sometimes they are not good at saving money like we are. Of course, they spent money for cigarette and liquor, TV to enjoy their life. Therefore, even if they are poor, it is important to grab their thoughts like what we

think so that we can see what the true factor of the poverty is. So in my opinion, the reason why it is difficult to improve poverty is that they can easily misunderstand them because of the preconception like poor people must make 100% of efforts to save money to get rid of poverty.

#### The gaps between people in urban poor sector and other people

There are also preconception among people in the Philippines, especially between people in urban poor sector and other people like who belong to middle class. About housing project by national government, there are many criticisms to it. The reason why they criticize it is that it is unfair to use funds only for urban poor community, though people in urban poor community don't pay taxes. However, this is actually affected by media in Philippines. The media affect public opinion so much, though they don't know the situation of urban poor community well. Furthermore, there is also prejudice to the urban poor people. For example, I often heard that "they are too dangerous, so don't be close." It is sometimes true but sometimes not. And I thought that the communities are closed to other people, so the prejudice and misunderstanding are easily happened, when I visited communities. If we could create the opportunities to understand each other between them, the number of people who support people urban poor community might increase. I felt that both of them are closed to each other. The people who make up the big gap between poor people and other people are not only the government but also the all people in the Philippines. In my opinion, NGO should be connected more to the people who have various fields so that they can make people pay attention to poor people. For example, mass media and the company which has a lot of money. Actually, in general, NGOs are doing big role to connect people in urban poor communities to the society. However, the scales of activities are mostly small, because of lack of money. And they don't have enough connections, so they can't maximize the impact of activities. In conclusion, NGOs should be connected to various people in the society so that they can maximize the activities and gather attention from the society.

#### **Educational gap**

I found that there is another gap and it is the important factor of making people to stay poor. It is Educational gap between poor people and other people. Actually, the fee for elementary school and high school are free in the Philippines. Therefore, most children can go to school, even if they are poor. However I found from interviews that public schools are normally for poor people and the others normally go to private schools. Unfortunately, the qualities of teaching in public schools are not good, and besides it, it is expensive to enter a college. So

that means it is very difficult to enroll in the smart college like UP and Ateneo. These universities have scholarship for poor people, but it is very a little. But I found from interviews that parents make all their children to go to school, because they hope their children won't be poor anymore. I was surprised that the reason why they want their children get a nice job is not to get more income to the family from them, but to hope just that children won't live poor like them. After all, it is the biggest problem that it is very difficult for poor children to get good education, even if they are very motivated. I wonder if they can utilize the system of calm school in Japan which name is "Toshin high school" they provide the class via DVD or online by great teachers. Actually, there is the case which utilized the system of them to the poor people in Bangladesh and succeeded. However, the fee for college is very expensive for most of poor people, so they have to be affordable to pay fee at first, so that poor people get a chance to enroll in good university.

I thought the problems of urban poor communities are seriously complicated, so I couldn't get an idea what is the effective way, what is correct to do. But I could understand what their problems are, and what they thought at least. There is no simple way to solve poverty. So I thought that we should utilize various areas of people to solve it by various aspects. I mean we should spread the attention to the poverty not only NGOs and government but also ordinary people.